



Spectrum

No. 42

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 42nd annual Young Writers' Conference was scheduled for April 27, 2022, with a keynote address from graphic memoirist Kristen Radtke.

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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Contents

A Letter from the Dean	8
A Letter from the Chair	9
Staff	10
Awards	11

POETRY

Mariah Montes Junkie Church	23
Stephanie Navas La fuerza de mi madre (The Strength of My Mother)	26
Jeffery Wilson If the Walls Could Speak	38
Audrey Reis Drained of Lemonade.....	39
Antonio Dawson Too Many	40
Elisa Anderson Closeted.....	41
D'Moni Dixson Ashes to Ashes	46
Kaya Schwartz The One Sided Surrender.....	47
Alyssia Gutierrez Burning the Old Year	48
Destiny Weddle Bound to the Sky	55
Jihad Albarati Evolving Colors	56
Stephanie Navas Listening to Wu-Tang Clan.....	70
Samara Valencia Colors	72
Catherine Chielpegian Remember.....	73





PROSE

Gianna Cardenas | A Game of Operation.....14

Angelina Johnson | A Silent Mage 16

Sakshi Palav | Being Brown 25

Victoria Juarez Rocha | The American Dream 28

Diana Garza | A Tale of Systemic Tyranny..... 30

Layci “Jasper” Cederlof | Nobody Knows 32

Alana Vega | The Selena of Yesterday 34

Julie Castillo | A Nation of Suffering Dreamers..... 36

Kevin Wu | Tāngyuán..... 42

Esperanza Salazar | Me consume viva 50

Shawn Moua | The White Shark..... 52

Riley Kurz | Where Will I Be When the World Ends? 54

Makyla Ayana Carrizales | Nobody Likes a Trickster..... 57

Olivia Reynoso | Flowers 59

Alyssia Gutierrez | The Sun and the Water..... 61

Gianna Cardenas | Single Mothers, On How They Move
Mountains and Hand Craft Stars 63

Sophia Whitmore | Keep My Memories Safe for Me..... 65

Grace Freitas | Call Me Your Moon 68

Giovanna Ibarra | She 74

Kevin Wu | Kaleidoscope 75





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 Kristen Radtke, 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. Please continue to cultivate your own vision and be proud of who you are as a writer as you express your own take on the world. As Poet Laureate of the United States Joy Harjo writes in Poet Warrior, "My innate impulse is healing, which is also standing up for justice, which can heal hearts and nations." If you imagine and write about a more peaceful and just future, you will help make it happen.

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

Finally, we all owe special thanks to Tanya Nichols, Fresno State's 2020–21 Outstanding Lecturer, for being the dedicated mastermind of this excellent conference, as well as Jefferson Beavers for his indispensable assistance. 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
Dean, College of Arts and Humanities





A Letter from the Chair

Dear students,

Welcome to the 42nd annual Young Writers' Conference! Each year, this conference showcases area high school students, your talents, and the range of unique and insightful experiences that make Central California flourish. This event shows us the world through your eyes, and allows us to gain a better understanding of our community as it is experienced by our future leaders. Your ideas, actions, and words are the tools needed to imagine new possibilities and map out new directions for our community. Your vision will determine our collective future, and that is why your voice and your writing are crucial to determining who we will become.

Today, we gather as a community of writers. We share a passion for the beauty and possibility of storytelling – for human connection through the written word. It is in this spirit of creating and sharing that we are all here today. Each voice helps us come to a better understanding ourselves. Your voices capture the unique little corners of our region and lived experiences that reveal themselves in precious, fleeting moments. What you think and what you have to say matter, especially in a gathering of people who understand your impulse to write, believe in your talent, and want to nurture your craft.

As you interact today with Fresno State faculty and graduate students, and as you make new friends from neighboring schools, stop for a moment. Take a mental picture of yourself and file it away so that, going forward, you can more easily envision future scenes like this one: where your creativity flourishes amongst like-minded peers. Maybe that future will bring you to Fresno State or maybe your time with the Young Writers' Conference will springboard you toward 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.

The conference celebrates new writers and the people who have nurtured their writing. Today we make new friends, take a few risks, and possibly even glimpse into the future. Today is just one more step in your writing journey, but we hope it will be one that makes a lasting impression and encourages you to continue on your path. We are excited that you're here!

Sincerely,

Dr. Melanie Hernandez
Chair, Department of English





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Awards

PRESIDENT'S AWARDS

Gianna Cardenas, Mission Oak High School | A Game of Operation

Angelina Johnson, University High School | A Silent Mage

PROVOST'S AWARD

Mariah Montes, Washington Union High School | Junkie Church

DEAN'S AWARD

Sakshi Palav, Selma High School | Being Brown

LIBRARY AWARDS

Stephanie Navas, Riverdale High School | La Fuerza de mi Madre
(The Strength of My Mother)

Victoria Juarez Rocha, Selma High School | The American Dream

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Diana Garza, Selma High School | A Tale of Systemic Tyranny

CHAIR'S AWARD

Layci "Jasper" Cederlof, Mission Oak High School | Nobody Knows

WILLIAM SAROYAN AWARD

Alana Vega, Mission Oak High School | The Selena of Yesterday

MIA BARRAZA MARTINEZ AWARDS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE WRITING

Julie Castillo, Mission Oak High School | A Nation of Suffering
Dreamers

Jeffery Wilson, Voyager Secondary School | If the Walls Could Speak





Awards

FRESNO POETS' ASSOCIATION AWARD

Audrey Reis, Mission Oak High School | Drained of Lemonade

THE NORMAL SCHOOL AWARD

Antonio Dawson, Voyager Secondary School | Too Many

PHILIP LEVINE PRIZE AWARD

Elisa Anderson, Avenal High School | Closeted

HMONG AMERICAN INK AND STORIES AWARD

Kevin Wu, University High School | Tāngyuán

FACET AWARDS

D'Moni Dixson, Fresno High School | Ashes to Ashes

Kaya Schwartz, Santa Monica High School | The One Sided
Surrender

SAN JOAQUIN LITERARY ASSOCIATION AWARD

Alyssia Gutierrez, Tulare Western High School | Burning the
Old Year

CHICANX WRITERS AND ARTISTS ASSOCIATION AWARDS

Esperanza Salazar, Mission Oak High School | Me Consume Viva

HMONG AMERICAN WRITERS' CIRCLE AWARD

Shawn Moua, Edison High School | The White Shark

MFA AWARD

Riley Kurz, Mission Oak High School | Where Will I Be When
the World Ends?





Awards

H. RAY McKNIGHT AWARD

Destiny Weddle, Corcoran High School | Bound to the Sky

SHERLEY ANNE WILLIAMS AWARD

Jihad Albarati, Los Banos High School | Evolving Colors

WENDY ROSE AWARD

Makyla Ayana Carrizales, Roosevelt High School | Nobody Likes a Trickster

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Olivia Reynoso, Los Banos High School | Flowers

Alyssia Gutierrez, Tulare Western High School | The Sun and the Water

Gianna Cardenas, Mission Oak High School | Single Mothers, On How They Move Mountains and Hand Craft Stars

Sophia Whitmore, Mission Oak High School | Keep My Memories Safe for Me

Grace Freitas, Mission Oak High School | Call Me Your Moon

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Kevin Wu, University High School | Kaleidoscope

SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY WRITING PROJECT TEACHER AWARDS

Forest Castle, Selma High School

Debbie Teixeira, Los Banos High School





A Game of Operation

GIANNA CARDENAS

Mission Oak High School

12th Grade

President's Award

There was a visceral beauty in forgetting everything that you had made me. For a while, I could forget the way you carved my bones brittle, (something once marbled, now frailed). How my veins had been rearranged, leaving red stains on silver tables, meant for warm lunches—not an organ exchange.

My eternal bliss was the seconds I had when my memory was blurred enough to not remember the way nimble fingers cut me open like a knife through butter. Laid me out on a table like it was a game of operation (split open, for everyone to see the way the pieces of me you hated were ripped out, replaced, with something easier to knead). Like putty, I was a new plaything—a new body on a not so new table—made malleable, easy to bend, even easier to *break*. I can still feel phantom pains in the back of my brain, from its cortex being rearranged.

It's been months, maybe years (I can't tell seconds, from minutes, from hours, anymore). Yet all I am is what you made me, nothing more and nothing else. Molded from wet clay and sculpted when leather (the easiest time to make an impression).

Wide unblinking eyes taken out and given new ones, better ones you said. (That meant prettier, more jaded, more *jagged*). I've stared at my face for hours (maybe minutes) and wondered when did my face morph and mutilate into a concoction of features that weren't recognizable anymore. It's disorienting, feels more like dissociating, the way realization seeps into bones and melts into brains. Like hot wax being poured into ears, it settles (an idea, it cements). So much time was spent (*wasted*) picking away at flesh to make it plastic.

There's a buzzing under my skin. Is it my body shaking (from anger, resentment, *revenge*) or is it the scalpel in your hand. Maybe the tweezers in the other? The little light above my head is blaring red. My bones are cracking under pressure, and the transfusions of blood you gave no longer run red, but black, thick like ichor—*like oil*. I hope it drowns you. Blood's





no longer flowing and my toes have gone still, the same way my fingers have, stiff and turning blue. Each time I lay down, a piece of me is taken and replaced. You've been picking at me for so long, that the buzzer overhead no longer speaks. No longer blaring red, for it has gone through much too many operations to be working so soundly again.

Is it that even the blaring little bright light, always screaming when I lay silent and still, no longer chimes for a body it can no longer recognize? Even the only thing that was ever constant, there through all the changes and cheering (so obnoxious). As the buzzer rang louder and louder with every slip of a scalpel, every wrong twist of a knife that dug deeper. Until it peeled off skin to show what's underneath.

There's blood on your hands, *all* of your hands, and all of it's mine. You ripped out my bleeding heart, laughed when you dropped it, let it shatter. And with every knife you drove into my skin, I'd lose sight of what I was, if I ever truly was it. You're fun little game of operation, that was merely a silly occupation, ruined my perception of what a person should be. Seconds, minutes, hours have passed by, but I still can't see through all the incisions you planned to make. So I'll break every mirror in the house, until I forget you ever did.





A Silent Mage

ANGELINA JOHNSON

University High School

11th Grade

President's Award

Lauris approached the Administration Centre, gripping a ribbon-bound scroll in both hands. Towering before her was a tall building with wide windows and shiny stone tiles. The surrounding forest of giant trees cast an ominous shadow over the area, making it feel like it was already evening despite it only being two in the afternoon. Above the door was a large sign that read *Official Mage Department of Echorre City* in swirly golden letters. A flickering street lantern illuminated the entrance with a dim glow.

Though Lauris had revised her application and rehearsed for the interview numerous times, she was still haunted by the reality that this wasn't something that could be easily prepared for. Unpredictable. Never free of the possibility of something she didn't expect.

For one, offices were often very loud, as if the average employee needed to chatter nonstop in order to function. Not necessarily chatter about work-related matters, but sometimes seemingly random topics just for the sake of chatter. She had learned a few tricks for handling difficult environments during her previous job at a large post office, but she couldn't count on their effectiveness in an unfamiliar place such as this.

She looked at herself in the polished glass windows. Her hair was held back in a neat braid, and her suit was smooth and clean. Her pointed ears stuck out to the side, prompting her to remind herself not to flap them up and down like she sometimes did when she was nervous. Though that sort of stim wasn't especially uncommon among elves, it still attracted an uncomfortable amount of weird stares. People tended to equate ear-flapping—or any other repeated physical movement—to something unspeakably crazy and obnoxious, as if the simple gesture created enough force to irreparably disrupt their lives.

With a deep breath, she pushed open the door and entered the lobby. Sure enough, it was buzzing with commotion. A dragon had tripped over a gnome and spilt a box full of calligraphed envelopes, which they were now scrambling to pick up. Several fae and a rabbit were huddled around a





magazine, murmuring among themselves about celebrities' recent affairs. On the far end of the room, a lion and a satyr sipped coffee and chattered on and on, as they moved their hands around in vivid expression. Two harpies were examining a set of graphs, highlighting one line in yellow and another in green and another in blue, while a newt attached sticky notes to the margins. An infuriated minotaur pounded on a counter, yelling at a skeleton for stealing his lunch. A human was curled up under a table with a pile of torn pages, sobbing into a napkin.

Initially, her attention jumped from one thing to the next. What were those graphs for? Why did that minotaur think a skeleton who didn't have a stomach would steal food? Was that crying guy okay? Her ears darted back and forth, as did her eyes. She fidgeted with the ribbon on the scroll, tracing the tight knot with her thumbs.

With rigid steps, Lauris cautiously went up to the front desk, where a deertaur flipped through the pages of a heavy notepad while chewing on a twig. She hesitated for a moment, wondering if she was supposed to ring the bell or just wait. Maybe it was rude to do that. On the other hand, maybe it was rude not to do that. Eventually the deertaur noticed her awkwardly standing at the counter, and gave a small snort.

"Whaddya want?" He asked as he took the twig out of his mouth.

Lauris took a sheet of lined paper and a blue pen out of her suit pocket, and wrote, "*Where do I apply for OMDEC?*"

"Down the hall to your left, then go two doors to the right. You're looking for someone named Maurry," the deertaur said, before biting back down on the twig.

Lauris nodded and mentally repeated the directions to herself as she followed the hall to a red door labeled *Maurry Goreveil, Manager of Hiring and Employing*.

Before she could open the door, it was thrust open from within, barely missing her face. She instinctively jumped back and gripped the wall to steady herself, clutching tighter to the scroll.

"If you don't finish that report by tomorrow, I'll finish you! Bloody sack of toad legs," someone shouted from inside, as a sobbing dryad ran from the room and hurried down the hall with a messy stack of papers.

Whatever Lauris was expecting to see today, it wasn't that. Maybe that sort of thing happened normally around here. She hoped it didn't. For the first time, she started to reconsider her choice to apply as an OMDEC mage. And yet, she worked so hard to get this far, so she pushed herself forward into the office... and was immediately met by the hiss of a gorgon. Dots of goopy saliva landed on the floor. Lauris stepped back and inspected her shoes for stains, not finding any but still wiping her shoes off vigorously just to be safe.

As Lauris scrubbed her shoes with a tissue, the gorgon cleared her throat. She looked up to see that the gorgon was glaring at her with pure contempt. Was it rude to clean her shoes right then and there? Maybe it was.





But wasn't that hissing snake lady responsible for her having to do that in the first place? Probably, but that didn't necessarily matter at that moment. If this was the hiring manager, she didn't want to make her upset.

Lauris hurriedly pulled out her pen and paper and wrote, "*Are you Maurry? I'm here to apply as a mage for OMDEC.*"

The gorgon squinted at the paper, her slitted pupils darting back and forth. She looked at Lauris with cold eyes, as if preparing to pass judgment on her attire, her posture, or even her mere presence. Then she sat down on the velvet chair behind the desk, coiling her serpentine tail around the legs of the furniture. Strands of snake-hairs squirmed in the air, letting out small hisses and the occasional squeak.

"That's me. Hand over your application and sit over there," the gorgon hissed, gesturing to a small wooden stool positioned in the corner of the room.

Lauris carefully handed the ribbon-bound scroll to Maurry and sat down on the stool, bouncing her leg up and down nervously.

Maurry tore off the ribbon and dropped it nonchalantly on the floor. As the scroll unrolled, her gaze crept over the numerous rows of small writing that Lauris had crammed in.

"Says here you worked as a mage-guard at Echorre Express Delivery, huh? Bet that was a lotta hard work. Dangerous stuff. You know, protecting the mail from disaster and whatnot," she said.

Lauris nodded. She wasn't sure why Maurry felt the need to point that out. Sure, there were some dangerous moments on the job, as thieves would go to great lengths if the package was valuable enough, but it wasn't usually as dramatic as "protecting the mail from disaster." Then the realization sunk in; Maurry was being sarcastic. She didn't actually mean what she said. She meant the exact opposite, and was making fun of one of the main points of the application.

In an attempt to prove that working as a mage-guard was relevant work experience, Lauris wrote, "*Last year, I stopped a group of trained mercenaries from stealing a delivery of bleeding wulfenite.*"

Maurry made a strange, almost gargle-ish sound that might have been a laugh. "I'm sure you did. Trained mercenaries, huh?"

Lauris nodded and wrote as quickly as she could, "*There were three mercenaries sent by a corporation from Riamene, equipped with crossbows and magic-focuses. There was a frost-mage, a brawler, and an unmage. They tried to capture the mail carrier and take the package but I stopped them by rescuing the mail carrier with a portal and telekinesis, then I took out the brawler by launching a—*"

"Ahem." Maurry coughed impatiently.

By now, Lauris's hand felt like it was burning. She usually didn't write that much at once, especially without simplifying sentences to make them as short as possible. Maybe it would make a good impression if she wrote full sentences by hand in a short amount of time. Unless it made her look





pretentious, which it might. Maybe she didn't write quickly enough.

"Get to the point. I don't have all day," Maurry hissed.

Lauris responded, "*Bleeding wulfenite is a rare mineral that can be used as a spell reagent to control undeads. I protected a pack of it from some thieves.*"

She shook her wrist in the air, hoping she would get a few minutes before she had to write again. However, she didn't get much of a break before Maurry was hissing at her again, this time her voice dripping with even more disdain, and drool, than it had before.

Maurry set the scroll on the desk, though hesitating for a moment as though she was considering throwing it across the room into the trash bin. "Look, you're a pain in the rear to work with. You don't talk, you've been bouncing your leg this whole time, and you didn't look me in the eye, not even once. Not making me like you a whole lot, you know."

Wait, was eye contact a requirement for the job? And not stimming? And talking out loud? Given how none of those things could hinder her ability to perform magic, Lauris wasn't sure why Maurry was using those as grounds for rejection. She had read the job requirements over and over, and she met all of the requirements on that list. Bachelor's degree in practical magic, at least six years of experience doing work as a mage, and a certificate showing a score of 90% or higher (Lauris had scored 98.7%) on a magic demonstration OMDEC had people perform before being allowed to apply for a job there. Did any of that matter if she could be rejected on the basis of things she couldn't really control?

Maurry sighed and stood up, handing the scroll back to Lauris.

"Okay, listen up. This hasn't been announced to the public, but we are having a shortage of mages due to some... recent disputes. So you're hired. But you better not slip up, or you'll be out before you even have time to pack your stuff."

Lauris nodded. She wasn't sure if she should thank Maurry or leave as soon as possible. So she awkwardly shook Maurry's hand as she assumed it was the most polite thing to do at a job interview. She received instructions to clean up an unspecified issue in the Echorre City Public Library. There, she was to look for a centaur named Naomi, a more experienced mage who would help her.

The library was an older building with a clay tiled roof and worn paint. Though it was usually one of the most calm and peaceful places in the city, it now shook with screams and crashes and roars. Someone had accidentally summoned a draco-chimera with one of the library's many spell-bestiarials. It sunk its claws into the ceiling, hanging upside-down over the front desk and spurting flames at anyone who went by. People rushed through every corridor, trying to hide, while accidentally tipping bookshelves in the process.

Naomi was already trying to get the draco-chimera down, with only some success. They had wrapped a length of cloth around the draco-chimera's foot in an attempt to pull it down from the ceiling, but all that





did was slightly limit its movements and make it much angrier. It let out an infuriated hiss and prepared to lunge at Naomi.

“Pardon, are you the new mage? If you don’t mind, might you stop this creature from slaughtering me?” Naomi asked, somehow sounding remarkably calm despite the creature spitting flames in front of them.

Lauris nodded. She took a pouch from her pocket and started lining up several tiny jars from it on a library desk. The jars didn’t contain anything particularly strange for a mage, just crushed rose thorns, moth wings, evergreen ashes, and other common spell ingredients. It was easier, in Lauris’s opinion, to cast spells when everything needed was lined up in front of her.

“Hurry up, won’t you?” Naomi yelled. They tried to tie the other end of the cloth around the stair railing. The draco-chimera kept yanking the cloth out of their grip and slinking closer.

At this point, Lauris was too focused to listen to Naomi. Once the jars were lined up, she drew two identical symbols on the same piece of paper she had been writing on all day and poured a few ingredients onto it.

The draco-chimera roared, lighting up the library with a bright flame. It took a small step back, still hooking its claws into the ceiling, and struck its tail out behind it. With a powerful kick, it pounced towards Naomi.

The paper lit up. As the draco-chimera leapt from the ceiling towards Naomi, it was stopped in mid-air by a glowing purple net that flew out of one symbol and dragged it to the floor. As it growled and tried to claw through the net, a second one was launched at it from the other symbol.

“Wait, you can’t use two spells at once! With that much mana, you might very well set off an explosion!” Naomi yelled.

Lauris shook her head and pointed at one jar of spell ingredients, a mostly empty jar of green sand. There wasn’t enough time to write out an explanation for how she knew it would work, but she hoped Naomi would understand what she was trying to say.

The draco-chimera thrashed and clawed at the nets. They flickered with unstable mana but held together. Naomi watched in disbelief as they stretched with unnatural elasticity.

Lauris summoned a glowing portal back to the ash-littered plane the draco-chimera had been summoned from. She gripped one end of the net and Naomi hesitantly grabbed the other. With several heaves, they brought the draco-chimera through the portal and released it to the other side. It shook the nets off and strutted away, swinging its tail from side to side irritably. As the portal closed, the library began to quiet down. Except for the burn damage, everything was relatively peaceful again.

“Whew...I’m relieved that it’s over with. I didn’t know green sand worked on spells like that,” Naomi said.

Lauris smiled. She was actually a bit surprised that it worked too. Green sand was used by some mages to make potions more stable, but this was her first time trying to use it with an actual spell. Most mages didn’t





try experimenting with ingredients, especially not in the middle of a confrontation with something that could spit flames.

Naomi stomped out a loose flame on the floor. “I suppose we should clean up, or we might miss lunch,” they said as they put on a pair of heavy gloves.

Lauris and Naomi split up to search the library for any stray fire. Lauris checked the children’s section first, fully aware that some children’s wildly destructive urges might make them a bit...irresponsible with fire. Especially the toddlers.

A small patch of the rug was crackling with orange embers. A young imp, creating an obnoxious giggling sound, was poking it with the corner of a board book. Lauris shooed him away and drenched the embers with water, watching the wisps of smoke disperse through the air until they couldn’t be seen any more.

A poster caught her eye. It had the image of a mage’s coat and a bottle of some unknown blue liquid. Under it was the caption *Great Minds Think Alike*. With several harsh strokes of her pen, Lauris scratched out the word *Alike*.





Junkie Church

MARIAH MONTES

Washington Union High School

11th Grade

Provost's Award

I guarantee not all of you have endured the mental issues
that statistically plague less than five percent of the youth
Or have had to carry dead brothers in light of a deadly night
that stemmed from a decades' old gunfight
Truth is, you think you're part of the minority
But tell me, have you ever had to turn a dollar into a meal for your family?

*None of you know where the train hoppers roam
Or where the junkie church squatters make their home
Not quite a bethel but far from a temple
A place where people make their confession
away from the threat of public affliction
Sometimes they end up meeting a conviction
But only because of the snitches that want to encourage societal ruin*

I tried to make the journey once but didn't know how
Thought injecting vocal poison was the only solution
But I know better now,
I feel better now
Truth is, I learned more off the congregation's scowls
than I ever could if I indulged in the whispers of a faulty preacher
Who hardly knew how to shepherd his cows
People ask, "How?"
This is the point where I must encourage you to sit down

*Ignorance is bliss, it comes in the form of a girl named Alice
She heard my gospel, then told the cops I was speaking through fallace
Said my words leaked of venom, though she'd never heard 'em
Thought she was kidding until frigid cuffs locked around my wrists
I was stuck*





Progress forward, bleeding from limbs
Sniffing oxy in the church while hanging and humming hymns
Wondering the concepts of life
as I dragged myself through mud and parasitic strife
Contemplating the reason of her deceitful infliction
why things didn't stray far from complications and
the event that made me conflicted
Presently I'm a juvenile delinquent
Molded my world after myself and my maledictions

*Been fooling around and screwing myself for sixteen years
while never having a memory strong enough to keep me from going off the rails
and toward a portal leading to hell
Already had my first incident, still lucky to avoid jail
and madhouses full of kids
who never had parental figures to replace their mom and dad
whose relationships were frail*

I had to reconnect with reality
Disconnect from my fantasies
Cause sometimes it's better to
let the credits roll like the end of a
long movie than to lose my sanity
while trying to be a better me





Being Brown

SAKSHI PALAV

Selma High School

12th Grade

Dean's Award

I am resilient, resourceful, and compassionate. But, above all, I am a dark skin woman.

With being a dark skin woman comes beauty, richness, pride, and power, but it is also riddled with intricate alleys of shame and fear.

To be a dark skin woman is to speak, but not too loud because people will label you as “ratchet.” It is to feel pretty, but never too much, because you will never be seen as beautiful as the ivory-tone woman. It is to watch your femininity be pried out of your pleading hands.

I came to these realizations at the age of nine as I watched my older sister get called beautiful by relatives, while I was advised to stay out of the sun. It was these comments that made me aware of the lack of duality my complexion held in others' eyes. It was painstakingly true, but it was an idea I had never considered to be important enough to process, especially at my age.

So, with these ideas prevalent in my mind, I spent most of my childhood scrambling to steer away from stereotypes surrounding black and brown women. In grade school, I purposely became the “Kind Girl”. In middle school, I transformed into the “Soft-Spoken Girl”. I had ideas, but I never dared to speak them with authority in fear of being unheard or labeled.

At the beginning of high school, I began immersing myself in the world of politics, opinions, and activism through my sister. She would sit me down and spend hours explaining to me the need for change, and why activists around the world used their voices as weapons for change. It was then I began to realize the depth and value my experiences as a dark skin woman hold.

However, my mind did not fully accept my true power until I went to the annual pride parade in San Francisco some months later. This breathtaking parade was not only a celebration of sexuality but of change. I saw women – dark skin, queer and trans women – preaching and singing at the top of their





lungs. These women were unapologetic, loud, and demanding. They knew the social pressures they are boxed into as black women, but they did not care. They embodied the beauty, richness, pride, and power that dark skin came with, a side of my complexion I had rejected for the majority of my life.

The glass door insecurities I had emulated all my life now shattered. I no longer craved to be the nice or soft-spoken girl. I craved knowledge, liberation, and justice for the next generation of young black and brown girls to follow.

Being a brown woman in America, I am taught it is better to be seen than heard. But as I unraveled the labels I had identified with my entire life, I stripped down to the essence of my true self. I am a dark skin woman, and my voice—powerful and steadfast—can rally and conquer. It is my greatest power.

I am a dark-skinned woman, but I am now my own light and I walk a trail brightly blazed.





La fuerza de mi madre

STEPHANIE NAVAS

Riverdale High School

12th Grade

Library Award

Pasando por cientos, si no miles de campos.
El recordatorio de Dios de que Él nos estaba protegiendo
de las dificultades de la vida.
Estaba viendo como el sol quemaba a los trabajadores.
Su batalla por una nueva vida, incluyendo
la seguridad de sus hijos.

Esto me recuerda la batalla de mi madre para escapar de la pobreza
y una vida peligrosa.
Laboriosas marcas de la vida que soportó en su cuerpo.

Espero que nunca me deje, todas las lágrimas de cada inmigrante
y el trabajo duro que me hizo pensar en aquellos que oraron
por una vida privilegiada.

Estaba cegado por el odio y mis acciones ingratas
Nunca reconozco el esfuerzo de mi madre durante
de mi infancia

Cada callo en las manos de mi madre tiene una razón para una vida mejor
Para demostrarle a la gente que somos mucho más que limpiadores de casas y
su amor por sus hijos.

Cada duda convertida en motivación.
Para proporcionar la educación
que ella soñaba tener

Pero tuve el privilegio de conocer su alma valiente.
Todo lo que puedo recordar es
la fuerza y las luchas de mi madre

No puedo volver atrás en el tiempo para recordar todo lo que ha hecho por mí.
Pero puedo seguir adelante.
Cada paso para hacer que mi madre se sienta orgullosa
de su decisión de venir a Estados Unidos...
la tierra de las oportunidades.





The Strength of My Mother

STEPHANIE NAVAS

Riverdale High School

12th Grade

Library Award

Passing by hundreds, if not thousands of fields.
God's reminder that He was protecting us
from the difficulties of life.
I was watching the sun burn the workers.
Their battle for a new life,
Including the safety of their children.

This reminds me of my mother's battle to escape poverty
and a dangerous life.
Laborious marks of the life that he endured on her body.

I hope it never leaves me, all the tears of every immigrant
and the hard work that made me think of those who prayed
for a privileged life.

I was blinded by my hate and my ungrateful actions
Never recognizing my mom's effort
during my childhood.

Every callus on my mother's hands has a reason for a better life
To show people that we are much more than house cleaners
and love for their children.

Every doubt turned into motivation.
To provide the education
that she dreamed of having.

But I had the privilege of meeting her courageous soul.
All I can remember is
the strength and struggles of my mother.

I can't go back in time to remember everything she has done for me.
But I can move on.
Every step to make my mom proud
of her decision to come to America...
the land of opportunities.





The American Dream

VICTORIA JUAREZ ROCHA

Selma High School

12th Grade

Library Award

Seventeen. Senior. This is a place I've longed to be in for so long, yet now that it's here I'm stuck.

"Where are you going to college!" they exclaim as their eyes force me to lie and claim whatever major it is that I feel is appropriate at the moment.

"Political Science." "Journalism." "Music."

These are the big little lies that follow me around each day.

My family moved to the United States when my sister was only two, and my parents had only her as a symbol of their pride. Much like other immigrants, they came here not in search of a better life for themselves, but rather for their daughter and future daughters to come. It was a good enough reason really, but no good deed goes unpunished.

Neither of my parents ever finished high school, let alone go to college. As a result, it was instilled in me from a very young age that school was the most important accomplishment one could have. They watched as their two older daughters flew out of the nest only to fall a few moments later.

As the youngest daughter, I have often faced the burden of being compared to my sisters. At first glance this should not be an insult. Monica is a delight, her hands flowing with creativity and life. Claudia is a beauty as she comforts even the demons sleeping in the dark. Yet I am neither of them. I am Victoria, representative of victory. But if such a thing is true, then why do I feel defeated?

The delight and the beauty that were my sisters could not make our parents proud in the way they felt they deserved, therefore the spotlight turns to me. It is now my responsibility to give my mother the college degree she never received. But this is not a spotlight I ever wanted or even was supposed to have.

My entire life I have felt guilty because of the pressures that have been placed on me by both my parents and my siblings. Yet I take a small amount of comfort in knowing I am not the only one.

Many first-generation students feel academic pressure, and worse,





academic guilt. My parents could not afford to go to high school and yet I have the impertinence to complain about a free public school? Why do I have the audacity to complain about the dress code, the College Board, the standardized testing, when “America” is an opportunity my parents did not have? Perhaps it’s because despite feeling guilty for getting everything my parents wish they had in life, I can see the flaws in this magical place that my people call El Norte.

As a little girl, I believed that someday I would become a lawyer. This was, of course, after I discovered that blood repulses me, therefore I could not be a doctor. I believed that one day I would sit in the Senate and run for the presidency. These dreams, however, did not last, for they were not mine to own.

Many students feel the guilt that their immigrant parents have unintentionally placed on them. As a result, they resort to choosing STEM majors that they perhaps did not want. They do it to make their parents proud, and to live up to this image of what a good little immigrant is.

I was born in the United States. I was delivered by an “American” doctor and given an American birth certificate. Yet in the eyes of bigotry, I will always be an immigrant, and because of this, I have to try ten times harder than everyone else, and fail ten times worse.

I am now a senior in high school and I’ve lost all of the plans I’d previously laid out for myself. I can’t be a lawyer if I must defend people I disagree with. I can’t be a professional musician without losing my passion for music. And I can’t be a journalist if I want to lavishly afford living in a big city, far from the reach of this provincial little town.

The American Dream is the dream that allows people like my mother to hope for their children to one day have what she does not. But the American Dream does not account for the disparities between first generation children and the white kids whose families have been here for centuries.

My American dream will someday allow me to be free from the pressures that society places on children of immigrants. So one day I won’t be afraid of questions revolving around my academic life and future career path.

“So what do you plan on doing with your life?” they’ll ask.

And I can respond with, “I simply do not know.”





A Tale of Systemic Tyranny

DIANA GARZA

Selma High School

12th Grade

College of Arts and Humanities Advisory Board Award

Although this is a world where institutions are applauded and the status quo is admired, I will not be satisfied by the mediocrity of either. At the detrimental age of 17, life as I know it seems to be at an end, and I can't help but grieve for what could have been. It's as if I've been turned into a marble slab—atrophied by stagnation—victim to a system who is carving me into the imperfect prodigy, destined to become a mindless statue.

“The System” refers to—although is not limited to—society's hierarchical and rigid subjugation to systemic education. You see, school has become a tool of conformity, turning out employees rather than evolved individuals.

The evolution of school as conformist and collective is quite ironic considering the word's etymology. “School” is a derivative of the Greek *scholē*, which means “leisure.” Although it's quite paradoxical that a place of great stress was originally intended as a place of recreation, the connection is not so distant. To the Greeks, idle hours were not wasted time. They were crucial periods of philosophy, conversation, and insightful thinking. School meant to congregate with peers and learn for the sake of knowledge, not power or greed or image.

While I love learning, I can't help but want more from “The System” that delivers a uniform education. A student's everyday regime is a conventional gateway for compliant nine-to-fivers. Such rigidity devalues the essence of knowledge—curiosity—and is completely alien to the concept of school as an avenue for enlightenment. The importance in earning the graciousness of an A is more significant than empowering young minds. Consequently, students aim to please, not cultivate themselves. The grading system has been so thoroughly infused into the bones of education that students can't learn without seeking its validation. Although I believe I'm worth more than my grades, I admit there's still an insatiable thirst for an A.

But learning is personal, so why should my performance be compared to that of my peers? Why is my brain being measured by a derogatory and





inaccurate scale?

School has made me reliant on its reward system, unquestionably adherent to regulations and numb to working unhappily. As pupils we are trained to understand that leisure is a taboo and self-satisfaction is only achievable by systemic orthodoxy.

Not only is “The System” proficient at turning out robots, it’s great at setting social stations. Those who are not ‘fit’ for school or cannot pay for higher education (which in itself is its own issue) face less desirable choices: drop out, join the military, work for minimum wage, and even become government dependents. Of course there are many who find success and joy off of the clear path, but my point is that those who fall into the above categories were failed. School’s monopoly over future prosperity enforces class distinctions by discriminating against those who don’t conform to the standard.

Humans have corrupted school, allowing it to become a corporate agent. And while I am infatuated with education, I can’t help but loath “The System” that has torn me out of love with learning. Sadly, knowledge is reduced to memorization for the next exam, and curiosity is impractical under rapid course progression. I hope that one day education will become an elastic phenomenon, liberated from systemic tyranny.





Nobody Knows

LAYCI "JASPER" CEDERLOF

Mission Oak High School

11th Grade

Chair's Award

I've never told anyone that I'm a thief, stealing things from nature as if I had that right. Taking flowers from the mountain side, taking homes from bugs.

I've never told anyone that I don't seem to know my place; superiority and inferiority throw knives at each other in my mind, nicking skin and sticking to walls like points on a conspiracy board. Like red pins on a map, outlining someone's desperate fantasy of escape.

I've never told anyone that gravity's grasp on me is too tight; I lie awake, staring a hole through my bedroom ceiling, as if to coax the drywall into parting so I can fall into the sky. Nobody knows that when the sun falls I fall with it, staring up at the vast abyss, marveling at the Moon's sudden beauty, as it lies in waiting, forever out of my reach.

The truth is nobody sees a lot of things. How I wish I could tell every spider in my room how much I love its presence. Nobody sees how I hold onto plants that I pass on the street and greet cats as if I've known them for an eternity.





Nobody sees how this cardboard house bends and cracks, threatening to reveal me to the weather. Nobody sees how silence makes my skin crawl.

Nobody knows that when storms shout from above, I stand in the street, challenging Zeus to hit me. Nobody sees my heart weep when I experience joy. Nobody sees how emotions throw punches at each other in my headspace, only revealing that anger is my true default.

Nobody sees the ghosts in my room. The way I invite them to dance to the music playing on the T.V. Oh, the things that they would say if they saw what I did; my hands gently plastering the smoke like bandaids on fresh cuts. The kisses that cover bloodied hands, bruised legs. Platonic intimacy that I'll never receive. Fingerprints strewn like the Moon's tears along the spine of my very being.

Nobody knows me.





The Selena of Yesterday

ALANA VEGA

Mission Oak High School

11th Grade

William Saroyan Award

The unfortunate inheritor of the terminal family curse sat at her desk, having a staring contest with her computer screen.

And it's true. I was having a staring contest with my computer screen.

It wasn't writer's block. Being assigned a short story of your family's past is pretty simple. Unfortunately for me, my family's past is not.

I was born in Colombia, more specifically Jardin, Antioquia, to Sofia and Sergio Rojas. Both of them were bold for staying in the country, but neither of them cared. My dad came from a long line of *machismo* men who were usually involved in the cartel or politics. My mom was also an inheritor of the family curse, which is why she was not living in Medellin with the rest of the family.

Originating from our oldest ancestor, the Rojas family curse is a 40 year clock placed on the first girl born in the newest generation after the current inheritor dies. My grandma's sister, the inheritor before my mother, died a month before my mom was born, giving my mom 40 years to live. My mom died when I was seven, so I don't even get to live to 50.

The curse was placed on my family after my Muisca ancestor Chihuita cheated the goddess Huitaca out of a deal. Chihuita was brutally killed on the night of her 40th birthday, hence the 40 year countdown.

Sasamuy, her eldest daughter (she had two), was the first person to consider the curse bad luck. She went her whole life without having children thinking it was passed down through inheritors. When her sister's first child was born without the silver and black hair Sasamuy and Chihuita had, they saw it as the green light to continue to produce. When Sasamuy





passed away 40 years after Chihuita's death, her sister's eldest daughter woke up with the characteristic silver and black hair. It was the sisters' beliefs that started the cycle of shunning the daughter with the curse, and that continued even as knowledge of how the curse was inherited grew. This included daughters who hadn't inherited it yet.

Most inheritors chose not to stay in Colombia. My mom, the pinnacle of Rojas tenacity and hardheadedness, did. She fell in love with my dad in Barranquilla and the both of them ran away to Jardin. It was from their love that Casa Roja was born. And me, I guess.

From what I remember, my parents were very open, welcoming, and protective of the town's safety and privacy. One utter of their last names to the wrong people, and their entire world could go up in flames.

Casa Roja did, in fact, burn down with my parents in it.

I don't remember a lot of the details. There was a woman, who I later learned was my grandmother, banging on the front door, demanding for my parents to come out and show themselves. My mom rushed me to a neighbor's house and told me to pick her a nice bouquet of red roses for her office. When I came back to show them to her, my childhood home, the place I was most happy and safe, was turning to ash before my very eyes.

I'll never forget meeting my mother's eyes in the window of her office, and the sight of strands of my hair turning silver.

The townspeople did try to help, but the fire never ceased. The neighbor I was staying with came back for me eventually, snot-nosed and eyes burning from tears, and let me stay until my mother's will could be carried out.

I was sent to live with my aunt Valentina in America, who was shunned for speaking out against the tradition of banishing the inheritor. She and my mom were in constant communication, even when she chose to leave Colombia. She was the one who raised me, and I've been grateful for it my whole life.

I've lived in America as a regular Columbian woman ever since. I started dying my hair when I first arrived, much to the dismay of my aunt. I try not to let the 40 year countdown hang over my head. I've got a good 24 years left, and I plan to make the most of them.

Thanks for helping me fill my computer screen, by the way.





A Nation of Suffering Dreamers

JULIE CASTILLO

Mission Oak High School
12th Grade

Mia Barraza Martinez Award for Social Justice Writing

It's December 9, 2021, I turn on the TV, immediately I'm greeted with the disturbing news; a group of 55 migrant individuals are found dead. More than 100 migrants, packed in one small trailer, desperately tried to reach the United States. I gasp sharply in disbelief but not surprised, my breath is caught when a disturbing photo of them is passed on the flashing screen. Lifeless bodies sprawled on the side of the road. Their dirty clothes ripped, bright red blood dripping, and limbs bending in unnatural positions. Only the white body bags, impeding us from seeing their faces frozen in despair. My heart aches at the mere thought of how much they desperately longed for a life worth living. Buried in unmarked graves without identification nor honor. It makes my guts twist in a knot and my stomach churn. Like the Israelites longing to arrive in the promised land. They're victims of their desire to reach the "holy land."

Everyone glorifies this so-called glorious country filled with "multitudinous opportunities." The suffering furiously instills in their children to reach; "*el sueno dorado*," the awe-inspiring golden dream. Filling their heads with false hope of escaping the violence, oppression, and poverty of their corrupt countries. To pursue a dream that is at their reach but too elusive to hold onto. Unknowingly leaving out the cruel realities of the world we live in. Where the pigmentation of your skin or thickness of your accent determines how everyone perceives you. Then learning firsthand discouragement when faced with rejection and suffocating pressure to conform. Well, I'm not the first or last to say, "This nation is a pathetic attempt at embodying a dream."

Yes, of course, we're given the constitutional rights that were founded by their forefathers. But what's the point of having them if we can't





exercise them freely without any oppression? “*Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness!*” Didn’t millions give their lives to fight for these core ideals? Now discarded and rotten by the putrid corruption of society’s standards. They’re just empty words; written on a crumbling document. Forgotten by the very nation that once strived to uphold them. Branding individuals with the labels of being “*illegal aliens.*” Like the destructive locusts’ plague, breaking down every piece of ambition, not leaving until every speck of desire is consumed.

Finding themselves struggling every day to find the determination to overcome insurmountable obstacles. Purposely put upon them by the white supremacy ideologies, wanting us to leave this illegally stolen nation. Working themselves to the bone, in disgustingly low-income jobs; that nobody else wants. Desiring more for their children and future generations. Shamed by a society that is afraid of the enrichment that we bring to this nation. Frantically grasping but never being able to channel the sufficient amount of courage, to pursue justice against hatred. Facing harassment by their neighbors and people who swore to serve society.

Against all odds, we still fight to escape a corrupt nation to find ourselves facing another. What’s so enticing about this nation? Definitely, not the ICE officers who separate innocent children from their mothers’ arms at the nation’s borders. Then cruelly throwing them like worthless animals into isolated concrete cells. Neglecting the basic emotional and physical needs of each soul. At the point where detainees have to desperately plead for compassion. Then trafficking or sexually abusing petrified detained children and adults. Instead of focusing their efforts on capturing real threats to society. Or the abuse and harassment of white privileged individuals who scream, “*We’re in America, speak English, not Spanish!*” Targeting and even attempting to murder our children. Needlessly labeling all of us as ruthless criminals. Relinquishing any desire to empower others from different cultures. All in all robbing society of the opportunity to diversify with enriching ideals.

We are mighty dreamers who will never let these setbacks define us. Success is not nor will it ever be guaranteed. Nevertheless, we’ll continue battling to enter this nation, lured by its promising potential. Neither human nor divine power will discourage us from trying. This nation will overflow with our blood, sweat, and tears. Yearning that soon our future generations will thrive and not have to struggle to survive in this hostile environment. Slowly but surely we’ll climb the social ladder and build a strong foundation for our *nation of dreamers.*





If the Walls Could Speak

JEFFERY WILSON

Voyager Secondary School

12th Grade

Mia Barraza Martinez Award for Social Justice Writing

If the walls could speak
They would talk of how the tortured child
Cried himself to sleep.
How the child tried to ease his pain
Through drugs or something to drink.
He can't find love
Even though that is all he seeks.

If the walls could speak
They would tell you
The child has no parents
The streets replace their absence.

If the walls could speak
They would tell you of hurt and shame
He dropped out of school and
Joined a gang.
On the outside he smiles
Inside he is torn and bleeding.
He wears a mask that smiles
But feels like weeping.

If the walls could speak
Everyone he loved had abandoned him
He found a type of love
From his gang again.
Anger and hatred
Is all he knew.
All he wants is someone
Who is loyal, trustworthy
To give his love to.

I am a cell wall
If I could speak
I could tell all
Children's stories that I keep.





Drained of Lemonade

AUDREY REIS

Mission Oak High School

11th Grade

Fresno Poets' Association Award

I have no juice left.
I can keep squeezing,
And squishing,
But what remains,
All that it's been,
Is the stringy fruit fibers,
Attached to my skin.

I feel utterly drained
Of all my sour sap
I have nothing left to give
Juice is what I lack
There's so much more
That needs to be done
But when it comes to lemon drops
I don't even have one

I have no juice left,
But there are glasses that need to be filled.
I am still needing more,
But any ounce I had I've spilled.
I keep pressing
And wringing,
But every drop has been drained.
I can no longer make lemonade





Too Many

ANTONIO DAWSON

Voyager Secondary School

12th Grade

The Normal School Award

243 bricks

Wondering what life beyond is

Asking if this is all there is

Why were they molded this way?

To keep these souls locked away.

243 bricks

Become a child's home

Watching as a child become grown

Seeing them come back

Again and again.

Coming to see their old friend.

243 bricks

Asking if this is the last time they'll see

Their once-young human being.

Will they change and be freed?

Or continue with shackles on their feet?





Closeted

ELISA ANDERSON

Avenal High School
12th Grade

Philip Levine Prize Award

Many times I have come close,
To telling you my secret, but you know how that goes,
With each passing day I feel I drift further away,
I'm stuck in the oceans never ending sway,
My confession burns inside my throat,
And I know there are many who are in the same boat,
Behind my emerald eyes and happy smile,
I fear is a girl who is hardly worthwhile,
Again so close to letting you see,
To open my closet door and set my secret free,
I know my family is kind at heart,
And that telling my friends would be the best start,
Even still I fear to open the door,
And I hope that you won't ask anymore,
All of this is still so new,
With my feelings inside, I don't know what to do,
Why must this be so hard,
Can't I just play the 'I'm okay card',
Why is it only we who must come out,
All I want to do is scream and shout,
Acceptance is what I'm searching for,
Still I'm scared to open the door,
Why do I feel so targeted,
For now I think I'd rather remain closeted.





Tāngyuán

KEVIN WU

University High School
11th Grade

Hmong American Ink & Stories Award

Ever since I was a high school student at Praetor High, I had a strong desire to leave the house as soon as possible. I dreamed that I would never see that house again, that I would surround myself with fun and friends, that I would start my own life and forget about my parents *Māmā* and *Bàba*.

It's been half a year since I last talked to, or even saw, my parents. The last time I saw them was when I was leaving for college. My parents trailed slowly behind me as I wheeled the train of suitcases down the hall to the front door. They were crying. "Our daughter all grown up now," they had said in a heavy Chinese accent. "We are very proud of you." I was so disgusted and eager to leave. They stood at the doorway as I hurriedly loaded my belongings into the trunk of my van, not casting a single glance at them. I was getting into my car when I saw that they were waving goodbye. I didn't wave back. And as I drove away, I heard *Māmā* shout, "Visit us some time, okay, Xue?" I only pressed my foot on the gas pedal harder, leaving my parents behind.

Now it is seven pm and I am standing at the doorstep of their house, the same place I left half a year ago. For several years, I had been so determined to live without them, scratching off on the calendar the remaining days until I could leave. Never did I expect that my dream would be utterly shattered by a holiday—Christmas. *Shèng Dàn Jié*, my family would call it. It was this holiday that brought me back to this place. As snow starts to collect on my head and at the base of my boots, I stand here. I stand here, remembering what Christmas means.

I remember the morning of Christmas last year. The scent of *tāngyuán* wafted through the door and into my room when I woke up. It was Christmas, so that meant I had to stay in my pajamas. The door gave its usual groan as I opened it, and I trudged down the stairs, adjusting my white t-shirt and pulling up my shorts.





I remember that my parents had been making *tāngyuán* in the kitchen when I got downstairs; *Māmā* was scooping sesame filling into the glutinous rice flour and rolling them up into tiny spheres, and *Bàba* was steeping them into boiling water. I tied my black hair up into a ponytail and joined them. Just like every other Christmas, I helped them make *tāngyuán*, and just like every other Christmas, I hated doing it. As I messily stuffed the filling into the sticky dough, I remember thinking that I would've rather gone to a friend's house and watched a movie.

My sister Xin and my brother Shou tumbled down the stairs an hour later. Still wearing their pajamas—red t-shirts and Hanes underwear—they dashed towards the Christmas trees and the presents glimmering underneath it.

“Stop them!” *Māmā* yelled, laughing. Sighing with irritation, I dropped my ball of rice flour and dived at my siblings, swooping them up with my arms and keeping them from tearing apart the gifts. They kicked their legs and twisted their bodies out of frustration.

“Aww, but we want presents!” Xin and Shou cried while attempting to wriggle away. “Let go, *Jiějiě!*”

Bàba's voice sounded from the kitchen. “Eat *tāngyuán* first.”

“Yes,” *Māmā* murmured as she led my brother and sister to the table. “Eat first, then you go open your *liwù*.”

I remember that we all gathered around the table for breakfast. Everyone had a bowl of *tāngyuán* floating in osmanthus tea; we always ate that for special occasions. Xin and Shou were so excited that they were trembling in their seats; I had to be ready to tackle them if they tried to make an escape for the presents.

I remember getting really disappointed with my Christmas present. My siblings' and my faces were illuminated by the lights on the tree as we sat on the carpet. Farther away sat my parents on wooden stools. Of course, Xin and Shou tore through their gifts faster than I could make a single *tāngyuán*. They got new shirts and a Monkey King action figure; I, a pink sweater with a panda face on it.

I stared at my gift for a few seconds without speaking. My dad stepped forward. “Your *Māmā* made your *máoyī*.” My mom hand-knitted that sweater. I looked at her and saw that she was beaming.

Wipe that smile off your face, Māmā, I remember thinking. It doesn't even look good. But I didn't say that aloud. Instead, I just muttered “thanks” and shoved the sweater under my arm without giving it another glance.

I remember trudging up the stairs despite my parents asking me to come back to play Snakes and Ladders—another thing my family does each Christmas. I remember going back to my room and closing the door behind me. I swung the closet door open and flung the sweater into the corner farthest away from me.

It had always been like this. The gifts were always cheap. A tiger





plushie, a collection of hair clips, a vase of fake peonies, and now a sweater.

I remember slamming the door shut and screaming into my pillow.

I remember the morning of Christmas this year, today. The day before, *Bàba* texted me. *Are you coming over for Christmas? Xin, Shou, your mom, and I miss you so much*, the text had read. I had already planned to spend today with my college friends, so I had ignored his text. Besides, I'm leaving them behind. So I turned off my phone and placed it on the nightstand before falling asleep in my apartment.

I remember waking up this morning, imagining the smell of *tāngyuán* filling the room. The aroma was gone when I had fully awakened. *Oh, right*, I thought to myself. *Tāngyuán...I need to make some*. I half-dragged myself out of bed to make breakfast, wishing that there was someone to help me.

As I rolled the glutinous rice flour into balls with my sticky hands, I kept casting glances at the corner of the room, expecting to see Xin and Shou racing towards where the Christmas tree would have stood. I would be wrestling with my siblings during this time. Vigorously shaking my head, I convinced myself to be happy with the well-deserved peacefulness.

I remember the silence in my apartment that breakfast. It felt... lonely and empty. *But this is what you wanted*, I told myself as I chewed on a *tāngyuán*. *You had always dreamed of this*. But I couldn't shake off the feeling that something was wrong. The *tāngyuán* tasted bland.

My phone suddenly rang on the table. I looked over and saw “妈妈” on the screen. It was from my mom. She was probably calling to ask if I was coming for Christmas; I would be opening gifts right now. I reached my hand to answer the call, but my finger remained hovering over the phone. I pulled my hand back and picked up the spoon, scooping another *tāngyuán* into my mouth. I chewed and waited. The vibrations eventually stopped. *Finally*, I thought. I sipped osmanthus tea from the edge of my spoon as I stared at the small Christmas tree, which sat on the table and drooped slightly with flickering lights. It looked just as depressing as my parents' gifts to me.

My parents' gifts. I looked back at the wilting tree, and I could almost see small boxes at its base. I could almost see two silhouettes of children in simple clothes were squirming as a taller figure had her arms wrapped around them, could almost see two older people sitting in chairs while the three younger figures pulled the decorative paper off the boxes, could almost see the happy expressions on all their faces when the presents were opened. I blinked, and the image disappeared.

I remember then staring down at my bowl. The *tāngyuán* had gone cold, and the osmanthus flowers had sunk to the bottom of the tea. It didn't taste good this time. *Maybe it's because I didn't make it with the ingredients at home*, I thought to myself. Or maybe I didn't make it with the people at home.

I realized that I missed being with them. I missed being able to gather at the Christmas tree with my family, having to keep my sister and brother





from tearing open the presents, and making *tāngyuán* with *Māmā* and *Bàba*. I missed the true Christmas. I missed *Shèng Dàn Jié*.

I remember checking my suitcases after breakfast. I had to dig through every bag in my apartment searching for something particular. Eventually, I found what I was looking for: the hand-knit panda sweater.

The snow has formed a mound on my head. I brush it off with a hand, careful to not get any on the sweater. I look up; the sky is dark already. *I should go in soon*. Turning back to the door, I quickly recite my speech underneath my breath, “Hi, everyone. Wow, it is cold outside isn’t it? Anyway, I hope you had a wonderful Christmas together and I hope you don’t mind me joining you for a few hours. And yes, *Māmā*, it is the *máoyī* you made for me.” Satisfied, I close my eyes and slap both cheeks with my hands. “Okay, I got this.” I take a step forward and rest my hand on the doorknob, letting the familiar feeling of it sink into me. With a deep breath, I fix my sweater one more time, and I open the door.

The smell of *tāngyuán* immediately greets me. From the doorway, I see my family. *Māmā*, *Bàba*, Shou, and Xin are sitting on wooden chairs, gathering around a Snakes and Ladders board on the dinner table. Upon hearing the door open, they all turn their heads.

I see *Māmā*’s eyes widen, and tears start to well up in *Bàba*’s. My siblings immediately jump out of their seats and rush towards me. “*Jiějiě!*” They scream happily. A sense of warmth and comfort washes over me. This is where I can play board games with my family, where I can wrestle with Xin and Shou, where I can make *tāngyuán* with *Māmā* and *Bàba*, where I am meant to be. I forget the speech that I prepared. So I just grin and say: “I’m home!”





Ashes To Ashes

D'MONI DIXSON

Fresno High School

Fresno Area Council of English Teachers Award

As the light fades out
I can see what has become of me
It doesn't bother me
Ashes.

I can't help but wonder
Did I do enough in life?
Did I waste my shot?
Ashes.

In the horizon I can see a new dawn
Something new for me
My glass soul shatters not
Ashes.

I can tell this isn't the end for me
The remnants chase something anew
With my new resolve comes hope
Dust.

A second chance is all I need
I can live a life with purpose
I accept the challenge of life.
Dust.
To the welcome of the light
I surrender my worn-out soul
Make me not hollow but whole again.
Dust.

And as I embrace the calm end I've been gifted
The life I've lived slips away
As I'm given one anew.
Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust.
A second chance to shine.





The One Sided Surrender

KAYA SCHWARTZ

Santa Monica High School

11th Grade

Fresno Area Council of English Teachers Award

At first it was an overreaction
A miscommunication

Then came the blame of myself
“You didn’t ask”
“You could’ve texted”
“Of course you were invited”
But how would I have known?

Soon after was “too many people”
You can come only if you need to
A rescinded invitation to the place I once called a second home

Next was the isolation
Me pulling away in fear of getting pushed out even farther

Finally came the ending

It began with me reaching out,
Trying to repair the damage that had been done
It began with me fighting for my other half

It ended with her eager to move forward
It ended with her turning a blind eye to the past
It ended with her telling me we hadn’t been best friends for a while

It began with a one-sided fighter
And ended with a one-sided surrender





Burning the Old Year

ALYSSIA GUTIERREZ

Tulare Western High School

12th Grade

San Joaquin Literary Association Award

Cold feet, and empty houses fill the first of twelve
Mistakes rewritten into stories to burn
Chapter four missing.
Lost in the fire

He loves me and nots spelled out in flower petals on the floor
Except I rigged the game to expel the “nots”
Same clothes, but the ticking and the tocking sings that it has been days
Burned flowers do not smell sweet

I made an angel swear to me with our locked pinkies she would stay
A promise that was never hers to keep
“This swearing is a sin,” he said
A kiss from birth to a whispered goodbye from a life above the clouds
You can not burn what is already lost, but they found a way

Time for joy and cheer
Grief and sorrow do not exist in their lives
My first fire refused to swallow my three hundred regrets, so I made two
She never asked questions
She got the job done





Absence invites itself to burn,
So I let it burn
It wouldn't burn
Hate and Love
I watched it all burn.

Three syllables stuck at the tip of my tongue
“is” versus “was”
Every memory I have ever cherished
I auctioned it all to the fire with the lowest bid
I watched it all go up in smoke

Ash painted fingertips fill the first of twelve.





Me consume viva

ESPERANZA SALAZAR

Mission Oak High School
11th Grade

Chicanx Writers and Artists Association Award

Me ahogo. Necesito aire. Pero como, si me encuentro en el agua? En el océano. Atrapada bajo la superficie. Abro mis ojos pero ya no me encuentro en el océano. Me encuentro en mi habitación, el océano simplemente siendo un sueño. El océano se ha ido, pero con el mi habilidad de respirar también. Necesito respirar. Aire. Me desespero y me caigo de la cama como si el aire se encontrará en el suelo. Mi visión se pone borrosa. Me muero. ¡Me muero!

En ese mismo instante, una ráfaga de viento empuja por mi garganta y se sumerge en mis pulmones. Respiro profundamente. Respiro agitadamente. Hasta que logró consumir el aire que tanto deseaba, me acuesto contra el suelo y descanso. Y respiro.

Continué con mi día como si nada hubiera sucedido, pero poco enterada estaba yo, que a partir de ese momento la ansiedad había tocado a la puerta de mi vida.

Al día siguiente, al estar en clase en mi escuela, un hormigueo corrió entre mis venas. Mi pierna no dejaba de moverse. Mi mano no dejaba de moverse. No dejaban de hacer movimientos constantes, rápidos, y ruidosos. Mis dedos no dejaban de tocar contra el escritorio. Sonaba como una persona irritada tocando la puerta de una casa sin parar. Los que me rodeaban se enfadaban y me decían que me callara. Pero cómo detener un movimiento al que yo no controlaba?

Aun así, lo ignoré y continué con mi día como si nada hubiera sucedido, pero poco enterada estaba yo, que a partir de ese momento la ansiedad había tocado a la puerta de mi vida.

Al día siguiente, al estar en el bus de regreso a mi casa, me entró el temor y me paralice. Mis nervios, tendones, y músculos se congelaron. Quería moverme pero como, con tanta gente que me rodeaba? Me espantaban. Me ahogaban. Me paralicaban. Tensa como una estatua permanecí, hasta que aquel temor se me fue al fin.

Aun así, lo ignoré y continué con mi día como si nada hubiera sucedido,





pero poco enterada estaba yo, que a partir de ese momento la ansiedad había tocado a la puerta de mi vida.

En la noche siguiente, mi mente se llenó de ideas molestas a las cuales no podía controlar. Deseaba que se fueran pero solo me molestaban, insistiendo en atormentarme con ideas de un futuro lleno de negatividad. Los latidos de mi corazón incrementando considerablemente con cada tormento adicional que mi mente creaba de un futuro terrible. Mis pensamientos volaban, mis latidos corrían, mientras que yo comenzaba a hiperventilar.

Desperté en mares de sudor, con la cabeza contra el suelo. ¿Me había quedado dormida? Mi cabeza me dolía y tenía un golpe en la frente, y a pesar de todo me encontraba en el suelo como si me hubiera caído. Sin ninguna duda me di cuenta de lo que me había sucedido: me había desmayado.

Mi situación ya había llegado muy lejos. Por más que no quisiera, yo necesitaba ayuda pues ya no podía controlar lo que me sucedía. Así que en poco tiempo encontré ayuda experta la cual me ayudó a resistir, soportar, y vivir con mi ansiedad. Nunca se fue pues ya había entrado en mi vida, pero cuando más quería, yo podía volver a cerrarle la puerta de mi vida, por más breve que sea el momento, pero entre más intentaba, más en control permanecía.

Aunque la ansiedad había tocado a la puerta de mi vida a tan temprana edad, yo lo ignoré y continué soñando que volaba, ya que, sin duda alguna, era yo la que mi ansiedad controlaba.





The White Shark

SHAWN MOUA

Edison High School

11th Grade

Hmong American Writers' Circle Award

Once upon a time, a white shark was born into a world of darkness. Everyone and everything had a shade of grey and black, from the coral thriving on the seabed to the sharks he called brother and sister. He was the only thing different in this landscape of darkness, different enough to be discriminated against.

Everyone mocked him. From the fish he called prey to the seagulls that soared the great blue sky, he had had enough. The insults he'd received from the day he was born to the day he currently lives; he had held it in long enough. Rage and sorrow swelled inside of him, blinding him from reason. Blinded, he massacred all those who insulted him because of his appearance; their cries for forgiveness and screams of agony were mere hopeless attempts to live and insult him again. He did not discriminate against anyone unlike those who mocked. He killed all from the children to the parents of the persecutor, justifying his killing as the killing of wrongheaded people.

As he killed, he grew, slowly staining himself with the blood of the ones he had killed; he who once white of innocence changed into the dark red of coagulated blood. He had noticed these changes in himself but thought of it as a temporary staining of the blood of his previous culling. He did not know himself, but the sea had labeled him the "Rage of the Sea."

After many years of killing, he had finally found the last one who mocked him. It was the child of his brother, the brother who he killed months ago. He could see the fear in the child's eyes, the desperation to escape, and the hopelessness of surviving. What he saw scared him, his rage dissipated, and the killing intent halted, but regret came rushing inside him, it flowed as if it were a river, tirelessly and endlessly. He saw in the child what he had done over the years of being blinded by rage, filled with regret and sorrow. He looked at the child and pleaded for forgiveness and to kill him for his wrongdoings, but the child did not speak.

He then remembered he saw the child's corpse years ago, only skin and





bones. He had starved to death. He asked, "What are you?"

It answers, "I was here before you and will be here after you, I saw the day you were born and will see the day you die; I am all around you."

He turned and looked all around but saw nothing but only the dark blue sea, he thought you must be the sea itself. The sea who gives and takes life; he asks, "Can you take my life, great one? I have taken too many lives, I no longer want to live with this regret."

The sea answers "I know you have taken many lives, but you cannot take the easy way out. I will make sure of it."

He cries, "Why must you be so cruel?"

The sea answers, "I am not cruel, it is just life, but you've taken many lives, you are the cruel one. The only thing I will do that is cruel, is make you invulnerable until you pass from old age." The shark swims away in anger.

"May you live with your regrets happily." The sea snickers.





Where Will I Be When the World Ends?

RILEY KURZ

Mission Oak High School
10th Grade

MFA Award

I wish I knew the answer if I were, to be honest. All around us, the world is crumbling, but we're expected to act as if it's healing itself. Humanity was given the beautiful gift of life. Yet, mankind threatens it and laughs in its face like it's a mere plaything. Will I be in my mother's arms, hanging tight to the cloth of her shirt? Or, will I be laying in a field of sunflowers watching the sky burn?

Could I even possibly be laying on the clouds watching the world brutally take its life? Maybe, I'll be swaying in the ocean, listening to the low hum of the tide. I could possibly even be laying in the arms of the one I love most, fading into the night.

Life was God's greatest gift, a treasure, a sanctuary. Yet, mankind wanted to go beyond just life. They wanted a life without a means to end. A life where wreaking havoc was just another caution thrown to the wind. A life where death was just an old fable. The damage is done. The world is on the brink of collapse and we're all along for the ride. Consequences of our own actions.

When the world ends, I'll be *free*. Frolicking in meadows. Feasting upon luscious fields of green grass, my eyes soaking in every blade. The sun will dance upon the horizon just as the skylights on fire. The valleys will cave once more, the oceans will split, the mountains will crumble and the stars will fall. I'll welcome it, we're all destined to perish.

So when the world ends, I'll be going with it.





Bound to the Sky

DESTINY WEDDLE

Corcoran High School
11th Grade

H. Ray McKnight Award

Dream.

She was bound to no earth
Wings feathered and free
Bound to the sky
But aware of her limits
For she knew if she flew too close
She would wind up like Icarus

She was alone
But contempt
For no one else let go
Of their earthly bounds
No one let go nor
Allowed themselves to dream

They became bitter
Why?
Because they lost
The love they once had
For Humanity
She never did

That is why she is bound to nothing
– But her own free will





Evolving Colors

JIHAD ALBARATI

Los Banos High School

11th Grade

Sherley Anne Williams Award

6

I could name the colors of the rainbow
The blue in the shifting ocean
The green grass after a fresh mow
The golden crust in an apple pie

10

Colors meant more
Purple highlighted a dreamer's fantasy
Pink showed off femininity
Red followed rage

13

The colors became realistic
Black the dark hair of a sad life
Yellow the light hair found in a privileged life
It was no longer just hair

16

The colors are still visible
Only I wish I never saw them
Brown the color of my skin
White the color I am beneath





Nobody Likes A Trickster

MAKYLA AYANA CARRIZALES

Roosevelt High School

12th Grade

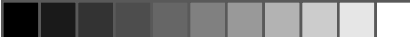
Wendy Rose Award

There are many tricksters who walk the Earth—not just mankind but beings of all nature. None, however, are more troublesome than the fox. The fox who sneaks his way through harsh snow and luscious green fields all the same, planning his pranks on the world as intricately as a basket weaver threading each fine blade of grass into an ornate pattern. Most know of the sly tod who snatches and scurries, and those who do not will come to learn in due time. Though there comes a point where the sneaky fox becomes unbearable to deal with (if he was not already). Of course one fox as it is is bothersome, but oh how lovely is it to reap the consequences of being hoaxed by an entire family of tricksters?

One skulk in particular was known throughout the forest for their escapades. They worked together to take what they wanted and humored themselves when they pleased. The group was woven together just as intricately as the piece interlaced by the basket weaver's delicate hands. They were a beautiful tapestry that could dance and sing under the comforting strokes of the sun... but one thread did not fit with the rest of the tapestry. One little kit seemed to glow a fiery copper. Far too bright compared to the auburn fur of the others. The coat that the kit wore was not the only fire that seemed to draw everyone's attention as there was also a fire burning inside of the kit that the skulk wished to dwindle.

You see the kit did not plan the same way that the rest of its family did. It was clever just as the others had taught it to be but perhaps it was too clever. The kit was good at being a trickster, so much so that it also pulled pranks on the rest of the skulk. Its family did not seem to enjoy being deceived in the same way that they deceived others. They soon began to grow tired of the little kit's shenanigans. The skulk was meant to work together, to interlace like the basket, to dance like the tapestry. The kit enjoyed weaving its own plans and danced so vigorously that the others





were forced out of the sun's gaze. It was a trickster tenfold compared to the others and one day the others had had enough of the kit's games. It was carried away somewhere deep into the woods and left atop a tree stump without a word.

The kit cried and yipped out in fear, calling for its skulk—for anybody—to find it. You would think that its mother would rush to the kit's side in fear for its safety. You would think its father would return and explain that it was just another sick joke. You would think its grandfather would learn forgiveness and welcome the kit back into the skulk with an apology. Did none of its siblings remember the winter they shared together close inside of the same womb? The answer was no, but aside from trickery foxes were also known for being loyal. So why then? Why must the fox cry out with no response, hoping and praying to be found? Where was that loyalty?

The kit had been raised in its skulk, adjusted to surviving with a family. It did not know where to go or what to do. It did not know if it should continue to wait. It was clear that nobody was coming back but the kit needed its family. It needed any family. It had been shunned for tricking the others, but had they not been doing the same to the kit all this time? If they truly cared then how could they have abandoned the kit without an ounce of compassion? So had the skulk not tricked the kit into thinking that it was loved? The blade of grass that did not bend with the weaver's hands. The thread that strayed from the tapestry. The troublesome fox who had learned the pranks of its ancestors appeared to be intolerable even to the ones who taught it to be a trickster.





Flowers

OLIVIA REYNOSO

Los Banos High School
11th Grade

Honorable Mention

I've always been able to recognize the familiar musk of flowers, in a crowded house or an open field. The sweet yet tangy ghost hitting my nose and offering a glimmer of peace from the chaotic world outside my senses. Since I've been a babe, they've been a part of my life.

A little girl running into a yard without care, the bright sun beaming down on her and her plants. Green grass, soft to the touch beneath her, around her, blades of it stuck within her frizzy hair; residue from her play. Beside her rests a garden flourishing with sunflowers, roses, gardenias, other bushels of nature greeting her when she neared. The scent wafts around then through her nose; her soft exhale afterward being followed with a smile. Her siblings would pluck flowers off their stems, and rub them between their palms until the tiniest bit of liquid seeped from their rolled petals. Like soap, the children would clean their hands, and appreciate the scent that glued to their hands for the rest of the day. There I believe, is my happy place. I know not the address of the yard, or the month or time or year of this moment. I have no memory of my neighbors, or what the house I lived in even looked like. What I do remember is leaving the yard, the flowers, my home. The red car that drove away from said memories to a new city and away from the critters I used to speak with. No longer was I sitting with a ladybug in hand, a dandelion slid behind my ear, just barely peeking out from my hair. Now I was someplace new, with a barren old tree looming over my new yard. "Give it a few months, the shrub would be gone," I was told.

Sure enough, the new yard began to grow with potted plants and yard decor. I've never been able to distinctly decipher how each type of flower smelled, they all had the same general feel as a kid. Soft petals, sweet feminine smell, smooth stems and seemingly perfect leaves. The soil in my new home was not soft, or soothing. It was rough. The only "flowers"





that grew were trapped in their pots. They were often brown, crispy, dying or dead. They moaned and spat at me when I'd walk out the door. In the daytime, the poor plants would shrivel under the sun. In the daytime, I'd have to deal with the hard grass beneath my feet. In the daytime, I was miserable. Where had my wonderful flowers gone? Now the only flourishing nature I see was at the park. The ladybugs there didn't know me by name, or let me count the spots on their back. They'd fly into my hair and then jump off giggling. They weren't my friends. As I grew, the ladybugs stopped bothering me, the attempted garden gave up trying, and I distanced myself from the misery of my yard.

I've noticed, when I enter a shop; something like a furniture store or thrifted clothing outlet. The familiar scent of my childhood seems to find me; perhaps a candle that's lit, hidden behind the counter, taunting me, reminding me of what I used to know. I cringe my nose and take shallow breaths. The scent gives me a headache.

A fresh bouquet of flowers on my dinner table, a gesture set for a special occasion or holiday. I find myself turned away from them, eating quickly and letting them watch me walk back up the stairs. The smell of flowers isn't what it used to be. The smell of flowers makes me uncomfortable. The smell of flowers is *gross*. I hate that what used to be lovely is now so acrid. My past self would swoon over their colorful beauty. My present self finds comfort in masculine scents and dark hues.

I'll always appreciate flowers, and how the bees and other creatures depend on them. How florists make a living, and how natural pesticides protect our crops. Yet their scent will never be forgiven. They're unforgivable, I say? Though they've done nothing wrong! It's my own fault, why had I grown so accustomed to the cracked dirt beneath my home. No flowers grew there. I think about them often, however, and sometimes I find myself drifting off. Back to my old home, the blurred house is meaningless in comparison to the glorious scenery that lay before it. I go back, and allow the lucid love to refill my senses.





The Sun and the Water

ALYSSIA GUTIERREZ

Tulare Western High School

12th Grade

Honorable Mention

After two months, I asked him when I could see her. He said that he was sorry, but I needed wings. So, I asked him for wings. He laughed, he said “maybe in fifty years.”

That same night she came to me in my dreams, she shared with me a memory of us visiting the water, and said that I didn’t need wings because she would come to me every night. But, my days were swallowed by dreams. I could not compromise so I did not listen, and so I asked him again, I asked him for wings. He said I was not ready. To which I replied: my soul was ready, the second hers was gone, and it had already left to spend eternity with her. That I am nothing but an empty vessel of flesh and bones, that I am a body that has forgotten how to be a body, that I curse to the sun for the light that it brings, and that I spend every night whispering to my heart, begging and pleading for it to stop trying, to stop carrying the weight of my meaningless existence.

So, he said to me, “Come back to me in fifty years.”

So fifty years I slept. The second I woke, I summoned him with a prayer, and I beseech him for wings, he refused to look me in the eyes, he said “Wings I can not grant, for you have not lived.”

I watched year after year burn. I am 60, then 90, I am one hundred and fifty. My heart is alive and well, my body old and withered, ready to dig far enough for it to lay. My soul bearing time in another world. He does not come. So I sleep. When I wake, I am 17. My heart alive but not well, my body not old but withered. It has only been two months, but it has felt like one hundred and fifty years.

I have an urge to visit the water. I watch it from a distance. I watch the white twinkle of it glisten as the sun kisses the surface of the untouched body. It reminds me of her smile. The water so inviting, the waves ready to play trust fall. I edge closer. I let the water run through my fingers. It invites me to play. So I play. It pulls me into its arms. Its lips fall upon my lungs





and I let it pull me into a deep sleep. I see the same man from my dreams. He asked why I couldn't wait 50 years, but I had no time to answer, because right over his shoulders I saw her and my soul met my body. I ask if my sin can be forgiven. He says all sins can be forgiven. So I ask him, this time not for wings, but to be the water, and her the sun.





Single Mothers, On How They Move Mountains and Hand Craft Stars

GIANNA CARDENAS

Mission Oak High School
12th Grade

Honorable Mention

Single mothers put the stars in the sky just so their kids can have something to reach for, they create raging oceans from tiny rickety backyard swimming pools and are there to cushion the fall when you shoot for the moon and fall short. My Mother made something from nothing, and even though we didn't have the same soil everyone else did, soft and supple, she still raised us from concrete and we flourished. There's a certain resilience in my mother that I don't think I can find anywhere else but in her. *You did everything to help us grow*, watered us in dry seasons, sheltered us from viscous rainy weather, and I watched your own hands bleed red and blue from words and actions meant to cut down seedlings much too small to stand on their own. We grew up with the best you could give us, and that was more than enough.

For that, I'm sorry Mom, I'm older and I'd like to think I'm wiser, you did everything for me to grow, even when my thorns pricked your fingers when they only intended to care. You held my hand when I was afraid of monsters, imaginary and real, comforted me every time I felt like the world was falling apart, when I couldn't keep myself together, your arms did. In a house like ours, that sometimes didn't feel like a home, you were the calm that rivaled even the most vicious of storms that led to doors slamming, shattering glass, and tears pooled on the bunk beds we'd hide in. *Thank you for always thinking of us first, and I'm sorry that you never got to think of yourself too*, you'd put yourself in situations that would leave me crying on the phone with you so I knew that you got back safe. There was never a moment you weren't there for me, even if I didn't need to hold your hand to walk anymore you were always there to cheer me on. You were the one





that took me to school every day, who drove me to all my first practices and games, the only one who would wake up at 4a.m. and drive me four hours for no reason. *You* were the only parent at my eighth-grade graduation, and my high school graduation will be the same. Every major moment in my life was accompanied by *you* supporting me, even if it wasn't a big one, you never needed a reason to because you loved your kids more than the earth loves the sun, (all three hundred and sixty-five days spent revolving around us) because for you, loving your children *never* gets old.

I'd like to think I got my selflessness from you, but I don't have a selfless bone in my body, not like you who's made of them, worn down from all the forgiveness you give, even when people don't deserve it. *Sometimes I feel like I have to protect you too*, because your heart is too big for your body Mom, and some people aren't as gentle with it as they should be. Some genes skip a generation and maybe that's what happened with your forgiveness because you're so overflowing with it and yet I have none, we're two ends of an extreme, you're much too forgiving and I never forgive at all. I'm bitter and hold onto things that hurt me so they never come back and hurt me again, but you let them in with open arms. *I wish my soul was half as kind as yours*, but if you let everyone in, with soft smiles and even softer words, who's going to keep all the ill intent, (vicious, and every bit bad) at bay?





Keep My Memories Safe for Me

SOPHIA WHITMORE

Mission Oak High School
11th Grade

Honorable Mention

There are always the people who we never see, people everyone seems to ignore. Most of them live forever in the shade never showcased to the world but I refuse to not let *her* be seen.

She was that classic tale of the mysterious girl in the back of the class that “no one got” and everyone seemed to see *her* that way. The whispers in the halls, the posts on social media, and the names. I always thought the name calling was something that was done only in the movies because it was never done to me. I thought people were nicer than that, but the people at my school proved me wrong time after time...But she would never let that phase *her*. She always picks herself up again with incredible grace, turns away and does not give them a lick of attention. I think this is why people loved to tease her so much, she was not an easy target.

Was she so different from everyone? No, but they loved to try and break her. One day I was walking to class and she dropped a piece of paper and of course I scrambled down to get it. It bounced in and out of my hand almost like it was trying to escape. I picked up my hand and slammed my palm into the center of the paper, forcing it on the floor. I felt my foot begin to wobble side to side unsure of what way to fall until my body lost balance and my face fell straight into the laminite.

A faint rose-like whisper escaped from her throat, “Are you okay,” her head tilting in sympathy.

“*Writing*, uh... shit... I mean paper. This paper you dropped it.” I stood frustrated yet in awe, I never noticed how beautiful she really was. Silky black locks cascading down her face accenting her eyes, which resembled both the beauty and power of a tiger’s eye crystal. She reached her left hand out using her right to grasp her sweater and pulled it tightly to her body.





On her right hand, her skin was painted with red marks stretching like Ivy up her arm. I think she could tell I noticed and began to tug her long sleeves, "Thank you," she whispered ever so faintly as she retreated back down the hallway that has never appreciated her.

The urge to speak to her once more overcame me as I stood watching her walk away. Soon as if independent from my body my legs and mouth moved toward her and uttered, "Can I walk with you, I hate walking home alone and I... I forgot my um," I paused, "my earbuds."

Walls seemed to be forming between the two of us the longer she stayed silent until ever so quietly, "I'd love to," left her lips and hit my heart. We walked down the hallway to the school joking about some of our favorite and least favorite teachers. Our conversation flowed so effortlessly. From embarrassing stories to funny anecdotes I felt a connection I had never felt before. I noticed after a while that my house was nowhere near hers but I didn't care, walking with her is worth the extra 10 minutes. We stopped by a park and found a nice tree to sit by to continue our conversation.

"No one ever has noticed me the way you do. It's weird I always say that I'm like awing of a butterfly. Beautiful, identical to its counterpart, and fragile. But no one ever notices how fragile that wing is. The wing is so beautiful you want to touch it but you can't because one the butterfly didn't let you but two because if you touch it, it... might... break," she paused, looked around then continued, "You can't throw stones at a butterfly but you can hurt her with words. I'm not sure if this even makes any sense but this is always what I've used to make sense of it." I stopped and thought about her words for a bit. I wanted to know so badly who hurt her, but all I could do is listen.

Bothered by my silence she began to speak, "Does it not make any sense? I know I'm a bit out there," she laughed it off although it obviously hurt.

"To know this side of you. Sorry, knowing this side of you," from our talk I know she was a stickler on grammar and wanted to be right, "it makes my heart full. I never knew why people didn't like you, I still don't, but I want to let you know I'm here." She laughed and mouthed the words *thank you*, and we began to laugh again.

"Notice the woman in that house over there. She walks in and out every 5 minutes waiting for her son to get home from this afterschool program," chuckling with a giant smile on her face, "There is no after-school program. I'm a part of it. It's a big inside joke the kids in our neighborhood used to not have to go home right away."

Her smile was something that could not be bought, if I could bottle up this moment, that smile, her laugh, I would. But all good things have to come to an end, "Same time tomorrow?" I asked hoping she'd say yes. I tucked my arms deep into my pockets and swung my body back and forth rocking off my heels and on to my toes.





"I'm not sure if I'll *be* here tomorrow," Her eyes and brows were angled down and she looked defeated, "But I wanted to thank you for one of the best, if not, the best day of my life." She ran over to me and wrapped her arms around me and hugged me so tightly I could hear her heartbeat. The slow and steady beating felt at ease... she felt safe, she finally whispered, "*Thank you so much.*"

As she walked towards her door, she swiped all of her hair to one side revealing a line of bruises scars imprinted on her neck and back. Starting back home I couldn't help recalling every bit of our conversation. I remember her saying small vague details about her family. Like how her family wasn't close and how her dad doesn't like when her hair isn't long. She talked about for as long as she could remember her hair had always fallen no less than mid back. My mind began to race, what if she's in trouble, what if I was a cry for help. Or what if maybe because of my tendencies to overthink maybe I just read too far into the situation.

"I need to look her up on social media!" I thought. Yes! Why didn't I think of this before, but right as I lifted up the lid of my computer I realized... I never got her name. I knew everything about her, her deepest secrets, her favorite color, and we even exchanged phones and took turns showing our favorite memories, but not her name.

The next day I came to school I was hoping to see her, but there were no girls whispering in the halls, no guys yelling names, it was dead silent.

Sitting down during 1st period I heard a crackly voice come in from the overhead intercom, "Good morning and attention students, I'm sorry to inform you that one of your very classmates last night took her own life—" Everything went silent. I could hear a faint ringing in my ears as my mind raced. They didn't even need to say her name. My gut just knew, and a bit of me liked not knowing her full identity.

I looked around the room to see everyone in shock. Shock? They knew what they were doing to her each day, ruining her only escape. I wasn't about to sit there and let everyone use her for their personal gain but just as I was about to get up our teacher walked over to me.

"A teacher gave me this to give to you," she handed me a medium-sized blue box with a ribbon tightly wound around... it was painted with butterflies. I slowly unwound the ribbon and opened the box to find it was filled with photos. All of the pictures that she had showed me of her favorite pastimes. There were pictures of beautiful blue skies, an adorable Alaskan husky, and just pictures of her smiling. When I got to the bottom of the box, under the last photo there was a note that simply read:

"Thank you for everything, but before I go for good can you do me a favor and please *keep my memories safe for me?*"

Love, her





Call Me Your Moon

GRACE FREITAS

Mission Oak High School

9th Grade

Honorable Mention

You are my Sun. This I know for sure. Your warmth, your kindness, your glow. The way you light up a room. Your smile is blinding. Your laughter will forevermore burn into my memory and into my soul. Everyone who has met you has nothing but their love to give you. People worshipped you in days of old, and rightfully so.

You are my Sun. This I know for sure. But I do not know what I am. I do know that I am nothing like you. I have no such kindness or warmth in my heart. People do not think upon my name fondly, in the way they think upon your's, My Sun. My smile does not melt hearts, nor does my laughter. If I am burned into someone's memory, is it not for good reason, I can promise you that.

You are my Sun. This I know for sure. Perhaps I am your Icarus. Drawn always to you. The very sight of you gives me freedom like I have never known before. You give me freedom; you give me wings. I would gladly die today and a thousand other days, simply to know that I can touch you. To fly up and greet you, to give you all my love. But that love would only result in losing you, for I shall fall into cold waters below. My desired Sun, please do not call me your Icarus.

You are my Sun. This I know for sure. Maybe I can be your flower. Then, I might reach up every morning for you. To feel your brightness, your gaze falling upon me every day. Your love may finally allow me to bloom. Bloom for you and for others. Kindness has always been in your nature. I shall give my life to the bees and the butterflies. You would like that of me. I shall allow my newfound beauty to be appreciated by the mere humans we once were. But they would cut me from my roots in the ground, and take me away so I





could no longer feel your love each day. My glowing Sun, please do not call me your flower.

You are my Sun. This I know for sure. I could try to be your seashore. I shall bathe in your sunlight, and tell you all the stories that are left in the sands that I have become. I could tell you of every young couple's love through their footprints, as they walk side by side. It shall make you happy, and me proud, for as beautiful as their love may be, it will never compare to ours. In the winter I shall have you all to myself, and I will love you every day. I will feel you up against me and I shall be content. But in the summer, others will try to come to me and soak up your light, which is so rightfully mine. I might become jealous if you give them your light, and you don't deserve a jealous lover. My perfect Sun, please do not call me your seashore.

You are my Sun. This I know for sure. Would it be a shame if I became your Moon? It seems whatever I try to become only results in harm for us. I do not wish to lose you, the way Icarus lost his wings, the flower lost its roots, and the seashore lost its sight of you. I realize now I have always been the Moon. I am cold, but I am constant. People may not love me the way they will love you, My Sun, but they will need me. I can provide for them in a way that would make you proud. We would see each other a lot less, I know. You would remain in the clouds and the blue sky. I would stay with the shining stars. But do not worry, My Sun, for none of them will catch my eye the way you once did. If we would only embrace during an eclipse, I would make the most of it. I promise both you and myself it would last long enough to fill my now-cold heart. For a short moment, I could shelter you from the Earth's gaze, and remind you how perfectly we fit each other. Our touch would cast shade upon any other human love, even if only for a few minutes.

You are my Sun. This I know for sure. You can call me your Moon.





Listening to Wu-Tang Clan

STEPHANIE NAVAS

Riverdale High School

12th Grade

Honorable Mention

Hit shuffle is what I told myself a while back
I came across a song called “One of These Days”
Well, it started to unpack
All the past memories of me foolishly trying to amaze you
Before I knew it,
I blew it You don’t know who I am
I’m new to this genre
I never knew the importance it had for you
And your friends too

I was a naive little girl living comfortably in my own little world
Didn’t care much about what adults hurled
You were scared little boy who fought against the world
Never fit into their imperiled
Expectations and masculinity terror
You felt like it followed you forever
My eyes follow deep into your soul
Got no impression of any childhood error
I fell right into a rabbit hole of your damaging youth
I finally got to learn about your truth

The lyrics floating through your headphones
It helps you sleep better at night
You knew that your mom didn’t marry a knight
In shining armor
The world had no room for you
It’s always black and white
You have always cried out for hugs that felt warmer





Than the sun
You were afraid of the monsters that came alive in the dark
Sleep deprivation comforted you and insomnia enlightened your creativity
At an early you knew that life was no amusement park
All of those energy drinks triggered the passivity
of your reality

The police sirens around you, had your mind trembling
All of a sudden you remember your past
No matter how much you try
Your inner child can't run very fast
You remember what it was like hustling in the streets
Always trying to make ends meet
You were grateful with every bite you got to eat

At times, you question why you lived and not the other kids
in the neighborhood
You try not to offend God with your questions
No one ever understood you
Everyone seemed to be destroying your boyhood
You were resentful against those male authorities in power
Your world was just so bitter and sour

You pay no attention to me
My impression didn't mean anything
Love was impossible for you to reach
You always thought it was not something to teach
Your heart perceived as cold
There was no love for you to hold

You trusted me for some reason
Then you put your head down
You went on to pretend you didn't know my name
Seasons passed by and you're still the same
You reached for your headphones and
Went away
Avoid eye contact
You hated it when people came your way
Clicked on the song
Around people who thought life was sunny
"I come from the slums, I ain't no dummy"
Singing along to WU-TANG CLAN lyrics
Living on tight money





Colors

SAMARA VALENCIA

Mission Oak High School

12th Grade

Honorable Mention

With a honey smile and lemon like teasing
Sour, soon sweetened up with your soft words
Starlight dancing off your bronzed skin

My lilac smile and violet gaze,
Inhales of Infatuation, purple streaks left in the sky
Heart pounding to the rhythm of your footsteps

Meeting you in a blue haze
Cold January nights and hollow words
Your warmth withers away this winter's chill

You are fire,
Not red or angry or destructive
But candlelight, soft and warm

Rosy cheeks and a whisper of a promise
A flushed face, the fantasy of falling in love slowly
Than all at once.





Remember

CATHERINE CHIELPEGIAN

Edison High School
10th Grade

Honorable Mention

I could tell you
what I wore the first day I met you,
the last time you cried,
the first girl you liked,
the exact shade of blue you love,
the sweatshirt you like to wear most,
even the flavor of chapstick you use
or your favorite ice cream flavor

I could explain
how you slowly begin to smile
when you're truly happy,
the way you start to stutter when you get mad,
that rub the back of your neck when you're nervous,
how you look down when you laugh,
and that you get quiet when you're upset

But you wouldn't be able to remember
the shade of pink that I love,
my favorite pair of shoes,
what I wore yesterday
or even my middle name
if I asked you

And you never noticed
how I watch you while you drive,
the way I cover my mouth when I laugh,
how I look at my phone when I'm nervous,
and how I play with my hair when I'm excited





She

GIOVANNA IBARRA

Edison High School

11th Grade

Honorable Mention

And *she* is gone, long gone. I remember *she* told me, “It’s going to be alright. *We* will be fine.” It was not fine. *We* were not fine. *She* was not fine. Those were the last words *she* said to me. It was not a goodbye, or a farewell, but a good wish. A hope. *She* would glow at the sight of falling rain, laughing at how the humidity made her hair reach for the clouds. The sound of raindrops touching the cold floor, the scent of sweet tranquility. I remember her laugh. Not the last one, nor the first one, but the sincere one. The one that *she* could not hold in, even if *she* tried to cover her mouth. The laugh that I reminisce fondly over, since *she* forgot how to recreate that laugh. I remember the last time we talked, the last time I saw her. The one with the little courage I had to face her. It was not the best confrontation, nor was it the prettiest conversation. *We* both argued about who was right, who was wrong, who should stay, who should leave. I blamed her for all the problems. The problems *we* caused. I blamed her for being too naïve, too kind, too trusting. I blamed it all on her with no regrets. As if all the bad was caused by her wrongdoing. As if *she* had all the power to create chaos. I blamed her for not thinking straight, the risks I took when I should not have. The problems that others have caused but I blamed her instead. I blamed her. *She* blamed me. Now, I do regret it. How could I have blamed her? For wanting to be who *she* was? For exploring the world as *she* saw fit? For making her own decisions without the acceptance of others? *She* was just a child. There was no reason to blame her? How could I? How dare I? It was not *she* who was to blame. No. It was I who was to blame. Oh wait... I am *she*.





Kaleidoscope

KEVIN WU

University High School
11th Grade

Honorable Mention

“Dude. A flower field?” the boy in black said.

“Yes, a field of flowers,” the boy in red said.

“That’s what we need to draw?”

“Yes. We need to draw flowers on a...on a...how do you say it? *fleurs sur une colline?*...on a hill.”

“That’s it?”

“Well, at least that is what Pixar told us. We got a commission to draw a field of flowers for their newest project.”

“But flowers.”

“What?”

The boy in black ran his hand through his gelled, brown hair. “I don’t know, dude. Just wish we got something cooler, y’know?”

“Hey, flowers can be cool, no?”

The two high-school boys were sitting in a basement. They were almost invisible except for their faces, which were illuminated by the screen of the monitor that sat on a desk in front of them.

“M’kay,” the boy in black said, adjusting his black leather jacket and pulling up his jeans. “So Pixar just wants us to draw a flower field.”

“Yes.”

“What colors did they say, Thomas?”

Thomas swept his blond hair out of his eyes with a hand. “I do not know. They did not say.”

“Let’s just look at the flower fields in past movies.”

They shifted their identical caster chairs towards the desk, rolling over the mass of crumpled papers strewn across the floor. They typed it into the search engine and scrolled through the resulting images.

“Red and yellow. White and black,” Thomas said, his faded, red Rick and Morty t-shirt lit up by the many colors on screen. “Pink and red. Blue and... *violette*. The red and blue mix. Purple, I think it is called. Anyway, all the fields are only two colors, Adrian.”





Adrian leaned forward and picked up his pen. “Ayy, I like it. The pattern, I’m saying.”

“I kind of do, too.”

“Let’s do something like that then.”

With that, the two boys picked up their electronic pens and started scribbling on their drawing pads, which were connected to the monitor by USB cords. And on the computer screen, blue and pink flowers started blooming. Neither said a word as they were concentrating on the project. Only the clicking and scraping of pen against pad could be heard.

“Adrian,” Thomas broke the silence. “Did you hear about Sam?”

“Who?”

“Sam. You know, the person in our class. Short, brown hair. Kind of tall. Wears *les lunettes*—uh, round things on face?”

“You mean glasses?”

“Yes, glasses.”

“Yeah, I know Samantha. What about her, dude?”

“Well.” The pen stopped moving in Thomas’s hand.

“Hey,” Adrian said. “We gotta keep drawing.”

“I know, you do not have to tell me. And about the classmate. It is not Samantha anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“It is just Sam. And Sam is not a girl anymore.”

“Wait.” Adrian stopped drawing and looked at Thomas. “What? Why?”

“Do not ask me.” Thomas shrugged. “I do not know. And keep drawing, we are not done with this yet.”

Adrian started drawing again. He spoke after a short pause. “Okay but... dude, does this mean she—I mean he—he’s a guy now?”

Thomas shifted in his chair and adjusted his worn-out khakis. “Well,” he began, “Sam is not a guy either.”

“So neither girl or guy.”

“Yes, I think. Like the name Samuel is the guy version and Samantha is the girl version, but Sam is neutral.”

“Man, that just confuses me.” Adrian shook his head and was still looking at his friend. “She say anything to you?”

“No, not directly to me, but I did hear her talking about it the other day.”

“What happened?”

“She was saying how she did not feel like she was a girl and that...that she felt more comfortable identifying as non-binary,” Thomas made air quote gestures at this phrase. “And she said how the world should have more than only two genders.”

“So, what you’re sayin’ is we’re now adding a third gender.”

“I do not know. To be honest, I do not see why we need a third. It...it makes things, uh, *désordonné*.”

“Messy?”





“Yes, messy. And, like, I do not know. I think the world would be better having only two, no?”

“Yeah...it would be easier for Sam to be a girl. Dude, this just hurts my head—”

“Wait!” Thomas suddenly shouted, causing Adrian to fall out of his chair.

Adrian stood up. “Dude! What the heck?”

“Sorry, but look at the screen!”

Both turned to the computer, which illuminated their faces with pink and blue light. After a pause, Adrian said, “Wait dude, why’s there a blob of yellow flowers?”

“I think you accidentally switched your pen to yellow a few minutes ago.”

“Huh?” Adrian scratched his head. “Oh, my bad. Just wasn’t looking at the screen. I’m gonna erase it.” He leaned forward and tapped the pen on the screen a few times to switch the pen to its eraser setting.

“Wait.” Thomas caught the pen between his fingers to keep it from touching the screen.

“Dude. What is it now?”

“It does not look too bad though.”

“Huh? Well...” Adrian’s voice trailed off uncertainly. “I mean. The field has blue and pink flowers already. We don’t need yellow, dude.”

Thomas nodded. “I know, but look at it.”

They stared at the patch of yellow for a few seconds in silence. The new color stood out from the vast majority of pink and blue on the screen.

“It is not that *laid*. I mean, uh, unsightly,” Thomas continued. “It could complement the other two colors. Maybe we should add a bit more yellow and see how it goes.”

“You sayin’ we should give it a chance?”

“Yes.”

“Fine, okay. I guess it doesn’t hurt to just try.”

“Yes yes. Add some yellow there.”

Adrian did so.

“Okay...we need to add more,” Thomas said.

Adrian nodded and placed his finger on a different area of the computer screen. “I’ll add some here.”

“And I will go there.”

Both nodded in agreement. They turned to their drawing pads and scribbled for a few minutes, adding patches of yellow flowers to the field. Within a few minutes, the field became a mixture of blue, pink, and yellow. The two boys set down their pens and leaned back in their caster chairs.

Adrian sighed. “Okay...it doesn’t look bad, I guess.”

“Yes, I’m surprised. I was not expecting the field to look that beautiful with the yellow.”

“Same.” Adrian rubbed his eyes. “It just throws me off though, man.”





Was expecting the field to look messy. I guess it's because we're adding a third color to something that had been two colors."

"Yes, I'm used to seeing only two colors in a flower field. But this looks good, too."

"We're keeping this one, right? It looks better than the one with only blue and pink."

"Yes. But..." Thomas leaned closer to the screen.

"What is it?"

"What if...what if we add another color?"

"What? That's just a hard 'no,' man."

"Why not?"

"Dude, three colors is enough. Four's too much and would make the field look messy. *Désordonné*, you'd say."

"I mean...we don't know this for sure, no?"

Adrian stretched his face with the palms of his hands and sighed.

"We have time, too," Thomas added. "You can sit and watch, but I'm going to try something right now."

"You're *loco*, man. Just crazy. What color?"

"*Viol*—I mean, purple."

"Dude, why? It's pretty much dark pink. Why not just keep it pink?"

"It is not dark pink. It is purple."

"Basically the same color."

"No, listen. Purple is like pink, but at the same time it is also different. You can not exactly call it dark pink because it looks like pink. It does look like pink, I suppose, but it is its own color."

Adrian closed his eyes and muttered something in Spanish under his breath. "Okay, fine. Go ahead. We always have the undo button, I guess."

"Yes, I know."

Thomas turned back to the monitor and started clicking and scraping his pen against the drawing pad, and on the computer screen, the color purple started blooming in the digital flower field. While Thomas's eyes were fixated on the screen, Adrian had his eyes closed. After a minute, however, he opened his eyes and sat up in his chair. Thomas turned his head away from the computer. "What do you think? Good, no?" he asked.

"Well...it's looking okay so far. I'll help, I guess." With that, he picked up his pen, selected the purple setting, and began to draw purple flowers with his friend.

When they finished, they set down their pens, scooted their chairs back a meter's distance, and observed the scenery on the monitor. It was a flower field of more than two colors, consisting of blue, pink, yellow, purple flowers that dotted the green hill. The two, their faces tinted rainbow by the computer's illumination, did not speak for a few minutes. They stared at their creation with eyes wide open.

"*Beau*," Thomas murmured. "It's beautiful."

Adrian nodded slowly. "It is beautiful," he echoed. "Honestly, thought it





was just gonna be chaos. This whole thing of adding colors, I mean.”

“Me too. I was already happy with the blue and pink field, but I did not expect the yellow and purple to make it better. It makes it, uh, *bonita* as you would say it.”

“Yeah, man. They blended in better than I thought.”

“But they also brought their own qualities to the field.”

“What d’you mean?”

“Like, they added the warmth and the cheerfulness and...and the happiness...that was missing before.”

“Dude, they’re just flowers. But I kinda see what you mean.”

There was silence for another minute.

“So,” Thomas said slowly, “I suppose the field looks better with more than only two colors, no?”

“I guess. Maybe more colors makes the world more beautiful.”

“Yes. Like if the world was, uh, a kaleidoscope of colors.”

“Yeah.” Adrian paused for a moment. “Dude, maybe Sam was right.”

Thomas turned to look at him. “What?” he asked. “What do you mean?”

“Like, I mean, Sam was right about the world. Like the flower field with more colors, the world could be better with more than just boys and girls.”

“Oh. Right, huh. Like a kaleidoscope.”

