

Spectrum

No. 41

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

FRESNO STATE.

Discovery. Diversity. Distinction.

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 students. All publication rights revert to the authors after their work appears in *Spectrum*.

The 41st annual Young Writers' Conference was scheduled for April 14, 2021, with a virtual keynote address from Nic Stone, New York Times best-selling author of fiction for young adults.

To request additional copies of the journal, or to support *Spectrum* and the Young Writers' Conference by 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,

Congratulations on your works being included in this journal and for participating in this year's Young Writers' Conference! For more than four decades, Fresno State's Department of English has hosted this conference for students in order to support you as you hone your craft. We are honored to have as this year's keynote speaker, Nic Stone, who will surely inspire you towards a lifetime of creativity.

Writing is such a liberating experience, as it allows you to observe the world and express your own ideas. As Justyce McAllister writes in Stone's *Dear Martin*, "I need to pay more attention, Martin. Start really seeing stuff and writing it down. Figure out what to do with it." Please continue to cultivate your own vision, be proud of who you are as a writer, enjoy the art of writing, and share your thoughts with others in order to build a more equitable and just society. If you imagine and write about a more beautiful future, you may succeed in creating it by inspiring others through your art.

Our Department of English is a wonderful place to study literature and creative writing, and it has produced many successful writers who have published their works with prestigious presses and journals. We hope that you will enroll in Fresno State to find your passion and pursue your dreams.

Finally, we all owe special thanks to Professor Tanya Nichols for being the dedicated mastermind of this excellent conference, as well as staff Jefferson Beavers for his indispensable support. Please remember to thank your teachers, too, because they have shaped you into the aspiring writers you are today.

Thank you for joining us and have a wonderful day!

Sincerely,
Dr. Honora Chapman
Interim Dean, College of Arts and Humanities

A Letter from the Chair

Welcome, dear students, to the 41st Young Writers' Conference! Each year, this conference provides a forum to showcase the talents of area high school students, and the range of unique and valuable experiences that make the Central Valley flourish. This event shows us the world through your eyes—the same eyes that in a not-too-distant future will mobilize those observations and combine them with your aspirations. Your ideas, actions, and words are the tools needed to reshape our community into a vision you would like to see made reality. And that's what writing is all about.

Today, we gather online as a community. We convene writers across genres who share a passion for thought, expression, beauty, and possibility. When you write, you challenge. You critique. You commiserate. You console. You celebrate. You connect ... and above all else, you *create* something that didn't exist before, but does now, and it's all your own ... until you share with it with others. It is in this spirit of creating and sharing that we are all here. You are a part of that. Your voice matters. What you think and have to say matters, especially to like-minded peers, teachers, and future collaborators who want to create alongside you.

The English Department and the Creative Writing Program at Fresno State welcome you. As you interact today with our faculty and graduate students and as you make new acquaintances, stop for a moment. Take a mental picture of yourself at this event. File it away so that, going forward, you can more easily envision future scenes like this one: where your creativity flourishes amongst peers. Maybe that future will bring you to Fresno State or maybe your time with the Young Writers' Conference will springboard you towards other successes. Either way, savor your time here today. You are with people who share your love of language, and who are interested in what you have to say.

Today we celebrate new talent, and thank all of the teachers, family, and friends who have nurtured that talent. Today we make new friends, take a few risks, and possibly even glimpse into the future. Congratulations on the successes that have gotten you this far. We are excited to hear more of your voice and learn more about what those eyes have seen.

Sincerely,
Dr. Melanie Hernandez
Chair, Department of English

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Awards

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Ryan Orme, Edison High School | On Love and Boyhood

PROVOST'S AWARD

Shannah Nwachukwu, Mission Oak High School | The Fanatic

HENRY MADDEN LIBRARY AWARDS

Stephanie Gutierrez, Mission Oak High School | The Perpetual Problems of Immortality

Katie Xiong, University High School | I, Too, Sing America

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Samara Valencia, Mission Oak High School | Lucky Strike

Cadence Doods, University High School | A Prayer for My Country

FRESNO POETS' ASSOCIATION AWARD

Jovany Oliveros, King City High School | Phasmid

Awards

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Eden Bernstein, Edison High School | October's Black Cat

PHILIP LEVINE PRIZE AWARD

Jordan Jackson, Edison High School | Love for an Unjust Country

HMONG AMERICAN INK & STORIES AWARDS

Emily Vang, Edison High School | Encyclopedia Autobiography

Tangela Nguyen, University High School | Phở

FACET AWARDS

Nyanza Williams, University High School | Achilles Heel

Jeffery Wilson, Voyager Secondary School | From Streets to Cells

MFA AWARD

Mariana Rubio, Tulare Western High School | The Believers,
the Deniers, and the Heroes

SAN JOAQUIN LITERARY ASSOCIATION AWARD

Gianna Cardenas, Mission Oak High School | Color Me and
Call Me a Rainbow

CHICANX WRITERS AND ARTISTS ASSOCIATION AWARDS

Ernesto Bustinza, Edison High School | Always be grateful for
what you have

Nicole Nunez, Mission Oak High School | En la tumba de 202

HMONG AMERICAN WRITERS' CIRCLE AWARD

Mallie Yang, Edison High School | The Mekong River

Awards

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Miguel A. Villegas, King City High School | How to Play a Guitar

SHERLEY ANNE WILLIAMS AWARD

Kylie Roberts, Washington Union High School | Red

WENDY ROSE AWARD

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HONORABLE MENTIONS

Logan Meadows, Home school | L-O-V-E

Joann Moon, University High School | Enough

Mariah Ruiz, Porterville High School | The Forbidden Kiss

Tyler Doan, King City High School | Fly

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Sword

Alexia Prieto, Porterville High School | Feminism

SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY WRITING PROJECT TEACHER AWARDS

Laurie Jones, Mission Oak High School

Jerilyn Cavanaugh, Edison High School

On Love and Boyhood

RYAN ORME

Edison High School

President's Award

Knowing who I am is like a shell game —
It's standing outside a store window and squinting through the glass, trying
to see inside through the reflection.
You have to search through what you know in order to discover what you
don't. From there, you learn. Rinse and repeat.
(The process of learning goes like this: unconscious incompetence,
conscious incompetence, conscious competence, unconscious competence.)

I am standing on the outside of boyhood holding a string or the end of a
noose, I can't tell which. I am holding something deep in my chest. It's
tugging on the pit of my stomach and clicking its tongue in the hall, and
suddenly I see that some part of myself is missing.

Is it missing, or was it ever there at all?

There is a shift, then. Like an earthquake.

It's different from the quakes I've felt in the past. It's closer to a convulsion
than a tremor.

I can't put words to it, but I know it makes me feel deeply joyful and wild and
afraid — its epicenter is tucked inside my chest, and aftershocks crawl up
the nape of my neck, shatter my jaw, tumble into my mouth and coil around
my fingers.

There are no words for this feeling but I am aware, somehow, that it's a
secret that only I can decipher.

I'm out of my depth — I deal in language, not the animal feelings my body
creates.

So: I am outside of boyhood and I am outside of girlhood.

I do not want girlhood. I want to love — that's what I always come back to.
Love.

The thing bouncing off the walls in my echo-chamber heart — it is love. It
is boyhood. I know this like I know each and every one of my twenty three
names.

It belongs to me, and it is made of light. Inhale and there's a glow behind my
eyes. Exhale and it drips like honey.

It is a river coursing through a tranquil garden. It is the plants around the river, the apple tree, and we are in the Garden of Eden. There is an incomprehensible creature standing at the gates. She is holding raw power in her hands. She does something the books don't tell you about — she lets us pass.

And then we're falling off a cliff, falling into bed, falling home in my little bedroom with the striped blanket and the yellow walls. We're hiding out behind the backyard shed and playing in the rose bushes. We're trading secrets in a tent with string lights on the porch. The sky above suburbia is star-speckled and lovely, but we pay it no mind. Our voices are the only things that matter here.

We are coming into ourselves and it is lanky and awkward and messy and odd.

We are healing.

We are coming home;

I am coming home.

I am home inside my head and under my blankets, after the doors get locked and the light over the front door goes dark.

They said,

You're just following a trend.

She said,

You're perfect the way you are.

and I shifted my weight. Said,

It isn't like that.

Said,

You're not understanding me.

But none of them wanted to in the first place.

Now you're asking permission in my imagination. In my imagination I'm saying

yes, of course, whatever you want.

You're saying

hold me.

So I do.

I am realizing new things.

I am realizing that although my stomach twists and my mouth goes dry — I can say what I want. What I am.

I am realizing that this is my boyhood, this is my Garden of Eden: to hold another queer trans heart in my queer trans hands.

I don't want it to end rushed and thoughtless; I want to take my time. I want run-on sentences. I want to think about the rules for a long time and then break them. I want to run my hands gently over everything I keep inside and I want it to be okay.

And then the doubt —

Is it okay?

Am I allowed to have this?

This started as an epiphany, a blaze of glory, a divine purpose.

For a few minutes, when I first touched pen to paper, everything was beautiful.

Now I'm alone in my darkened bedroom and everything is exactly what it is. I don't want these feelings to go away.

They disappear if I describe them as anything except what they are.

This is tricky business. This is a tightrope walk. This is writing in blood.

I have so much to say. So many feelings — about boys and girls and people. About homes, and time. About love. About things so big I can hardly find the words. Language, in all its beauty, can feel awfully confining.

Often, I struggle not with finding words for my feelings, but with writing them. Putting them down on paper makes them so much uglier than I'd like to acknowledge. I want to turn all my problems into art. It hurts that I can't. But I write anyway. I write at risk of sounding unoriginal, under pain of being read as pretentious, and in spite of everyone that believes angst does not deserve to be revealed in at least a little.

Last summer I got rid of my bedroom mirror and started writing about what scares me.

I'm scared that I've lost my spark, that I've written every story I have to tell. I think boys are beautiful. I have to force down shame every time I think about them.

All the things I've told you in my head? I'm saying them for myself, too.

We are not dirty. We are not weak or broken or undeserving of love. We are still children.

And now we've arrived again at the edge of the cliff. I'm standing on the edge of the train bridge with my arms outstretched — I hold power in my hands. The bridge rattles and creaks, and I am deciding now, right now, to let myself fall. I don't care what comes after.

The Fanatic

SHANNIAH NWACHUKWU

Mission Oak High School

Provost's Award

Yes, I am the Fanatic. A disapproved homeless woman on the street who is exhilarated over the whole flipping moon about a dime. Except, I've found something worth more than all the Ferraris and diamonds in the world. Heaven in a second of a blink.

(Pause, and read that again.)

A little heads up, it's invisible and the only way to vision it is through the finished work of the man, Jesus Christ. That last line made you want to drop this page and run, yet, I assure you this is nothing as simple or repulsive as religion. Do not call me deranged because you can't see the girl who's curled up in a ball with scars on her wrist. The vilest creature to ever exist. The ugliest insults branded with iron on her skin. Her grandad's cold, slithering ghost lying next to her. And all she craves is that the faithful blade she held was sharp enough to cut deep. Deeper than the despondent oceans. You can't see the monster that is dwelling inside her, tempting her with its lies. According to her peers, she's an amort wreck seeking "attention." They are blind to her tortured soul that bleeds

B L A C K.

But here's the big but, she didn't become the headlined suicide story her teachers would gossip about, her friends would forget about, or her family would reminisce about. She found a secret; That everything she had known was a huge scam, and finally the gaunt "real world" was proven a lie! You see, that girl was willing to risk her reputation and her life for someone who was bigger than she ever will be. So she gushed off the serpent's head. No more unbelief. No more friending the devil who is everyone's enemy.

As said before, this isn't depressing legalistic religion where you just follow some rules. This was more arcane. She was following a person, Jesus the Christ, who will undoubtedly judge all, at the end of creation. That alone is incomprehensible for depraved man to understand or believe. If anyone was going to call her crazy for throwing her scornful friends, idolatrous TV shows, and her malicious anger into the bubbling, smokey, pit of fire, so be it. Because she was ludicrous. She was unstably insane. And she was me, who, unlike many, didn't normalize my demons or our ephemeral "reality." So, yes, I am the Fanatic.

The Perpetual Problems of Immortality

STEPHANIE GUTIERREZ

Mission Oak High School

Henry Madden Library Award

“What is that godforsaken smell?” I mutter to myself as the putrid stench of sewer water merged with decay forces me to gag, the odor entangling itself within my nose.

The smell, sadly, grows more prominent. I fling my head up to locate the origin of the repugnant scent, only to see that it is wafting from a hunched man in a dirt-covered trench coat who is examining the displayed items by the door. I squint my eyes in his direction. He reminds me of children attempting to sneak into a movie theater by stacking on top of each other and hiding underneath an oversized trench coat.

The man shuffles closer and inspects a shelf holding unmatching sets of teacups and some leaking pens I keep forgetting to remove. He clucks his tongue and heads towards where I am sitting behind the counter.

“Good afternoon, sir. If you need any assistance, I am at your service.” I say without inhaling any new oxygen, I don’t want to risk vomiting when he is this close.

He glances around the shop, checking if there is anyone else around, and reaches into his coat. “Well,” he says in a deep, raspy voice, “I’m actually interested in selling.” Please don’t be a gun, I pray, but he pulls out a skull instead. Okay, it’s just a skull, nothing of concern.

I feel the heavy tension in the air stiffen my bones. The man in the dirty coat is selling a ... human skull. How did he come across the skull? Is it real? Blaring alarms detonate in my mind at the broad danger this man has brought. I should report him, but before I can say anything, he hastily adds, “I’ll sell it for a dollar.”

“Deal,” I reply, shoving the dollar into his hand and taking the skull. Who knows when I’ll receive another opportunity like this, may as well take advantage.

I watch him put the singular dollar in his pocket and usher towards the door, only pausing when his hand is gripping the bronze doorknob. “I was never here,” he says and walks away.

Hmph. What a strange fellow. I clutch the skull with both of my hands

and inspect the scratches and grime impressed onto the skull. I press a gentle thumb into a discernible fracture.

This skull belonged to a living person, with dreams and hopes and maybe even a family. Now this person is dead, nothing remains except a bundle of bones. Still, I wonder what it feels like to change. To grow wrinkles and sprout gray hairs. To decay as the sun sweats liquid gold and casts shadows over the freshly cut grass where your body rests six feet underground. Or, for this specific case, have your skull held in the grubby hands of a pawn shop owner. But no matter how much I ponder existence, I will never experience the liberation of death because I am cursed with immortality.

I believe I have been around since the beginning of time. (I am not entirely sure because everything before 276 B.C. is a whirlpool of blended and faded memories.) One of the memories I can envision with perfect clarity is the day I stumbled upon the pawnshop.

I remember trudging through the scorching heat somewhere in a field, desperate for the sweet relief of shelter from the blistering sunlight, when I detected a small building in the distance. Hoping it wasn't a mirage, I plodded forward and entered the shop. Inside I found pots detailed with intricate designs depicting town stories and legends on the side of the room, and trinkets and paintings covering every other available surface. I wandered around the shop, registering every knickknack I came across until I found a note of sorts that read, "Good luck."

As vague as that note was, I understood that it was my job to accept responsibility for the shop. Now, I do not know who wrote the note, and after decades of investigating, I still know nothing. Whoever created the pawnshop left no trace, and, perhaps, there was no creator to find in the first place. The dilemma is, I do not necessarily care for answers. I only want to know if there is someone out in the world like me.

It would not be so arduous for me to encounter another immortal if it were not for the pawnshop changing its location. Back then, I used to worry that the shop would disappear without me, but after some experimenting, I have come to find the shop will not move without me inside and leaves when it believes I need to relocate. It keeps me safe from people noticing that I do not age, but knowing the reason does not prevent the wave of loneliness that rushes over me when I see a mother and a child holding hands or the bells of laughter within a group of companions.

The longest I have stayed in one place was eight years. The shop left when I was accused of witchcraft because I had not aged; blamed for selling my soul to the devil for everlasting life by my thick-witted neighbor, jealous of the number of customers I stole from his shop. After the accusation, I hurried away and slammed the door of the pawnshop shut. When I opened the door again, I was somewhere in Switzerland.

"—Excuse me," a silvery voice calls.

I jerk back, and the heavy skull that was still in my hands falls onto my foot with a soft thud. I bend down to rub the part of my foot that was hit and swiftly pick up the skull from the floor, placing it on top of a dusty pile of books next to the cashier box. I clear my throat.

"Hello," I greet, cementing an unbothered smile on my face.

“I’ve been trying to get your attention for a while now, but I suppose zoning out at work can’t be helped.” The woman with the sweet voice chuckles and twirls a strand of her hair away from her face. She looks familiar, but I can’t quite place where I have seen her before. If she were one of my customers, there is no way I would forget someone like her. Not the small mole under her left cheek, nor the tenderness I see in her honeyed eyes. Never in my eternal life would I be capable of forgetting her.

“I, um, yes,” I flustered. Feeling heat rush up and redden my cheeks, I extend my hand to her.

“What’s this for?” she asks with a single eyebrow raised and no hesitation to shake my hand.

“Who knows,” I beam without letting go of her hand, “I’m Finn Walby.” The woman smiles at hearing my name. She has such a genuine, lovely smile.

She opens her mouth to speak, but she is rudely interrupted by two police officers — one comically lanky and the other one looking like an angry teacup I’d like to kick — who propel the door to the pawnshop open. The rangy police officer momentarily halts at the sight of the woman, gawking at my hand enclaspd in hers. He shakes his head and strides over to her side. The woman, I wish I knew her name, lets go of my hand and turns to face the taller officer. He bends forward to whisper something in her ear, and her eyes widen before turning back to stare at me. Then the angrier-looking police officer gets in between the others and me, grabbing my still extended hand, and places a handcuff on them.

“You are under arrest for the murder of Lowell Dallenbach.”

I suppose there is a lesson to learn from all this, never buy a skull from a random stranger because you will most definitely get framed for murder. I wish I knew this sooner.

Soon after, I was sent to the county prison without much of a trial because, apparently, you will not gain the judge’s favor after calling him a “pompous bastard” and a “discombobulated imbecile.” The context of those little nicknames is unimportant.

To my utter astonishment, prison is not that terrible but rather dreadfully monotonous. The food is subpar at best, and the other prisoners stay away from me for reasons I have yet to understand. I have no cellmate, so I have the entirety of the cell to myself. I only worry how the guards will react when they notice I have not aged, and this time I have no way of escape to my pawnshop.

I roll over on my stiff bed to stare up at the ceiling of the cell, counting the small cracks in the cinderblock roofing to distract myself from the ever-present problem facing my existence. I reach 126 cracks when I hear someone whisper my name. I turn my head to whoever is beckoning me and recognize the girl from my pawnshop. I leap off my bed and tiptoe to her hunched figure outside of my cage.

“What are you doing here?” I whisper, failing to wipe the grin off my face.

“Obviously, I am going to help you escape,” she whispers back. She pulls out a key and a pink wig from underneath her coat. “I have a plan,” she smirks. “Here, put this on,” she instructs, shoving the stiff pink bob into my arms.

The wig looks cheap, like a wiry birdnest constructed of pink plastic strands. I put it on anyways and adjust it to what I think would look decent, considering I can’t look in a mirror and that it does nothing to conceal my prisoner’s uniform. I comb the neon pink strands of hair with my fingers in an attempt to salvage the lousy disguise and pray the loud jangling of the keys does not notify any guards that may be on patrol. The jangling continues. Anxious, I lean forward and see the woman’s delicate fingers leisurely flip through keys and test them with the lock, trying every key until the cell opens.

“Wait, you never told me your name,” I blurt, accompanied by the clamor of an unlocking cell.

“It’s Marigold,” she grabs my hand and pulls me out. “All right, follow my lead.”

I had no idea what her plan was, but it turns out her phenomenal prison break plan was simply to walk out of the county jail. Even more surprising, it worked. No one stopped us, no one even batted an eye. (She later explained it was because she worked at the prison and bribed everyone to a pancake breakfast in the morning.)

“What was the point of the costume then?” I asked.

“Sometimes there is no point to anything, Finn,” Marigold replied. “We can do anything if the universe doesn’t stop us.”

“Okay, but what does that have to do with the pink wig?”

Marigold and I walked in silence, listening to the sleepy rustle of leaves and the occasional meow of a cat. The creek of an opening window, the fading music from an apartment we passed. A cool breeze passed and I shivered. It was already well past midnight, but I couldn’t bring myself to mention the time.

“Thank you for helping me break out of jail,” I stopped walking and waited for her moonlit face to turn to mine, “but why? You don’t even know me.”

She stared forward, gaze not wavering from the dark walkway ahead. “I knew a Finn Walby once. I remember you from back during the Salem Witch Trials, you disappeared when you got accused. I also remember seeing you were a shopkeeper in Italy around the 1700s. Should I go on?”

Oh.

She peered up at me then. “You don’t understand how annoying it has been running into you so many times over the years, and you never saw me. You were always disappearing before I could even talk to you.” She sighed and kicked the pebble in front of her. “Funny that I have all the time in the world, but I never had enough time when it came to you. Whenever I went searching for you, you had already left, all without a trace.”

Her words caused my heart to pound and flutter. To buzz with the urge

to hold her and never let go out of fear that she would disappear. She had found me. Never have I been more thankful towards this absurd universe. Meeting her feels like a blind man regaining his sight. If only I had looked up sooner, I would have found what I had been seeking all along.

“I’m sorry,” I paused to catch my breath and reorganize my thoughts, “I think I was so absorbed in the idea of finding you that I never actually began searching.”

“Well, next time, start searching.” She smiled that entrancing smile of hers, and I smiled back. She took a step forward, and I followed as we continued to walk down the path in front of us. Imagining the future we could share now that we knew we were no longer alone.

I, Too, Sing America

KATIE XIONG

University High School

Henry Madden Library Award

I know it's been said before
but not in this voice
of the brown-eyed sister,
the yellow skin and
the dark hair of me.

It's my turn
to say
what I see,
I'm going to sing America
with all the Mekas¹
inside me;
from the souls
in the Yellow River
to the spirits
in the refugee camps
to the families
in California
all of us

Singing America,
from my pog²
to my nus³
dancing to our phaag⁴
eating our mov ntse dej⁵

Our moment has arrived
the moment
which we show off
that we are here
too.

So, turn that music on
give us that Hmong beat,
Ib-Ob-Peb!⁶
One-Two-Three!
Kuv yog Mekas thiab
I, too, am, America.

Inspired by “I, Too” by Langston Hughes, “I Hear America Singing” by Walt Whitman, and “I, Too, Sing America” by Julia Alvarez.

¹ Translates to “America”

² Translates to “paternal grandmother”

³ Translates to “brother”

⁴ Translates to “song”

⁵ Translates to “rice with water”

⁶ Translates to “One-Two-Three”

Belleza

MICAELA CORS

Tulare Western High School

College of Arts and Humanities Advisory Board Award

Once upon a time, there was a princess called Belleza. The princess was gorgeous, with her long dark hair, large topaz eyes, and warm honey skin. She always wore the most extravagant clothes to highlight her features, thus adding to her looks. In this way, her name shone through, but she was also bossy, mean, inconsiderate, and spent her time doing pointless, shallow things. She was always yelling, and whoever was unlucky enough to spend time with her, left feeling worthless. She was cruel to her servants and citizens, which led her to be known as “The Scary Princess.”

As in most fairy tales, we have our dragon. Now, this dragon was quite handsome as well. He was gigantic and had pearly emerald green scales that, in the sunlight, seemed to change from turquoise to green to purple. His massive wings, horns, and tail were tipped with a red hue, and his teeth looked as if they had been painted with the whitest white. The dragon was very wise and kind and spent his days flying whichever way the wind blew, meeting new people, and doing all he could to help them.

When he heard about Belleza, he knew he needed to do something about it and began to head her way. He planned to teach her something she’d never forget.

When the dragon reached the castle, he tore the roof off of Belleza’s tower, swooped in, and snatched the princess in his claws. He flew off with her, while she screamed and kicked the whole way.

When they finally landed, they were at the dragon’s home. The dragon went inside for a moment, and when he returned, he had a simple peasant’s dress.

“Here,” he said as he handed Belleza the dress, “You’ll need to change into this.”

Shocked, the princess began, “If you think that I’ll be wearing that, then ...”

“I’ve brought you here for a reason,” the dragon cut in. “You live and rule in an amazing kingdom, but you are a problem. As a leader, you have the responsibility to set an example for your people and you are failing. Everywhere you go, you spread a trail of misery.”

Belleza was at a loss for words. No one had ever spoken to her that way. Then again, she didn’t dare talk back to something who could swallow her

up in a second.

The first task that was given to Belleza was to clean the dragon's entire house. Now, this was an extremely large task given the size of the dragon, not to mention the fact that she had never worked a day in her life. Nevertheless, she worked tirelessly to mop the floors, scrub the mountains of dishes, wipe the greasy walls, do days of laundry, and clean the dingy windows. No matter how well, hard, or fast she was working, the dragon always seemed to be yelling for her to work better, harder, and faster. Her mind was turned to all her servants and maids she had always mistreated. Not a single one of them had deserved the type of cruelty she gave. After the third day, she was finished! This had not been an easy or enjoyable experience, but Belleza couldn't help but feel a sense of pride in the work she had done.

After a good night's sleep, the dragon didn't waste a moment to bring them to their next stop. They landed by a little stream in the middle of a forest, and Belleza was left with only the instruction to "Go and explore."

She spent hours wandering, not sure of what to do, but what she saw was wondrous. The forest was so amazing and vast. She saw birds flying, and when she was really quiet, other animals would find their way out of the brush as well. She stumbled upon a field of wildflowers, containing every color imaginable. Belleza smiled and used her time to make a flower crown for herself and necklace for the dragon for when he was to return.

The stream was fabulous. The misty air was so cool, and the princess laughed as she jumped from rock to rock over the bubbling water. For the first time in a long time, she felt at peace. Belleza recognized that this simple day in the forest had brought more joy than anything she ever did in the castle.

As the sun began to set, the dragon returned, and Belleza presented the flower necklace to him, while they flew away, she thought she saw him smile.

The following day, Belleza and the dragon traveled nearly half the day to get to a faraway land called Incumplido. Everyone living in the land had blue skin — the color of the ocean. Their hair and eyes ranged from red to yellow to purple, and everything in-between, but to Belleza, this place seemed very similar to her home. She saw modest cottage homes, farm animals, gardens, little markets selling fabrics, foods, jewelry, pottery, tools. The people and the village were so lovely, but as she began to look more closely, she noticed that not a soul was happy. In fact, it stunned the princess to see the people look so angry and unkind. Belleza was given her task. "Find someone happy."

"Easy," she said to herself, "someone must be happy here," but as she continued to walk through the town, she began to doubt her earlier statement. It seemed everywhere she went, the people were yelling and arguing, scowling, and pushing people out of their way as they went.

Frustrated, Belleza turned the corner to see a group of poor, tired-looking villagers sitting against a wall, while a man passed bread to them. This man seemed to be glowing with happiness. She had found him! Belleza walked up to him, and before she could say a thing, he introduced himself. "Hello, my name is Armonio. It is so fantastic to meet you!"

“Hi, I’m Belleza. It’s great to meet you, too.” The princess looked around again before asking, “Why is everyone so angry?”

“That’s how they were born,” he answered. “They believe that because they have always been that way, they have to continue to be that way, but I’ve learned a secret.”

“What is it?” she asked eagerly.

“It’s never too late to change. You can always be better. Being angry and mean didn’t make me happy, so I changed. I worked hard to be kind even when it was hard because my happiness was dependent on what I made of my situation.”

“Wow,” she whispered in awe.

“We should be going, Belleza,” the dragon said from behind her. And after saying goodbye to Armonio, Belleza and the dragon left Incumplido.

The dragon landed near the village where her people lived. “Thank you for taking this journey with me,” he said.

“No,” Belleza started, “thank you for showing me how to live.” The dragon flew away and the princess began her trek to the castle. She looked around and saw her people for the first time outside her tower. They were so pleasant and happy. They were so kind, and some even offered her some food on her way.

How grateful the princess felt that her people were like Armonio, but she needed to be a better leader for them. From then on, she was going to strive to be kinder, more considerate, compassionate, hard-working. As she reached the front gates, she smiled. Belleza finally understood what her name really meant, and because of that, she became truly beautiful.

We Live in a Country

CANDICE SANCHEZ

King City High School

Dean's Award

In a country built on the very ideas that all men were created equally, where does the truth lie?

We live in a nation where the melanin in your skin determines how long *you* get to live.

It was a government built to get away from another. Another that was abusing the rights of those under its control. In the end? They left and made another; one that let anyone be free, but now, where is that freedom? The one that was fought for ever so desperately? The hardships that were faced and the battles that came, where did all that work go? Was it all some waste?

Is it in those whose skin is as smooth and fair as porcelain, hair as golden as the sun, and eyes piercing blue and even deep as the sea? What about those whose skin is bronze as caramel, or dark as a calming starless night? When do they get to experience, what it is like to walk the road of blissful freedom and not get berated, belittled, or battled for their complexion in every attempt to step? Why is it that every time we take a step forward, we end up three steps back? If we are truly the greatest nation in the world, shouldn't our demeanor, our people; our words; our most grandiose peoples; our colored kin reflect that? Shouldn't our name tell others that we are what we stand for?

Should we not be known as a nation in which we take the lives of those who are as dark as night? Why is it that murder at hands of a white man be applauded while alleged forgery receives a kneel to the back of the neck? I'm talking about the children that are locked away in cages that are treated like dogs. The trafficking and sexual abuse that never gets brought to light from what happens with ICE. The parents that are separated from their children; paying the cost for entering the land of opportunities illegally; but wait, wasn't this land stolen – *illegally*. Where is the justice for our Natives? The land that was theirs but wrongfully taken, the pain they endured trying to help the first Europeans. We can talk about the assaults that took place, the femicides that continue to those with a beautiful brown face. There is

so much that has taken place at the hands of our American race.

Our government is on that brink of becoming the very thing it swore not to be. One which abuses its power and disparages our rights – the foundation of everything toxic and unhealthy. America, your own founding ideas in the documents that birthed you urge us that it is our duty to alter or abolish the government that is becoming obstructive of the goals it swore to give. But even as we try, time and time again to change it, you resist. George Floyd did not resist, so why should you? Why should you resist change when you were the result of change? Are you a hypocrite?

You help turn a blind eye on the dark skin that is murdered, while hyper-fixating on the white that falls on the most protective surface of all. We chant each morning to this country's official cloth, the words of liberty and justice for all and you'd think it'd be manifesting into reality but it surely hell is not. Do you not see the problem in getting murdered in your peaceful sleep? To get stopped and shot for carrying a bag of skittles; that got mistaken for a gun? No. You mourn the deaths of those who begin a school shoot-out. They're the ones that get let off easy and with the mental health card – psychiatric help. There are so many-colored heroes on this land but the ones that get labeled as patriotic heroes in the end are the ones that pull-out gunfire and claim it was self-defense. Self-defense against our melanin friends that did nothing to end in remnants.

Dear America,

You are not at all what you are made up to be, not in the slightest. You are merely a third world country that reeks of a white savior complex.

Elixir of Funk

ABEDALLAH HAMMOUDA

Edison High School

Chair's Award

A Past Case of Blood Sugar

Young and starved of the developed palate, picky eaters survive off chicken fingers and fries. The half full plates paired with dark soda to ease the sludge of unenjoyable food do not compare to charcuterie boards that are laid full of wine-soaked cheeses and gluten free crackers.

All you picky eaters have got to start somewhere. Going to, quote-unquote, "fancy" restaurants and ordering off the kids' menu up until the age of 14 doesn't do you any good to enjoy food for what it is. Those nights ended with the expulsion of the dark soda you drank, as dark lemonade-tinted urine.

The sugar that'll rot your teeth and give you diabetes by the time you're fifty was hindering your growth. Although you were told this growing up by your diabetic and foreign-minded grandparents, you couldn't help yourself from consuming that high fructose, corn syrup-infused liquid called Pepsi. Those American colors of red, white, and blue on aluminum cans that glistened with ice cold condensation were calling your name. Super Bowl commercials, for example, sell Pepsi very well thanks to their weirdly erotic messages. Those sixty-six grams of sugar are calling your name, each and every one, but not a single one of those pretty ladies in those commercials are.

Guzzle Guzzle Guzzle ... Belch

Soda. Pop. Liquid cocaine. It goes amazingly well with a pizza or chicken fingers. That was your kryptonite. Any basic food under ten bucks makes the marriage of soda and fat better than peanut butter and jelly.

High School, High Crash

It's a tough crowd that you meet from grades 9-12. Between cliques and just straight loners, high school has a place for every kind of person. Granted it may not be a good place, but it's still a place.

Like many, you were the competitive and "challenge yourself" type

of student. Taking AP classes and partaking in sports and clubs, it was draining. Only to come home at 6:00 p.m. each night, do homework 'til 11:00 p.m. or 2:00 a.m., wake up at 6:00 a.m. and repeat.

The next morning was an apocalypse. Not the zombie kind, although you were dragging like one for the first two class periods. It was more of a conformity among the masses. On every corner of the campus there was a student with a large drink whether it be a Frappe, some blended energy drink with more grams of sugar than the number in my checking account, or a Big Gulp. The zombies on campus were woken up from a dragging slumber. They got a short jolt of energy that led to a prolonged sugar crash by lunch.

It's as if one day someone told you, "Here, try this," as they handed you their liquid cocaine that was as welcoming as a double rainbow. As bright as that rainbow was, it led to a thunderstorm of stomach growls and nausea from sugar syrup on an empty stomach.

Everyone's Place:

Cool kids on the benches

Smart kids in the library

Loners in the hallways

You in the bathroom stall for 20 minutes

Nonetheless, the zombies had infected you as one of their own. Congratulations, you are now one of them. You earned your place, and once again it wasn't a good place, but it was the best you could do.

The Whole Foods Hippie

Let's get one thing straight, Whole Foods is the most overpriced grocery store to ever exist. No matter how much you try to justify it to yourself, it's overpriced. When you tried to go vegan for a week to "try it out" and racked up a three-hundred dollar grocery bill, something went wrong.

The only reason for you to go is for specialty items like exotic fruit or some organic, fair trade, non-FDA approved dietary supplement from a shrub in the jungles of Brazil. Other than that, there's no need. But the one time came around that there was a need, since you were searching for said encapsulated shrub extract.

And there he was, the embodiment of Whole Foods. In the drink aisle, a real-life hippie wearing socks and sandals with a headband, mustache, baggy clothes, and cool glasses. You knew in a heartbeat this man either drove a Prius or a VW bus.

As you strolled past, he got your attention and asked for some advice. Reluctantly, you stopped and stared as one does at such a rare breed of coolness nowadays. He wanted to know what brand of kombucha you would like to recommend. Judging a book by its cover and looking at your bland outfit, it should've been on him to infer that you didn't belong in such a pretentious place. Your hesitation was a dead giveaway and as you thought he was about to judge, he welcomed you with the unsolicited advice you

didn't know you needed.

He explained, in short, kombucha is a probiotic health drink made from fermented tea. Intrigued, you asked what it tastes like and he offered to buy you a bottle to try. Who knew such a cool person was also such a kind one as well? You thought, hmmm maybe I'll be back again sometime, now that your perception of Whole Foods shoppers had changed. One thing was right though, you walked out of the store, into the parking lot, and he entered a Prius. Some judgement is true after all.

Further research concluded the kombucha community is middle aged yoga moms, dieticians, and self-proclaimed health enthusiasts on blogs talking about its miraculous benefits.

First Impression Flavor Rating: negative three out of five stars.

First Impression People Rating: five out of five stars.

White Lab Coat

The past undeveloped palate for food and drink was behind you. With time, you matured and grew, both physically as well as in your inclination for what's healthy and what isn't. Realizing you were too young to endure IBD and stomach ulcers, but too broke in the wallet to spend four measly bucks on a drink a few times a week, a white light bulb floated up above your head.

The white light bulb was actually a white lab coat. You had the bright idea to try and replicate this drink at home. One science forum after the next, with the occasional stumbling upon home brewing blogs, led to a summative profile on kombucha: slightly sweet, funky like apple cider vinegar, and slightly fizzy like a semi flat soda.

To ferment this tea, you needed the SCOBY which was a bacteria colony that resembled human cadaver skin. It was awkward to the senses, slimy on the hands, and aggressive on the nose. It was time to begin the journey to cure cancer; small batch sweet black tea was added to the bacteria and left to ferment in your closet for two weeks.

So much was happening that you couldn't see. It started as a black, coffee-colored liquid and finished as Jack Daniels. In that two-gallon glass jar, something was coming to life and it was making its presence known. From there, you bottled it with fruit and let it sit for an additional three days. Little did you know that you had created a time bomb. By day three, you heard an explosion in the closet that would've been deafening had you been right next to it. Carbon dioxide had built up pressure in the bottle and completely obliterated the top, sending shards of glass in every direction except straight.

After multiple adjustments to independent variables, you felt like a true scientist conducting your summer research at University. Despite trial and error, you tried to overcome the literally explosive, in your face experiments to ultimately come to a conclusion.

Six months later, the new profile of your kombucha was actually

enjoyable. Not too sweet, not too funky or sour, and just fruity enough to where you didn't wince at drinking it like you did the first time.

Coffee Convenience

Out of everyone else, you're the one who supports local, one-of-a-kind coffee shops or roasters; you actually care about the drug in a cup that you're addicted to but won't admit to. When it comes to coffee, there's no in between: full of sugar, filled halfway with cream, or black. You're the good guy of the coffee trio. You're the black coffee drinker who also enjoys quality lattes and capps. Your palate is refined, you enjoy the simple but fine things and not the diabetic coma-inducing "stuff."

Third wave coffee shop aficionados are coffee seekers of the highest level. Your coffee might not be as popular as the mainstream stuff, but that's why "third-wave" is in third place. Those quality chasing cafes are the place for you. You go into these hole-in-the-wall coffee shops for the aesthetic and soon enough you begin to get accustomed to the once unfamiliar setting. In there you find Wi-Fi that is actually fast, loud coffee grinders to emphasize freshness, and the perfect chairs to sit for hours on end while doing schoolwork. The aroma in the air is sweet and roasty, so you realize life is sweeter in the way that lacks sweetener.

Just like specialty coffee, your kombucha tastes of nuance and natural sweetness, acidity, and bitterness. The elixir that began as a science experiment became your passion to share with sleep deprived college students and kickboxing instructors who valued the need to replace their energy drinks and cheap coffees. You made health taste good.

Tale as Old as Time

NICOLE NUNEZ

Mission Oak High School

William Saroyan Award

And as Eve ate the apple, the age of innocence was no longer. Condemning them to a world of sin. A world without God. The fruit from the tree of knowledge had left them banished for all eternity. “Your temptation has gotten the better of me Eve,” Adam urged, frantically shaking her arms. Dropping her at his feet, he ventured towards the thorns of lover’s rock. In the darkness, he ventured onward, when suddenly Adam had thrashed against something unknown.

A sudden anguish in his rib had left Adam on his knees. It seemed to last a millennium for him to rise. Seeking a life in solidarity, he continued to set forth. Until, the path of destiny had brought him to a peculiar hourglass placed upon an aged pedestal. Smothered in vines, bearing pomegranates at its feet. A hourglass cultivated of the richest black and flowing with the shiniest of sands, appearing quite sinister to the naked eye.

“Who is there?” Adam cried out.

“It is I. An Angel. Do not fear for I have fallen to Earth for your sake. Surely, you will not die,” echoed throughout the forest.

“I am no longer in fear. For I trust your name and that is honest enough. I beg, direct me onto the path of my Lord.”

A voice called out to Adam, “The world has not given you another choice. He forgets that you are human. Let me be of help. A fellow in dire need of a hand, you are. What do you desire? What do you want? Perhaps, a world free of curses and fates. If it is fate that you wish to rewrite, then time shall lend you a hand. Are you willing to accept and shake a poor sinner’s hand?”

“I bring it upon myself to change the circumstances. It is up to I, to unleash myself from the imprisonment I am held in. I wish to be free of this wretched hell. Not shake, but welcome. For I am a sinner as well,” Adam decided as he succumbed to the words of the clock. “Time will be in my favor. Oh, Eve, do wait for me. For I, in the name of our Lord, shall amend our sins.” With six flips of the hourglass, Adam was led into the past. At the time near the foreshadowed act of temptation. “If you dare wish to change the acts of the past, then you must stop Eve from eating the apple. One thing before you leave: You mustn’t let your past self see you. Now, carry on and take the hourglass with you.”

Without a moment of hesitation, Adam made haste toward the Tree of Knowledge, with no regard to his surroundings. In the woods, he scrambled as fast as he could, where darkness would not allow him to see that he had dropped the past onto his knees. The sudden falling of his past self was enough for Adam to grasp that it was too late. There would be no undoing, even with time on his side. He had finally encountered Eve on her knees, rocking back and forth. She mumbled to herself, "The day you eat from it, you will die. That is what the Lord said. There was a choice. Why later when it can be dealt with now? It is our destiny. Yes, the lord had already seen what our fate was to be, where we were needed." Adam had understood. Why else would the Lord have said such a statement, such a statement with temptation? Why would he let us willingly know of the possibility that the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge possessed? He must tell his former self of this realization, that only with the gift to time would he be able to understand. This time, Adam would not fail in making it in time.

There was no presence at Lover's Rock when Adam had arrived. In returning the hourglass to its original holder, he was determined to wait and have a glimpse of his past self. His past self had just reached the end of the pedestal, and had cried out if any one was there. "Why isn't there anybody answering? Where is the angel that once spoke to me when I had lost everything?" Adam pondered, hidden by the forest's will.

Adam took matters into his own hands and recalled every word spoken verbatim. "It is I. An Angel. Do not fear for I have fallen to Earth for your sake. Surely, you will not die," he said word for word. And when his past self had given him the trust, Adam had spoken from the heart, "The world has not given you another choice. He forgets that you are human. Let me be of help. A fellow in dire need of a hand, you are. What do you desire? What do you want? Perhaps, a world free of curses and fates. If it is fate that you wish to rewrite, then time shall lend you a hand. Are you willing to accept and shake a poor sinner's hand?"

If there is no guidance, Adam reasoned, then he shall by his own. He had accepted his role in the understatement of what had happened that day. For he was also a poor sinner. Still and all, there was a price to be paid, not death, but worse. For what he thought was a gift from his savior, would actually be his downfall. The sand in the hourglass had run dry.

And as Eve ate the apple, the age of innocence was no longer ...

Lucky Strike

SAMARA VALENCIA

Mission Oak High School

Mia Barraza Martinez Award for Social Justice Writing

“The date is October 2nd, 3:15 p.m. This is my fourth session with my patient, Alina Braun. Alina, is it alright if I record this conversation?” the therapist said to her while she seemed to stare at the tape recorder that she had placed on the table in front of her, not saying anything.

“I can always just turn it off if you don’t want to,” she said to Alina, catching her attention while she looked up to her.

“It’s fine. You can record,” she said slowly, as though she was processing those words in her head while the therapist nodded her head.

“So, Alina . . . do you think you’re ready to talk about it today?” she asked her, only to be responded in silence by the girl.

“That’s alright. We don’t need to talk about it today if you don’t want to. I was on —”

“No it’s fine,” Alina said, cutting her off suddenly while her eyes moved to meet hers. *“I ... I want to ...”* Her gaze quickly moved away to look at the floor, as though she was embarrassed.

“Alright then ... Why don’t you start whenever you’re ready ...” the therapist said crossing her legs towards her.

Alina was silent for a few minutes as she stared out the window before looking back at the tape recorder, reaching her hand out as she took it in her hands. *“It was a Friday ... or I think it was a Saturday ... I can’t remember ...”* she said.

“That’s alright ... I don’t need the day. You don’t need to know what day it was. ... Why don’t you just tell me everything you can remember?” the therapist said, as Alina fiddled with the recorder in her hand.

“I ... was invited to a party by this acquaintance of mine. I think I didn’t have work the next day so I just decided to go for some reason, maybe because exams were finally over or to just see if I knew anyone there I haven’t talked to for a while. ... It was around 11 p.m. I think when I showed up to it.”

“Do you know who was hosting this party?” the therapist asked.

“Some senior ... it was his birthday or something because he invited his whole grade to come, but the word spread around fast and I’m sure every junior, sophomore, and freshman showed up to it. ... I was in the kitchen, drinking some punch and watching some friends of mine play beer pong

when this guy came up to me ...”

“And what did he say when he approached you?”

“I think he just said hey and asked me for my name. I couldn’t really see his face because it was dark but I think he could tell that I tensed up because he just pointed to one of my friends and said a joke or something, whatever he said, it made me laugh. He just kept making jokes until he got me to say what my name was. Or maybe until I felt safe.”

“Do you know how long you were with him for?”

“It was an hour I think. We just ended up talking on the couch and he was showing me pictures of his dog and what he was planning to do after college. It turns out we were both in the same major. Women studies.”

“And did you feel safe when you found that out?”

“Well ... yes, because in a way I thought that maybe he was some kind of feminist and supported women’s rights and wouldn’t ever hurt a women . . . I was surprised because I’ve never seen him in class before since there’s only about two other guys in there, but he just told me he takes it online because of his schedule,” she said, trailing off for a few moments before continuing.

“After that ... he invited me upstairs with him; he told me it would be quieter up there and there wouldn’t be so many people around. After a few minutes I finally agreed and we went up there together.”

“Why did you decide to go upstairs?”

“I guess I didn’t really think he would do anything I didn’t like, and if he did then I could always just say no and he would stop. He took me into this room and closed the door behind me. We were just talking but after about ten minutes he started to touch me and whispering things to me . . . I didn’t know what to do . . . I kept telling myself if I liked this or not but when he ended up getting on top of me I think that’s when I realized I didn’t so I told him to get off ...”

“Did he react to you when you said that?”

“No, but I was whispering so I just thought he didn’t hear me so I said it again ... and again, only getting louder, but he just told me to shut up and that if I went upstairs with him and let him touch me is because I wanted it. So I started saying no ... I remember I was shaking under him and trying to push him off ... I think he realized I was trying to fight back because he slapped me to make me stop while he began pulling at my clothes ... and then ... then ... I don’t remember.”

“That’s alright Alina. You don’t have to try and remember what was happening. ... When something so traumatic happens to one person, their memory tends to block it off. ... Why don’t you tell me the next thing you remember,” she said.

“I was on the bed, naked. Everything in my body was hurting while he was putting his clothes on ... I didn’t say anything, I couldn’t say anything ...” she said, the tape recorder shaking slightly from her trembling state. “And then, Lucky Strike left. ...”

“Lucky Strike?”

“He picked up something from the counter, I got a glimpse of it but it was that cigarette brand ... Lucky Strike. I guess since I never got his name, I’ve always just referred to him as that ... but I just got up after a while and put my clothes back on and went home. I stayed in the shower for about two

hours I think.”

“And how come you didn’t tell your parents or the police what happened after this?”

“Because I was so afraid that I wouldn’t be their daughter anymore, that they would have to be parents of the raped girl, that my neighbors and friends would look at me and only see me as the girl who was raped at the party, not Alina Braun anymore ... and the next week I had to go to church, and I wasn’t even listening to the preacher until he suddenly yelled out, God never gives us what we can’t handle. And I remember ... just everything ending at that moment. If there was a god then why did he put this on me, why on earth would he pick a 20 year old girl to put all this baggage on. Why would he pick me to be raped? I never went to church again after that.”

“You kept quiet for two years after this. ... Why did you decide to file it in now?”

“Because if there was a chance that he did it to me, then maybe to other girls as well. And all it takes is one. All it takes for one person to rise up and tell their own story, and soon, others who went through the same thing will start speaking out about it because if people like Lucky Strike had listened the first time, then maybe there wouldn’t be so many rape crimes! Until no really means no, and until I can go to a party without having to watch where my drink is every second or go home while carrying pepper spray in my keychain! Until I will stop being looked at as someone who was destroyed and as someone who survived ...” Her voice was shaky as she managed to calm herself down after a few moments.

“Two years ago I was raped at a party by a guy who I thought I could trust. By a guy who was in women studies and had a dog who was given to him by his own aunt that had been sexually assaulted. Even though I had said no and didn’t give consent, because I had given him my attention he had thought it was okay and that my words didn’t matter. That I would enjoy it because I am a woman and that just means that I should enjoy whatever kind of attention a man would give me. That I no longer like to be touched anywhere on my body because every spot in my body resarks a memory I wish I never had. I am tired of reliving my rape story the same way a soldier is tired of recalling his own gun shots. No woman is ever asking for it so that is why I ignore every person that comes up to me and dares ask me what I was wearing or if I was drunk, like that makes a difference, because America is so tired of hearing all these rape crimes like they had never listened to the word no, so I will continue to tell my story, until no one tells me I was asking for it.”

A Prayer for My Country

CADENCE DOOMS

University High School

Mia Barraza Martinez Award for Social Justice Writing

As the gentle waves collide with the resilient country

I reside on

I dwell on Beauty.

The artificial and superficial standards of Beauty

Prominent on the minds of the multitudes that refuse to consider the Beauty
That matters.

The small, warm palms of a child, pressed against a flushed rose cheek

Or the scent of valley lilies and lilac wafting through an open

Window.

Hot coffee, lukewarm tea, the residual grains of sand which stubbornly situate

Themselves in course, split hair

And wedged under unmanicured nails

The Beauty of Love, a mother's or father's or brother's

Love surpassing race and gender, age and sex

And then

I dwell on Hate.

The unconditional Hate rooted in a country, with

Foundation embedded in the ways of false liberty and freedom

Hate of race and gender, age and sex

The Hate stubbornly remaining in generations, whispering to the future of
America.

Hate shooting down our Black

Our Gay, our Female

Our Youth, our Latin

Our Oppressed.

And as the gentle waves crash against the precarious country

I reside on

I pray.

For the America I want for my children, the America I want for my neighbor

The America I want for my people.

I pray.

Phasmid

JOVANY OLIVEROS

King City High School

Fresno Poets' Association Award

If you look closely, I'm just like a walking stick.

Movement roams my limbs and joints to be free but yet,

I choose to camouflage myself among the tall ancestral woody branches,
that lay lifeless and conspicuously dead in the sentry of wooded glades
oscillating for the reckon heavens.

I try to imitate the twigs to be "ordinary" by swaying in the wind
rocking back and forth on the bare bones of bark to be deprived from the
hillocks and heaven kingdoms.

I'm anchored to the idea to be just like a "branch" to survive but rebellion
is rooted at my core, bellowing against my ribcage to promulgate but digested
by the tremors of trauma that taint my insides.

I could retire, but I abandoned my freedom as well as my individuality to be
suffocated by society's hands to deviate judgments.

Being out in the open meant being free, being free means being vulnerable
to predators that dwell in the infinite nuance and edges of trunks encrusted
in foliage.

I may seem prey to cranes who gorge on the flesh of the "defeated" and
rewarded by the harbingers who are used for the currency of mercy.

I can simply regenerate my limbs the next time I molt.

Verdant leaves that brush against my peeled elbows may say that a divine
man made me like this,

But if all things are made in the image of this man, why can't I not accept
being a walking stick?

I should have simply been born a lifeless branch.

October's Black Cat

EDEN BERNSTEIN

Edison High School

The Normal School Award

I had more than enough reason to quit, running the music for our sophomore production of “The Little Shop of Horrors” was not particularly high on my list of priorities, and with the way people talked to me, you’d think I was a maid in their personal mansion. I was, in a way, a bee in a pool of water, the music almost impossible to run properly, and the workload far too great to be staying at school till 9 p.m. every night. Unfortunately, I had made a promise, and even though I wished there had been an “only applicable if you treat me like a human being” clause, I had signed away a month to learn every sound cue, get them perfectly right, and sync them up with the lighting (which, if you couldn’t guess, is not a particularly easy task).

Doing all of this by myself was the worst part. No one would talk to me, as I was “just the tech kid,” and no one would listen to me when I said I was having difficulties. I felt like I had to bear this workload alone until my friend October took over running mics, the other half of the sound tech. We worked right alongside each other, having the same hardships and problems with actors. We got to help each other through hard days when the stress level was so high, I would get into the car after rehearsals and break down into tears.

October was amazing, his eyes kind, his smile bright and warm. His point of view was refreshing, and the jokes we shared cheered us both up when times got hard. He was good at his job, much better than me, and I was glad to have his company along the way, no matter how much I teased him about being a rule follower. He dressed in long skirts and dresses that made him stand out to anyone he met, which included me, and although I’m sure most people looked in distaste, I was in awe the moment I laid eyes on him. His confidence, no matter how many times he said it was a facade, was inspiring to me. The way he lit up a room when he entered it, his laugh infectious and beautiful, was so freeing to watch. No one even saw it, but he was perfect.

The show was wonderful, we had both practiced so frequently and put so much work in that the probability of something going wrong was slim. However, it wasn’t nonexistent. For the most part, the shows went wonderfully, the cast doing things smoothly, the directors stressed out of

their minds, and the tech crew absolutely smashing it. We went above and beyond. I truly thought I was going to get to the end of the run without a big mistake, without a mortifying failure. However, as it turns out, a slim chance becomes a lot bigger when you're working on a faulty computer, that's the only place the music is saved, and the entire show depends on your job.

Needless to say, our matinee show was far from perfect. I had woken up in a bad mood, not thrilled to spend over 12 hours on campus, and the sky was cloudy and cold, so October and I couldn't even go on a walk together in between shows. He brought me a cake pop that morning, a gesture I (and my breakfast-less body) had greatly appreciated. Before show prep was pretty standard. We set up mics, we started up the sound system, we had two mics break with no replacements, the latter of which took the most out of us. It was a few hours before it came time for our 9 a.m. show. October and I sat in the back of the cafeteria, our backs pressed against the wall as we held our breath and prayed the actors remembered their cues. I was put on a headset, which was the hardest thing to manage while also having to keep ready for cues. Being next to October was a great help, though. When we had time in between songs, he would look over and smile at me. He always carried around a stuffed black cat, a weird gesture to anyone who didn't know him. I found it sweet. Its name was Spider and it was an extremely worn-down toy, a comforting object October was not very keen on letting other people touch. On the days we had shows, he would put it in between us, out of my reach, which I more than respected, but close enough where it was almost like a reassuring friend kissing your cheek. Most shows days, October would simply take Spider back after the closing number, give me a high five, and leave out the back door to take mics off of actors, which was my favorite part of working sound (taking off mic-tape *hurts*). However, on the day of our matinee, it was no normal show day.

The run started off fine — I might even go so far as to say above average. Matinee audiences were always drab, mostly full of old women who would definitely ask you where the bathroom was when you were trying to do quick repairs to the sound system. We didn't have any sound system errors in the first act, not even a blip, so it was to everyone's surprise when in act two the computer that we had decided to run our music tracks off of, rebooted in the middle of a song. Silence as the actors waited for their cue to keep singing. Silence as the audience tried to piece together what was happening. Silence from the backstage tech managers. Silence from October. The improvised lines were deafening, the song starting up after they had already started singing, then cutting out again, then going to the next track. Twisting and turning in my head, wrapping up any ability I had for problem solving into complex knots. I wish I could say this is where my lifeline came in, but it wasn't. Not even October could help me. The computer was breaking — and everyone blamed me.

After the run, I went backstage to take off mics, the disgruntled murmurs from the cast, their sharp glares. Everyone hated me — and I hadn't even *done* anything. The actors cleared out eventually, their unwilling compliance not lasting for very long. In the end, it was just me, in a big empty hallway — October having gone upstairs to put the mics

away, the rest of the crew going backstage for lunch, actors going who knows where. I was stressed, tired, hungry, I felt dejected and unwelcome. I started to cry. I want to say it was a small cry, a pretty cry maybe, but that's just not the truth. I sobbed, my back pressed against the wall, feeling like everything was all my fault. It wasn't long, however, until there was a knock at the door.

"Hello?" October poked his head out from the door, his brows furrowed in a way that made his face look uncharacteristically serious, his normal wide grin nowhere to be seen. He looked at me sympathetically, before walking over and sitting next to me against the wall, his hands messing with the end of his long skirt absentmindedly. He did that a lot.

"It wasn't your fault you know." I suppose he meant this to be comforting, but I cried harder. It sure felt like my fault. He let me lean my head onto his shoulder. He didn't try to reassure me. He didn't try to give me advice. We just sat there for a few minutes in silence.

After a short while he moved, making me pick my head up, letting him rustle around in his backpack for a few seconds before pulling out Spider; its ears were torn and almost gray from wear. He held it out to me, smiling kindly, asking me to take it from him.

"Spider?" I sniffled. "Are you sure?"

He didn't answer, just pushed the stuffed cat into my arms, his back falling back against the wall. I don't think anyone has ever shown me a more selfless act of kindness.

Love for an Unjust Country

JORDAN JACKSON

Edison High School

Philip Levine Prize Award

A dream is a hope.
Some dream of wealth,
Some dream to try to cope,
Some dreams be that of gold,
Or so I was told.

I dream of a home,
A better America.
A place where I'm free to roam,
And won't have to worry about false oaths.
These oaths were said unto my people
When they were seen as a mere servant.
No rights, No justice!
Just "shut up, ignorant Negro!"
Said with such urgency.

We had no liberty.
We weren't as Earth's rivers,
Free to go wherever and whenever.
We slaved and lived in misery.
Although I still love my land,
It's a work in progress.
I know its truths,
And it will discard someone like me
With a simple flick of the hand.

Poetry re-creation inspired by "Let America Be America Again" by Langston Hughes

Encyclopedia Autobiography

EMILY VANG

Edison High School

Hmong American Ink and Stories Award

— after Amy Krause Rosenthal

Christmas

Every year I look forward to the thought of wearing my Christmas pajamas during November to get that overwhelming feeling of excitement of the upcoming year. The end of the year has always brought me excitement because of all the holidays and family gatherings that occur during this season. I've always enjoyed the smell of peppermint and the sound of all the little kids whose names I cannot remember running around the house and making gingerbread houses. The thing that brought me joy the most was sitting around the people I love to see the excitement that I felt leading up to Christmas on their faces whenever they opened a gift from the heart.

Cultural Inequality

I am Hmong. I've always been proud to be a Hmong American knowing the story that my people have gone through and I've always respected it. It is something that I have never been ashamed of and something that I wish to carry 'til ends, meet. Although I am proud to be Hmong, there is inequality in my culture that comes with being a woman that I disagree with. In my culture, as a young girl you are taught to cook, clean, and watch kids at a very young age and if you do not know how to do these tasks as a young adult you will be told, "Tsis muaj txiv neej yuav koj yog koj tsis paub ua qhov no," which translates to "Nobody will want to marry you if you do not know how to do this." Just hearing these words as a young yet observant child really affected who I am as a person today because it changed my mindset. In this case, being a small observant child benefited me because it made me believe that I did not have to live up to the standard of men but to the standard of myself since I've only seen my parents tell this to my sisters instead of my brothers. With this mentality it caused a clash between my parents and I in view of the fact that I found it unfair to see my brothers do things that my sisters were not even close to being able to do without getting that lecture. To this day, I still have these clashes because of this imbedded cultural

belief but being older I've been able to learn and educate myself and my parents on this ongoing problem.

Los Angeles

Los Angeles, the city where people go to shoot for the stars, and either is lucky enough to land or unfortunate enough to miss. Los Angeles holds a small place in my heart because it was one of the first big cities that I traveled to outside of the valley. I remember going there on a warm day during spring break in elementary school and eating the sour rainbow belts that dusted sugar all over me as I picked it up from its container. It was my first time going out of town so after a long nap my eyes gleamed with excitement as I saw the movie famous Hollywood sign in the far distance. That day was one of the best days I've had in a long time because of the rush of joy I felt while being outside of the city and the warm yet cool beach air that blew my hair back as I rushed out of the car towards the water. And with that I've always loved Los Angeles for all the precious memories I've had there.

Mrs. Einecki

My fifth-grade teacher Mrs. Einecki was one of the most downhearted and loving teacher that any student would have been lucky to have in their lifetime. I was lucky enough to have her as my teacher and a guide before she left for Montana with her wife. She taught me how to be open about my feelings and to never be afraid to speak up about issues that made me feel uncomfortable. Every time I entered her room the warm smell of pumpkin spice hit my face and made me feel safe. It was my safe place to be able to talk to a teacher without feeling judged because to me she felt like an aunt that I never had. I know that I wasn't the only one who felt this way towards her because after talking around it seemed as though everyone who had her knew and felt the motherly figure that stood in her presence.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder?

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, or OCD, is something that I have investigated a lot recently. I think I may have mild OCD, but I have never been diagnosed with it so I'm not so sure. Ever since I was in elementary school, I have had struggles with multiple OCD symptoms. One of the first times I remembered repeating something was when I was putting the half-frozen corn dogs inside the oven and closing the oven door and realizing that I did not close it properly. I looked at the oven door and yes it was closed properly yet my brain said that it was not. That day I spent five-minute reopening and closing the pale white oven door while feeling the warm heat from the oven each time it opened until I felt satisfied with the last close. At that moment my mother walked in on me and stared at me for half of those five minutes without me realizing and asked me what was wrong, but I couldn't tell her cause I didn't know myself. Years have gone by with me repeating multiple things like touching a doorknob each time I

left my house all the way to repeating a motion because the first time I did it “didn’t feel right.” This has become a big issue in my life that doesn’t bother me as much as it used to because I’ve learned to find alternate ways of not repeating something.

Porta Potties

Porta potties are a great way to release the waste that you are holding inside your body when you’re not at home. But will I ever use one? The answer to that is no. Porta potties are disgusting and there is no way that I will ever know who sat on that toilet before me. I remember walking into the smelly enclosed space while trying to pee on a fishing trip and I almost fell inside because of how much space there was between my bottom and the toilet seat. Needless to say, next time I will be digging a hole instead.

Rhythm and Blues

Rhythm and blues is one of the most soothing song genres to my ears. The intricate layers of music produced in this genre by all the artists really shows what true art can be. As a child I usually listened to songs that played on the radio and jammed out to, “If I ain’t got you” by Alicia Keys as I stuck my head out the window and felt the whiplash of the wind. Although my face felt numb by the time, I pulled my head back in I enjoyed it because I felt as if I was in a movie scene driving down a beautiful city road. R&B music has cooperated itself into my soul ever since I was a child and because of this I have been so thankful to be able to have the opportunity to appreciate and listen to this artistic form.

Phở

TANGELA NGUYEN

University High School

Hmong American Ink and Stories Award

“Pack up!” the instructor yelled. The scent of Phở and hoisin sauce from the restaurant across the way wafted through the doors of the dojo and landed on my tongue.

“Up for noodles?” I asked her.

She looked up to me and took off her mouthguard, revealing multiple gaps from lost teeth. “Sure, Ba!” Her side ponytail danced back and forth as she waddled back to her gear bag, making sure to not step on the lines of the mat as she had always done since I could remember. I had just gotten her a new dobok, it was stiff but now wore with the sweat of just one session. She let one side of it slip off her shoulder to reveal her tank top underneath. “I look just like a teenager when I wear it like this!” she always made a point to tell me. How admirable it was.

A few paces to the door and she stops and stares through the glass that separates the two atmospheres. Her mouth formed an “O” shape as she whipped around to face the opposite direction. “I need to tie my shoe ...” She crouched down despite the fact that she was wearing flip-flops. She formed the bunny-tying method with her hands until she realized it for

herself, which she then started to scratch incessantly at her ankle. This behavior is nothing new, I saw it on her first day of 2nd grade, and the moments before entering venues for our tournaments. But what could be so formidable about the outside that would ignite this action in her?

On the bench directly outside the dojo sits 4 girls her age, dressed in clothing riddled with gemstones and glitter. Their blush-covered cheeks rose to their shimmery eyes with every bite of the sweet pastry they were eating. Their legs swung back and forth and induced a jingle-jangle of the zipper loops on their boots; their blonde hair remained stationary in perfectly tight spirals, sealed in place with what I can only describe as gorilla glue. I looked down at my daughter still crouching and still scratching.

I had faced a similar fate my first days of school after leaving home in Vietnam. All I ever asked for was for Phat to make me cool like the American kids were. I disliked their hamburgers, and their whole education curriculum is too lax and carefree. I wanted to wear a different pair of jeans every day and I wanted to carry glasses. But of course, none of that mattered, because I was a dumb student who wanted to smile as the others did.. No, I simply wish that I wasn't ridiculed as I was.

I bring her up by the arm, which she then shrouds in embarrassment. "Hide behind me," she follows my judgment and we creep outside the dojo. The 4 girls were so immersed in their raucous guffawing that we shuffled to the car with ease. She sits in the back seat and buries her head in her arms. She sniffled and choked on her tears. We bought fried chicken and ate it on the way home.

Achilles Heel

NYANZA WILLIAMS

University High School

FACET Award

Look in the mirror, what do they see
A bounty of scars, skin like evergreens
The sight of flaws that chip away slowly
Waiting for the day the prisoner will be set free
The darkness comforts
Even though they can't breathe
They're drowning
But revel in the suffering
Surrendering
To the rush that is pain
Wishing for it to go
But begging it to stay
The darkness surrounds
Fire and ashes abound
In the darkness they are found
In the place with no sound
There they wear their crown
The land of familiar frowns
They kill themselves trying to feel
Self-sabotage before minds have fully healed
Taking swigs and popping pills
Cutting skin and skipping meals
The human condition
Its own Achilles heel

From Streets to Cells

JEFFERY WILSON

Voyager Secondary School

FACET Award

I remember it quite vividly—as if it were yesterday. Knock, knock, knock. I woke up with a start. I checked my phone for the time. It was 10:37 a.m. I got up and walked over to the window next to my front door. I peeked through the curtains and saw a man and a woman, both with badges, bulletproof vests, and guns in their holsters. I had seen people in uniform before.

Your typical narcotic law enforcement officers, undercover agents, or gang task force agents frequently wear this gear. “Gang task” is what my “brothers” and I call them. Just to give a little background before we get back into my memory. These are close friends of mine, who I call my “brothers.” I look to them as my family since I don’t really have any of my own. All I have is my grandmother, little brother, and disabled cousin.

In my town, people would look at us and think we were just another bunch of gang members in the City of Chowchilla, waving around blue rags, staying out late, hanging by the street sign, and causing trouble. Well, you know how it is. People often like to judge a book by its cover. We were more than just that. These were the people I grew with. They were there from the start. These were the people that I turned to when I had no place to sleep or food to eat.

The streets taught my brothers and I that we had no one but each other. One day, on October 25, 2018, Heaven took a brother from us. All of us grew up in a similar environment. All we knew was violence. Who could blame us?

Back to what I was saying. I didn’t answer the door because I knew they were here to arrest me. After a few minutes, I thought they may have left. I got ready to leave the house, just in case I was going to get arrested.

I hopped in the shower and got dressed, so that when I left, I wasn’t looking like I just woke up. Before I exited the house, I made sure I was looking “fresh.” I was off to start my day. I went through my backdoor and took my alleyway as a route just in case “Gang Task” was still in front of my house.

Just like any other day, I was on my way to the “block,” or in other words, the “hanging out” spot or “hood.” I fell in love with my block, I had been putting in work for it like providing money for it since I was 13. Sometimes when I put in work it puts other people’s life in danger.

I hit the block and started kicking back with a few of my friends who were there already. It was 12 in the afternoon and we were near the street sign reading 11th Street.

I was waiting for school to get out, so I could make my move on any good-looking females my age. Just then, 3 cop cars and 4 undercover officers swarmed in on me. They hopped out with all guns on me yelling “Gang Task Force! Chowchilla P.D.! Hands up don’t move!”

An officer pinned me against his patrol car and threw hand cuffs on me. They took me over to the station when a detective began asking me questions. He said something about me being on camera at a store, and that I had pointed a gun at a customer, while to rob him. I denied it, even though the customer had snitched on us. Then he asked me “Was this Juan committing this robbery with you?”

Then I replied with “Won who? I got nothing else to say to you.”

Before I knew it, I was on my way to Madera County Juvenile Hall. My friend Juan was already there waiting for me because we were on the run together. It was my first time in Juvy.

I had court on Friday. My heart was sinking when I heard the judge say they were trying to hit me with a strike and 36 months of being incarcerated. I was ready for it because I knew this was the life I had chosen. I kept on going to court for weeks, fighting my case, and the judge started talking about 24 months in Boot Camp.

A month later, I ended up beating my case. The judge only gave me a couple more months until I was able to go home. I called my grandmother every day and she cried every day, begging me to get my life straight and to do good. I told her I would when I came home. I was stuck in a cell with 243 concrete bricks as walls for a few months.

I went home, ready to start doing good, but I wasn’t prepared to do so. I got released to the same old environment I grew up in. Not even a week after I got released, I was already on the run.

I cut off my house arrest monitor because probation kept on raiding my house. At the time, I was selling drugs, so I cut off my house arrest monitor because I didn’t want to get caught at my grandmother’s by probation in the middle of a drug deal.

I was on the run for about a month before I was back in Juvy. They caught me with charges of multiple narcotics and marijuana. When I got caught, I was thinking like, “Oh man, here we go again! What is my grandma going to have to say about this?”

I wasn’t thinking about the consequences. All I knew was that I wanted quick good money. They took me on another trip to the Hall. On the ride there, my mind was racing about what my grandmother would be thinking. She told me she never wanted to hear that phone call again—that I’m locked up or worse, dead. My grandmother’s greatest fear was losing me. I got booked in and was back in my cold concrete cell.

I hit court 3 days later on Wednesday. My attorney told me my recommendation was a year in juvenile hall or a 12 month boot camp commit. I was trying to fight my case for the ongoing month. It took a month and then on November 20, 2020 at 9:30 a.m. I got sentenced to 12 months in Boot Camp.

Over time, sitting in my cell all alone, thinking about what I could do to just change my life for the better. I came across many obstacles that made me want to stay in the addicting life I live. The Boot Camp commitment has helped me in many ways and even though I'm still maturing, I have developed into a better person. I'm exhausted in this life. I'm losing to many "brothers" to a cell or to a grave and I can't stand it anymore. The worst thing is disappointing my grandmother.

Every morning, I wake up and I repeat the words my grandmother said to me on that first phone call, "Get your life straight. I love you and really want you to do good. I want you to go places and I don't want to see you dead or locked up your whole life. Set a good example for your younger brother."

My life is like a hamster wheel. It's becoming a cycle. Getting arrested is becoming repetitive. I remember back when I was a kid, I would look towards basketball and football to stay out of trouble. But now I'm starting to get the hang of this boot camp thing and it's been keeping me out of trouble. I mean, the military is something I'm getting really into. All I know is when I go home. I want to serve my country and join the Navy SEALs and make sure my little brother and grandmother are on their feet. Not all memories are great, but they are an experience and you can turn them into something great.

The Believers, the Deniers, and the Heroes

MARIANA RUBIO

Tulare Western High School

MFA Award

Do you remember?

We used to gaze at silver screens,
and spend our days barefoot in the sun.

We'd get all dressed up to go nowhere, just for fun

We held hands and Blessed our differences

We threw our golden parties, and one night I looked into your starry eyes

I saw you in rose-colored glasses, the grass always seemed to be green
on both sides

Do you remember when I said

Please stay, I'll give you all of my heart

Somehow you made everything Heavenly Blue

I never longed for another time, I never wanted to go

Then the worst of the silver screens came alive

Now I'm reading eulogies instead of wedding speeches,
because you took off your mask and showed us who you really are.

You think you're a patriot, but you're really just an idiot

Their arrows came down on those who wanted Peace,
so Red blood spilled into a Black & White world.

And you let them die.

Don't second-guess why the world split into two

Don't minimize a blazing fire

Don't blame me when I hide from you

So, I guess I'll see you on the other side

Keep your distance from me please, 6 feet apart

Somewhere, someone's brother struggles to breathe,

Code Blue

So they begged the white-coated Saviors,
and praised the starving blue collars

They lifted them up to the sky, like they're the ones that needed saving.
But when all is said and done, they'll put them back with the orange bottles
they came with,
when they can't give you a miracle.

...

Cried the Bride, "Nevermore!"

She's dressed in raven black instead of dove white
Sirens instead of bells
Fear instead of Love

...

Fade into view

The sands of the hourglass fall so swiftly,
I'm a Faithless voyager in the desert of time,
waiting out what feels like an eternity of drought, yet it's only been
a moment
Some nights I memorize the creaks of the floor, and yearn to go outside
Some nights I weep for the lost, and realize I'm no longer yours
Some nights I leave flowers by your stone grave
But one day I'll forget you ever existed
I still look to the sky, but I don't know why
I'll still ask the wrong questions—
always in doubt— but at least I'm trying
But now some nights I'll paint a new life, and I'll pray for you

Now there's the Believers, the deniers,
and the Heroes.

So I guess the real question is,
Which one are you?

Color Me and Call Me a Rainbow

GIANNA CARDENAS

Mission Oak High School

San Joaquin Literary Association Award

“You feeling blue?” Was a common phrase I’d heard throughout my life, whether that be to me or someone I’d know, It was said to me when I hadn’t left my room in two days, or after a particularly grueling game lost. Blue was something I had — for an unknown reason — quickly associated with sadness, it was dark and deep, blue that swallowed you whole, you sunk into it. It was felt often — the dark blue — sometimes for days engraved into the four walls I stayed in or washed away within seconds like footprints on the quiet beach in a quiet town. The deep, dark, blue that was coincidentally, the same color that stained my club jersey — I tried not to think too much about that. It wasn’t harsh, sometimes suffocating but never something I had intentionally fallen into. It wasn’t always a dark azure that clung to you and never let go, sometimes it was soft, slowly coloring and washing over me the same way the tides do the sandy shore, it felt the same way melancholy and singularity. Blue was walking at in the middle of starry night skies after sneaking out at 3 a.m. with friends, blue was the police cars showing up at my house twenty minutes to late, it was saying goodbye to a friendship of years in the making, and it the soft sound of the lo-fi playlist I listen to that makes the world stop spinning. It was dark and never ending and soft and comforting all at once.

Soft and quiet blues soon turned into seething reds, blaring and loud, demanding a sort of attention that I could never give. Red in all its glory was the seething feeling that sunk into my skin after arguments, it was boiling beneath my skin like lava. Red was the color of Mom’s lipstick and it was the same color as heartache. It was warm and comforting the core of the campfire that embers still glowed, it was fireworks, and the passion I felt. Red was the embarrassment that rose and made my cheeks hotter than even the hottest heatwave. It was also the anemia pills that made my stomach sick and the school days left early because of it. The color of raised skin after scratching at bug bites that drew blood — I still get yelled at for picking at them to this day but the itch they give is one never sated. Red in all its glory was a never ending combination of the passion, love, anger, embarrassment

and everything else felt.

If red was like a wildfire, spreading fast and taking over every inch there ever was to take, never sparing and conquering everything it touched and setting it aflame. It's only obvious that flames can't burn forever and from rubble the green roots and stems buried for so long flourish and flow freely. ... Green was flowing freely connecting everything and everyone, roots that spread far and wide in every direction, a highway that was only getting more complex as I grew, it was the connections I made. It was the sickness that clawed at my throat and ripped out my lungs, green was the monster that clung to you and never let go, it would grow and fester, it was greed, and *envy*. It was the ugly monster that reared its head when other kids talked about their fathers, or their new toys, or the vacations the family went — the things they could afford. But it was also the same color as the grass I layed and rolled in for hours and the eucalyptus scent that covered my house as a kid and still does, it was moms salt baths favorite scent and the stress relief that she'd spray in my room when I was having too rough of a time and too stubborn to admit it.

Alas forest greens conspired and swirled into softer hues and tinted yellow shades, no longer vines that twisted and grewed but now the blinding sunlight that allowed such. Yellow was comforting, it was soft smiles sent by friends and laughing till my stomach hurt listening to jokes that never made sense, it was my raggedy old teddy bear I slept with for years but could never name. It was the same shade of yellow as the dandelions in the front yard I'd make flower crowns from, and paled in comparison to the soaking yellow raincoat I wore in the rainy season. It was the steam I saw wafting through the air after a fresh pot of pozole was made, one that no matter how big wouldn't last a day. The same tinge as the bandaids I was covered in as a kid. Yellow an ongoing joke I hated as a kid; it was never a favorite color and every year without fail when my soccer jersey was handed out it was the same nasty neon color that I told my mom made my skin look to dark. (Child me was much more insecure about my skin color than me now.) Yellow was also the electricity that buzzed under my skin, the same one that drew goosebumps on my body, and made my hands, my legs, my arms, and my fingers shake every second of every minute of the day. The electricity that made me talk and talk and talk, forgetting the point but not being able to quit the words coming out of my mouth or the million and one thoughts buzzing around in my head. It was also serendipity and epiphanies, poetic words stemming from the buzz of lightning that crackled in my veins.

As soft yellows shifted into oranges, shining suns became blazing sunsets, the memories tied with them melded into another existence entirely, orange was another component of another part of what feels like another life entirely. Because orange was the warmth I basked in when the sky was as pretty as a painted mural. The same as soft smiles and even softer touches, it was neon glow sticks on halloween, the candied corn I'd throw at snotty brothers. Orange was sunkissed skin after beach days, and the afterglow that followed me and my team after a good game won. It's the shade of the salt lamp in my room that glows every night. It was the fine details on the club jersey stuffed far back into my closet. It was the

transparency of those pill bottles that filled the draws for anemia and some filled with claritin when my allergies clogged my nose and clouded my vision. The main tint that coated the skys on evening afternoons when the sun was soon to sleep. It was the euphoria I experienced oh so rarely but well cherished when it was.

Yellow and Purple were parallels, opposites on the color scale and opposites in the feelings I felt were divided by an ocean. Purple was Mom's favorite color, it was the beginning of all her passwords and the main component of her closet. The color of the sheets I wiggled and wormed my way into when my dreams went from lavender to a darkened violet. It was my favorite plant in the school's gardens and the Jolly Ranchers I'd steal from the candy jar at Mom's old shop. It was the color that painted my skin when me and my brothers hit too roughly and ten shades darker on my knees and hips after grueling practices spent thrown out on the hardwood floor. Only to get back up and be told to try harder. Purple was the chamomile tea with honey I drank every night for months straight when my insomnia got too bad and the same shade was the eyebags I had to match. It was the color written under every "Favorite color?" question asked as a child — Because obviously if it was my Moms favorite it was mine too.

Gray wasn't pretty, not a blush pink or cerulean blue, although now it's the same shade as my curtains, bedding and the shiny silk pillowcase I sleep on every night. A shade that covered gloomy clouds that were on the verge of crying on my Aunt's funeral, and the color of the smoke that flew from dying lungs and trampled cigarette buds thrown outside. Gray was suffocating, not like blue, it wasn't something that I sunk into, it was the pit I felt in my stomach when my anxiety got bad. It was a sudden drop and then nothing at all, it wasn't a feeling, it was numbness and *nothing*. Gray was also the monotone tinge that frequented on rainy days, it was petrichor and muddied boots that ran back and forth and soaked asphalt. It wasn't all bad and It wasn't all that great either, after all there was something oddly comforting about experiencing nothing at all, burnt out from viscous vindictiveness, everlasting envy, and heated heartache. But that was soothed with earl gray tea on the highest gray shelf in the gray stained cabinet, a dollop of honey along with it to feel something sweet. Gray was the lack of sensation that came after feeling so much, underneath the viscous red and gnarly purple and sickening greens it layed silent, too quiet to distinguish whether it was real at all. I was a blank, gray, monotone slate every morning waking up with a new color pressed into skin by emotions I couldn't remember and wouldn't try to comprehend.

So paint me, color me in and call me a rainbow, with my lovely reds, sunset oranges, dandelion yellows and my envy inducing forest greens, a rainbow with bone-chilling blues and viscous purples. So color me, and call me rainbow, and please don't ask me "Are you feeling blue?" because I don't feel blue If I can't feel the reds and greens that come along with it. Underneath even those pretty colors that painted me and made me blue, were a thousand more shades and a thousand more hues of tones I couldn't begin to name. So don't call me blue, not when I'll never be able to be anything less or anything more than the kaleidoscope of colors that made me a thousand times more complex than just the blue I sometimes let you see.

Always be grateful for what you have

ERNESTO BUSTINZA

Edison High School

Chicanx Writers and Artists Association Award

“Always be grateful for what you have, there are some people who have nothing.” As a child this statement seemed odd considering the fact that we were part of the people who had nothing. At the time I heard this advice I was likely 5 years old. Little did I know that mere months later I would be homeless and not in the custody of my parents. Nevertheless, I did as good a job a 5-year-old can do at being grateful. I took this advice to heart. After all, it was a pretty good tip.

Weeks later, I fell asleep mulling those words over in my head. As my mother lay on her side of the floor of my uncle’s living room the next morning, I turned over to see my siblings and father sleeping in exactly the way she was. Heads on the firm yet flat and thin pillows, shivering bodies covered by the blanket we all shared, and a look of sleeping bliss plastered across their face. I would often lay awake on mornings like this. I thought of all that my imagination would allow. Where would we all explore today? What could I fashion an impromptu toy out of? What, if anything, could I eat?

But as the months dragged on, heeding this advice became much harder. I looked around and saw naught to be thankful for. Our parents had lost custody of us, and we had been sent away to live with our Tia. My siblings and I saw our parents, who were struggling on their own with addiction and alcoholism, only on the rare occasion where we could have visitation; of which mostly took place at the nearest McDonald’s. When we came home we were met with the heavy hand of our Tia, who I was convinced was put on this earth to leech as much money as she could from government aid and to be the main antagonist of mine and my sibling’s lives. She took great pleasure in starving and beating us. A bonafide villain that woman was. “Always be grateful for what you have,” I thought. I have a scooter and my brother and sister have a bike! Not many people have those. I relished this fact. At least until they were all stolen. I have my siblings with me. I have a lot of Legos from my uncle. I have some cool Lightning McQueen shoes and a SpongeBob shirt that I loved. That’s

quite enough, right?

Almost a year later, I looked around again and saw a scene so much different than before. Here were my parents no longer doing drugs but still drinking, they had custody of us, we had an apartment and we all lived together, we had cable TV for goodness' sake. All was well. I was grateful for what I had.

I would love to end the story here; with sunshine and rainbows painting the sky brilliant hues of the most vibrant colors, my family back together happy as can be, no longer going hungry every night, and watching our Xfinity On Demand. But that wouldn't make for a very interesting story now would it?

No, it wouldn't. Often we hear that you must know your history or be doomed to repeat it. Well, my parents didn't bother to study much. This time of unmitigated bliss was fleeting. Before we knew it, we were evicted, homeless again, and couch surfing with anyone who would let us in for a while. Family, friends, and family friends were all generous enough to open their doors to us for a short time. Still, I was grateful for what I had. My family all together.

Eventually we moved in with my grandma and all was well for almost two years. I can't remember very many bad memories here. Always fun, plenty to eat, video games, game nights with the family, friends from school came over. It was as perfect as perfect can get.

Yet again though, I made the mistake of getting comfortable. I came home from school one day, was handed a box, and was told to pack. Another eviction. Thus, we repeated the cycle of staying with friends, cousins, friends of friends, and friends of cousin for a little bit at a time. I was grateful for what I had. I knew that there were people who had it worse than me. This kept my mind at ease.

You see, the first time we were homeless and evicted it was only an appetizer of a multi-course meal that would be the rest of my life.

This twisted timeline of successive ups and downs lasted for years and years. We never had a permanent home and I found myself conditioned to no longer be comfortable anywhere, as I would soon have to pack up and leave.

It became harder to be grateful for what I have. As I got older and saw what other's lives were like, it became more and more difficult to be grateful. Why was it that my friend's parents had steady jobs? Why do they get to eat dinner every night? Why do they have so many clothes? Why don't they have to wear the same hand-me-downs day after day? Why are their parents so loving towards them? Why are their lives so perfect? Those years of always looking at the bright side took their toll, and now all I felt was emptiness. It was hard always being the poor kid at school, never having the necessary supplies, wearing the same shirt and pants every day, having parents who always had violent fights, always argued, and were absent as much as they could be.

I wanted to know what life was like for others. I wanted to know what happiness was, what a functional family was, what being full at dinner meant. I begged and pleaded and prayed to the heavens to grant me this wish. Even if it was for a day. I wanted to know what it was like to have things to be grateful for.

Those wishes never came to be. Nothing ever changed. I never knew the greener grass on the other side of the fence. All I would know is the worn-down couch I called my bed, the dinners we made with five dollars, and the pain of knowing that this cycle was ceaseless.

Looking back, hearing those words of advice for the first time served to get me through some tough times. I kept my eyes on the bright side. But, I stared at the light so long and hard that I had become blind to reality. I was left emotionally drained and drained. Devoid of all the glow that 5-year-old me had possessed when those words were first uttered.

En la tumba de 202

NICOLE NUNEZ

Mission Oak High School

Chicanx Writers and Artists Association Award

En la tumba de 202
Ahi encontraran mi abuelo
Un hombre de poquito palabras
Pero muchos deseos
Deseos de despedirse de su familia
Deseos de vivir

Te fuiste Abuelo, antes que yo llegara
Pero no estoy enojada
Por tus memorias se fueron antes que tu
Y tu vista se volvió oscuro
Ya no mas pudiendo mira la belleza del el mundo

Sin embargo, estos mismos ojos todavía lloraban
Y todavía, miraba el amor que teníamos nuestros por el
Sin embargo, sin sus ojos, seguía siendo el hombre al que admiramos
Seguía siendo mi abuelo

Esa día que temo recordar
Los lluvias de Talpa no pararon de llorar
Y por los calles, caminaban la gente en recuerdo de ti
Cantaban los mariachi con todos sus fuerzas
Baladas en tu nombre
En el nombre de Pablo Nunez

En la tumba de 202
Ahí está mi abuelo descansado en paz
Por la voluntad de Dios
Libre de todo lo que le trajo dolor
Con flores a sus pies
Flores de cada emoción y de cada color

Mi abuelo solo se llevó su cruz y un puno de tierra
La tierra al que lo ayudó a construir su vida
Ahí estará mi abuelo
Ahí me estará esperando
En la tumba de 202

The Mekong River

MALLIE YANG

Edison High School

Hmong American Writers' Circle Award

In my culture, there is an untold story of a man who lived by the Mekong River of Thailand.

The river was the border between his homeland and Laos.

One day, he made his way to collect water from the river, however, he did not return with what he had set out to retrieve.

The river had turned red with blood; the shore's horizon had become a cemetery of dead bodies.

Day by day, the water became darker and the number of corpses flowing down the river grew.

Every day, in respect of the dead, he would gather the corpses of these strangers, remove the silver on their bodies, and give them a proper burial.

The ground became so crowded that everywhere he dug, there was already a resting body buried.

The shore became so occupied that the only direction the bodies could flow towards was the ocean.

To his little knowledge, he didn't know of the Secret War occurring north of the river and the people in desperation to survive death.

We are the Hmong people.

How To Play a Guitar

MIGUEL A. VILLEGAS

King City High School

H. Ray McKnight Award

1. Undust your grandfather's old guitar. It may be a little off key, but it will be fine for this.
2. Check if anyone is home. You don't want anyone knowing you are gone.
3. Grab the guitar, go to the backdoor, open it, and walk to the woods.
4. Be careful of the branches, because they will try to stop you.
5. When you arrive at a clearing, sit down on the tree stump, placing your guitar between your knees.
6. Notice how the dense treetops only let little golden rays peak through them.
7. Feel the rays on your face and how they warm up your recently dried cheeks.
8. Look at the distance. You may be looking for some seconds, maybe some minutes, don't worry, it doesn't matter how long you take.
9. Look at the way the leaves fall at an interrupted rhythm that not even the woods can decipher.
10. Look at how the bushes' shadows hide the flowers that mark the pathway back home.
11. Admire the color of the grass, and how it dances with the breeze that is barely able to pick them up.
12. When you feel your phone vibrate, snap out of your trance, look at the notifications, read the messages, but close them immediately. Don't worry, he does not deserve your attention.
13. Place your phone face-down beside you.
14. Grab the arm of the guitar with your left hand while hugging the strings with your right one.
15. Don't play anything yet. Instead, look at the distance once more, but this time you are going to want to cry; hold it in.
16. Strum the guitar once and notice how it is out of tune.
17. Start tuning the guitar, one string at the time.

18. Notice how all the strings need to be rotated to the right, except the fifth string. That one needs to be rotated to the left.
19. After you finish tuning the guitar, strum it to see if they sound good together.
20. Do it again because you can never be too sure.
21. Repeat step 20.
22. Place your left hand on the G chord position.
23. Start playing the one song you know. Y'know, the one he taught you.
24. Whatever you do, do not sing. It will only make things worse.
25. After four rounds of the same four chords, start to sing. Don't worry, you can't hold it in anymore.
26. When you hit the first chorus, you will start understanding the lyrics.
27. Understand why he decided to teach you this song.
28. Understand why you needed to sing the lyrics.
29. Understand you needed to hear them.
30. After you finish the song, repeat it once more.
31. When you get to the second chorus, you will want to contain the tears inside you. Don't do it.
32. Drop to the ground. You will hear the guitar bouncing off the tree stump.
33. Start crying.
34. Cry harder.
35. Cry until you feel a faucet open in your nose.
36. Cry until you feel your lashes burning from the salt of your tears.
37. Cry for what they said and didn't say.
38. Cry for what you wish you had said.
39. Cry because you couldn't cry back then.
40. When you finish, dry the tear-trail that formed on your cheeks.
41. Look up to the sky and wonder for how long have you been like that.
42. Reach for your phone to check the time.
43. When you notice how late it is, stand up, wipe the dirt from your jeans and go home.
44. Notice how the branches opened a pathway, not touching you at all.
45. See the notifications on the lock screen of your phone.
46. Call him, he will not answer at first, so call him again.
47. He will respond.
48. He will apologize, but don't say that you forgive him, even though you already have.
49. Hang up on him.
50. Cry again. This time to let him out of your system.
51. He will apologize, but don't say that you forgive him, even though you already have.

52. You will have no tears left to cry. You will feel better.
53. When you arrive home, go straight to your room, there is still no one at the house.
54. Close the windows and curtains of your room and lock the door. Not to let anyone in, but to not let anything out.
55. When you hear the front door open, dry your cheeks and go downstairs.
56. They will ask you if you've been crying.
57. Answer that you hit your toe on the counter. They will not believe you, but they will not mention it anymore.
58. They will ask you how your day was. Say that it was fine. Nothing more. Nothing less.
59. After you have eaten dinner, return to your room. If they ask you why you are leaving so early, just say that you are tired.
60. Place the guitar by your bed. Not to keep it safe, but to keep yourself sane.
61. Look at your fingers and notice the callouses on the tips, grayed with the metallic strings. Be proud of them, since they are now the only thing that should be hurting now.

Red

KYLIE ROBERTS

Washington Union High School

Sherley Anne Williams Award

Red.

A color, a noun, a detail, who cares

I see red out the womb

Thinking it's going to be my last time,

It's not.

Apparently time rewinds

People love their color combos,

ESPECIALLY red and ... black

But no, not on a shirt.

But what's underneath that

Blood, a clump of cells.

Skin, a thin layer of tissue.

I see as protection,

You see you as a weapon

I can't walk into a store,

Without YOU feeling threatened.

Without my palms seen as stolen.

License and registration, but don't reach for it

Or I'll think my life is in danger

Allowing me to take yours.

Put your hands up

Stop resisting

Just you standing there is a threat to me.

Threatening ...

Whipped, kicked, stripped
Of our kids, lives, freedom
Eaten, beaten, Touched. All. Over.
Yet seen lower than animals.
Too lazy to do your own work
Knew we were intelligent
So would not allow us to learn.
You say it's all in the past
But is that a fact?
Made fun of our culture
Yet YOU tried to reclaim it back
NO
The only difference between now and the past
Is you put on a fake face
And tell us just to laugh
Laugh.
An expression made for when we find something
Fun, amusing, desiring ...
I do not find it amusing of my own ancestors dying,
My little sisters crying,
Because they want to be "normal"
Job interview I need to be MORE "formal"
Unattractive, unprofessional, ghetto
Walk into my job and won't get a hello
That's if I get the job in the first place
Because you don't like the crown of curls
Placed above my face
Tans, braids, beads
You want to be me, without being me
You may see it and treat it as a cure
But I see being Black as a blessing.
Red.
The color of the gunshot wounds my people get
Just for our very existence.

Eucalyptus

KANE SJOBERG

Edison High School

Wendy Rose Award

Ten thousand leaves rasp in the breeze
Whispering the world's secrets above me.
Come winter, creeping fog, they anoint those below
With cool drops of peace, muted calm is bestowed.

Seven sisters arch over this road
“Widowmakers,” as they are known.
Dark wisdom pervades these great bitter trunks
Of ivory pallor, charcoal watercolor stumps.

Drop a tear, drop a branch, with a gale of wind
Our loss of a soul, of yours but a limb.
Forbearance of fate, terror loosed with a crack
—Eucalyptus, how cruelly you ransack!

L-O-V-E

LOGAN MEADOWS

Home school

Honorable Mention

This is my last day of freedom — the day before my eighteenth birthday. This is the last time I'll walk the streets of this city without being hated intensely by approximately half the population. I imagine stepping into the Orange Division administration building and receiving a wristband, the sign of my loyalty.

We have two divisions. The Orange Division is made up of individualists, and the Purple Division, socialists. The two disagree on pretty much everything except for the mutual hatred of each other. Our nation is technically built on the principle of freedom, but according to my grandfather, that was abandoned long ago. When I try asking him what he means, he only turns sad and shakes his gray head. Life under divisions is the only way I've ever known, but history books and my grandfather tell me it hasn't always been this way. Although I know nothing except *this*, I have a strange feeling that my freedom and rights are about to be stripped by some cruel, unseen force that hides within this system.

I run my hand nervously through my short, dark curls and turn onto my street, giving up on trying to enjoy this last day. Oh well, I'll just have to spend it the way I've spent every other evening of my life: family dinner with a side of politics. Yay.

I swirl my pasta in circles around my bowl and ... here it goes — the conversation turns to the divisions. My sister makes a nasty remark about an old friend of hers, who just chose Purple. Dad listens but makes no move to reprimand her behavior. Mom fiddles nervously with her orange wristband.

"You're still planning on joining Orange tomorrow, right, Chase? You know how heated things have been ..."

"Yes, Mom, I'm joining tomorrow. First thing."

"Good, it's about time," Dad adds.

"Why do I *have* to choose Orange?!" I shout, slamming my fork down. "Can't I be my own person?"

My sister rolls her eyes, and Mom keeps fiddling. Dad clears his throat, remaining calm. "Orange is who we are, son. You're a part of this family, so you're Orange. And you know that if you don't choose tomorrow, they'll just choose for you and you'll end up in the same place."

He completely ignores the fact that I *could* choose Purple if I want to. After dinner, I escape to my bedroom. This isn't right. None of it is. But I don't know how to make sense of the problem or even begin to formulate a solution to it. Fully clothed, I sink onto my bed and eventually drift off on top of the quilt.

The sun peeks over the city skyline, and I take a deep breath. The building looms tall ahead of me. Before I can change my mind, I head inside. I arrived early, expecting the line to be long and the wait to be hours, but only about fifteen people stand in line. I mean, it makes sense. Most people my age have already chosen since we're allowed to do so at age sixteen. I guess a part of me has remained undecided, so I've put off my decision for as long as possible even though I knew that in the end, I'd choose Orange.

In front of me, a woman decked out in orange draws my attention. I first notice the names of several prominent Orange leaders on the back of her T-shirt. When she turns around, I see that her face is covered in orange piercings and that a tattoo of the same color crawls up her neck. The front of her shirt screams words targeted at Purple that I'd never imagine speaking aloud. By the time she turns back around a couple seconds later, I'm sick to my stomach. What has this society come to that we absolutely forsake every form of kindness and decency for the sake of personal beliefs and government loyalty?

I glance back at the people behind me and notice Taylor, my best friend since grade school, a few yards down. He fidgets, squirms, and casts troubled glances toward the front desk. That's weird; he's usually so easy-going. Disturbed by those in front of and behind me, I gaze down at my bare wrist, imagining what it'll be like to wear something on it all the time. Will it suffocate me? Is it possible to be suffocated by something on my wrist? What if it itches? I could have an allergic reaction and suffocate because of it. Wait, maybe ...

"Next. Next!"

I snap out of my endless spiral and step forward. "Sorry, ma'am. I'm here."

"Let me see your license." She doesn't look up. I fill out a form, stand still while they take what feels like a million photos and fingerprints, reluctantly allow them to prick my finger and take my precious life's blood out of me, and finally, offer my arm to receive the visible sign of commitment. The orange glows brightly against my pale skin.

"Thank you," I manage.

"Last thing," the stern lady demands. "Absolutely no talking or socializing with Purple is permitted. You're one of us now."

I swallow hard and step away. Turning back the way I came, I lock eyes with Taylor. He holds my gaze for about three seconds before breaking away and sprinting off at full speed toward the exit. I try calling after him, but like a dream where one loses the ability to speak at the most crucial moment, the words catch in my throat.

All I can think as I make my way home is, *What have I done?*

MEET ME UNDER THE HIGHWAY. 11:00. My knee bounces up and down as I wait for night to fall on the city. What I'm about to do could very well cost me everything. But it's worth it. *She's* worth it. I check my phone. 10:45. I don a sweatshirt and pull the hood over my head then strain my ears for any sound coming from the hallway or surrounding rooms. Nothing. I switch off my bedroom light and slowly twist the doorknob. The door squeaks as I pull it open. *Shhh!!!* my thoughts scream at the hinges. *Not now!*

The cool night chills my face. Our neighbors' houses lie dark like ours, but the streetlamps create too much light for my comfort. I lower my head and hurry down the street, skirting the rings of yellow illumination. Every footstep rings in my ears. What if someone decides to step out of their house right now, demands I tell what I'm doing, somehow manages to find out I'm planning on corresponding with the enemy, and BAM! I'm a goner.

You're being paranoid, Chase. There's nothing to worry about. The war hasn't begun yet. Yet. The word echoes in my mind to the rhythm of my labored breathing. That word terrifies me. I don't want a war. Not when my girlfriend is on the opposite side. But it probably won't be long before Orange takes action against Purple Chief Executive Elliott. I shudder and hurry on.

Finally, traffic noises increase enough to ease my breathing and slightly soothe my nerves. They also mean I'm close — closer to the highway, closer to her.

I cut through the gas station then move down a grassy slope. I recognize the purple and orange graffiti on one of the concrete support columns for the elevated highway. I hop over the narrow drainage ditch and step into the shadows.

"You came," she whispers. A petite figure steps around the column, and I move in close.

"Of course, I came, Jordyn." After my eyes grow accustomed to the dark, I stare into her beautiful face to take in the details, as if I don't already have them burned into my heart. The enchanting smile spread across her dark brown face warms my heart. She looks almost exactly the way I remember her looking the day we met at the park when we were kids. Because our families are on opposite sides, everything we were involved in was separate, which left the park as the only place we could spend time together. Now that we're older and tensions are heightened, it's here. I take her right hand and pull back the cuff of her sleeve. The purple nearly glows in the traffic lights. She does the same with mine, but the band on my wrist, of course, glows orange. I feel her eyes burning into my skin, so I pry my hand loose and shove my sleeve back down.

Afraid to meet her eyes, I whisper, "We lost our freedom today, Jordyn."

"We'd already lost it, Chase."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen to me. *We'd already lost our freedom.* It disappeared when people decided you can only fit into one of two categories. When the divisions stopped caring about the people and only about who was in power. When we stopped seeing each other for who we really are. We didn't lose it today, Chase. We lost it a long time ago."

I sigh. "You're right. I'm still trying to make sense of everything."

Jordyn drops her gaze.

"What is it?"

"I'm scared. Scared for our people. We're so blind. When we only see division alignment, we're not seeing each other. If we continue down the road we're on, we'll destroy ourselves."

"What do you mean? That's who we are. You're either Orange or Purple. It's just the way it is." I sound like my father, which scares me to death.

"It doesn't have to be. Just try to imagine," she grows excited, and her face takes on a faraway look. "A society where we embrace each other for who we are and listen to what others have to say instead of always attacking each other's beliefs. It'd be amazing! You could love who you love without having to hide it. We could be a truly free country where people can express themselves uniquely. We could ..."

She's entering the realm of things I can't quite grasp. "I should probably go now. If someone finds out ..."

"Don't leave." She pulls me closer. Her enthusiasm fades as tears trickle down her cheeks. "I don't wanna lose you."

I take her chin in my hand and lift her face so she'll look at me. "No matter what happens, I won't let them pull you away from me. Regardless of what you believe or I believe, I promise we'll stick together."

She nods, and I press my lips gently against her wet, salty cheek. We exchange shaky smiles, and I slip away, leaving her in the shadows.

I sip a glass of soda at my friend Derek's house, incredibly uneasy with all the Orange conversation floating around me. I glance about the room at the people I at one time called my buddies. *Buddies* — I'm doubting whether that word applies anymore. These people are exactly what Jordyn called "blind."

"Let's see it, Chase!" Joel calls. I reluctantly pull up my sleeve, showing them my orange wristband.

"Congrats, bro," Philip punches my shoulder playfully. "Welcome to the family."

I restrain myself from snickering at the absurdity of that sentence. I guess Jordyn's wild ideas are beginning to work their way into me because I find myself longing for the society that she described. Oh well, it's too late, I've already chosen.

Bored to death, I find a chair in the corner and pull out my phone to check social media. Arguments explode all over my friends' feeds. Recalling the image of Taylor fleeing the administrative building yesterday, I switch over to my best friend's feed. I gasp. His latest post is a picture with no caption. The photo says it all. It's a close-up of his pale hand grasping the brown hand of a person across from him. I can tell that they grip each other's right hand, but there's no sign of a loyalty band on either wrist. Written on the back of Taylor's hand in thick, black ink are four, simple letters: L-O-V-E.

This is the answer I didn't really know I was looking for. There can

be another way. We don't have to remain divided. The question is: Will I be brave enough, strong enough, and love others enough to help forge a new path? *I have to be.* It'll take all of those things to rip away the layers of division, prejudice, and hatred. The system won't fix itself. I guess if change is ever going to come, something has to be done.

Beneath the highway, with trembling hands, I slide my pocketknife between my arm and wristband and yank, loving the breaking sound that results. I hand Jordyn the knife, who does the same with hers. I then take her right hand and a marker and write the letters L-O-V-E on it. We link hands, and I snap a picture. I sense an energy running through us that can only be felt if we're together, united. That is what we must be if we're going to destroy the division and become a truly free people. If there ever was a time for it, it's now.

In that scary and exciting moment, I had no idea just how much it would cost me.

Enough

JOANN MOON

University High School

Honorable Mention

Color code your priorities. Use that seemingly never-ending list of tasks as motivation. Oh my God, you overslept again! Now your whole day is ruined.

You have so much potential, why don't you use it? Stop using procrastination as a shield to hide your incompetence and fear of never being enough. Because you aren't, and you never will be.

This is how productivity is done. Just a few more days until you can indulge in whatever you want to do — that's what self-care is all about, isn't it? You're doing too much. You're not doing enough.

Answered a question wrong in class? Not surprised. Why does it take you so long to send emails? Why do you take so long to do simple things? Why can't you tell your dad that you love him? Oh, stop crying. That's only for Saturdays when you have time. Compensate. Work out in the morning if you ate late at night. Pull all-nighters if you have to, but lie to your mom and tell her you slept well.

Time goes on forever but seems to slip through my fingers like sand.

OK, maybe one episode ...

OK, maybe another.

Well since it's automatically loading ... this is the last one!

...

Ugh! Look how
much time you
wasted!

How are you supposed to be your Pinterest board when you just sit around?
Would your 12-year-old self be proud of you? Because I'm not so sure.

Why are you writing this? Don't you know that this is a

W I N D O W

I I
N N
D D
O O

W I N D O W

into your intrusive thoughts?

The Forbidden Kiss

MARIAH RUIZ

Porterville High School

Honorable Mention

It was a dark and gloomy night and finally Alaster's journey came to an end. He jumped off his horse almost stumbling as he felt his numb feet hit the ground. As he regained his balance the bottle from his hand shattered against the stone floor startling his horse into a retreat. Alaster replied to this action by saying, "GET BACK HERE! ... coward." It was no doubt he was drunk, on both his sorrows and the rum he bought from a nearby pub. He wanted to forget all his troubles at home because his wife caught him and his mistress only two days after their wedding. She kicked him out and warned him not to return, so he did the only thing he knew he retreated to a pub seeking an adventure he knew not. He approached the entrance of the dark and old house, no this was no house castle would be more of an appropriate term for the building. He heard the story of it at the pub, and how anyone who entered it never came out and those who did never spoke of what they saw. Alaster took one step closer to the door and hesitated, "What if the stories are true, and I never return," he thought, "Alas, I have nothing left to lose if I never return so be it." He took two more steps and as the door was directly in front of him he held his breath as he knocked on the pitch black door. This door showed its age on its peeling paint and chipped wood and yet the design was still noticeable, you could still see every detail on it, the black roses and thorns carved in. Since his first knock was ignored he did it again however this time he heard the echo from his loud banging flow through the building. There was a haunting silence and he believed no one was home, so he let himself in. "Hello ... if anyone is there show yourself to me and make yourself known," Alaster said as he brought the lit torch from outside the door with him. The single flame was the only light besides the one provided by the full moon. The building looked completely abandoned, broken glass and pieces of the house covered the floor and yet the stairs were still intact and the ceiling had a marvelous sparkling chandelier covered in more diamonds one man could own in his entire life.

"I'm here," a quiet almost angelic female voice replied. Alaster was startled by the sudden presence of a woman he could not see. Any wise man would've turned back and abandoned this ridiculous quest, but Alaster could not. He was completely drawn to the voice and he longed to see the woman it belonged to.

“Please, make yourself known to me ... some into the light I bring you no harm,” Alaster said as he stepped up the black stairs as they creaked he walked more joy caring of the dangers that may await him.

“STOP!” The beautiful voice commanded. He did as she said and remained in his place, the moonlight hit perfectly for you to notice his features: the bags under his eyes, his face flushed with intoxication, his messy hair and his eyes that look as if they were drained of life itself. As he stood wondering if he should continue he was brought out of his thoughts when he saw a woman approach from the shadows as she stepped into the moonlight at the top of the stairs a few feet from Alaster, one could not help but notice her beauty. She had fair skin hair as dark as the night and eyes as black as coal, but her eyes too looked lifeless.

“What is your name?” Alaster asked, not once removing his glare from the woman’s face. “Elizabeth, who are you and why have you entered my home?” Elizabeth asked, taking a step closer to Alaster.

Without knowing of his actions Alaster also took a step closer as if he were in a trance, then he finally said “I am Alaster, I bring you no harm. I heard a story at the pub of an abandoned house that is believed to be haunted. I must have been led to the wrong place. I’m sorry for the intrusion.”

“It’s okay ... I don’t get visitors often, Alaster if I may ask ... why were you at the pub and not with Isabella is she not your betrothed?” Elizabeth asked with a slight smirk on her pale lips. Alaster took a step back as he wondered how she knew his wife’s name however the smile she gave seemed welcoming and so he stepped back forward.

“She isn’t too fond of me at the moment,” he replied, again not once leaving her gaze. “... And why not you seem to be good company to keep,” Elizabeth asked, stepping down the stairs til she was only two steps away from Alaster. He could now see she was wearing a white dress resembling a wedding one.

“I was not loyal to her ... we were only married to days ago and already I have been unfaithful,” Alaster doesn’t know why he’s telling her all this but he can’t stop it’s almost as if her eyes are compelling him to tell her everything. With those words the doors to the house slam shut and as he snaps out of his trance he runs to the doors and tries to pull them open with all his strength. However, as he runs he drops his torch and the flame goes out leaving the only light to be the moon shining through the cracks in the roof.

“You won’t get those doors open ... none of them ever do,” Elizabeth says, as she descends down the stairs and slowly approaches Alaster. “I’ll let you go if you can fill my one request,” she says, with a taunting grin across her pale lips.

“Anything ... I’ll do anything just please allow me to leave,” Alaster says with a complete look of terror on his face.

“I require ... a kiss ... just one will do. I know it wouldn’t be the first time you kissed a woman other than your wife.” She replies as she walks so close to him she can hear his heart nearly beating out of his chest with fright.

As Alaster nods in agreement he asks, “Just one kiss and you will let me on my way deal?”

“Deal.”

With that one word, their lips connected. At first it was like every other kiss Alaster ever had or at least he thought that until he felt his lips started to become numb. He started to feel the pain from his lips travel from his face throughout his body, it was a pain like nothing he had ever felt, and yet he couldn't stop. He couldn't remove himself from her hold and he didn't try to instead he embraced her more by wrapping his arms around her waist. The pain only increased and he felt his whole body burning and as Elizabeth pulled away she looked down at the floor. Where the man once stood was a pile of ash a sinister smirk appeared on her face and the doors swung open. The wind from outside pulled the ashes with it, she kept her part of the deal, for she never said if he would leave dead or alive he just assumed he would be unharmed. Alaster was now nothing more than ash, if he had waited at the pub and heard more of Elizabeth's story he would've heard how much she was like his wife. He would've heard how she found her betrothed with a mistress as well, and how she said she would leave him to be happy with the other woman if he gave her one thing. All she required was one last kiss as he fulfilled her request she stabbed a blade through his heart, but no matter how much pain he caused her she still loved him and shortly after a few days she went insane and died of a heartache from the pain of both losing the man she loved and for being the reason he's gone. Ever since that day she had been killing men like her husband and like Alaster with nothing but a forbidden kiss.

Fly

TYLER DOAN

King City High School

Honorable Mention

I was looking at the black sky,
When I was scouting for the ball.
It made me want to fly.

I tried so hard to jump high,
But I kept getting blocked by the wall.
I was looking at the black sky.

So, I still continued to try
The player in front of me was very tall,
It made me want to fly.

I was about to cry,
Because I started to fall.
I was looking at the black sky.

My opponent started to wave goodbye,
When I was starting to crawl,
It made me want to fly.

I don't know why, but,
I began to recall I was looking at the black sky,
It made me want to fly.

A Mother's Love

WENDY MACIAS GARCIA

King City High School

Honorable Mention

Womb

You are by yourself in a dark sac for nine months, just growing, eating, sleeping, and growing. The only person you have is your mother and her LOVE. When you are born, she cries tears of joy because in her eyes, you are perfect, beautiful, just flawless. You find comfort in her arms, her kisses, and her vibrant lullabies. Following your birth, her postpartum back aches are unbearable, yet she would surrender her whole life for you. She is your birth giver; YOU are the light in her eyes.

Childhood

You're growing up, having memories and being, a child. Your mother is there to cherish every moment, not wanting them to pass, nor wanting you to grow up.

Food tasting, park adventures, opening presents, nightmares, first day of pre-school, knee scrapes, imaginary friends, all your birthdays, shots, discovering a sport, missing your first tooth, puzzles, riding a bike (no training wheels), making cookies, placing the Christmas star, first haircut, silly friend arguments, drawing on the walls, potty training, movie nights, and countless more ...

Teens

This chapter is getting harder than the one before, yet she continues to demonstrate her insane love for, you. Her goal is for you to thrive. Too many things happen that you lose yourself and reject her. Still, she offers herself 24/7.

Break ups, friend-recks, getting your first car, graduating, finding a job, going to college, high school sport games, grade recognitions, car crashes, college rejections, stressful breakdowns, birthday parties. Mental health; But there's no need for therapists or counselors; Mom always knows best.

Adulthood

You are now independent and grown-up. Mom is not around the house to clean up after you nor cook for you. She is no longer there to pay for your showers, gas, and trash. This does not mean that she doesn't support you nor that she doesn't care. Instead, believe it or not, this demonstrates her love towards you, her tough love in letting you go and allowing you to prove to life that you will do it on your own. There is no need to worry though because she is always going to be there if you trip on the way. She is just a call away. Her love connects all cities to get to you.

Her love is forever present.

Parasitic

CANDICE SANCHEZ

King City High School

Honorable Mention

Older men, in mid-life crises
Cling to me; leaching onto my femininity.

Looking at me as if I've fallen from heaven;
but little do they know that my mind is a weapon.

Yet they can't stop like dogs, foaming at the mouth
ready to chase me down as I ignore their pathetic hoots.

The rabies they reek and seep through their cat calls;
I dissolve their ego like salt on their tongues.

I can't lie, walking past as their ill-intended eyes stare me down;
their grimy hands swatting my thighs, something to them so profound.

Looking at me like I'm the sweetest nectar of life;
the purest water in the drylands.

These men want to sleep with little girls.
Truly the most parasitic in all of humanity.

Double Edged Sword

SILVESTRE PATINO CESAREO

King City High School

Honorable Mention

Some say love is beautiful
Others are afraid of love
Both are correct
Love is an intense feeling that should never be taken lightly
Truly loving someone is an amazing experience that fills you with joy
Doesn't have to be in a romantic way, it could be a brother, sister, mother or even a cat
This feeling alone often gives people a reason to live
Love is beautiful
But love can lead to heartbreak and grief
When someone you love decides they no longer love you or didn't love you to begin with
That leaves you not knowing what to think, someone you loved so much never even felt the same
Many choose to kill themselves for that reason alone
Losing a loved one to the Grimm Reaper will place a void in your life
What was once there is suddenly gone
The person you kept so close to your heart has ceased to exist
The memories you have of them will only remind you of what has been lost
Love is terrifying
Many say the grief and hardships that come with love are worth it.
I have loved ones, I've lost loved ones and it often makes me think of how cruel this thing we call life is
But I must admit, I don't regret loving those who I've lost
Love is such a difficult thing to put into words, I'm only 16
I haven't experienced enough life to truly know what love is
Love can build you up but it can tear you down just as fast
This thing, this sensation we describe as love, truly is a double edged sword

Feminism

ALEXIA PRIETO

Porterville High School

Honorable Mention

It's hard being a girl. People of the opposite gender may say we are dramatic for saying this but it's true. A girl goes through being judged on clothing, being harassed at least once a year, molested once in their life, characterized as being weak, pregnancy, period, and society. Society believes women are not as strong as men, that woman should only do certain jobs and have a certain body shape, to wear certain clothes and it goes on. That's society for you. Us women know men have it hard too of course but, the world and it's people need to give women more recognition. We are stronger than they think. We go through much more than they think. We do a lot more than what they think. It's time we show that women really are the true leaders of this world.

Come back to this when you need to hear this.

Unknown, 3/18/20