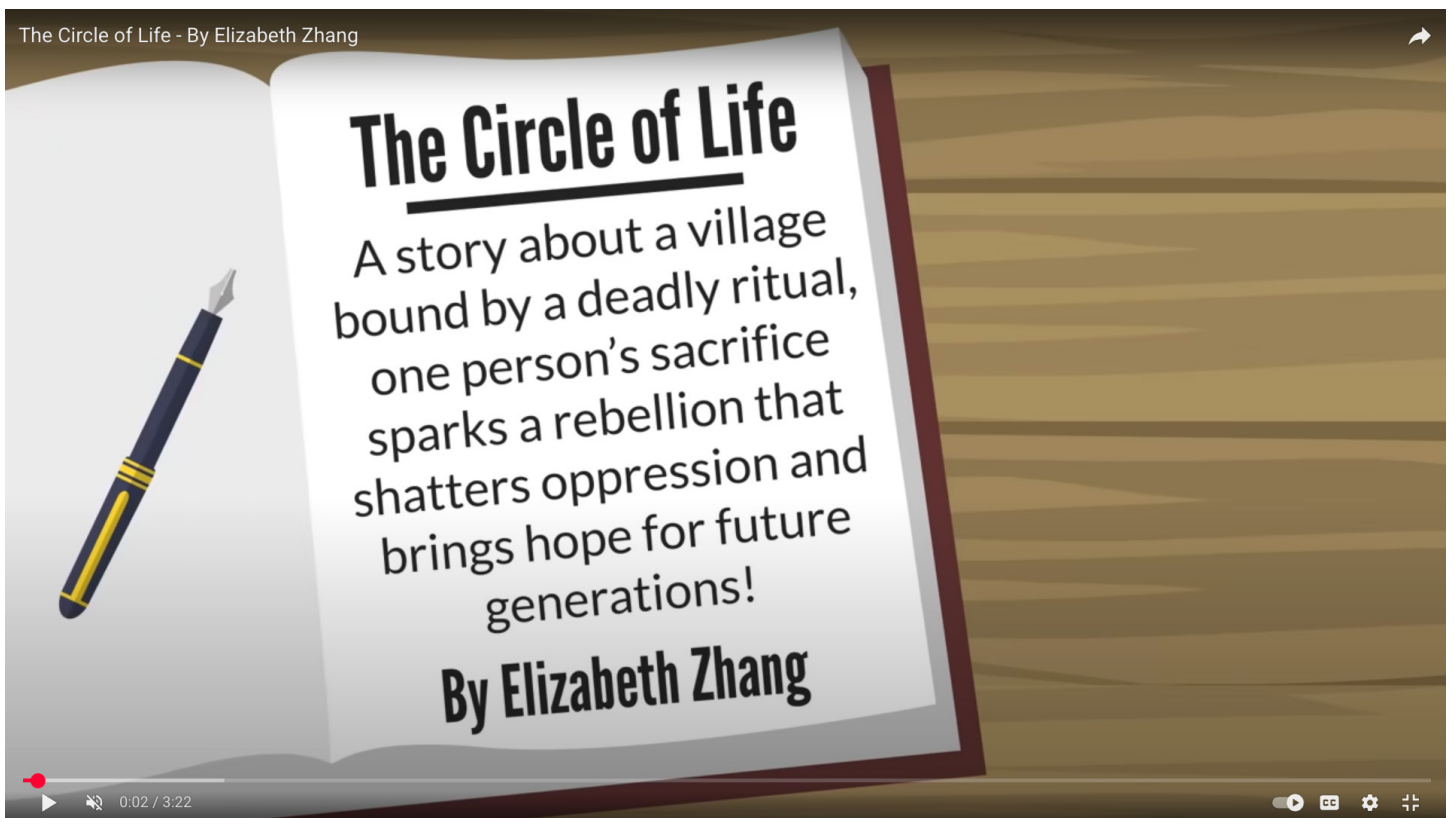


The Circle of Life

{A STORY OF JUSTICE, RESILIENCE, AND THE POWER OF COLLECTIVE ACTION}

Silver Key, 2025 Pennsylvania Scholastic Writing Awards

Winner, 2024 Revell Writing Contest – Wolff Prize for Fiction, The Hill School



Accompanying animation [available on YouTube](#)

Seagulls circled in the sky, their pearly white feathers ruffled by the wind as they flew.

Edward sighed as he watched them pass by overhead.

A net that had gotten snagged on some jagged rocks the day before was in his hands.



There was now a massive hole in the center, rendering it virtually unusable unless it was repaired. *Those blasted rocks. Almost lost my best net to them.* Edward tied the next knot with more aggression than necessary.

The previous evening's sunset was ethereal, as it always was on the island. Edward had only wanted to stand on The Ancestors' Cliff to admire the sunset for a few moments before making his way home. Alas, the universe had other plans for him; a sudden gust of wind ripped the net from his hands and nearly sent him tumbling down into the sharp stones below. Edward landed on his knees, scraping his bloody hands off on his shorts after he had regained his breath.

Darn it.

As Edward watched the birds flying overhead, he raked his fingers through the sand, making delicate patterns on the beach. He grabbed a handful and let it fall through his fingers, feeling each individual grain as they passed from his palm to the sand below.

The village has been incredibly anxious lately because of my wife's pregnancy. Despite over two thousand of us living on this island, the last time anyone had a child was nearly two hundred years ago, in 1377. I still remember that day.

Edward sighed, shifting his attention from the seashore to the sun setting in the sky. He shut his eyes

as the wind began to pick up, gently ruffling his coal-black hair, and retreated into his memories.

Freya, our elder, had gathered us around the cauldron where the sacred stones lived. I was young then. I had not truly believed that the very people I lived with and loved were going to sacrifice someone simply because that person chose the wrong stone. Ethan and I were the best of friends. We laughed about the absurdity of the situation, under the impression that it was simply impossible. To this day, I am unsure why neither of us had realized that our circumstances were very, very real.

Ethan, having chosen the singular red stone out of thousands, woke the next morning to two soldiers dragging him out of bed and to The Ancestor's Cliff. Freya, standing on the edge of the cliff, blessed his soul as they pushed him over the ledge, letting him fall into the razor-sharp rocks below. I can still hear the echo of his screams.

I observed those around me, wondering how anyone could possibly choose to bear a child, knowing that they would send someone to a certain death. Were John and Anne incapable of compassion? Were they truly so selfish?



Edward opened his eyes to the world once more and after a moment of consideration, he approached the water. He stared down at his feet, watching the waves gently lapping at his toes.

When Eleanor told me that she was with child, I nearly cried. Out of joy or out of pain, I do not know, for although there is nothing more in this life that I wish for more than to share a child with the woman that I love most, I know that in doing so we sentence a member of our island to certain death. Am I incapable of compassion? Am I truly so selfish? Any day now Eleanor will give birth to our baby, sending one among us to the underworld.

Edward lifted his head to stare out at the vastness of the ocean in front of him.

I wonder who will be chosen this time. Will it be the kind old lady down the street who sells bread and whose eyes crinkles every time she smiles at the children playing on the dirt path in front of her store? Will it be the man who mends clothes for anyone who needs it, not once asking for anything in return? Will it be the child whose dream it is to one day have his own farm? Perhaps it will be the woman who spends day and night foraging in the woods so that her family might be able to go to bed with a full stomach. Who knows? Maybe it will even be me.

A bitter laugh is torn from the back of Edward's throat. From behind him, a vague shadow of a man approached, calling out his name.

"Edward!"

Snapping his head towards the shout, Edward's eyes widened in recognition. "Henry!"



The two men rushed towards one another, capturing each other in a warm embrace. Hugging and patting each other on the back, they shared a moment of peace, disturbed by nothing but the gentle breeze on their bare skin. Unfortunately, the moment did not last.

"What is wrong?"

Henry hesitated to answer Edward, not wanting to ruin the fragile moment; although, he supposed that the moment had already ended the second Edward had noticed something amiss. Licking his lips, Henry took a deep breath.

"Eleanor...she has gone into labor."

Henry placed his hands upon Edward's shoulders - almost as if to hold him in place against the oncoming wind, which was rapidly growing in intensity.

"The baby is on its way."

Edward sucked in a massive lungful of air. "Truly?" "Yes, truly," Henry responded.

"Oh! We must be on our way now!" Edward rushed to pack up his belongings, eager to return to the village in time for the birth of his child.

Henry called out to Edward once more. "Edward! Edward."

Edward turned to face Henry. "Yes?"

"The Choosing." "Oh."

"They have already begun," Henry informs him.

Edward's face fell in realization and his movements began to slow.

Edward and Henry walked at a comfortable pace, not too fast, on their way back to the village, for both of them knew that upon their return they would have to partake in The Choosing. They passed by deer, foxes, rabbits, and bears. Edward even stopped for a moment to pluck a few flowers for his wife. Sweet Williams were her favorite. The greenery around the two men soothed them, allowing them to forget what was to come for the time being.



At least, it did until Henry asked, huffing out a laugh as he did so, "Do you ever...do you ever wonder what it would be like if we did not have The Choosing?"

Edward looked at Henry, seemingly deep in contemplation as the lines on his forehead darkened, growing more prominent in the last vestiges of daylight.

Henry continued, "I mean, if we did not sacrifice one of our own every time a child is born...is there truly no better way to keep the population under control? Perhaps the oldest person in the village is sacrificed each time there is a birth or perhaps every must go at a certain age or maybe-"

Henry cut himself off, dipping his head down in shame after a brief silence. "Sorry.

Never mind, it was a stupid idea to begin with."

Edward shook his head vigorously, "No, it was not a stupid idea. I believe that you are right."

Henry's head snapped up in surprise, his eyes searching for any signs of deception in Edward's face. Finding none, he simply nodded and the two continued on their journey.

"Eleanor, I am home!" Edward shouted into the house as he burst in through the front door, slightly out of breath from the long trip up from the beach. He walked across the living room, running his fingers across the smooth surface of the wooden chairs and brushing them against the oak door frame as he made his way to the bedroom.



Eleanor, lying in bed with the newborn baby in her arms, watched as Edward made his way towards the two of them. Upon reaching the side of the bed, Edward gingerly lowered himself, leaning in to be face-to-face with his newborn baby.

"Edward," Eleanor looked down lovingly at her husband, who was gently shaking the baby's hand using two of his fingers.

Pulling up a stool, Edward apologized. "I am sorry for being late. How are you feeling, darling? Are you alright?"

"I am well." Eleanor smiled, "he is beautiful, is he not?" "He has your eyes," Edward noted.

Eleanor considered this for a moment. "I think he looks more like you."

Edward smiled, running his fingers across the smooth surface of the baby's head. "Do you want to hold him?" Eleanor asked.

"Yes, I would love to, darling." Edward nodded.

He looked down at the baby as Eleanor placed the child in his arms. *He has his mother's eyes.* Edward cooed at the baby, tenderly rocking him from side to side. The baby began to gurgle as Edward and Eleanor smiled in unison. Swaying, Edward danced around the room with the baby, following the rhythm of the soft tune that Eleanor was humming.

"I must leave soon, my love. Henry says that they have already begun rounding everyone up for The Choosing." A fearful Edward said, regretfully.

Eleanor mused, "I wonder who will be selected. It has been centuries since the last Choosing."

"Whoever it shall be, there is nothing to be done about it. Especially not by us." "I know, I know." Eleanor sighed.

"Stop your fretting, everything will be alright. I promise. You know I always keep my promises." Edward reassured her with a fierce look of determination on his face.

"You do." Eleanor smiled.

In the background, the bell in the town square rang out three times, acting as a final summoning for anyone who was not already in the square.

“It is time.” Edward said stoically, handing the baby back to Eleanor. “I will be back soon. As soon as it is over.”

Bending down to kiss both Eleanor and the baby on their foreheads, Edward smiled at them one last time.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” Eleanor shouted as Edward was on his way out. “Be safe!” “I will!” Edward disappeared into the evening.

A few minutes later, Edward arrived in the town square. Standing at the back of the crowd, he joined the other two thousand inhabitants of the island as they gazed up at their elder, Freya, who was on an elevated platform at the front.

Freya began her speech, “Welcome, all. I know that you are all eager to return to your families as soon as possible. We have gathered for two reasons, the first of which is to celebrate Edward and Eleanor. Let us congratulate the couple and their newborn.”

The crowd began to clap and cheer enthusiastically until Freya hushed them, just a few seconds later. Beaming with joy, Freya called out to the crowd, “Is Edward present? Edward? Edward, are you here?”



“Yes!” Edward shouted across the crowd, making his way forward as the masses parted to create a path for him. After several moments of awkward shuffling, Edward stepped onto the platform, where he stood opposite her.

She greeted him, “Welcome, Edward. How is the baby?” “He is well; he is resting with his mother now.”

The crowd was audibly moved. Edward held back a grimace at the crowd’s sounds. *How can they be so joyful for Eleanor and me when it is the two of us that have murdered one of them?*

“Have you and Eleanor decided on a name?” Freya questioned. “No. Not yet.”

“Well, I am certain that it will be as beautiful as your child surely is.”

A handful of people melted, placing their hands over their hearts as they smiled and cheered.

“Now, we do have to proceed with the more grim side of this most joyous event.”

The crowd quieted down and people began to whisper to one another with rumors of who they believed would be chosen.

“As I am sure many of you may recall, at this point each member of our community must draw from this collection of rocks that lies before us. The one who unfortunately selects the stone that has been marked red will have one sunset and one sunrise with their loved ones before they must join our ancients in the ocean by jumping off of The Ancestor’s Cliff.”

Edward’s jaw clenched and his knees ached with the memory of the fall he had taken just the day before. Freya, either not noticing or electing to ignore his discomfort, gestured towards Edward.

“Edward. Will you do us the honor of being the first to select your stone and decide your fate?”



Edward nodded and smiled politely, making his way to the cauldron that contained the collection of stones.

Members of the village watched as they began to form a line. *Here we go.* Edward took a deep breath before reaching in. He dug around for a moment before making his selection and wrapping his fingers around the smooth, cold surface of the stone. *Is this what a tombstone feels like?* Edward stood with his hand clenched tight around the stone, not looking at it until Freya gave him permission to.

One by one, the villagers made their way towards the platform, each securing their own pebble before retreating back to their original positions. Edward, however, remained at the front of the crowd with Freya. Freya slowly approached the cauldron, taking the last stone out. She turned the cauldron over to show that The Choosing had been completed.



“Remind yourselves of why we must do this. It is because of Edward and Eleanor’s blunder that one among us will soon be reunited with our ancestors long before, every one of which stands united with us during our continued lives on this ancient land. We must not falter in our beliefs; we must cherish these precious moments we have with one another. It is because of the sacrifices made by those brave souls who came before us in time that we are able to gather together today. Because of them, we can find comfort in one another, to experience the warmth and the laughter that fills our homes and our bellies during a cold winter day. Please, on the count of three, open your palms.” Freya instructed the crowd.

“One.”

“Two.”

“Three.”

Some opened their palms slowly, hesitant to see what was inside, while others did so hastily, not wanting to wait in suspense for a moment more. Murmurs quickly spread as people tried to figure out who The Chosen One was. Their voices overlapped with one another as they turned to their neighbors.

“I do not have it.” “It is not me.” “Do you have it?” “Is it Elena?” “Who has it?”

“Who has the red one?”

Freya spoke over the crowd, commanding them. “Without further delay, we must know.

Who among us is so fortunate to have been chosen today?” “Oh, dear.” Someone said faintly in the background.

The villagers quieted down as time screeched to a halt. Edward blinked at the bright red stone in the center of his palm. He closed his eyes, hoping that perhaps it was all a nightmare, that he was seeing things. *Please. I promised Eleanor that everything would be alright. I always keep my promises.* Who was Edward even pleading to?



Edward opened his eyes once more, confronted by the reality of the present moment. His heart rate spiked, and his breathing grew shallow as he realized the implications of the seemingly innocent pebble he held in his now sweaty, shaking hand.

I am sorry, my love. I broke my promise.

With his eyes wide in fear and disbelief, Edward announced to the crowd in a shaky voice, “I have it. I am The Chosen One.”

Later

Eleanor collapsed onto her bed after tucking Edward Jr. in for the night. She used the back of her hand to wipe the sweat off her forehead and move the hair that was sticking to it. Ever since Edward had been chosen, Eleanor and Henry had been working to overthrow Freya and to end this archaic tradition once and for all.

In the sleepless nights filled with Edward Jr.'s wails, Henry helped her calm him down. In some strange way, he felt responsible for Edward's death, for it was he who found him at the beach and told him to come back to town. Right after the ceremony, he had fallen to his knees in front of Edward, begging him for his forgiveness.

"Please, Edward. Please." Henry grasped one of Edward's hands with both of his. His head was bowed, his voice was shaky. "You must forgive me. If I had known the ceremony could end in such a way, I never would have approached you at the beach."

"Henry, look at me." Edward used his free hand to cover Henry's. "I cannot forgive you, because there is nothing I can forgive you for. This was not your doing."

Henry lifted his head slowly, his eyes filled to the brim with tears.

"Please, Henry. I bear no ill will against you. It is not you who created this horrible tradition of ours. And please, rise. This is quite absurd."

Henry stood up, legs a little weak.

Edward continued, "Listen to me. Do you recall the conversation we had earlier, on our way back to the town?"

Henry, looking around to make sure that no one was eavesdropping, "Yes."

Edward clasped Henry's hands even tighter. "First and foremost, you must care for Eleanor and for our newborn son."

"Of course," Henry promised.

"Secondly, you must work with Eleanor, so that no one else should suffer the same fate as

I."

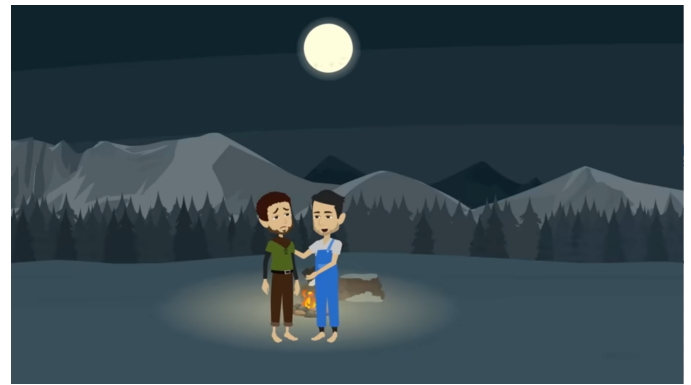
"By that, you mean—"

"Yes." Edward cut Henry off. You could never be too safe.

Henry nodded stiffly. "I swear to you, Edward, I will take care of your wife and son. And I will work so that no one should suffer the same fate as you. I am a man of my word. You know that."

"I do. I wish you all the best, Henry. I must be off to see Eleanor now. She does not know yet."

"Yes, yes."



Edward put a hand on Henry's shoulder, "Goodbye, my friend." "Goodbye, Edward. I shall not let you down."

Edward nodded grimly, patted Henry on the back, and walked back toward his house.

Over the course of the following months, Henry worked with Eleanor so that they might resist and eventually overcome Freya's rule. In the cover of night, they sought allies in the village, speaking to their neighbours. The townspeople knew of the incredible brutality that occurred in each instance of the archaic ritual, but they had long since succumbed to its injustice, accepting it as a misfortune of life.

Eleanor and Henry begged them to have hope, to see that, if only they could come together to make a stand, the Choosing did not have to happen each time a member of the village gave birth. Slammed doors were the only responses the pair received at first. Still, as their words brewed in the back of people's minds, people eventually began to overcome their fear of

being punished, of Freya, and day by day they garnered more and more support.

There were moments where Eleanor was not so certain of herself, the grief of losing Edward still too great to bear. Even then, she willed herself to remain focused on the task at hand—for little Edward, and for the future of the village.

As the time passed, a sense of anticipation swelled. Whispers of a new age, of a just ruling body began to fill the streets. There was not an exact moment, but at some point, a threshold had been crossed—it was time.



Eleanor's and Henry's eyes met over a sea of people as the townspeople began to gather in the square, hidden by the moon and the stars. Not a single word was spoken, so as not to alarm Freya and those who still supported her, but nothing needed to be said. They all understood one another.

As one, they began to move, closing in on Freya's home. Her night guards opened the front door for them, nodding to each villager as they entered. Even they had come to realise the unnecessary violence of Freya's rule.

Flooding Freya's room, they startled her awake.

They demanded answers from her. Why, for so many years, had she sought the suffering of the common people? Why must they sacrifice one of their own each time one among them gives birth? Death is not the answer, surely she was wise enough to know that.

Freya refused to give in at first, sticking to her lies, but when her wisdom was brought into question, she could deceive them no longer.

“Of course, I am wise enough to know such simple things! Buffoons, all of you.”

Everything is exactly as I designed it. The Choosing has never been about anything but instilling fear into your hearts and maintaining my position above the rest of you. Do you think it is merely chance that has allowed me to remain in power for so long? Fools.”

The villagers stared, aghast. Freya realised her mistake, but it was already too late. She had exposed herself as a fraud in front of half the town. She was never better than any of them, she did not have any sort of magical powers that granted her the ability to rule. There was no higher power that would punish them if they did not complete The Choosing.

From that moment on the townspeople no longer feared Freya, for they finally saw her for what she truly was: a liar. Her centuries-long dictatorship had finally come to an end.

The crowd rushed out of her house and stormed the platform which held the ceremonial cauldron used in every Choosing. They destroyed it, smashing it into a million pieces and scattered each shard far from one another. They would be terrorized by Freya and her falsities no longer.

Later, while everyone else was celebrating in the town square, Eleanor made the hike up to The Ancestor's Cliff. Cradling Edward Jr. in her arms, she gazed out at the sunset. Below her, the waves lapped at the rocks, the very ones that had pierced Edward when he fell.

“We did it, Edward,” she breathed, closing her eyes and tilting her head back. “We did it.”

In that moment, although perhaps Eleanor was only being wishful, the warm embrace of the setting sun felt like a hug from Edward himself.