

Spectrum

No. 40

A publication of the Department of English
at California State University, Fresno

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Produced annually since 1980, *Spectrum* is a publication of the Department of English at California State University, Fresno, as part of the Young Writers' Conference. The youth journal celebrates the best creative writing work submitted by central San Joaquin Valley schools, as selected by an editorial board of Creative Writing Program graduate students and alumni. All publication rights revert to the authors after their work appears in *Spectrum*.

The 40th annual Young Writers' Conference was scheduled for March 25, 2020, with a keynote address from U.S. Young People's Poet Laureate Naomi Shihab Nye.

To request additional copies of the journal, or to support *Spectrum* and the Young Writers' Conference by volunteering your time or making a tax-deductible gift to Fresno State, please visit fresnostate.edu/youngwriters for info, or contact the Department of English at 559.278.1569.

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A Letter From the Dean

Dear young writers,

Writing and reading are integral to the process of you developing your own identity. As an expression of yourself that is reflective, sometimes philosophical, and downright fun, writing allows you to express many ideas over the course of time and transport yourself to other worlds, even if you are still in your own home or school. In addition, whenever you read someone else's poem, novel, or story, you notice something new and gain a new perspective.

You have the opportunity to work with the best creative writing faculty. After all the work in class with your teachers, it is your own personal insight into our world that will appear on the page. It is your insight, your unique experience, that has produced your very own consciousness that will fuel your literary production. Cultivate your own vision, be proud of who you are, and enjoy the art of writing and sharing your thoughts with others. After all, writing can help create understanding for everyone.

Your English teachers are crucial for your process of emotional and academic growth, because their energy, time, and dedication to teaching you inspires your trials, mistakes, and success. Don't be afraid to make a mistake with your writing: All of us need editors and coaches, and we never settle for the first draft. The beauty in writing comes from polishing it again and again until it becomes the finished creation. I know that your teachers are proud of you for choosing to write as well as read the works of others.

This conference is one of Fresno State's prized partnerships with our region's high schools. It is a model of how faculty can collaborate to promote writing as an art form that impacts and enhances people's lives in myriad ways, whether at work, at home, or out in the community. Whatever you do in life will be enhanced by reading a lot and writing well.

I am honored that the College of Arts and Humanities is a collaborative partner in your educational journey. Here's to your bright future!

Sincerely,
Dr. Honora Chapman
Interim Dean, College of Arts and Humanities
California State University, Fresno

A Letter From the Chair

Welcome, student writers, to our 40th annual Young Writers' Conference, a gathering that presents us all with a yearly reminder of how vibrant the diverse culture of our Central Valley can be.

As essayists, poets, playwrights, and short-story writers, you may claim a place within a proud community of Central Valley authors. Today you will interact with some of the English Department's outstanding faculty members and most accomplished graduate students. Our faculty members routinely publish in some of America's finest journals, so I hope you will make the most of this chance to talk with them and imagine the way that you, too, will contribute to making Fresno a place with a continuing reputation for creativity and social engagement.

Welcome as well to the dedicated and accomplished high school teachers joining us here today. Your energy and enthusiasm have been essential in developing and nurturing the talented young people we see here. I and my fellow faculty members owe you special thanks for preparing these talented writers for their future careers, careers we hope will include their return to our University classrooms in years to come.

Welcome, then, all to this celebration both of what you have already accomplished and of what your futures as writers and mentors will bring. Seize the opportunities this day will offer to challenge yourselves and thereby develop your talents and your dreams.

Sincerely,
Dr. Lisa M.C. Weston
Interim Chair, Department of English
California State University, Fresno

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Awards

PRESIDENT'S AWARD

Abedallah Hammouda, Edison High School | Tree of Tareez

PROVOST'S AWARD

Katie Xiong, University High School | A Life of Blood,
Sweat & Tears: The Story of a Hmong Teen Bride

HENRY MADDEN LIBRARY AWARDS

Evelynn Hli Her, University High School | Incense
Emma Maule, Mariposa County High School | Run.

DEAN'S AWARD

Miguel Angel Villegas, King City High School | Papers

WILD ABOUT BOOKS AWARD

Leo Price, Edison High School | The Pursuit of Knowledge

WILLIAM SAROYAN AWARD

Martin Mijares, Dos Palos High School | The Trees Whisper

MIA BARRAZA MARTINEZ AWARD FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE WRITING

Amber Garcia, Corcoran High School | It was Christmas.

CHAIR'S AWARD

Mazzy Ballard, Mission Oak High School | October.

MFA AWARD

Stephanie Gutierrez, Mission Oak High School | Irony of Death

Awards

FRESNO POETS' ASSOCIATION AWARD

Cadence Dooms, University High School | Maternal Thoughts

PHILIP LEVINE PRIZE AWARD

Elijah Castro-James, Career Technical Education Charter | Floating Ladders

THE NORMAL SCHOOL AWARD

Samara Valencia, Mission Oak High School | Nine Lives

FACET AWARDS

Elizabeth Conricode, King City High School | Shortness of Breath

Alexandra Lozano, Duncan Polytechnical High School | The World is Mine

HMONG AMERICAN WRITERS' CIRCLE AWARD

Gabriela Valencia, King City High School | Junior

HMONG AMERICAN INK & STORIES AWARD

Evelynn Hli Her, University High School | Bridging the Gap

SAN JOAQUIN LITERARY ASSOCIATION AWARD

Doretha Hewlett, Bullard High School | Where I'm from

CHICANX WRITERS AND ARTISTS ASSOCIATION AWARDS

Nicole Nunez, Mission Oak High School | Esos ojos oscuros

Antonio Dawson, Voyager Secondary School | How it went down

DRAMATIC ARTS AWARD

Lottie Messick, Mariposa County High School | Don't Ask About Work on the First Date

Awards

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Omar Lewis, University High School | Between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X

Travis Pura-Hicks, King City High School | The “Caretaker”

Fatima Torrez, Mission Oak High School | El anochecer en tu rostro

Asia Baylis, Career Technical Education Charter | Little Sister

Chloe Mendoza, Selma High School | By the Petals
of My Lonely Flower

Alexander Osorio, King City High School | The Pacific

Isabella Porras, Selma High School | Comfort In My Lonely

Sydney Jacobs, Mariposa County High School | American Ode

Alannis Santiago, Mission Oak High School | Tiny Dunkers

David Gonzalez, King City High School | Spiraling Tower

Gabriel Aguilar, King City High School | On Nights Like This

Kane Sjoberg, Edison High School | When I was Young on
Cornell Street

Paulina Valadez-Garcia, University High School | Group #16

Emily Ganiron, Mission Oak High School | Death of a Hero

Cadence Dooms, University High School | The Memoir of an
Atrocious Scrabble Player

SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY WRITING PROJECT

TEACHER AWARDS

Antonia “Gabi” Brittsan, Washington Union High School

Grace Hinojosa, Dos Palos High School

Tree of Tatreez

ABEDALLAH HAMMOUDA

Edison High School

President's Award

One stitch after the other, intricately interwoven with the one beside it. They are beautifully detailed cypress trees and olive branches that lay in red cotton thread against the darkest of black wool cloth. She lay awake at the crack of dawn from the sound of the *Fajr* call to prayer. Nabeeha, my grandmother, is 11 years old. It's 1963.

As the sun rises from the east, orange and golden hues brush over the expansive fields of olive and fig trees in the nearby foothills of Deir Debwan, Palestine. The light creeps by the minute, reaching the windows of the house which takes over the need for oil lamps at night. If there is anyone left asleep, the light is there to wake them. But Nabeeha is already awake, she went the whole night without rest. Living the daily Palestinian struggle, coping with such uncertainty of safety calls for a means to distract herself with the handmade *tatreez* sewing and embroidery. Embodying her young Palestinian spirit, it is more comforting than the lull of sleep.

There is a gentle knock at her door. "Habibti, are you awake?" asks her mother, Fatima, in Arabic.

"Yes mama, I just woke up. I'll get ready for school after breakfast. Is baba still here?" says Nabeeha diligently, acting as if she had just woken from a night's rest. But her mother can see her face, her red eyes and eye bags accent the orange sun coming through the vertically barred windows. She walks over.

"When was the last time you slept?" asks her mother in a worried tone. Right before Nabeeha can answer, she pulls her quilt up from her knees in an attempt to hide what was in her lap. But before she can, her mother unveils what she was trying to hide. It is a handmade *thobe* which is a traditional embroidered Palestinian dress that she has been working on for days on end. In the same way an anxious person bites their nails, Nabeeha has been tirelessly working her hands and youthful fingers to merely take away the fear of home.

"It's nothing mama, I was just stitching this because I was bored,"

a bigger lie hasn't been told by her than this one. Her mother grabs her face with one hand, pinching her cheeks together making her lips furrow like frowning eyebrows.

"It's *haram* to lie to your mother, so tell me how long have you been working on this dress?" says her mother.

"Only a few days," Nabeeha says as tears begin to pool in her red eyes.

"It's okay *habibti*, it's okay. I'm here for you," her mother has embraced her while caringly stroking the back of her hair. She has understood what her daughter has been going through. She knows ever since Nabeeha was young she would distract herself from her troubles by staying occupied during this life altering occupation by Israel. It is unnerving to know settlers are living on land a few kilometers away, living in homes of now refugees and building on the soil of those who for generations have lived there before. The idea of her home being taken or demolished is one that shakes a young girl to the core.

Sitting there for a little while longer, embracing each other as the comfort of human connection dwindles from "I'm scared" to "I'm okay", Nabeeha has gathered what energy she has left to get ready for school. Despite the 20-minute walk up and back down a hill, nothing trumps her desire for education.

Every day she journeys to school alone. And once she reaches the top of the hill, she looks over the land as it begins to look surreal. Knowing there is violence and war, she closes her eyes and prays. She prays for herself, for her family, and for all the people who want peace and freedom. She ends by affirming the presence of God over this land, "*La hawla wala quwwata illa billah.*" After her prayer, with her bag in hand and hijab in place, she continues to walk to school with her head down just as she had learned to do to stay out of trouble.

As she approaches the doors to the school, she whispers under her breath "*Bismillah*" and enters.

The school day is over and Nabeeha feels weighed down by the last couple of days. On her walk home, she decides to take a detour to one of her favorite spots outside her home. There is a fig tree she likes to go to; it grows in an awkward shape out of the loose fertile soil, so the stump is short and dipped in the center before it branches out. She goes there for the quietness of it, the secluded peace that takes her away. As if the land has sprouted a hand, she sits in its palm as the branching fingers protect the red target on her back. Hours pass and she is there sitting at the stump, stitching her dress that she snuck into her bag before leaving for school. The sun has begun to set, and her eyes begin to strain from the lack of light for the detailed work she is doing. As she walks herself home, the pain in her eyes grows more and more unbearable to where she begins to itch them relentlessly trying to make them feel better.

When she arrives home and enters the house, her mother comes to her worried about where she has been this entire time after school but seeing her daughter in her current state stops her from getting upset.

As Nabeeha has her hands on her eyes, her mother asks, “What’s wrong with your eyes?”

“I don’t know, they just started hurting a lot as I was walking home because—” she stops herself from explaining that she was working on her dress.

“Okay, well go wash your eyes with some warm water, and get the eye drops from the cabinet in the kitchen so I can put them in for you before bed,” her mother tells her.

Nabeeha makes her way to the kitchen where she gets a chair to stand on to reach where the medicines are kept. Still covering one eye, she looks over the top shelf with half vision and grabs the brown dropper bottle with the yellow label. As she grabs it, she can faintly see a picture of an eye at the bottom, meaning this must be the eye drops. She comes down from the chair and makes her way to her mother in her bedroom that she shares with two other siblings. She lays her head in her mother’s lap as she gives her the bottle.

“This should soothe your eyes after a while,” says her mother as she widens Nabeeha’s eyes with her thumb and index finger.

The solution is in the glass tube hovering over her eye, ready to drop center. One drop falls into her left eye and there is an instantaneous shriek of agony that leads to a painful and burning cry. It is as if her eye is being kissed by the flame of her father’s lighter. Frozen with confusion and fear, her mother does not know what is going on.

“What’s wrong?! Why are you crying?” asks her mother. With her heart racing not knowing what to do she grabs Nabeeha by the back of the neck and tries to force her hand away from her eye so she can see what she is crying helplessly about. Unable to speak from the pain, she only moans and groans while covering her face. Her mother grabs the dropper bottle and looks at it hesitantly. The solution is written in Arabic.

“Al-al-yoo— Al-yoo—” she tries to pronounce but ultimately fails at completing the word due to her lack of knowledge. She has gone her whole life at this point with the disadvantage of being illiterate. Overcome with frustration she throws the bottle against the bed and runs outside to call her neighbor for help. She approaches their porch and begins to bang against the steel door to get their attention. This late at night, they might be having dinner or praying *isha*, but this is too important. A woman opens the door.

“Fatima, what is it? Did something happen?” says her neighbor Miriam. As she stands in her doorways, she has a loosely wrapped shawl around her head that isn’t hiding her emotions at all.

“Come with me! Something has happened to my daughter!”

Miriam leaves what she was doing at home and goes to help Fatima. As they entered the room Nabeeha is in, they see her curled up in the corner of the room with her knees up to her chest, not being able to help sobbing from the pain.

“Nabeeha, it’s me Miriam, come here let me see what happened,” after all Miriam is the only person around with any medical background as she was a nurse in Egypt for a little while. No other doctors are around, let alone easily accessible. She grabs Nabeeha’s face gentler than when Fatima had done it, and carefully looks around her eye.

“What did you put in her eye?” she nervously asks Fatima.

“Just the eyedrops from this bottle. Her eyes were itchy and red. Here.” she hands over the bottle and Miriam’s eyes immediately ignite with realization.

“Oh no, these aren’t eye drops. This is a bottle of *alyud*.”

Fatima is confused as to what the word means but she knows it was used as an antiseptic for cuts and scrapes. *Alyud* is the Arabic word for iodine, the yellow label is to caution its use. The picture of the eye at the bottom is there to inform against using the yellowish-brown substance in eyes and warn of the serious damage it can cause.

“Go get the starch and a cup of warm water,” Miriam says as she tries her best to stay calm. Fatima comes back with both things asked of her, and she hands them over to Miriam while her hands shake from worry. Miriam expertly mixes the water and the starch, and she dips a small piece of cotton cloth into it. She gently squeezes the cloth on Nabeeha’s eye just enough for the solution to flow out around her eye.

“Do this for her every morning and night but go see a doctor as soon as possible.” These are the only directions given by Miriam to nurse Nabeeha back to health, but she is unsure if Nabeeha has lost her vision or not. The night comes to an end and Nabeeha is resting after the pain has settled down. Fatima has nothing to offer her neighbor but only her gratitude and the customary invitation to dinner sometime later in the week as thank you for the help.

A week passes of Nabeeha staying at home and adding the starchy cloth to her eye until her family is able to get in contact with an eye specialist operating out of Nablus, a nearby city. Up until the day of the doctor visit, Nabeeha would only go outside to her favorite tree and count stones. There she would sit alone with a wrap over her eye. Kids from the school nearby would lurk in the brush rolling mint leaves in fig leaves like a cigar and smoking it. The stones Nabeeha counted became the ones hurled at her by the kids who made fun of her injury. She makes the trip to the eye doctor with her injured eye and little red marks from stones that didn’t quite break skin but broke the spirit instead.

After a lengthy examination of her clouded eye, Dr. Walid decides she needs glasses to compensate for the loss in efficiency her eye has undergone. This comes as a shock as it doesn’t sound like a bad thing compared to a possible surgery. Nabeeha is still troubled at this decently good news in the grand scheme of things because she knows what will come from this. People will make fun of her and call her “four eyes” just as they do to every other person who wears glasses. Her eyes begin to water at the thought of this, but she only weeps from her one good eye as the crust around her left eye is a water dam only discoloring her eyelid at the attempt to cry. Feeling the opposite, her mother is in pure relief. She tries to convince her daughter that this is a good thing, that Allah was good to them. But it is no use as Nabeeha’s confidence is already breaking down.

When she gets her glasses a few days later, she is hesitant to put them on. The thin silver wireframes don't balance out with the quarter inch thick left lens, but this is her eyesight, she has to wear them. As she puts them on, the world seems new to her as everything seems brighter and clearer than ever before.

Her feelings towards going to school are mixed. Once she arrives, the kids are all looking her way. No one else really wears glasses and those who do are the ones who are made fun of the most, relentlessly picked on by the kids who believe they are better. When it comes time for class to start, Nabeeha opens her school bag for her books and realizes that her dress is still there. She blankly stares at it, forgetting how she has gotten to where she is. She doesn't blame herself or the dress. The whole school day goes on with that dress on her mind. What is she to do with it? She contemplates finishing it or burning it. Her fear of war has blinded her, manifesting as a distraction from the reality around her.

As she walks home, her dress is in hand with a firm grip right where she stitched her final red stitch. Entering the kitchen, she gets the brown bottle of iodine out of the cabinet. In her left hand is the bottle that almost took her left eye. But in her right hand, is the half-made dress with elaborate stitching that she sees clearer than ever. Her left hand goes limp and the bottle rolls from her palm to her fingertips, ultimately falling and breaking on the ground. As Israel has taken their lands, the bottle has taken part of her vision. But the dress has been a means to express her resilience to fear. She finishes the dress that night with immaculate detail. The motifs of olives between lines of palm leaves, and crisscross patterns that almost look braided, is the beauty of Palestine. In spite of harm done, Palestine continues to stand tall as does she with her glasses giving her the strength of vision.

A Life of Blood, Sweat & Tears: The Story of a Hmong Teen Bride

KATIE XIONG

University High School

Provost's Award

"I knew I had made a mistake once I got there." I said telling the reporter every single detail of my story. *"How did you get there? Why did you choose to go?"* I moved around in my seat looking down at the floor embarrassed. *"You can tell me. Your story is what's going to help other younger girls like you not make the same mistake."* the reporter explained trying to calm my anxiety down. I tilted my head up and looked toward the window and back at her. "It was 2007, I met him when I was 15 years-old. He went to the same school as me but was about two years older than I was. I had calculus with him. I didn't really notice him at first, because I usually kept to myself most of the time and he ... He was talkative, funny, and the basic extrovert. I had never met a Hmong guy that was so out there. ..."

"What was so weird about that?"

"Well, most Hmong individuals I had known were more introverted like myself and not very ... What's the word?"

"Outgoing?" the reporter interrupted.

I nodded my head and paused to recollect my thoughts and memories that I couldn't imagine were mine but they were. "Then one day after school he came to me. I was sitting on a bench in front of the school waiting for my father to pick me up. He asked me what I was doing and told me that I was pretty. Of course I had given in to him; I had never been called pretty by a boy before and it was a good feeling. He flirted with me and asked me for my number, which I gave to him after. When I got home all I could think about was him and when he called me, our conversations would last until two in the morning. After 2 weeks of talking, I became his girlfriend."

"What was your family's reaction?"

"They didn't really care. I think they thought that the relationship wouldn't go anywhere, so they weren't worried. ... Until one day, he asked me if I wanted to go to the grocery store with him and I agreed after lying my

parents that I had an after school study group to attend to. I got in the car with him which was filled with dirty clothes on the floor and the smell of beer and whiskey in the air. I was a little hesitant at first because my conscience knew that something was wrong about getting in the car with him, but before long we passed by the grocery store and he didn't look back. I was freaking out and he knew."

"Did you say anything to him?"

"Yes, I asked him where we were going and he told me that he had to pick stuff up from his house first. I told him that we could've stopped at the grocery store first, but he ignored my suggestion. In my head I was just wishing that he wasn't going to take me to his house to get married. I had heard stories like this from my mother. The Hmong girl getting kidnapped to get married. I was too young, I thought in my head, but the biggest thing I was worried about was what my family would think. I knew that it would bring them shame if they found out. I knew I had made a mistake once I got there. His family was already waiting at the door for us and all I wanted to do was run. ..." I took a deep breath and paused trying not to cry. I didn't want to continue, but the reporter grabbed a tissue and handed it to me and I took another deep breath, "I was too numb to run. He grabbed my hand nearly dragging me to the door. His father greeted me and immediately started the ceremony. We did the traditional Hmong marriage ceremony and his family called my parents to tell them that I was their new *nyab* (daughter-in-law). When they handed me the phone, my mother was on the other line crying. "Mi ntxhais, koj txhob quaj nawb. ..." (my daughter, do not cry, okay). Although my mother was trying to reassure me, I couldn't stop crying while listening to the breaks in her voice and the sadness in the way she spoke her words to me."

"Your family didn't call the police?"

"No, they didn't. They called our clan leader and all he said was, what was done was done. After my family hung up, like my clan leader said, what was done was done, and my now husband took me to his room and slept with me. Let me tell you, it was the scariest thing in my life. I wanted to yell and scream, but I couldn't do that or else I probably wouldn't be here telling you my story."

"Are you saying he sexually assaulted you?"

"Yes ..." my voice cracked. I moved around in the chair and started crying. "I stayed with that horrible man for 3 years and those were the worst 3 years of my life. His mother hated me and expected me to do all my chores and duties as a *nyab*. I hated her but kept my posture up and attitude down. My husband wouldn't let me out of the house for the first year. It was literal hell. It felt like I was captured and put in a tower for years and no one dare came to rescue me, even though they knew. My family never called or visited because my husband refused to let them through the door. While I was a *nyab* I cooked, cleaned, cooked, and then cleaned again. My husband, of course went to school and he ordered my family to put me on independent study."

"Why didn't he just let you go to school?"

"He didn't want anyone looking at me, but at the same time he wanted a smart wife. Most importantly though, he didn't want me to escape because he

knew I would do anything to escape from his grasp, even kill myself.”

“Can we talk about that? Over time you developed depression right? How did you get through it?”

I looked around and grabbed the hot water that was in front of me and took a long sip; I was trying to push the topic away, but I knew I had to speak up. If I didn't then other girls could get into the same situation as me, and I didn't want that for anyone in the whole universe. “Um, yeah. I tried probably over five times to overdose, but either my brother-in-law or husband would try to stop me. After that my husband would beat me until his parents told him to stop. At the time the only option in my head to get out of that situation was to die. In the mindset that I was in, I was hurting so much that death was a better option to me.”

“Then you met Tina right?”

“I had known Tina since 7th grade actually. She had been my best friend since then, all the way to sophomore year. The only reason we stopped hanging out was because I didn't come to school anymore and I didn't have a phone to call her, so communication just stopped. But then he finally gave me permission after one year of captivity to go out, because according to his standards I was good enough. Right away I went to a telephone booth and called Tina and she agreed to meet me at a McDonalds that was around the corner of our high school. It was there I told her everything and it was there I finally got the chance to plan my escape. When I went back to the house all I could think about was getting out of that house, but I knew it wouldn't be quick and easy. So, I stayed with him and his parents for 11 more months of torture. I had never felt more tired. At this point my depression was getting worse. Any chance I got I hurt myself, and if my husband caught me he would hurt me. I'm lucky enough that I didn't give him any children. I remember my mother-in-law mocking me when I was crying about missing my family. She told me that, now that I'm married, I will live a life like other married Hmong girls: taking care of the family, working around the house and giving birth. I was devastated hearing this. This was the moment I realized my hopes and dreams for a future was never coming true.”

“How did you finally escape?”

It was about two years after my meetings with Tina. We kept in touch meeting once every month. It was a Friday and I told my husband I had a doctors appointment and I told him that I would walk there because it was a five minute walk. He agreed and then once I had gotten to the doctor's office, Tina picked me up and drove me to my parent's house. When I saw my parents I cried my eyes out. The emotions that I had kept inside for those two long years were exploding from my eyes. My mother hugged me so tight and my father couldn't let me go. That night, my parents, clan leaders, and the rest of my family called his family to tell them I wanted a divorce. One of my clan leaders didn't want to come because he believed that if I came back into the clan it would bring shame and disgrace to my family. His own words were “I'm sorry to say that the good Hmong men will not want to marry you,” he said. “Only the men who need you at night will have you.” My father did not care because all he wanted was his daughter back. Those words haunted me for years. In my head, all I could think of was, “I'm never going to find love

ever again” but at the moment my mother told me to brush it off and the clan leaders that were there permitted my divorce. You don’t know how happy I was. It was finally over. I was finally safe. I didn’t have to be the perfect daughter-in-law anymore, and most importantly I didn’t have to live with that hell of a man. I could just be me, a Hmong girl who got her freedom back. I remember two nights after, my ex-husband pounded on my family’s front door. At that point my family had to contact the police and I got a restraining order against him.”

“Did you ever love him?”

“At first yes. That was probably the only thing that was stopping me from leaving. The thought of, he loves me, I love him, stuck in my head through those 8 months. But Tina asked me this question which was the thing that made me really want to leave, “If he really loved you, don’t you think he would care for you? You wouldn’t have all these bruises on your body, you wouldn’t have your freedom taken away from you, and you probably would actually be happy if he actually loved you.” That was a big hit at my heart. When I was with him, I was never happy. He deprived me of my freedom and innocence. He hurt me mentally and physically and who calls that love? That was the changing point for me.”

“What was the aftermath?”

“Well, for two years I went to therapy and I’ve gotten better. Elders gossiped about me like crazy, calling me a disgrace, whore, disappointment and worst of all they would scare their daughters telling them that no one loves me and that I will go to hell for marrying so young and then divorcing. That was probably the worst thing about getting divorced.”

“What was the worst thing about being a teen bride?”

“You always felt alone. In the Hmong culture when you became a bride, you were expected to be a woman and at the age of 15 that’s pretty difficult. You had no freedom at all. But let me tell you, the biggest thing that us Hmong girls can do for each other is not keep everything inside but to listen and help each other. If we aren’t there for one another who will be the one to save the young Hmong girl from a life of blood, sweat and tears. Many Hmong clan leaders estimate that 30% to 50% of the girls marry before age 17. But most Hmong girls like myself, disagree and say that the figure is much higher, perhaps 70%, and that some of the brides have yet to reach puberty. This is unacceptable and we need to be here for each other to remind one another that we are not just here to make babies and be housewives. We are here to have a future and to find someone who is able to appreciate that, whether it be a Hmong man or not. That’s what I wanted and that’s what we need to do. We need to come together and help one another. That is the only thing that will stop Hmong child marriages from happening.”

Incense

EVELYNN HLI HER

University High School

Henry Madden Library Award

While helping my mother in the kitchen with hu plig morning preparations, I catch the faint presence of energy — of spirits. The ethereal scent of incense brings me closer to the gates of the other world welcoming ancestral entities at the doorstep of my home.

I hear the light click of smooth polished goat horns that divinate as well as tarot cards and tea leaves at the bottom of a tea cup. I hear the last ring of his gong and the final chime from his hoop, the sword lays still until picked up by another... His dance, his horse, his mask all rich in culture and many years of experience are respected and well known throughout our community.

Grandfather stands guard at the front door chanting loud and clear. The phonetics of our native tongue, mellifluous as the syrup my grandmother serves with her homemade ncuav, is spoken in tandem with rhythm and sounds like a song. Tall and strong, my grandfather is a powerful man. He's wrestled with tigers and captured poj ntxoog near river banks. Despite his age, grandfather stands guard at the front door.

He sweeps the house with his broom of leaves cleansing everything in its path for the incoming of a new year. He is a blessing, who blesses us all. What scares me most is when the crashing of his sword silences forever. For who is courageous enough not only to fill the shoes of a great txiv neeb, but to become bigger than him? To carry on tradition into the next generation?

The lingering wisps bring me back to the kitchen task before me — be a good daughter and continue cooking.

Run.

EMMA MAULE

Mariposa County High School

Henry Madden Library Award

The Two of You

There are plenty of fish in the sea. When you catch your first fish, chances are you want to keep it. The memories that both of you share are countless and they take you back to happier times. Are those times coming again in the near future, or are they simply in the past? Sometimes, fish need to be put back in the water. Emotions and actions don't match up; you are trying to breathe water and your fish is trying to breathe air. Happy mediums can't be found, everything is a struggle and you might not realize it at first because love often overtakes consciousness. Some fish have razor sharp teeth that somehow cut away and the heart, mind, and body without you ever noticing until the end. You are your own person. You are your own fish. Don't be afraid to swim in your own direction, and remember that it's never too late to change your mind. It may be your first fish, and it might make you sad to throw it back into the ocean depths, but you need to remember that fish don't drown. You need to separately process water and air, you need to walk away from the shore, before you're the one who's drowning.

Love,
Your Daughter

Annie closed her laptop solemnly and pushed herself back from her desk, the office chair gliding her across the floor and aiming her towards her bed. She could hear her parents arguing in the room next to her; the house was silent aside from them and the two bedrooms shared a wall. She leaned back in the chair and positioned her arms above her head, trying to stretch the thought out of her mind that her parents would never see the letter that she had just written. The more she thought about it, the angrier she got, though she couldn't quite pinpoint what the anger was at. Was it at her mom for choosing to stay with her abusive father? Was it at herself for being almost totally powerless in this situation? She didn't know, but at that moment it didn't matter.

Annie touched her toe-tips to the ground and shuffled herself and the chair back to the desk. She flung open the laptop, entered her password, and was back on the Google Document that she left off on. She stared at it, her face blank of any emotion, hoping that her mind would change to be the same. It remained biased, and tears began to drip down her face. It contorted and her eyebrows furrowed, Annie clicked the back arrow, taking herself back to her collection of "Recent Documents," and tapped with two fingers on the mousepad. It brought up options for the document, and without hesitation, she clicked "Remove." What was the point of writing it if no one was going to look at it anyway?

Their shouting was getting louder now, but somehow it was still inaudible. Annie felt as if she could see their silhouettes through the wall, her dad towering over her mom, trying to belittle her. Her mother wasn't backing down, her body was outstretched towards him yet her arms were not reaching out. Annie's mom screamed something at her father, but it was cut short with a loud slap. Annie shook away the apparitions just in time to miss that, and she shuddered. As if on cue, her orange tabby cat Oliver slunk out from under her bed, his chubby tummy dragging across the hardwood floor as he did so. He sauntered over to the desk and stopped at the base of the chair. Annie reached down her hand and traced it across his back. He lifted his tail up and let out a small purr, filling the room. The house was quiet now, and Annie started to wonder if the people in the apartment next to her had heard what was going on. She would never know; they never seemed to complain about the noise.

"Come on Oliver, let's go and get something to eat. I think the coast is clear." Annie wrapped both of her arms around her cat's enormous body and stood up with him. She tread quietly over to her door and maneuvered Oliver into one arm like a baby. She used her free hand to twist the door knob and pull it open. Oliver let out a louder meow this time. Annie stopped in her tracks, looked at him, and held a pale finger to her lips. He didn't get the memo and meowed again. She set him down on the floor, and he trotted away into the living room. Annie followed him and out of the corner of her eye noticed that there was something floating at the top of her fishtank. She made her way over to it and sat on the couch, leaning over the arm. She pressed her forehead against the glass.

Seven fish were swimming in the fishtank, their bright purples, blacks and blues swirling around the enclosure. They weaved in and out of plastic seaweed and through castles, seeming completely unbothered by the little green fish that lay lifeless at the top of the water. Annie sighed and reached around to the back of the tank where a little net hung. That fish was her favorite, it had been around for as long as she could remember. Her father had won it for her mother at the state fair when she was pregnant with Annie.

She opened up the lid and used the little net to scoop out the petite fish. Her scales glistened in the sunlight coming in from the window, mocking the summer trees out in the backyard. Annie silently said her goodbyes to the fish and walked into the kitchen, gently placing him on top of the already full trash. Oliver noticed that she had meandered into the kitchen and started to make his way over to her. Annie turned away from the trashcan and looked at

the clock on the wall. It read 4:30 p.m., and she decided that it was only okay to eat a snack right now. She turned her head back around and opened the pantry door.

There was surprisingly quite a bit to eat, considering the fact that neither of her parents had been to the store in about a week and a half. She eyed a red bag of Doritos, but didn't want to open the bag because she felt it would be too loud. Annie scanned the shelves for a few seconds more, then decided that the fruit snacks looked promising and grabbed two packets of them. Suddenly, their arguing had started up again, but it seemed one sided. She couldn't hear her mother's voice, and her dad was getting progressively more intense. She decided to ignore it and walked out of the pantry, shutting the door.

As she turned around to walk back into her room, she saw Oliver rummaging through the trash. Her eyes widened and anger started to course through her body. "Oliver, no!" she whisper-yelled, taking a step towards him. He had the little green fish in his mouth. Annie tried to push him off, but instead she accidentally knocked over the trash can in the process. Oliver ran off and she cursed under her breath. Just then, the house erupted with noise. Her father was yelling at the top of his lungs; you could feel his fury seeping through the walls and into the rest of the house. Oliver crawled under the couch, and Annie stood still. Her mother let out an awful, blood-curdling scream, making Annie flinch. Her painful screams echoed as the rhythmic sound of fist on bone continued. Her father boomed something that, for the first time today, was fully audible.

"I wish you were dead!"

Her mother let out one last cry and the pounding stopped. Annie felt her insides shrivel up, and she nearly doubled over. Was this it? Was this truly the end? She looked over at her parents' bedroom door, waiting for any sound of life. Her heart was pounding in her chest. She stood for what felt like hours waiting to hear something, anything. And then she heard it. Sobbing.

Footsteps traipsed heavily around the room as if they were pacing. A deep breath was taken, and some rustling of what sounded like blankets being thrown up in the air to lay them down flat. Then more footsteps. However, this time, they were headed to the bedroom door. Annie's blood froze in her body. The handle turned, and the bedroom door opened slowly, a small creaking sound coming from the hinges. Out stepped her father, covered in blood, tears streaming down his cheeks as if his face were a windowpane in a storm. His gaze searched Annie's. Annie's eyes were wide with fear. He took a step towards Annie, sorrow in his gait.

Annie's blood had dethawed, her heart was back to raging and her mind was back to racing. She watched her dad take another step towards her, and she felt herself beginning to cry. "Annie, please ..." he trailed off and sniffled.

Annie took one last look at her father.

"Annie, please!" His voice had gotten louder. Annie hurriedly made her way into the living room, and she could feel her father's footsteps behind her. She twisted the doorknob and slammed the door to the front porch behind her.

And then she ran.

Papers

MIGUEL ANGEL VILLEGAS

King City High School

Dean's Award

She is alone. She doesn't understand. She screams, she yells, she cries. No one understands. No one will understand. She pushed. Her scream ceased; another cry starts. A newly born mom holds her baby. She smiles, he cries. He has a future, she doesn't. He is her future. She loves him.

They move, far, far away. ...

New scenery. Arid. Rough. Barren. Lonely. She understands, he doesn't. He learns to understand. New language; mother language. He did not know. He never knew. She lied. A new origin was written.

She only protected him. She had fear. She didn't know what she could do. No one knew. She hid; they hid. She loved him. She did not want the Red to take him away. But the Blue took control, and maybe they would be okay. Maybe she could tell the truth. Maybe they could go back; into the unknown.

He was the sun of her desert. He was the moon of her night. He was the water of her river. He was the clouds of her sky. She was his mother, and he was her son. He was the fish that could cross the *charco* not knowing he could. He questioned. She kept quiet. He did not cross, they just walked. They always walked, she never thought of it. She never thought it would come back around.

2016. Summer. The map turns Red. The Red engulfs the Blue. There is fear. There is rage. There is uncertainty. There are tears. The Red devours the light. Darkness. The room was filled with darkness. The mom hugged her son, for a last time; though they did not know it would be the last time. They would of have never had known, but deep down, she did know. But he smiled, she cried. He asks. She speaks. He learns. He forgives, though there was nothing to forgive. She was afraid, now they must pay. She cries. He cries. They hug. They kiss.

He is sent back. ...

They never meet again.

The Pursuit of Knowledge

LEO PRICE

Edison High School

Wild About Books Award

I awoke at once to the call of my name. There was no more shade from the tree above me, so I sat in the warm Tuscan sun.

“Baccio! Baccio!” my father called.

“I’m coming, Father!” It was time to work again. I ran to the pen to start the process of collecting the wool of the sheep.

“Grab the shears on the bench, there,” my father told me. My entire family was in an urgent mood. We had to collect and sell all of the possible wool if we wanted to eat in the coming weeks. I took the shears and started my work. After a few minutes of shearing, my father started to complain about the city dwellers.

“Every six weeks, we are required to bend to the will of the Medicis’. People like us live in dirty impoverished towns while they enjoy a glass of Vino in one of their many palazzos. They do not realize that it is our responsibility to clothe them and supply their luxuries.” My father hated these people and they sounded awful to me, but I had never left my cottage except for trips to the market. I wondered if there were people like the ones in his rhetoric. This curiosity grew while I worked. I wanted to explore for myself.

Early the next morning, I set off on my exploration. I didn’t think it was necessary to explain my quick journey to my parents, so I silently slipped the door. I took a deep breath of the morning air watching the sunrise color the green landscape a beautiful yellow hue. Remembering the paths taken by the wool collectors, I walked towards the city of Pisa.

After about an hour of walking, I heard the cathedral bells ring. I looked ahead and saw a tall tower that looked odd. Upon closer inspection, it seemed to be leaning. I had never seen anything like that before. From afar, Pisa was a beautiful city, but it became obvious that only some parts held up to my expectations of massive palaces. After a few minutes of walking on the cobblestone streets, I noticed a house that stood out from the rest. It was not a palazzo like the ones my father described, yet it was different from its neighboring houses. I decided to look inside.

I neared the side of the stone home. I saw the head of a man that seemed to be deeply focused on something. As I pulled myself up to the window, I saw a man, slightly older than my father, diligently building a model of spherical

shapes. He had graying and wore modest clothing. I made an accidental grunting noise, enough to reveal my position. The man glanced towards the window and saw my head dipping below the sill.

"Who's there?" he called out. The man looked out the window and saw me hiding. "What is a boy of your age doing under my window?" My face turned red with worry and embarrassment. I look very young for my age. My bare face and scrawny, malnourished body led to the illusion of my young age. In reality, I was fourteen. My embarrassment did not help my inability to make a rational response to his question.

"Nevermind that," he said. "Come in and help me with this." I was slightly surprised but mostly relieved. He seemed trustworthy. While walking through his door, he directed me towards a contraption of balls surrounding another larger ball. "What is your name, boy?" he asked.

"Baccio, sir," I responded.

"Well, Baccio, come hold this up for me," he instructed as he pointed towards the contraption. "My name is Galileo Galilei and I am a polymath." After placing an object on the apparatus he asked, "Do you know what this represents?"

"I don't know," I replied. I hope I made the right decision by coming into his house.

"That is Earth, our home," he told me. This confused me. It does not make sense that we could be living on a ball that could hold the entirety of Tuscany.

"How is that possible?" I asked.

"I'll start from the beginning," he said as he picked up the model we had worked on. "This is the solar system. We live here, Earth, one of the multiple planets revolving around the Sun. There are five other planets revolving around this star. We know it as the Sun."

My little education and small knowledge of the solar system caused this discovery to astonish me.

"Are there other people out there? Like us?"

"I have yet to answer that question," he told me. I came to a sudden realization.

"I need to get back home!" I exclaimed. My parents must be extremely worried to find my bed empty. I told Galileo that I needed to start on my way back home. He understood and invited me back to his home anytime.

After two more weeks of education from Galileo, he told about an interesting invention of his. He directed me to a long gold tube with pieces of glass attached to both ends. It was positioned on a stand pointed towards the sky.

"I call this the telescope," he said. "It is used to magnify objects at a long distance," I was amazed as I'd never considered such a thing possible. "I can use this to prove the Solar System Model," he said" This confused me. I thought the concept of planets orbiting the sun was well known among others.

"What do you mean, prove?" I said confusedly. Galileo's face sunk after hearing my question.

"The Catholic Church teaches that everything in the universe revolves

around the Earth, not the Sun. By saying the Church is wrong, we tread on dangerous waters. There is a chance I will face serious consequences as a heretic. But, I believe this telescope has the potential to provide evidence to prove the theory. This brings me to my next question. I am taking a job at the University of Padua and I want you to join me as an apprentice. Your curiosity as a student impresses me.” I was thrown off guard by his question. I did not expect my learning with Galileo to intensify this quickly.

I told him, “I must speak with my parents,” but I already knew my answer was yes.

Four years later, we were analyzing the discovery of a new moon when three loud knocks echoed throughout the home. Galileo opened the door to multiple imposing soldiers nearly forcing him to the ground.

“Galileo Galilei, you are formally summoned to Vatican City to face trial for heresy!” one barked. “We will seize any item deemed illegitimate by the Pope.”

“Please, I haven’t done anything,” he exclaimed. It didn’t seem to matter to the soldiers. I was hidden behind a stack of paper material. Galileo walked towards me under the guise of compliance with the soldiers.

“Baccio, you must take my unpublished papers before the church takes them first,” he whispered.

“B— but,” I stuttered, “I am not ready to teach.”

“You must trust me, Baccio, I don’t know if I will ever have the chance to publish these papers. The diffusion of knowledge transcends the importance of either one of us and still, you are ready.”

“I will not disappoint you.”

The Trees Whisper

MARTIN MIJARES

Dos Palos High School

William Saroyan Award

One night, diving in the depths of my subconscious, I found myself sitting under a gnarled oak tree, light grey carved with dark wrinkles like the skin of an old, old man. Beside me was a young man, colored like a rich clay. He was dressed in a blazer and dress pants, but he seemed uncomfortable in it, like an ill-fitting skin. His eyes glared off into the distance, in the directions of foothills that speckled the horizon. For a moment neither of us spoke, until finally he stood up, his bare feet resting on a root of the oak we stood under.

“Who are you,” were the only words I could manage. But they were enough, and he had heard them. Those otherworldly eyes bore down on me, and he stood there in silence, before he offered a rough calloused hand. Taking it, he helped me up, and his stoic face slowly turned into a smile.

“A wonderer,” he said in a hoarse whisper.

“A wonderer?”

“One who wonders,” he smiled again. “I wonder where my home has gone, I wonder what this land has become, I wonder, but there is no answer. Not for me.”

He began to walk down the hill that the oak tree stood on, and I found myself slowly following. The sun above us was hidden away in clouds, casting the world in a depressed set of greys. I took my eyes off the man to glance at the sky, and the next moment after I lowered my gaze, we had left the hills far behind us. We stood in a marshland, with trees decorating the view around us. “I am sure you have never seen this place,” he said to me, leaning down to scoop up water from a stream.

“Where is this?”

“Where you call home,” he said. “Or at least, what it once was. What you live in now is but a ghost, a shell of its former self.”

“And what happened? Why is it like this?”

The man gave me a look of amusement, but one of annoyance as well. “Do not play coy with me,” he said coolly. “You know very well what happened. You simply don’t acknowledge it.”

Once again, the surroundings changed around us, to a much bleaker state. The green marsh no longer surrounded us, and there were no trees as far as the eye could see. Instead, there slowly moved a tractor down a barren

land, tilling it as it passed. It was a sight I knew well, empty, being prepared for the next season's crop. It was a common sight all around my house, and I had grown accustomed to seeing it as normal.

Wonderer, however, has signs of distress all over his face at the sight. "It surprises you doesn't it, that this is the same place that we were a few moments ago."

"Is it? I would've never guessed. It's all so different."

"From your time to mine, many things have changed. Quite the understatement." As he muttered those words, I could swear I heard the faint noises of gunshots. "The land has been divided amongst those who believe they are entitled to it, and promptly drained of any life it had beforehand. And then they wonder why the ground grows weaker and weaker each and every harvest."

"It was all for the sake of progress I'd assume," I tried to argue, but Wonderer laughed at the thought.

"Progress has sacrificed many things to get where it is. It isn't just the land, but the people as well. There are not many of my own kind here now, and the population shrinks with every year."

He glanced up at the sky, gesturing as a dark mist slowly blanketed the horizon. "After so many years of this progress that you speak of, your skies have been coated in this toxicity. You breathe it in everyday, and it poisons you from the inside. Is that too for progress' sake?"

I tried to find an answer, but Wonderer continued. "Tell me, when was the last time you saw a deer walking around these lands, because I can tell you when I did. Was it worth the progress if the entire land has been eradicated of its natural state?"

"But it's to feed our people," I finally said. "Or is it wrong to do so? Would you rather have us starving for the sake of a few measly deer?"

Wonderer gave me a sad, solemn look, shaking his head. "I suppose the greater good can be blinding, can't it? My people were akin to those deer, a little too much to you lovers of progress."

"So what, you want it all to go back to the way it was?"

"It is far too late for that," Wonderer sighed. "The land has lost its virtue, and the air has rotted. The water runs ruined, tainting the stomachs of all those in these valleys. The time for action had come, and now it has gone."

"So what is the point of all this," I said to him, as the world around us slowly returned to the hill with the old oak tree. "Why are you telling me if it's too late?"

"The tides of change cannot be stopped, but they can be directed. Change is inevitable, but why must it change in a negative way? You are at a point in time where the change is at a critical point, one where a simple sacrifice will cause all hope to be lost. It may be too late for the world that I had to exist, but that does not mean one in which you can exist in can't."

The sun was setting behind the mountain range as Wonderer finished his spiel, and he collapsed against the oak with a tired sigh. Gingerly, I sat beside him again, as he closed his eyes. "I once heard a man say that respect is given to those that deserve it, but why is none given to the very mother who birthed you? Nature, she has yet to abandon you, and here you are, on the

fastest path to do that to her.”

And suddenly I awoke in a cold sweat, wishing that what that odd man had said was simply a dream.

If only it had been a dream.

It was Christmas.

AMBER GARCIA

Corcoran High School

Mia Barraza Martinez Award for Social Justice Writing

It was Christmas. Bright lights flickered in every house, windows were opened to display Christmas trees with sparkling lights and shiny ornaments of all colors. We saw families with smiles spread across every face and fireplaces being set getting ready to open presents. Most importantly, love was in the cold, wintery air. Despite all the happiness surrounded by me, I felt alone. I was with my three best friends, Cole, Bella, and Malachi. Like any normal day, we were four teenagers walking through the dark streets — although this time, the lights made the dangerous streets feel safe and welcoming. For the first time, we were happy to see each other. Christmas is the one night of the year we are not mischievous, yelling at day and crying at night. We see what these people have and wish we had it too.

We're all runaways. Cole had abusive parents. He is constantly shaken up and does not trust anyone except us, although we still think he has a secret hatred towards us. He has long wavy hair that he wears up constantly, and big brown eyes with the best smile. If only he didn't turn to a life of crime, he would be loved by everyone at school. I also had abusive parents. I still have scars up and down my arms and legs from getting cut from knives. I have a scar on my cheek from getting scratched by my mom. My dad is out of the picture as he left before I was born. I have wavy brown hair that falls just below my shoulders. Malachi felt like he didn't matter while at home. He has a little sister who took up all his parents' attention. He started to get bullied and his parents would never listen to the horror stories he had to live through. Bella though, she's the sensitive one in the group, yet, she is the reason we're all still together. She has straight red hair and the biggest blue eyes with freckles. She helped us with our problems and keeps us hopeful in something wonderful happening for us. She ran from home because her father left home and her mom turned to smoking and drinking. She realized she didn't need her so she ran off with me, her best friend of 4 years at the time.

After running off with Bella, we met Malachi and Cole. Turns out they had been runaways for a couple of months prior to us and found each other at a grocery store as they shoplifted together. A few months later, Bella and I were out at a local park where we saw Cole and Malachi. Since then it has been 6 years. In a few years, we will all be adults and hopefully, we can get our lives

together. We all have dreams and so far we can not fulfill them because we are just kids.

We sat at a curb on Johnson and Bell, counting all our money. We had \$67.50 and decided to go to IHOP. We got four hot chocolates and a chicken strip dinner. We were talking about Cole's hair and how he should cut it when Cole and Bella stopped talking and starred past Malachi and I. They then made eye contact and a shiver went down my spine watching their facial expressions become worrisome and then expressionless. Bella shouted out quickly that we need to leave and as I slowly turned around, I saw my mom with a guy I never seen and a beautiful young girl. The connection came quickly as I realized she had a daughter with this man. I almost refused to believe what I was seeing. I sunk down in my seat as I watched this strange woman who looked nothing like the drunk parent I owned and a tear slid down my cheek. I couldn't believe what I was seeing, the very woman that tortured me for eleven years of my life, was standing just a few feet away with people I have never seen, finally happy.

I got up, speechless, my body doing something different then my mind wanting it to do. I walked towards them, hands shaking crazily. For the first time in six years, I saw my mom, and a strong will to hug her overwhelmed me. As I approached her I stopped and she turned facing me. Tears were flooding down my face as the man with her then faced me, smile wiping off his face as it seemed he recognized me. My mom went to say something but I hugged her tightly before she could get a sound out. Resistantly she hugged me back and whispered in my ear, "I'm so sorry."

As I turned to look at my friends, still not letting her go, I saw the confusion in their eyes as tears ran down their faces too. If they were happy or sad tears, I could not tell you. I finally let her go and snapped back into reality, suddenly becoming angry at her once again. I yelled at the top of my lungs, "How could you abuse me for all those years? Your own daughter and you let me rot out on the streets!" I felt eyes turn to us from every direction. At this point, Cole was hugging me from behind whispering that it is going to be okay.

A few hours later and I was staring at a hot cup of chocolate that my mom offered to buy for me. I did not acknowledge her existence but she bought it anyway. She explained to me how after I left she went to a rehab facility and got treated. She has been sober for about 5 years. She said while she was going to the group she met a nice man named Daniel. About a year later she gave birth to Angela, her daughter. They are getting married in a few weeks and asked if I would like to attend. She said she thought I was dead up until about a month ago when she saw us at a local park sitting under a tree. She said she instantly knew it was me but was too afraid to say something.

I was angry and hopeful at the same time. Here was the woman who brought me into this life, sitting in front of me for the first time in 6 years, and I didn't know how to feel. A million thoughts crossed my mind. Maybe I can finally go home. Maybe my friends can live with us. What if they force me to go back home and leave my friends? What will happen to my friends? I blurted out, "Are you going to make me go back home?" Where she immediately responded with, "Yes." I was terrified as I looked at my friends,

eyes watering, “What about them? If they can not come then I don’t want to go either!” My mom nodded and said, “Yeah I understand, but I need to talk to Daniel about all this. Until then you and all your friends can sleep in our guest rooms.”

One year later

Turns out Daniel was not so accepting about a bunch of random dirty kids moving in, but he let us after my mom cried for what seemed like forever. My friends are living here under foster care but were working on getting them homes. Bella is getting adopted by us soon and I could not be happier! Not only that, Cole and I got together and it is going to be a year in a few days. We have found everyone’s birth parents. Cole’s dad went to jail and Malachi’s father passed away due to illness. Other than that, everyone seems to have cleaned up their act, although nobody wants to see them or have them in their lives.

We have all given up stealing and have returned to school. Bella wants to become a social worker while Malachi and Cole are going into the police business. Me though? I’m an author. Without me, you would have never realized the true dangers that lurk around you. Be careful with your children, you never know when your last day with them might be.

October.

MAZZY BALLARD

Mission Oak High School

Chair's Award

It is October. The air is cool, the sun is warm. I can feel everything. I count my steps, I listen to the sound of my shoes hitting the pavement softly. I can hear a television show floating through the open window of someone else's home and into my ear. I can smell the food cooking in someone else's home. I think about my family. I miss my grandparents. I miss my best friend. I think about him, I think about how I shouldn't be thinking about him. I see my shadow, I see all the insects on the ground. Living, I am alive. I am sad, I don't want to be sad. I breathe deeply and think, *it is October*. I am alive. I smell laundry detergent, the best kind. I think about how I never got my license, I think about all my friends who've never gotten their licenses. I think about all of the things I wish I could do, all of the things I would be doing if I were medicated. I think of how expensive it is to be medicated. I wonder how I'm still alive now. I miss being close. I wonder how my life will turn out if I never figure out how to control my illness. I stop and touch a rose, the sunlight pours between the leaves and onto me. I imagine being lonely, I am lonely. I wonder how I ended up so boring, how did I live so fast? I think about all I lack, everything I don't have to offer. I think of my body, I think about all that is wrong with it. I think of how perfect my body really

is. I remember there is nothing wrong with me, as a being. I think of how miniscule everything truly is. I think of the smells and the sounds. I try to remember, this is October, there is only one this year. Very soon, much sooner than I'd like, it'll be a new year with a new October. I think about how hard it is to be born so melancholy. I think about how much of a burden and a blessing it is. I wish I had somebody, I think of how stupid is it to need somebody. I think, how natural is it to need somebody? How human? There's nothing wrong with needing somebody. There's nothing wrong with not wanting to be alone. I cross the street, I breathe deeply. *It is October. I am seventeen years old. I should stop smoking.* I miss the people who aren't even gone from me and I miss myself. I feel everything. I walk up my driveway, I notice the extension cords connecting the hanging lights to my house. I push open the door into the house that is my home, where I live. I didn't turn sixteen here, I didn't turn seventeen here. He knows where I live but he doesn't visit. I kick my shoes off, I say hello to my mother who sits on the couch, where she always does. The woman who gave me this life. I sit down, I pick up my laptop and I type. It is October.

Irony of Death

STEPHANIE GUTIERREZ

Mission Oak High School

MFA Award

Bo awakened with an abrupt jolt of awareness shooting up his body and instinctively gasped for the sweet taste of oxygen in his lungs. He quickly sat up from the hard tiled floors with urgency and his hands began touching random body parts to check if he was hurt. As his body came to the conclusion that he was under no physical danger, he gagged at the pungent smell of chlorine and chemicals that burned his nose and filled his mouth. Bo's chest rose up and down rapidly as the suffocating smell instantly reminded him of the crushing nightmare he had just escaped. No, he hadn't escaped and Bo felt like a wrecking ball had fallen and smashed him against the floor, knocking all the air out his system.

"I died. I was dead." Bo whispered with panic shaping his voice. He took deep, slow breaths to stop hyperventilating and shakily stood up. *Not only did I die*, Bo thought, *but it was the most embarrassing way anyone could die.*

A deep shudder coursed through his body as he recalled his final moments. As humiliating as it sounded, it was still painful. He could still feel the excruciating burn that lit his entire chest on fire as he inhaled the pool water in desperate attempts to breathe. Bo shook violently as he attempted to wrap his thoughts around the situation.

"None of this makes any sense," Bo spoke to himself with a sliver of hysteria escaping. "I need to be rational! I need to breathe. ... I need to think clearly."

Bo attempted to "think clearly" but couldn't get past the cloyed combination of ammonia and chlorine that invaded his senses. He wrapped his arms around his legs, put his head between his knees, and squeezed his eyes shut, weakly attempting to overcome the anxiety overtaking him.

All of his thoughts came at a thousand miles per hour speed trying to come up with an explanation but instantly froze when he heard laughter outside of the small white room he was in. Bo went still and instantly stood up. There were people outside and maybe they knew what had happened to him.

Bo took a hesitant step forward. He debated whether it was a good idea to go outside to the strangers or to just stay in the room. The strangers could potentially be dangerous, and so he decided to have a look around the room

he had first awakened in.

Bo quickly glanced around the room, looking for anything that could hint to his whereabouts, but there was nothing. No piece of decoration or furniture inside the room could give him clues. The room was empty. There wasn't even a light source or any windows but the room somehow still radiated light. He let out an exasperated sigh and went for the door a few feet away.

Bo held his breath as he twisted the freshly polished door handle in front of him, revealing a high walled hallway with no end in sight. The hallway could go on for miles with the only form of decoration being golden wood bordering the plain walls and giant gold-framed portraits emphasizing the cleanliness of the place. Although the hall was mostly empty, it still managed to give off an aura of grandeur. Bo gasped as he turned his head upward, expecting to see the ceiling, but instead finding that there was no ceiling at all. Where the walls stopped, they revealed a mesmerizing ink black and purple sky with fluorescent gold stars that glistened and sparkled with fluffy, powder blue clouds that appeared to breathe, lazily floating by.

Bo still had his mouth gaped open when he heard a deep laugh close by, but he couldn't bring himself to look away from the sky.

"Excuse me," a warm-voiced woman called after him, "Bo Samways?" That stilled Bo. The beauty of the building and sky had distracted him from his goal of figuring out how he got into such an enigmatic place. He slowly turned to face the voice that called out to him and found a short woman wearing a flowing white dress with golden embroidery standing next to a tall, lanky man with matching embroidery on his black suit. The man looked as if he was suppressing a laugh, but Bo couldn't find what was funny about the situation.

"Yes?" Asked Bo tentatively.

"Hello, Bo. Let us introduce ourselves," the short woman said delicately, waving her hand between her and the other man. "My name is Evangelina Bellamy. And this is—"

"—Samuel Sullivan," the tall man finished with a smile. The man had a strikingly deep voice, deeper than any voice Bo had ever heard, but not in a frightening way. It was a voice that was as dark as the black sky above, but still soothing, similar to a cascading waterfall of honey, differing quite drastically from Evangelina's.

Evangelina nodded her head in confirmation. "And we are here to have you ready for your new position."

"New position?" Bo repeated. Bo didn't know of any position, let alone where he was. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I never applied for a job," he said, frantically looking between both of them.

Evangelina opened her mouth but was cut off by Samuel, "You see here, this isn't a job you apply for. We *choose* you." He saw the obvious confusion plastered on Bo's face and rolled his eyes. Samuel moved his hand in a swift circular motion and a golden clipboard appeared out of thin air into his hands, almost as if he were holding onto it the entire time. Samuel cleared his throat and began reading whatever was on his clipboard with a condescending smile. "Bo Samways. Male. Age 19. Occupation, Lifeguard. Cause of death: drowned at a lifeguard pool party to celebrate no persons drowning or getting injured."

He looked up from his clipboard to Bo, “Does that sound about right?”

Bo felt all the color drain from his face and only managed a weak nod. Bo was baffled at the sudden appearance of the clipboard but even more confounded that they knew of his life. Then, he realized that Samuel had just confirmed what he had theorized all along, that he was dead.

“Well now that we are all introduced,” Evangelina started, “ I should get going.” She turned to Bo, with a somewhat apologetic smile and explained “It was nice meeting you Bo, but my department is busy with organizing all the deaths, so I must go. Samuel will explain everything.” And with that, she stepped into the nearest portrait on the wall and disappeared.

Bo stared slack-jawed at the continuous acts which bent reality, wondering how nonchalantly the others had responded to it.

Samuel laughed and Bo responded with a questioning look. “Do you know that your name literally means ‘to live? Ironical since you died and have to kill others.”

“What do you mean that I have to kill others?” Bo asked with a horrified urgency. Bo liked to consider himself as someone kind and helpful to others, this would go against everything that Bo believed and stood for.

Samuel went on to explain that Bo’s new “job” entitled him to kill people, they were the ones who killed the living, determining what way they would die. Bo would have to go to a person that was assigned by either Evangelina or Samuel, and kill them in whichever way he found fit. Samuel explained that not all deaths had to be particularly painful but he preferred them to be dramatic and rather gruesome and disapproved of Evangelina’s preference for peaceful deaths, saying they were too dull and uneventful to find a single pique of interest.

“I don’t want to kill anyone,” Bo argued weakly.

“It’s our job to help humanity by killing people, and also, you don’t have a choice,” Samuel said as he urged Bo into a painting. As Bo walked in, the painting briskly transformed and morphed into a small office with a mahogany desk in the middle of the room with a gold plaque that was engraved with Bo’s name.

Bo walked to the desk and found a file folder in the middle of the desk and stared at it. Samuel told Bo the correct steps to properly kill someone during the long walk to the office they were now in. First, he would have to open the folder, which would instantly transport Bo to the person that one of Bo’s superiors had assigned, and then once he had located the person, all he had to do was imagine their death. Bo wouldn’t have to worry about being seen; Bo would appear invisible to any living person’s eye. Once the person was dead, Bo would be transported back to his office. It seemed easy enough, but that didn’t stop Bo’s stomach churning with guilt.

Bo was about to open the folder but instead looked up to Samuel who was leaning against the exit of the painting. “Break a leg,” Samuel told Bo, nodding his head toward the file.

“Isn’t that my job?” Bo asked with a weak laugh. Samuel chuckled and Bo took a deep breath as he prepared for what he was about to do.

Bo’s first kill was something he felt overwhelmingly guilty towards, due to his attempt at making it interesting, per Samuel’s request. Bo tried

to combine both Samuel's sadistic preference and Evangelina's quiet style of killing as references and ended up with approval and congratulations for a job well done afterward. Bo had killed an old farmer by having a cow somehow fall through the roof of the farmer's house and land on the sleeping man. He then killed a woman with a fatal shot during a gun safety class she was instructing. A favorite of the Death's Department, that both Evangelina and Samuel agreed to be both equal parts sardonic and quick, was when a salesman was trying to prove that a glass window was unbreakable, but broke threw and fell three stories to his death.

The list of Bo's satirical deaths went on and on but the crushing weight of guilt that overwhelmed Bo was beginning to become too much. Samuel didn't know why they chose him to kill people or why they had to kill anyone in general. He understood the dangers and negative effects of overpopulation, but couldn't they just kill some bad people occasionally? If they had the power to kill anyone, couldn't they find a way to make sure that everyone lived without a problem or the fear of dying? Bo wondered frequently over the concept of death and could never figure out how someone as virtuous and kind as Evangelina could ever consider killing a living person with a family and friends and dreams. So when Bo was reporting to Samuel over his latest kill, he asked why they killed people and how Evangelina could calmly watch people suffer.

Samuel was quiet for a long moment before he answered Bo. "Without death, no one would understand what it truly means to be alive."

Bo didn't say anything, but Samuel knew that he understood.

Maternal Thoughts

CADENCE DOOMS

University High School

Fresno Poets' Association Award

My mother is the strongest woman I know

She possesses the sort of dauntlessness needed to tell you that you have

A smidge of spinach in the crevice between two of your teeth,

Mixed with the unnerving elegance required to make you stumble over your sentences

With one of her chilling stares.

She balances this

However

With soft, tepid words that roll over her mouth

Framed with the perfect auburn colored lipstick

That she encourages me to wear, which, of course

I never do.

She has a surplus of bundled freckles around her nose
Even deeper than the caramel of her skin — which I am grateful to have inherited.
She is the only woman on this Earth I have met with the ability to both
Astonish and Agitate me with a single sentence.
Needless to say, I admire her.

On October 31st, 2019

My mother told me she had cancer

In January of 2020

She started losing her hair whilst working on a sewing project

For me.

My mother sacrifices more than I can fathom for me every day

And every day amazes me with her strength and dignity and pride

My mother is my hero

And if I end up with half of her grace in my adult years

I'll consider myself blessed.

Floating Ladders

ELIJAH CASTRO-JAMES

Career Technical Education Charter

Philip Levine Prize Award

In the mornings and in the evenings I am alone.
Not without purpose, I know the reason.
Because he has no choice but to be away.
Because this world taunts me,
With the thought that we can be complete.
It puts in front of me the concept of normality,
Of a nuclear family with no visible worry,
And pulls it right out from under me.

In the mornings and in the evenings,
I see the floating ladders.
Above the fleet of orange trees.
My fathers above all the rest.
Not in length for in truth they are all the same.
Of course, all the fruit-pickers work hard
For they are in much need as he is, as I am.
They have other people to feed besides themselves.
No, his ladder stands taller because he made a promise.
He made a promise to the mother of his most prized possession.
To the woman who sacrificed her own life to give me mine, his vow.

In the mornings and in the evenings of every day.
Every year since I first opened my eyes,
I saw the ladder that stood above others and above him.
I never entered the maze of trees in which he worked.
But waiting in the street before I knew what it all meant,
Before I was aware of the definition of a sacrifice,
As I smelled the citrus mist in the cold morning air,
I imagined wings on the ladder that he stood tall on.

One morning was different because in the evening I was alone.
He walked into the maze once more,
And never came out for his daughter.
The citrus smell turned sour.
The imaginary wings had been clipped,
On the ladder that still stood tall.
I was forced to snap back into reality.
Reality hurt, and it hit as hard as the ground did my father.

So in the mornings and in the evenings I saw my future.
In a way, I have climbed the very ladder that my father held.
Using this ladder, I stayed on top.
It taught me many things about life.
That in a heartbeat, everything could be gone.
One misstep and it can all fade away, leaving only a memory.
Leaving me behind to watch,
Watch the floating ladders.

Nine Lives

SAMARA VALENCIA

Mission Oak High School

The Normal School Award

In my first life, I was a cheetah, Running across the savannah knowing that no man or animal could catch me.

In my second life, I was a tiger, roaming the jungle with only the roar of my voice that caused others around me to run.

My third life, I was a panther, but I spent my days in isolation behind a cage as others came in and flashed their cameras at me.

In my fourth life, My life ended rather shortly, on a dark night as I crossed the street while a truck turned the corner.

In my fifth life, I could only remember darkness, but the warmth of a hand had always guided me, I only regret in my last moments I was not able to see their face.

In my sixth life, I had spent it underneath a bridge on a highway

In my seventh life, I was raised in the home of an old women, until one day she didn't wake up and I was left alone. I had then passed underneath a park bench.

In my eight life, I spent a majority of it behind a cage, but it wasn't like the one from my third life. It was smaller as I could hear others around me cry for help wanting to get out. I had accepted that this would be the place where I would die. That is until you came. I wasn't quite sure what your intentions were as you took me home that day. I was aggressive at first, but you were never angry at me, and soon I began to tolerate you. I began to understand that what you wanted was someone to love, and I was there to be that to you. Still, I could not have stayed long as I wanted. As my last breaths left my body, I could only hope for one thing. I could only hope that I could return to your side. That is how I would spent my last and final life.

In my ninth life, I met you again.

Shortness of Breath

ELIZABETH CONRICODE

King City High School

FACET Award

I can't breathe. The blue-grey rocks run along at my feet around the 100, 200, 300-meter marks and I can't breathe. All I must do is make it to that white line, that gratification of relief we get from it all being over. It's got to be 20 feet, 10 now, just 5 more now. The air is hot and desperate and fleeting, and I can't breathe.

Lately I feel like I am constantly running out of breath. I'm on fire. The tissue in my throat and eyelids is made of barbed wire. The tendons in my calves are a step short from snapping, but I can't feel it because my head won't stop pounding and it takes everything I have not to collapse into the million little planet-deep crevices between the synthetic rubber asphalt and earth's nuclear core.

And I am so close to hell.

The white line is right in front of me. All I must do is hold out, but I can't remember how long I've been holding out for. I can't see anyone's faces, but I know they're all aimed toward me. A moving crimson target.

I feel it closing in. Finally, the white line is under me and I can slow down. It's over.

I double over.

But I still can't breathe.

Feeling is constant. Feeling like I am constantly running out of time. Shortness of the moment and shortness of breath. This will never end.

The World is Mine

ALEXANDRA LOZANO

Duncan Polytechnical High School

FACET Award

I am free, yet I am owned. Separated from my mother, bought, given, bought again, and given to my master during a moment of grief. She adores me, she has set me free and made sure that I was never alone. She feeds me generously and makes sure that I am well. She allows me to feast from her meals and gives me my favorite treat occasionally. The only thing my master expects from me is comfort during times of stress. I entertain her by performing small tricks, but my Master never really expects much from me. I cherish our moments alone together in the dark, under the starry night sky. She tells me about her day and I share with her about mine. There's a language difference between us, yet we understand each other perfectly. I love my master. There are times that I crave the attention that only she could supply. She gently strokes and caresses me, by scratching behind my ears, my forehead, and chin. There are times where I hurt her with my talons when seeking her attention, but she doesn't mind and supplies the love I'm looking for. Still, as gentle as I can. There are times when she could feel my toes curl on her thighs when she pets me.

I hunt for my master and ward off dangers that could harm her. She praises me for my deeds and is always fond of me. She enjoys observing me practice my hunting skills, as I imagine all the mice I am chasing. There are times where I make my way up to the rooftop, I can see the entire kingdom from there. There are so many reasons why I love the rooftop: for one I run into sweet, delicious sparrows. Master doesn't approve of me hunting them, but I do it anyway. I see it as a way to show others how well my skills are. Master always gives me a disapproving look when one of her advisors tells her what I've done, yet she doesn't punish me for doing so. She is still intrigued with my curiosity and my sharp skills, she always watches in amazement at my quick, agile reflexes. I have learned to be a skilled, silent hunter. There are times where I surprise her when I spontaneously show up out of nowhere. In those moments she would jump with shock, once my meow breaks the silence, then giggle to herself, pets me, and continues with her task at hand.

These days she doesn't have much time to spend with me, which is why she makes sure that she feeds me routinely, caresses my fur before going off with her day, to wherever she goes. Every day I long to go with her, on her

adventures beyond the metal gate. She too also hopes that one day she could bring me along with her. She always tells me, "Be patient."

When darkness falls, I allow the slits in my eyes to widen, allowing my eyes to adjust to the small amount of light to enter in them, so that I could see into the darkness. Along with my eyes, my other senses sharpen as well. I could hear the slightest bit of grass swaying to cool breeze. I can see a small ant quickly making her way back to her colony, through the tall blades of grass making them rustle as she goes. I could smell the smokey meat that perfumes the air, caused by the neighboring kingdoms' parties. I see everything in the darkness, I see things that my master wouldn't be able to see. For this reason, every time she steps out into the night, I take it upon myself to follow her everywhere she wanders to ensure her security. Moments when she spots me, she smiles, and continues along with her duties. I am willing to guard my master with my life. At this moment as she writes, I pace beside her never leaving her side, except to take a sip of the water she has provided for me a few feet away, and to file my nails. Watch as small winged dragons flutter around us. I would stop them instantly if they approached any closer to my kind master, that wouldn't cause them any harm. During the day when I am off patrolling around her kingdom, I no longer have to worry about the peace in the domain, because now I have my own trusty apprentice. I took him under my wing, well paw, and taught him everything I knew. Our hunting techniques are different, but they are still efficient. He is a patient hunter, planning out his exact moves carefully. I am not as patient and tend to start the moment there's an opening. I specialize in close-range attacks, quickly rushing into a situation due to curiosity. As he is off in the distance observing and taking more into detail and waiting for the purr-felt moment to strike.

At the moment he is a small, fuzzy youngster with an abundance of energy, waiting to strike at any minute. He attempts to ambush me daily in an attempt to catch me off guard and finally beat me in a dual. One day he too would make a fine protector for my master. At the moment he is small, and Master can easily pick him up to smother him. Every passing day he never fails to impress me by how much he has learned and improved.. As the days go on, I could feel his attacks to be more powerful in our sparring matches. Though I do land a few kicks and bites to remind him that I am still stronger and he still has a lot to improve on. I do enjoy his company though; his ambition allows him to handle defeat properly and he never gives up. We share a different relationship than the one we have with our master. We see each other as equals for we are cats, understand each other without meowing, our communication is silent and expressive.

Every day I see him follow in my footsteps, more and more. Recently he has discovered how to reach my rooftop on his own despite his smaller figure. He also appreciates the beauty the sun displays for us before night falls, its unique art form every day. And every day I will know that the world is mine to discover.

Junior

GABRIELA VALENCIA

King City High School

Hmong American Writers' Circle Award

I sat, waiting, in the small cement room, as one question in my head tangled with others: *Will this be the last time I ever see my little brother?* My hands trembled. My heart raced. It had been six months since I had last seen him.

I looked up from my hands and saw the faces before me. They too, were lost within their thoughts. My mother and three younger siblings sat quietly, while my baby brother lay beside them. I looked at my mother. She wore the same look of disbelief that she had had on the day my brother had been arrested. That day, her tears had tumbled from her chestnut, brown eyes, like a riverbed flowing through a valley. When she had heard the news, her scream tore through the house and she had repeated his name — “Jr., Jr., Jr.,” — until her voice was hoarse, and she could say no more.

I jumped back into reality as I caught sight of a boy in an orange numbered jumpsuit before me. His hands secured with a metal chain cuffed around his wrists. The boy in front of me was not the boy I remembered from my childhood. This one was taller, bulkier. However, the way he carried himself intrigued me. My brother had always been the child who never wanted others to worry about him, but his eyes would reveal otherwise. These eyes were dimmed, fear lingering deep within the boy's soul. That fear cloaked his face, but he would never let the words escape from his mouth. He greeted us with a forced smile, then hung his head back down as the officer freed his hands.

“Thank you,” he quietly said, rubbing his wrists.

The officer nodded and closed the door behind her.

The boy sat quietly beside me, keeping to himself.

I sat within my chair battling up the courage to speak to the boy, my little brother, but I could not force the words to come out of my mouth for my tears would tear them away. All that could have had been heard within the small cement room were the silent voices of children yearning to be heard. I had somehow known that this would be our last physical conversation with each other, and I would have to grow up without the person I trusted the most.

I turned toward him, focusing on nothing more but the face in front of me. I looked straight into his eyes and his to mine. I wish I could have done anything to change his mind that day. To stop the anger that was tormenting

his sanity. To let him know that everything was going to be okay and that I loved him more than anything in the world, but it was too late. His mind had already been made the day my little brother, Jr., went from sibling to stranger. As the oldest all that I could have possibly offered him then was my help, and I failed to do so.

The boy I would taunt, laugh and learned to love with would soon become a faint memory within my mind. I looked at the young boy who sat in the chair, in the small cement room with forgiving eyes. This was the boy from my childhood, *my brother*. Within our final moments together, we both understood that our days as children were over. It was time to grow up and do what was best for ourselves. Even if that meant, without each other.

Bridging the Gap

EVELYNN HLI HER

University High School

Hmong American Ink & Stories Award

Are you Chinese?
Do your people really eat dogs?
What is my identity?
Where did I come from?
Who am I?

What is Hmong?

Of the many questions I was asked growing up, some had simpler answers than others. How can I go on in life working toward success if I don't know who I am or what my heritage is and where I am really from? We are not on the map, there is no place to be found — weird, I know. Growing up in America, I did not understand how to *be* Hmong. I tear up talking about myself, my family, my culture, or my personal life because I'm unsure whether or not it is out of shame or emotional pride. It has always been a struggle with identity, language barriers, and society leaving many living in the shame of broken families, broken languages, and broken lives.

One early Saturday morning, my parents dragged me out of the house to attend a conference. The sole reason: to listen to a guest speaker. As reluctant as I was, I trailed behind my younger siblings who shuffled behind our parents who made their way into their seats. I sat down, notebook and pen in hand to keep my preoccupied thoughts busy.

On stage, there he stood. Joking and telling stories — engaging and entertaining, I laughed; at one point, I shed tears and they fell staining ink puddles on my notes as I scribbled thoughts through blurred vision—stories laced with dark undertone themes. He told a story of a boy whose family safely crossed the Mekong River and on the other side, watched as their neighbors were slaughtered by the same boat that carried them. Guns pointed, corpses robbed and tossed overboard; of the twenty-three passengers, only five survived. The room sat silently still.

After the conference, I thought long and hard after deciphering my notes

and put together phrases and ideas I could convey to possibly answer the hard questions asked growing up.

What is Hmong?

We are farmers, fishers, warriors, the secret army, and storytellers. As mountain people, we are the highest of elevators — excelsior! We may not be rich with money but we are rich in our story repertoire. Our language is as tonal as the notes of a musical scale and we have rhythm and dynamics with each poetic phrase and painted scene. Not only are our stories told through voice and words, our eyes, nose, imaginations, and emotions engage to drive the energy of stories.

Growing up, I now realize how far our culture and heritage has been modernized ... Americanized. Living in the United States, many have broken away from tradition and buried it under American culture to keep from being outcast. Because of this, generational gaps form. We live in two different worlds and hold two different identities: one for the world and one for home. The fact that we currently live in the U.S. is because our parents and grandparents are giving us the opportunity that they did not have. Here, in the U.S., we may gain knowledge, but our parents and grandparents have wisdom. They know what's best which is why we are brought up as obedient. The beauty of my heritage is built on the legacy I create founded by the sacrifices made for me. We are not just refugees, immigrants, or aliens. We are here because we were recruited and capable for fifteen years as U.S. soldiers, but we stand as the warrior name, the Hmong who fought in another man's war. Do not let our unwritten stories be told by others.

“Though we may be short in stature, we are tall at heart. ...
Spread the heart, mind, soul for I am,

we are,

Hmong strong.”

—*Touger Xiong*

Where I'm from

DORETHA HEWLETT

Bullard High School

San Joaquin Literary Association Award

I am from the old school,
From the Bob Marley hits and the Fanti lyrics
From Motown, The blues, and Jazz
Beethoven an African moor,
And a little bit of Country

I am from miseducation by education
Where being highly intellectual and woke is essential
From where Hypatia invented Math and problem solving
I am from Maya Angelou, poetry in motion
Where African Americans that were shackled wanted to be Presidents
and Anesthesiologists

I am from a vision of light
Where your name is your nature
Where Numbers, signs, and wonders are real
From salvation and love
I am from the cross, Gethsemane, and the resurrection

I am from where the world wars one and two were not
Because of the segregation of a continent
My Roots are from Ghana, but my nationality is American.
Where Africans Kings and Queens were rulers and conquerors
From Egypt and Pyramids, I am me

Esos ojos oscuros

NICOLE NUNEZ

Mission Oak High School

Chicanx Writers and Artists Association Award

Había un leyenda sobre un Señor que caminaba en mi pueblo chico, llamado Talpa de Allende. Nadie sabía cómo se llamaba el señor o de donde era. Este hombre siempre vendría a principios de Noviembre. El día que celebramos a los muertos. Hombre extraño, dirían mis antepasados. Nos advirtieron que no lo miráramos directamente a los ojos. Porque sus ojos eran del color del negro más oscuro. Mis padres no tenían idea de que sé que era mi hora de irme. Los había escuchado hablar de mi enfermedad. Había decidido que finalmente me encontraría con este hombre de ojos negros. Ya no temía nada porque todo lo que sabía era que la muerte era segura. Finalmente era el 1 de noviembre y la ciudad lo sabía. El vibrante color naranja de las marigolds iluminaba los pavimentos de piedra de las carreteras. Olía a pan caliente, esperando ser devorado por sus seres queridos. El sonido de la risa y la conversación llenaron el aire. Y pronto, estaba llorando. Tal belleza que nunca experimenté nunca más. Llegué a la conclusión de que no encontraría al hombre con los desalentadores ojos negros. Vuelvo sobre mis pasos hacia la bóveda de mi familia cuando escucho una voz familiar. “Mija,” dijo un viejo voz susurrante. Me di la vuelta y vi al hombre con los ojos negros más oscuros. “Por favor, no me llesves,” grité a sus pies. Me levantó suavemente y lo miré a los ojos. Qué hermosos ojos tenía el hombre. Me consolaron y me mostraron que todo iba a estar bien. Finalmente fue este momento, supe que era hora de irnos. Me envolvió en sus brazos y lentamente me quedé dormida, mirando sus oscuros ojos negros.

How it went down

ANTONIO DAWSON

Voyager Secondary School

Chicanx Writers and Artists Association Award

I remember exactly how it went down
A couple of my friends and I were walking around
Acting a fool-acting like a clown
Looking for trouble in our little town

Went up to a house to get some money quick
After that Madera PD gave me a little trip
They read my rights and I knew this was it
Shed some tears for my mom — just a little bit

Took me to Juvy and I was on my own
Don't get to talk to my mom face to face
It's through a phone
Sweaty palms at court seeing if I'm going home

Judge told me I'm staying here from August 'til May
My brother came to visit me the next Sunday
Told me to keep my head up and always pray
For a new opportunity to have a better day

So I'm taking my sentence as a blessing
Don't got time to sit around and be stressing
Listening to voices that are uplifting
Seeing the changes in myself gives me a certain feeling

Looking at the bright side — not the negative
Even though coming in the hall is getting repetitive
Keeping my head parallel to the ground till the very end
All my charges led made my voices reprehend
My momma told me she doesn't want to get a call again
That probation or PD is trying to bring me in

But I made a promise to her that I'm going to change
Do a U-turn and I'm in my own lane
Getting tired of this cycle — doing the same thing
Tired of being a fool — time to start using my brain

Don't Ask About Work on the First Date

LOTTIE MESSICK

Mariposa County High School

Dramatic Arts Award

SCENE: MELANIE, a 24-year-old who sells essential oils in what she does not know is a pyramid scheme, is excited to go on a blind date. MARK sits at the table waiting for MELANIE who is running late for the date.

MELANIE: *[Quickly walking into the restaurant carrying a small case.]* Hi, I'm Melanie, you must be Mark! *[They shake hands and MELANIE sits down.]* Sorry I'm late, I hope you weren't waiting too long for me.

MARK: *[Calmly.]* Yeah, It's okay. I got here like five minutes ago.

MELANIE: *[Looks around.]* This is a perfect spot for a first date. *[Picks up a menu and reads it.]* This food looks delicious, are you ready to order?

MARK: Yes, I'm starving. *[Motions to WAITER offstage to the right.]*

[WAITER enters with a notepad.]

WAITER: Hello, what can I get for you two tonight?

MELANIE: I'll have the salmon, please.

MARK: And I would like the chicken alfredo with garlic bread.

WAITER: Thank you, your food will be out soon.

MELANIE and MARK: Thanks!

MELANIE: So, Mark, where are you from? I lived in Santa Cruz before moving out here for college.

MARK: I'm from Sacramento, so I'm pretty new to this area.

MELANIE: Really? Why did you move here?

MARK: I just got a new job as a teacher here. What do you do for work?

MELANIE: A teacher? That's awesome! As for me, [*MELANIE's face lights up*] I am a saleswoman for Sunshine Brand Essential Oils. I'm so glad you asked because I really want to show you our selection. [*She pulls out a small case with little bottles in it.*]

MARK: I'm not really into essential oils, but go ahead.

MELANIE: [*Starts taking out the bottles and sets them on the table. She points to one.*] This one's la-la lavender, it smells delicious. [*She opens it up and pours some on her hand then wafts it into MARK's face.*] Can you smell this? Isn't it lovely?

MARK: [*Blinking and moving his head away.*] Uh, I don't know. It's making my eyes water. ...

MELANIE: That's how you know it's working.

MARK: So, Melanie, what do you do as a saleswoman?

MELANIE: Well, every three months, I buy a case of fifty essential oils for five-hundred dollars that I have to sell by the end of those three months. I also recruit new salespeople for Sunshine Brand Essential Oils. Mostly, my friends and family buy them from me, and if I'm lucky I'm able to recruit them to sell their own.

MARK: [*Concerned.*] That sounds like a fun job, but are you sure it's not —

MELANIE: [*Excited*] Oh, yes! I love my job so much because it's so easy, and even though I lose money if I don't sell anything, it's totally worth it! And, get this, if I sell more than the other employees, I get a free trip to Hawaii!

MARK: I don't know how to tell you this easily, but I think you're in a pyramid scheme. ...

MELANIE [*confused*]: A pyrawhat'sit?

MARK: A pyramid scheme. They're illegal. It's a total scam. I'm guessing you don't make that much money and your bosses are super rich. You're putting so much money into this and don't get enough out of it. This company is stealing from you and you don't even realize it!

MELANIE: I— I don't think that's true. ... You're just jealous that I have

an amazing job. [*Folds her arms.*]

MARK: [*Starts getting up from his seat.*] I'm sorry, but I don't think I can date a girl who's part of a scam. It seems like you need to figure some things out before starting a relationship. ... [*Exits stage right.*]

MELANIE: [*Disappointed, calls to MARK as he leaves.*] But we haven't even gotten our food yet!

CURTAIN

Between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X

OMAR LEWIS

University High School

Honorable Mention

“Let no man pull you so low as to hate him”
Let that force that pulls you down force you up
Let that force propel you to freedom
Let that force drive you to heaven
Let that force drive you beyond
'Cause there is no force that can hold man's will
'Cause there is no force that can hold your liberty
'Cause there is no force that can take away your freedom
'Cause there are no chains that can suppress the human spirit
From the vile of hell to the eyes of heaven
No force can drag you to depth of hell
No force can keep you from salvation
We are not the weed in the garden of democracy
We are not the filthy vile bugs that dragged our ancestors to this garden
We are the flourishing flowers of freedom blooming from the rich roots
of slavery
We come from the deep undying soul of giants before us
We come from roots deeper than the rigid bedrock of democracy
'Cause
“We didn't land on Plymouth Rock, Plymouth Rock landed on us”

The “Caretaker”

TRAVIS PURA-HICKS

King City High School

Honorable Mention

I stood and clutched my 3-year-old sister’s chubby hand as we stared at the house in front of us. It was like a monster that devours children in the night. It was almost like it mocked us for our parent’s misdeeds. Never would I forget that house. The memory of horrifying police officers taking my parents was branded into my memory, but just as they appeared in my mind, they were disappeared as a monstrous woman opened the door. She glared at the two of us like a lion glares at a hyena. She was to be our caretaker, although she couldn’t have been qualified. After all, how could someone so monstrous be an actual caretaker? She grabbed us and forced us inside the house, she took my sister away from me. My whimpers of defeat filled the air as I couldn’t do anything but watch my sister get taken. The woman skulked back towards me from the shadows like a vampire and grabbed me with her ice-cold hands. She took me to an empty room and locked me in the abyss. I sniffled and fell to my knees sobbing. The salty tears fell down my face like heavy rain that would keep you up all night as I wailed to no one. “They didn’t do anything wrong. Why am I here? I wanna go home. ...”

The next morning I’m dragged out of my room like a prisoner taken to death row. I saw the others. There was a boy no older than me, two girls that looked the same, and my sister. She looked like a deer in headlights, but that didn’t surprise me at all. The woman tossed a plastic dollar tree bag and told us to eat up. I picked up the bag and ended up with some rotten ham and some bread. It was like a war zone over food. I noticed that Amanda didn’t even get a crumb so I gave her my bread, I didn’t give her the ham so she wouldn’t get sick. I was then taken to my room and left there the rest of the day. I just sat in the cold and dark abyss until I fell asleep.

Awoken from my slumber to violent shaking like a leaf in a storm, I’m taken out of my room to see my hero, my savior, my aunt. I had never been so happy in my life as I hugged her tightly. She was to be my new temporary guardian. My knight in shining armor. My guardian angel.

It may have only lasted three days, but this has been etched into my memory. I see it in my sleep, I see it in the day sometimes, after all a scar may fade, but never goes away.

El anochecer en tu rostro

FATIMA TORREZ

Mission Oak High School

Honorable Mention

La dulce miel de tus ojos se derrite en tu semblante,
tus labios que cantan las melodías de aquella noche.
Eres tu el recuerdo de mi imaginación.
Solo tu me llevas a esa noche tan trágica,
pero esto no es cierto y la realidad es una falsa mentira.

Pero estas aquí y siento tu respirar tocar mi pecho.
Ayúdame a escapar de este encierro que me tiene cautiva en mi ser,
y llévame donde tu estas.
Llévame a ese lugar,
en cual las estrellas son innumerables y los paisajes son coloridos.

Toca mi mano y extiende al corresponder a la mía,
porque no quiero separarme una vez más.
Que me llamen lunática o demente,
eso no me aturde pero prefiero estar contigo.
Quiero ver el anochecer en tu rostro,
y la luna en tus pies.

Little Sister

ASIA BAYLIS

Career Technical Education Charter

Honorable Mention

You're bright
You always know how to bring some light
To my day
Help me stay
A little more sane

But when we fight
It's a battle ground
Covered with gray clouds
You're the thunder screaming
And I'm the lighting beaming
Hateful words, that sound absurd
To anyone who overheard

But on our sunny days
I'm the wind that sways
And you're the sun that lights up the day
You always know just what to say

You speak true words
Even when you know,
It might hurt
You know how to get under my skin
You take a shovel and dig
Deeper than anyone else ever could
Sometimes I know you feel misunderstood
You assume I won't help
But I would

But on our brighter days
You're the Robin to my Batman
You help me fight the treacherous land
And I'll give you my clothes second hand
'Cause you're my wing man
Maybe that's why you know just what to say
To ruin my day
But also add some color to the gray
And I will never hate you
But the things you do

You're the moon
And I'm the tides
You make my highs
And my lows
And you probably don't know
All my hopes
For your success
And nothing less
Because yes
Nothing you do could ever make me hate you

Learn from my mistakes
So you can have an easier fate
Even when it's too late
If it's up to me
You'll never be put in checkmate
I'll try to save the day
So you don't have to pay

And sometimes you'll shoot and miss
But you'll always be MVP
And I'll be on your team
Playing defense
For those I love

By the Petals of My Lonely Flower

CHLOE MENDOZA

Selma High School

Honorable Mention

You've always loved the beach, called it your happy place. I've always loved the beach, mostly because of you. We've always loved the beach, together.

That July day we traipsed down the eroded wooden steps, beach bags in hand, sunblock on noses, and our love for the beach still intact.

I examined the flowerbeds near the base of the steps and thought how odd it must feel to be a flower near the sea. These flowers struck me as so out of place, yet purposely positioned by the hands of some arbitrary gardener, oxymoronic in nature. A symbol of ephemeral beauty, dependent on the sun for nutrients and water for sustenance. Just feet away lay a seemingly infinite expanse of the latter, its unique poison hidden to the naked eye. My thoughts were interrupted when you called me over to help set up. I left my lonely purple flower, secretly promising my later return.

I waltzed over, and we bickered for ten minutes before deciding on a place to settle our things. You wanted to be closer to the shore, closer to the action, closer to the exciting people. You craved it, you commanded it, but our things were bound to be wet within the hour. It was rising, but you didn't know it yet. I couldn't blame you. I had seen the signs and you hadn't.

Standing there, hands on your hips, you begrudgingly agreed, a silent testimony to your true stubbornness. It had always been so. We share a similar temperament and will. So we moved away from the shore, safe from the tide. It was enough for now.

Hours pass, beachgoers come and go, and we all take turns frolicking in the refreshing ocean water. I revel in the peaceful chaos that surrounds me. I feel the cool sand mold to my bare feet as I dig them deeper and the tide washes me over. Despite all the salt, I felt clean and free. I step back to reveal my unique print, only to have it disappear within the second. For a moment I frowned. That's too bad.

Earlier it was chilly. I turned my head to the heavens and imagined the clouds dutifully hiding the Sun Queen from her tormentor, the Moon King. She didn't make an appearance until he was halfway around the earth, and

she was finally safe. I welcomed her rays with much approval, until she herself turned sour and began to burn us loyal subjects without remorse. I found myself longing for the chill from hours ago. I suppose I received it later.

I took a break from my ocean endeavors to join you for some grapes beneath our green umbrella. Still damp from my escapades, I sat behind you and faced the ocean.

That moment was safe. I was safe with you away from the worries of the world. We were content with our day long escape. It was the perfect time — for honesty, for transparency, for me to tell you how I'd been feeling for months — to show you what had become a vital piece of my identity.

The beach is my protector, our happy place. Things will work out the way they're meant to.

In my head, I repeat the same eight words at least a hundred times. I couldn't bring myself to just say it. It could all be so easy if only I had the courage. But then again, it could all be so easy if I didn't feel this way. Then I cast my fears to the back of my mind, and said it.

Regret immediately filled the air.

As the words escaped my lips, we both watched a wave crash over some unsuspecting swimmers, and I winced. Your silence was thunderous, mimicking the symphony of the sea.

Then came the fall.

"Well," I choked. "Are you just not going to say anything? Is that it?"

"Are you sure?"

"I think so."

"Well, don't tell anyone."

I'd never drowned before, but I imagine this is what it must feel like. I'm aware of my impending demise, which makes it all the worse. Something snakelike and invasive slithers through my lungs, blockading my air way. My ears. Is that ringing? The noise is ear-splitting and somehow wracks my body with tangible shrills. My head feels the pressure of the seven seas. My chest begs for mercy, for relief it seems only death can grant. I seem to be watching this scene from a distance, vaguely aware of my pain.

My fears had become reality, my security was faltering. What was next? Oh beach, oh sanctuary of years, why cause me this pain? My darling, my flowerbeds, my keeper of the sea? This is not what I wanted: this is not what I needed.

Your embrace, your love, your soft words of acceptance that have cradled me for years: I needed that. But in your place I received the chill I had longed for earlier in the day, and I grasped for a sweater.

I was aware of my position on the sand, of the absurdity of this reality, but somehow I was drowning for the second time that day.

Suddenly I'm aware of some flying, scorching sand. It hits my thighs as my feet travel without consulting my brain. I'm running, away from you, from the beach, from this pain I never expected to feel. The soles of feet would bear the memory of this day for weeks. The ache of my heart would bear the memory of this day until I die.

I returned to my lonely purple flower, faithfully fulfilling my promise. We sat together as you and I did just minutes ago before the fall. We overlooked

the water, both flowers near the sea, out of place and oxymoronic.

We watched the boats for what seemed like hours. Onlookers passed by eyeing the girl sitting alone with the flowers. I turned away, away from the chaos that you craved, only to be left alone in my mind with my own chaos as only company.

I turned my head and focused on a green laden path. I left my purple flower, feeling content that she was not so lonely anymore. A set of familiar wooden steps accompanied the green laden path. I ascended the steps and was led to an inviting bench overlooking my previous sitting position. I sat and cursed that forsaken beach. After today, I will never step foot on one ever again.

You phoned me, out of worry I suppose. I answered and offered a brief response of assurance. I was safe, I'll be back soon. Nothing more, nothing less. I didn't owe it to you.

That night we drove back in silence. The silence was still filled with the deafening roars of the sea.

Today our silence is simply silence. A faint humming from the past still lingers in the air, but now we accept it and use it to remind us of the way things should never be. My feet have healed and my heart is getting there.

We falter sometimes and are taken back to that July day. The silence once again fills with thunder and my heart aches for the company of my purple flower. I wonder if she's as lonely as I am right now. At times these moments are brief, but at others they're enduring. It's moments like these that my feet feel a familiar tingling.

Since that day, I've yet to step foot on a beach. My temple failed me, my prayers left unheard on the altar. My once pristine, white dress lay disheveled on the beach beside my innocence. That day I had forsaken the past; things could never be the same and you knew it.

I've always held conformity in contempt, and perhaps this was God's way of sticking it to me. Be careful what you wish for because you just might get it.

In view of the status quo, different had always been unacceptable. In view of my life and ambition, different was always the goal. But when confronted with my differences, I attempted to reject them, because you rejected them.

I can proudly say that with each passing day, we celebrate these past rejections together. The progress is slow, but its existence reassures me.

I seem to have come full circle. I sought out difference, realized my difference, rejected and wrestled with my difference, and today I work to accept it.

Perhaps one day I'll step foot on a beach again. Perhaps one day my love for the beach might even return. Perhaps one day I'll find the courage to venture out of the flowerbed, and back into the ocean.

Today you extend your hand in acceptance, and slowly lead me toward the water. At other times, I must take the lead. We stand now on the edge of the steps, overlooking the sand, still a bit out of place. I'm left anxious for the future, but it's enough for now.

Until then I'll simply remain with the flowers near the sea.

The Pacific

ALEXANDER OSORIO

King City High School

Honorable Mention

Jonas Merseli peered outside the window of his small convenience store. Rain, strange for this time of year. The burly man chuckled, a faint smile forming on his face.

“Heather always liked the rain ...” he remarked.

Jonas glanced over at the calendar that was messily tacked onto a bulletin board filled with papers and posters. It was that day again. June 4th. That faint smile was quickly wiped away. He gazed out into the empty store, trying to distract himself with the old, boxy TV playing a baseball game without sound in the corner. His team was losing. Jonas grumbled to himself, looking away from the TV. An eerie silence began to emanate out from the unmoving aisles of shelved drinks and snacks. Without something to keep himself occupied, Jonas found nothing but the sound of his own thoughts, whose voices grew louder and louder.

No, I have a shop to run, he told himself. *I don't have time to go anywhere*. But as the vacant store showed, that blatant excuse had no weight. No one ever showed up at this time of morning; business was lacking in general, taken up by all the big chain stores nowadays. He knew this, but still, he was too stubborn to give up and leave. Too stubborn to admit he was ignoring something. Jonas had once said a simple life like this was all he wanted, a cozy little shop where he could relax after he got old, even if he was only 39. His family had stressed he become a doctor, or a chemist, or an engineer or just *something* that would earn him money; it's what brought him to the U.S. in the first place, but had never wanted that. No, he envisioned a simple, quiet life, free of complications. While he thought he had found that, it just seemed ... empty, fake, like a promise that had been broken. It wasn't all he had imagined. Something — or someone, rather — was missing. Jonas sighed. Feeling restless once again, he shuffled around the items on his front counter, moving a tiny picture frame next to the cash register.

It was an old photo, probably early '90s, but it was one that brought back memories. It was of he and Heather, celebrating his own birthday at a restaurant in Santa Monica. Being an immigrant from Europe, he had no other family to attend, so it had just been him and the older woman. Not that his family would have celebrated if they could. Heather, on the other hand,

always did things like that for him. She knew he couldn't afford such a thing himself; she was always so kind. Jonas sighed again. How long had it been since they last met? Three years? He felt like it had been almost yesterday, yet at the same time he felt like it had been ages.

Jonas glanced out the window, sitting in silence as he watched the light rain splatter onto the sidewalk. Then he looked back at the calendar again.

"Three years ..." he said to himself. "And still, I haven't showed my face for one damn time." He took the pencil he had been fiddling with, and crushed it in his fist. "Oh, to hell with it!"

Jonas stood up out of his seat and threw the pencil onto the floor. He grabbed a cap and rain jacket, and picked up his keys as he headed out the door. He locked up and jumped into his '87 Ford pickup; the old engine sputtered to life, and Jonas headed down the street. He had one stop in mind before his final destination.

Within a few minutes of driving through the city, he parked beside a small, plain-looking building with the words "Madeline's Flowers" painted on the side. Jonas stepped out of his truck and walked around to the front, his footsteps squelching with every step through the puddles covering the pavement. It was a familiar place to him, only now the building had begun to deteriorate with time; the deep red color of the bricks had begun to chip and fade away, replaced with a pale gray cement color. Jonas headed through the doors of the shop.

"Hello!" a female voice exclaimed. A gray-haired woman stepped out from the cluttered rows of flowers to greet him. "Welcome to ... oh, Jonas?"

He nodded, taking off his hat. "It's been a while, Maddie."

"That's putting it lightly," she huffed. "It's been years since you've shown up around here."

Jonas laughed nervously in response. Then the woman seemed to lighten up a bit.

"Well ... you know, it's good to see you again. But I suppose you're here for something. Pink tulips, right? Your usual."

Jonas smiled. "No, not this time. White lilies."

After picking up the bouquet of flowers, Jonas got back into his truck and drove onto the highway. From his memory, it would take about an hour of driving along Highway 1 — somewhere past Santa Barbara. That left him with plenty of time with his own thoughts.

Jonas recounted the first time meeting Heather. It was a scene he often found himself coming back to: 1987. Back then, he was only 21, and had recently moved to the United States from Switzerland to find work. Rough economic conditions at home meant he was forced to leave his little farm, leave his family behind, and earn money elsewhere. The strange meeting involved him smashing his head on a road sign while biking past the woman's house. It was raining that day, just like today. When Jonas had woke up, he found himself in an unfamiliar place, with a woman watching over him. After the initial surprise, the woman, who introduced herself as Heather, revealed she was a nurse; she had taken him inside to dry him off and treat his injuries out of simple kindness. Despite the odd circumstances, they quickly became friends; she sympathized with Jonas's situation, being alone in a foreign

country, working numerous jobs, barely getting enough money to support himself and to send to his family back home. She became a sort of mentor to him. Heather saw he had potential, she believed in him; it became her goal to guide the young man and help him succeed. Jonas appreciated her optimism and wise words of advice. Her mischievous personality was another one of her many quirks that he remembered quite vividly: she loved to joke around, always teasing people. Quite fittingly, the woman never cared what others thought about her. She just did what she thought was right. Heather believed that the path to true happiness was following your heart; that was the biggest difference between her, and Jonas's real family.

Before he realized it, Jonas had been so caught up in his daydreaming that he hadn't realized he was nearing the exit. Jonas slowed down, driving off the highway and into a parking lot. There were plenty of cars outside; as expected, only a larger amount than he had guessed, around 40 or 50. After parking, Jonas stepped out of the truck with the bouquet in hand. A cool gust of ocean breeze hit him in the face. It seemed like it hadn't rained here, thankfully, but the frozen wind was still enough to make Jonas cold, even with his jacket on. He looked over at the pathway that led into the park: his destination. The flags of 10 nations fluttered in the wind over a painted wooden sign that read "PNW Flight 213 International Memorial." Yes, no matter how hard he had tried, the uncomfortable thought that he had confined to the back of his mind emerged once again.

Heather was dead.

Jonas gripped the flowers a bit tighter. He walked up the long pathway towards the memorial wall itself, which stood at the edge of a decorated cement platform. Dozens of temporary signs lined the path to it, holding sheets of printer paper labeled with arrows and phrases like "Memorial Service, This Way". A couple dozen brown and black folding chairs had been set up in front of the massive wall; most being occupied with people. A well-dressed man stood at the entrance, offering Jonas a small pamphlet.

"Welcome," the man said quietly. "Take one. Service starts at 12."

"... Thank you," Jonas said, a bit unnerved. The paper was a small schedule, with a few bible verses and inspirational quotes on the other side. The entire thing was new to him, as Jonas had never visited the memorial himself, let alone the anniversary service. He could never bring himself to do it, and even now he couldn't believe he was actually there.

Before approaching the main wall, Jonas saw a small plaque off to the side. The painted bronze plate read:

On the evening of June 4th, 2002, Pacific Northwest Flight 213 departed from Los Angeles International Airport on an overseas flight to Tokyo Narita Airport. At 7:25 P.M., only 15 minutes into the flight, the Boeing 747-400 suffered a catastrophic fuel tank explosion over the Pacific. It dived into the ocean west of San Miguel Island, taking the lives of 434 passengers and crew members with it.

Jonas cleared his throat, feeling it had tightened a bit. After taking in a deep breath, he walked over towards the wall, looking up at the massive, black granite slab. It was inscribed with the names and ages of 434 people, those whose lives had been taken. He saw many bouquets of roses and flowers wreaths placed beneath the names, along with numerous candles and picture

frames. He also saw many Korean hibiscus flowers underneath one section, likely for that musician who died in the crash. Unlike the musician, however, many other names sat without flowers, without photos or candles or anything of the sort: forgotten. Heather's was among them, but today, that would be different. Jonas read the list of names on the wall, his eyes stopping at one line of carved white letters.

"Heather Monroe, 54," he whispered. Just reading the name made his eyes tear up a little. On that day, she had boarded the flight to attend a medical workshop in Japan, after a new breakthrough in patient treatment. Helping people until the end. *Why, of all people, did it have to be her?* Jonas thought. *A good, selfless person like that never deserved such a fate.*

His hand had formed a deathly-tight grip around the bouquet, almost crushing the stems of the flowers. Jonas tried to regain control of himself, wiping his eyes with the sleeve of his jacket. He kneeled down, placing the white lilies underneath Heather's name, and tried to think of a few words to say. This wall was the closest thing she had to a grave; even after they searched the ocean for days, her body was never found in the wreckage. Perhaps that was for the best, however. He put his head down, shutting his eyes.

"Thank you," he continued, not caring if others heard him. "For everything. For finding work for me, for giving me a home, for every time I asked you for help. Most importantly, thank you for being there for me. You were like a mother to me, more family than my own ever were."

Jonas recited a short Catholic prayer in Italian, his native language. Then he took a seat in one of the rows of chairs. He quietly waited for the service to start, once again left on his own to reflect on his past. Though he had accomplished the goal he had in mind, Jonas was still left with that "empty" feeling — not as powerful as utter despair, as he had felt long ago, but a more somber, wistful sense of sadness that lingered in the back of his mind.

What now? he thought. He still felt as if there was still something to do. Something left unfinished, but he couldn't tell what.

The ceremony itself was nice, lasting only around half an hour. Jonas did not pay it much attention, though; he had already done he needed to do, and spent his time thinking about Heather instead. He stayed around for a little while after it ended, keeping to himself while others conversed amongst themselves. More and more people disappeared. As the wind started to pick up, Jonas walked over to the railing, where he lit a cigarette and watched the rushing waters of the Pacific Ocean. After the others had left, he grunted and tossed his cigarette into the water.

"No," he whispered, "one more thing ..."

Jonas walked up to the memorial wall, pulling out the photo which he had grabbed on his way out of the shop. He looked the blue-eyed woman in the picture, and then back at the lilies against the wall.

"I'm sorry I tried to forget," he said. "I just couldn't accept what happened, that you were truly gone forever. And I realize I was wrong; I can't keep ignoring my problems, just hoping that they will go away. It's like you said: head them face on, even if it hurts. So that's what I'm doing right now."

Jonas hesitated for a second, squeezing his eyes shut. He kneeled down, setting the photo against the white flowers. Then took in a deep breath and let

go of it. He stood up to part with a few last words.

“Thank you ... for the last time.”

And with that, Jonas turned around, walking away from the memorial, and leaving the photo behind.

Comfort In My Lonely

ISABELLA PORRAS

Selma High School

Honorable Mention

(all i need is me)
my attic shakes again with my skeletons
and redisplay that my lonely body is all I have

my lonely body
tells me to stay in bed again
and that the fetal position is the only way
to get the blood rushing back to my heart

(all i need is me)
again the cobwebs get dusted out
from the corners of my eyes
and i begin to mourn the loss of my spine
because wow
even that seems to have left me

(all i need is me)
my lonely body cradles itself so well
my skin, my blanket
my bones, my bed frame
my mouth, the chattering AC that spits out music
and cools my lonely body
my mattress lungs breathe in and out
creaking with every movement
in a rhythm that keeps my pure heart
sound asleep.

and being a mind with no body can tell me
everything i need to know about this vacant place.
every morning i take a walk through this house.
i see my fixer upper,
and will make it a home.

American Ode

SYDNEY JACOBS

Mariposa County High School

Honorable Mention

Aren't you proud to be an American?

I was asked this the other day, when a classmate caught me pretending to say the Pledge of Allegiance. In reality, I was mouthing the lyrics to Journey's *Any Way You Want It* and was only a few words in when I was popped the question. I cocked my head, and considered what my desk buddy was implying. *Aren't you proud that you don't have to live in a country where children are starving and people are always living in fear?* I looked around the class, taking in the two students that were actually participating in this daily ritual, and the remaining thirty who were on their phones, talking to a friend, or were perhaps humming their favorite 80's jams.

Was I proud? I'm glad that I live in a 1st world nation, that I'm not starving, destitute, constantly threatened with beheadment, or a terrible combination of all three. But America also has history of slavery in its past, and a pandemic crisis of school shootings in our present. If you were to guess who said the quote "Does she have a good body? No. Does she have a fat ass? Absolutely." the main contenders would be a rapper, a college frat boy named Cole, or the President of the United States. (The third one would be correct.) And while America is far from being the worst place to live, currently, from where I was standing as a seventeen year old girl living in a world where politicians get to decide what I am able to do with my body, it sure as hell didn't seem like the most ideal place to live.

But I don't say this to the classmate in front me. The person who embodies a "True American," who will probably never get pulled over by the police, gun in hand, or raped by a boss in a locked office, who thinks if you work hard you will get rewarded because this is America, a place where everyone gets what they deserve. Instead I turn back to face the flag, let my right hand drop back to my side, and continue singing Journey until I hear the last words uttered by my ever-patriotic classmate: "*with liberty and justice for all.*"

Tiny Dunkers

ALANNIS SANTIAGO

Mission Oak High School

Honorable Mention

A boy pulls on his red shirt nervously, yet his legs shout in excitement as they hop around. He gulps in angst as he awaits for practice time to be over. But he can't let this precious time slide by without putting in effort. His curly locks bounce as he squats and practices aiming the orange sphere. His hands expertly dribbling the foreign object in hands, further inflating his need for more zeal. For little Eliam lived for the game.

Fweet!

The sharp tone of a whistle halts the players practicing in their movements, and like ants, they go into formation, glaring at the other team, making an unvocal promise to beat them. His breathing shallows, eyes dilating to focus in on the target goal: the basket.

Fweet!

The same whistle screeches at the players to start their fight. Legs speed across the court, shoes squeaking in determination against the floor. He grabs the ball and passes it to a girl, her arms up and awaiting the arrival of the ball, but last second a boy on the opposing team leaps up and snatches the ball away, darting to his goal: the opposing basket. But Eliam isn't having it. He chases down the boy, stealing the ball away and running faster than he ever has. He shoots his shot and makes a perfect basket.

His heart skips from the adrenaline and joy as he sees his family clapping and cheering him on. A giggle leaves his small body as his teammates high five him along with the coach.

"Alright! Come together!" The coach gathers up her kids, they huddle close and talk strategies. A light mist of sweat coats their bodies, more so from the nerves of all these eyes watching them.

"You're all doing so well! Keep it up. Try passing the ball more, and Eliam," his head snaps up from his spot, "we're counting on you."

And back into the court he goes, more ambition lodged in his brain.

I have to win. I have to win. I have to win.

The ball skids from player to player, back and forth from the teams as they fight for any shots. Several baskets are made on each side, the score is closing in as time dwindles and the uproar in the stands are reaching the minds of the players, exerting tremendous pressure on them.

It's then that the world stops as the final minute arrives and Eliam is passed the ball. All he sees is the basket, all he hears is his heart thudding against his ribs. His fingers can feel the bumpy skin of the ball, the smell of sweat and rubber mixing as his muscles ache in sweet agony.

"Go Eliam! Go!" His family is shouting at him in support, nervous looks on their faces. He takes a deep breath before charging towards the opposite end of the court. With only seconds left to spare he squats down and aims the ball, giving it his best shot.

The whistle blows, everyone sits shocked in their seats. Players look down in defeat, upset at the outcome of the last second. There's nothing more satisfying for Eliam than seeing the ball swish through the hoop before the shriek of the whistle. He's never felt this much tension relieve itself all at once.

"Eliam you did it!" It's like the world is in love with this little five-year-old boy who just won his team medals! His parents go up to him and give him a big hug. His sisters trudge to him slowly, trying to get past the other children who swarm their winning teammate. He couldn't have imagined it any other way.

Spiraling Tower

DAVID GONZALEZ

King City High School

Honorable Mention

Timrek already heard his parents yelling in the background as he headed out the door carrying his science project with him. As he walked to school, he noticed that his shoelace became untied. *Great. Another thing that I suck at. My grades stink, my art stinks, and me tying my own shoelaces stinks.* He sighed heavily. When he arrived at school, he prepared his project. The science fair immediately began after the morning announcements. The other kids had cool looking projects like vegetable batteries and invisible ink, but Timrek had a classic baking soda and vinegar volcano. Though he had a rough start, he just might have a good day, Timrek thought, maybe.

When he got home after school, he noticed his mother cooking dinner for his father.

“Hey, honey. How was school today?” she asked. Timrek noticed that she looked more tired and weak than the month before. Every time he asked her if she was seriously sick, she would reply that it was only a mild cold. He smiled and replied that school was fine. He couldn’t tell her he ruined his science project because that would break her heart since his mother helped him work on the project. Around bedtime, his mother was reading a bedtime story while the radio played in the background.

“Turn down the damn radio!” his father yelled. Timrek looked at his mother, frightened, but she just sighed and said it was going to be alright. His father always seemed to be angry. Whenever Timrek was watching TV or playing outside, his father would come home and find something to complain about. The good days that Timrek ever had was when his father wasn’t home. He loved his mother and his mother loved him.

The following months his mother’s health declined, and she was admitted into the hospital. She had been diagnosed with breast cancer and Timrek had just found out. He visited her frequently at the hospital every day after school. He would walk to the hospital and spend time with his mother. He would get help on his homework, then they would share stories and laugh. “I love you mom” he would always say before leaving. “I love you too. I’ll see you tomorrow” she would reply. The very next day after school, Timrek walked up to her room and noticed that her bed was made. He asked the nurse where his mother was, and they informed him that his mother

had passed away that morning.

Two years have passed after his mother's death and Timrek's life continued to spiral down like those tower games where you watch the ball swirl all the way to the bottom. His father would often stagger home late at night making his way to the dining table while Timrek would prepare his meal. With his mom gone, he had to make sure that his father was fed, and the house was in order. Everyday his father seemed to be drifting further away from Timrek. He couldn't wait to move out. *Just a few more years*, Timrek thought, *just a few more years*.

More years found Timrek as a junior in college, after passing high school with decent grades. He started dating a girl named Claire. She was smart, kind, and beautiful in every way. Although she made him happy, Timrek got sad from time to time; she reminded him of his mother.

Timrek and Claire finally got married and had a daughter together that they named Catherine, after his mother, and he was content for some time until some years later his wife died from leukemia.

Every night after her death, he would hang out at the pub down the street to drink his problems away. His bad memories of his parent's fighting, his failure in school, his father who never showed him love, and his beautiful wife who died like his sweet dear mother. He blamed himself for everything because he wasn't strong enough, to prevent those things. Scratching the stubble that had grown around his jawline, he sighed deeply as he took in a couple more drinks.

He staggered home one night and collapsed onto the couch. The sitter said goodbye to Timrek and his now nine-year-old daughter. He knew she was concerned about Catherine and himself from her various forms of grievances, but he didn't care. He never really cared about anything anymore. The next at the pub after his 6th drink or so, he started to think. His daughter doesn't have a loving father. He was finally able to understand his father at the end. His father resented him because he was a constant reminder of his deceased mother. Yet they still loved each other. Timrek felt a tight knot form inside his stomach and around his throat. For the first time, the alcohol couldn't hold back the pain. He started to cry. He sobbed loudly for what seemed like forever.

Timrek shuffled inside coming home from the pub. As the sitter greeted him, he noticed Catherine working on something. He walked up to her and

asked, "What are you working on?"

"A volcano. It's a school project," she replied smiling. Timrek smirked. Old memories flooded back to the time where he made one of these with his mother.

"Here, why don't I help you," he said.

"Thanks, daddy!" Catherine exclaimed with excitement.

Then, whispering to himself, "We'll make it work this time."

Timrek and Catherine had been working on the project for about an hour. They both shared stories about their day and they made each other laugh now and then. The last time Timrek remembered sharing this type of relationship was with his mom. He yearned to have this type of relationship again and he wanted it to be with his daughter. Looking up at his daughter, he smiled. *Man, I should have done this a long time ago.*

On Nights Like This

GABRIEL AGUILAR

King City High School

Honorable Mention

He stumbles
in through
the front door,
like a blind man
navigating through
an unfamiliar location.

**The smell of his breath
tells me everything.**

He slurs his words as if his tongue
was glued to the roof of his mouth.

**I pretend to be asleep in my bed so he
won't see me and start yelling again.**

His anger burns more furiously on
nights like this. **He's only hit me once,**
and he's told me many times that he'd quit
drinking. **It seems harder for him to keep
a promise than trying to quit.** He

isn't the same when he has a drink. I can't
remember when he last gave me one
of his cheerful smiles.

When I was Young on Cornell Street

KANE SJOBERG

Edison High School

Honorable Mention

— Inspired by “When I Was Young in the Mountains” by Cynthia Rylant

When I was young on Cornell Street, my mother brought me home from the school in the afternoon, tired from her day, but always interested in hearing about mine.

When I was young on Cornell Street, my father made Swedish pancakes on special mornings, ladling the batter onto the pan, spreading it such that it was as light and thin as a crepe, and always deliciously browned to perfection. After, I would use one of my mother’s cloth napkins to wipe all the syrup off my face, content and full.

When I was young on Cornell Street, I would walk around the corner to Mrs. Santefeumia’s house, where my friend Antonio and I would spend hours in each other’s company playing with LEGOs, swimming, and eating pizza from his father’s Italian restaurant.

When I was young on Cornell Street, I would take warm baths on frosty winter evenings before dinner, reading Garfield comic books for hours until the cooled water broke my reverie. On the occasion that the big books slipped into the water, my mom would use the hairdryer to dry it for a sad little me. My toes and feet were always pruned up after, and my footsteps damp.

When I was young on Cornell Street, my mom would take walks in the rain with me and we would traverse the blocks of our neighborhood, her showing me how the citrus oil of lemons and oranges create streaky rainbows in the rivers of the gutters. I would search for dams obstructing the flow and eagerly watch as the water exploded out when I rent the piles of sticks and leaves apart with my foot. At one specific drain, I would send big leaves on their way like boats in a storm only to be swallowed up by the gaping slot.

When I was young on Cornell Street, we would all sit out front and enjoy the slow, gentle summer evening descending into night, the crickets chirping and the ever-present mosquitoes flying in lazy circles.

When I was young on Cornell Street, on stormy, thundering spring nights, my dad and I would drive out North to where the city bows to the rolling foothills, and we would sit together and wait patiently for the massive bolts of lightning to make their stunning appearances.

When I was young on Cornell Street, I never needed anything nor wanted to go anywhere else, for I loved the home and family I had, the life I lived, and the fun I experienced. I enjoyed my childhood and will always remember it.

Group #16

PAULINA VALADEZ-GARCIA

University High School

Honorable Mention

“But Mama said not to go in there.”

“C’mon just a peek.” She says, holding her younger sister’s hands while walking closer to the large, mahogany door.

“Why are you guys here? You know we aren’t allowed to go in there.” The older boy says as he approaches his sisters.

“Don’t be such a downer, Oliver. Haven’t you ever wondered what she’s hiding behind there?”

“No, not really. If Mama says that we can’t go back there, it’s probably for a reason. Besides only mama has a copy of the key, so unless you know how to pick an ancient lock, there’s no way you’re getting in there.”

“But—”

“No, Emma. As the oldest, I think it’s my job to stop you from doing anything stupid, especially if you are dragging Chloe into it.”

Emma tightens her hold on Chloe’s hand and sends a sheepish smile to her older brother. After a pointed look from the fourteen-year-old boy, she places a protective hand on her jean pocket before pulling out a shiny key.

“Yeah ... it might be too late for that. I— I know! Okay, stop yelling at me and listen! I already took it so just calm down!”

Oliver lets out a huff and looks down at his youngest sister.

“We need to get Chloe to bed. Give me the key and I’ll put it back in Mama’s room before she notices.”

Emma glares at her brother and pushes the seven-year-old girl behind her.

“Just listen to me. Please, Oliver ...”

After a couple of seconds of silence, Oliver finally walks around Emma and leans next to the door. He thinks for a few more seconds before gesturing for Emma to continue.

With a grateful smile, Emma begins her argument. “I know I shouldn’t have taken the key, but I couldn’t help it! We’ve never been able to leave the house. Whenever we go outside, Mama always finds a way to bring us back in. All we’re able to do is explore the house and there’s nothing else to look at.”

“Yeah but—”

“Listen. You’ve seen on TV how everyone is able to go out and see the

world. Why can't we? I love Mama but, I think she is hiding something from us. And I have a feeling that there might be answers in this room. I don't want to keep living like this for the rest of my life." Emma finishes, waiting for her brother to respond.

"I understand where you're coming from, but what if ... what if we find something we shouldn't?"

"Well, we won't know until we try."

Silence befalls on the siblings again. It continues for what seems like forever before Oliver finally pushes himself off of the wall. He stares at her and the golden key hanging off her fingers and closes his eyes. After hesitating a bit more, he nods his head. Emma smiles at Oliver and Chloe before taking a step closer. He stands next to Emma and faces the door. She lifts the key and takes a deep breath before pushing it into the lock. The two eldest siblings look at each other before doing anything else.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Not at all."

Emma finally turns the key. They wait a bit. An eerie feeling takes over the air around them.

As the seconds pass, she shows no signs of continuing her movements. Oliver decides to take the lead and pushes on the door.

The door opens up completely. There are splurges of green light littered around the darkroom. Emma returns to grab Chloe's hand again and lets her feet follow behind Oliver. He carefully shuts the door behind his sisters and glides his hands over the walls.

"Oliver."

"I'm trying to find a light switch."

"Oliver."

"Hold on — oh I got it."

The lights hanging from the ceiling brighten up the room after the click. He waits a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the newly brightened room. After the spots clear from his eyes, he turns around. The white noise in the room is suddenly too much to handle. With the light now showing more of the room, the sisters begin to back away towards their brother. Oliver is stuck in his place and his lungs begin to cry after not receiving their timely supply of air. His wide eyes shoot around the room. Taking everything in.

Chole's soft cries are what it takes for Emma and Oliver to finally turn to each other. They both look at their youngest sister and feel the cracks spreading over their hearts from the fear taking over her once innocent face.

"H— hey. Chloe. G— go sit next to the door. Face towards the wall while— while we look around, okay?"

The young girl nods her head while wiping her tear-stained face. She pulls away from Emma and follows the orders from her brother and sits on the floor, clutching her knees close to her chest.

After a bit, Emma and Oliver bring their attention back to the room. They walk in further so that their conversation will not reach the ears of their terrified sister. They did not stray more than arms length from each other as they had not yet gotten used to their terrifying surroundings. Emma starts to cling onto Oliver as they get closer to the large containers.

“I told you we shouldn’t have come in here.”

“Don’t start. We can’t go back now.”

Once they get closer to one of the tall, glowing containers, they stop once again. A second passes by. Then another. Oliver clears his throat after who knows how long, and continues.

The horridness of the capsule was heightened after getting only a couple a feet away from it. It was about ten feet tall and was filled with a liquid. From observation, it became apparent that the luminous green color was projected from the light on the bottom of the vessel. Bubbles were adhered to the edges but, the specimen inside was clearly visible.

Floating in the questionable liquid, was a small human-looking creature. It reminded the children of the fetuses that they had seen in their textbooks. A chord was connected to the center of the being with a long tail flowing above its head and attaching to the top.

The siblings observed the floating body. Too enamored to even think about looking away. Eventually, Oliver glanced away from the organism and started studying the container. It was just a cylindrical, glass holding facility. What caught his eye was the label attached to the top reading “E-17”.

“What does ‘E-17’ mean?” Emma asks, as if she had read her brother’s mind.

“I— I don’t know. L— let’s keep looking around.”

Emma peruses her lips, nods, and starts walking again. They identify two other capsules with a desk resting against the wall on the other side of the room. The siblings observe that the other containers are labeled the same way, except for the labels changing to “C-17” and “O-17”. The fourteen-year-old starts with opening the drawers of the desk once they reach it and takes out the contents to further analyze. The eleven-year-old looks around the walls and strays away from her brother when a frame and what seems like a calendar catch her eye.

“Hey, if you’re going to walk over there, take this flashlight. I found it in one of the drawers, use it so you can see better.”

The young girl takes the flashlight and goes back to her investigating. The first thing that she shines on is the calendar. After reading a couple of notes, she realizes that all the events written down, were what the siblings had been studying for the last couple of weeks. Even the scores from their weekly tests were highlighted. But, one thing was off. The year of the calendar was fifteen years behind and it had some future days and scores written in as well.

After observing the calendar, Emma moves to the side and shines her silver light on the photo frame. Her breath hitches as she sees pictures of herself, her brother, and her sister lined up in rows. They all look older in the pictures but, she can recognize those faces anywhere. The first picture of each child was numbered at the top in the same format as the capsules. “E-0, E-1, E-2, E-3 ... O-0, O-1, O-2 ... C-0, C-1 ...” The pattern repeated fifteen times over each picture until the empty sixteenth slot disrupted the flow.

Emma goes back to the picture labeled “E-0” and observes the image of herself for a bit. With her confusion only growing, Emma looks back to the label on the capsule, then back at the picture. Just as an idea is about to erupt from her, she hears Oliver calling to her.

“Emma! Come look at this!”

She hesitates for a second before turning off her light and walking back to her brother.

“Look. This journal has our lesson plans for the next two years before they just ... stop. Yes, I was confused too but then, I found this. I wanted you to read it with me.”

Oliver holds out a dark, brown book with the words “Perfection Experiment: Volume Two” etched in gold on the top. Oliver opens the book after making sure that he places it in the middle of him and his sister.

At this stage, the capsules and Duplicates should be ready and the first group should be in development.

Now, it is time for the preparation.

In order to ensure that the specimens will turn out as they are intended to, follow the lesson plan provided exactly. Do not stray away at any time. All the learning subjects listed are there to ensure that the brains of the specimens develop effectively. If the Master takes liberties and goes against the program, the Master risks the possibility of the brains not developing at the desired rates.

The first part of this guide, will give an in-debt explanation on why each subject is essential for this process and resources for the Master if they find themselves lost at any point.

The second part of this guide, will provide instructions for the the down-time that the specimens will need in order to ensure a healthy brain and mindset.

The final part of this guide, will discuss what to do if the Duplicates cause any trouble and need to be terminated. It will also discuss what the Masters are to do with the terminated Duplicates while the next clones are finishing their development.

As stated, there are also more resources listed in this guide, so do not hesitate to use them if any problem arises.

Enjoy.

The elder’s hands start shaking as he finishes reading the first page of the book. He begins to reread the text before his hands lose their grip and the book hits the floor between the two with a bang. Oliver buries his hands in his hair and looks to his sister whose mouth is hidden under her clamped hands.

“O— Oliver. C— come look at what I found.” Emma says with a shaky voice. It takes all of her strength to grab Oliver’s shaking hand and drag him to the frame she was observing earlier. She shines the flashlight and watches as Oliver’s eyes widen.

He looks between the pictures and the containers as the realization of their situation finally sets in. He looks over to Emma and knows by the look on her face that she has had the same realization as well.

“W— we need to get out of here.” Is all Oliver can say as panic starts to take over every inch of his body.

Emma’s words fail her and she just nods along with Oliver’s words.

“Let’s just stay calm...We...we can escape. We need to escape. I can’t let any of us get terminated, whatever that means. We need to get out of here. L— let’s go get Chloe a— and get out of here.”

“How are we going to do that?! We don’t know what Mama can do to us!”

“Calm down. We— we can figure this out. Let’s start by getting Chloe and

getting out of this room. Then, we can think of something. Mama shouldn't be back for a while. We can make it. I promise." Oliver tries his best to stop shaking as he reaches out for Emma to take his hand. Emma hesitates as she reaches out and wraps her fingers around his.

Oliver does his best to give a reassuring smile before turning around and beginning to walk back to the door.

"We can do this. Let's just think about what we can do to—"

Oliver's words are cut short when they see the door beginning to open. They stop in their tracks and watch as Chloe looks up at the woman standing at the door frame with large eyes. The woman looks between the seven-year-old and the pair, who are a couple of feet away from her, before giving a soft smile.

"Mama ... I'm scared." Chloe says as she stands from her position on the ground and walks towards the woman.

"Chloe! No! Don't go to Mama!" Oliver yells out and takes a step towards his younger sister. Before Chloe can turn around to face her brother, the woman swoops her up and holds on to the young girl. After seeing the panic on her brother and sister's faces, Chloe starts to squirm and reach out for them.

"Mama you're scaring me! I want to go to Oli and Emma!" She cries as the woman tightens her hold around the child.

"It's okay sweetie. No need to be scared anymore."

Emma lets tears run down her face and releases a scream when she sees her sister fall limp against the woman after being stabbed by a cylindrical object on her nape in a quick movement. Oliver falls to his knees as a waterfall of tears stains his cheeks. Emma follows his movements and collapses next to her brother.

The woman smiles down at the children. After taking a last look at the girl weighing down in her arms, she turns and gently sets her on the floor next to the door. She then goes back to her previous position and smiles down at the crying kids.

"You monster!" Oliver yells at the approaching woman.

The lady chuckles before speaking. "So, you guys found out the truth."

"Get away!" Emma screeches and clings harder to her brother.

"I knew this group was special from the beginning. None of the others were able to piece the puzzle together. It's such a shame, I really was fond of you kids."

The brother and sister stand up as the woman makes her way closer to them. The siblings back away as they see her pull out the same device that was used on Chloe not too long ago.

"Run!" Oliver yells as he drags Emma behind him and heads to the door.

Before they can make it even half-way, she catches them and holds them in place.

They both struggle against her grip as much as they can. When all their energy runs out, the pair turn to one another. Seeing his sister's tear stained face, Oliver does all he can think of and wraps his free arm around his sister and holds on as tight as he can. Emma reciprocates the action and cries into Oliver's shoulder as a sharp pain hits the back of her neck.

Death of a Hero

EMILY GANIRON

Mission Oak High School

Honorable Mention

That night I found you doing lines or something in the bathroom

A part of me died with you.

I went through all of the pictures in the attic,

Burned all of the ones that you're in

But I kept the love letters.

When you walked out of the bathrooms

You had tears falling from your bloodshot eyes,

They looked at the mess I made.

"Please ..."

You couldn't even finish your sentence,

I stood up from the table, looking you right in those damned eyes.

They were different, nothing I knew.

My eyes were red too,

They stung, trying to hold everything in;

One breath was all it took.

"Let me help you."

Nodding slowly you wiped at your face,

"Well make this work."

We couldn't make it work

Months went by

And you kept falling.

I found you doing lines or something in the bathroom.

I tried,

I tried so damn hard.

You said you were too far gone

I didn't want to believe you, but I should have.

You came out of the bathroom again,

Sobbing.

"The death of a hero," I said

"What?"

Again,

"I'm a witness to the death of a hero."

You were my hero.

The Memoir of an Atrocious Scrabble Player

CADENCE DOOMS

University High School

Honorable Mention

From the time I was 7, I discovered my lack of talent in the Scrabble biosphere. It's a simple enough game— just create words out of thin air to win enough points to boast about at supper, and, of course, to rub into your sister's face for roughly 5 decades. Simple. My word concoctions consisted of flimsy, gaunt, tri-lettered words. Dog. Bat. If I was radiating a particularly audacious energy, the occasional lengthy word would make its way onto the collapsed board in front of me. Almost as flattened as my confidence. All in all, my skill at Scrabble, and aforementioned vocabulary, is extremely limited. Now, this fact may seem unnecessary— so what? Plenty of people don't find their passion within board games, and those who possess the savviness to navigate their way through the game rarely find value within said skill. However, in my circumstance, this fact remains wildly unfortunate. Because, from the age of 7, I knew I wanted to be a writer. Bumps in the road, such as my disdain for Scrabble matches and shortage of the adequate language to express myself, would continue to hinder me from this dream on and off for many years thereafter.

Within my experiences as a child, I discovered my adoration for the characters I witnessed in my everyday life. The cigar smoking, silver-haired accountant— constantly typing on his half-ancient laptop, whilst sipping his bitter, charcoal colored coffee. The ginger haired, lavender-scented english teacher at my local middle school, adorned in fringed clothing and paint stained, light wash jeans— who baked molasses drizzled cookies for her students. As I gawked at these saturated souls in the streets of downtown Visalia, I knew I wanted to possess the sort of talent needed to transcribe their auras onto paper, so everyone could read the world from my eyes. I found a sort of warm comfort in writing, the scratch of cheap gel pens on pastel-colored cardstock, the ink stains on my small palms from my hand gliding over the surface of newly fabricated sentences, and more than all- the feeling of finally having a friend.

As a small, round child with thick lensed glasses and an aversion to the feminine skirts all the girls in my second grade class would wear, making

friends with my peers was a *tad* difficult. I would bring overly-sweetened cupcakes on my birthday, pass out hand crafted, glitter-glued stationary hearts to everyone on valentines day, and was always available to be someone's partner for PE class— since no one wanted to be mine. Despite my constant efforts, I rarely, or rather— never, was seen hand in hand with another child on the playground at lunchtime recess. Therefore, my favorite moments were instead within my classroom. My teacher would pass out pages off magazine covers, recycled books, and shopping catalogues- and leave us with one instruction: write a story about it. I showered my poor educator with a constant flow of fictional stories about royal weddings, golden phoenixes, abandoned private schools- and everything in between. These creativity exercises maintained my youthful mentality for years to follow, as I continued to acquire countless local ribbons and certificates for my prose— until the year I turned 13.

In my seventh grade year, I developed not only as a woman, but as a teenager. As my height levelled out at an inch or two above 5 feet, the chubbiness of my face quickly changed to reveal pronounced cheekbones, and my thick-lensed glasses were switched for contact lenses- I finally had a chance for what I had craved for my whole life, a steady friend group. This small, round child had turned into a curvy, mascara-and-lipstick clad varsity volleyball player— and I didn't write a story for pleasure for an extensive period. 3 full years, to be exact.

In those 36 months, I experienced so much of life in situations I had never imagined myself in— I dated plenty of boys and girls, I played multiple instruments, I travelled to different countries to compete on Team USA for international level baton twirling, I was voted most likely to be Miss America and best dressed and most fashionable— but despite all these titles and trips, I was empty. I may have fooled everyone around me, and maybe even myself on the surface, but I knew I was still that small, round child from elementary school. I had meticulously built up my friend group to a plentiful mass of glamorous teenagers I wanted so desperately to be like, but still had no true companions. Everyone knew me as Cadence C. Dooms, the middle school class president, who danced around the halls with a constant state of joy, conveyed through a broad grin. But, no one knew me as Cadence, whose favorite color is pink but her second favorite is deep grey, whose worst fear is dying alone, who enjoys long drives in the dark with the radio shut off so everything can be quiet and still for once. I realized the severity of my betrayal to myself, how dishonest I was with everyone for the sake of my image, and I knew I needed to write again.

Once I returned to my fictitious world, I was head over heels again. I fell in love with poetry, and drowned myself in Dickinson, Keats, Frost, Whitman— and wrote pages upon pages a day trying to find the words that are unapologetically me. However, my Scrabble predicament was the first of many bumps in my journey to writing again. A common “comedic” phrase in my own household that emerges when I explain my future goals, filled with creative writing, is, “Do you plan on making money?”

Hilarious. How amusing.

This phrase was enough to snap me back to reality when I was

younger— they were right. How crazy must I be to wager my future on my ability to set a pen to paper? In continuing my journey of creative writing, I guess the answer is pretty insane, because no matter how irrational it may seem— I realize that as long as I'm working doing something that overflows my heart with passion and saturates my entire being with the sort of satisfaction that one can only dream of, I'm willing to endure everything it takes.

My love of writing has brought an ever growing number of characters into my life: my auburn-haired friend who is the first to light a fire in me, the friend with the soul of a saint who keeps me humble, my charismatic and ever-endearing language and composition teacher, who reminds me every day the power words possess. My own mother, who lost her hair to an ongoing immune battle with the antagonist that is cancer. My teammates, who have seen me bleed, sob, and cry tears of joy on foreign soil. Every character has brought invaluable lessons into my life, and I only can hope to possess the skill to honor them in my future writing. Until then, I'll endure losing an infinite number of Scrabble games, and continue the search for my voice of brutal honesty, on my hands and knees, to show the literary world who I unapologetically am.