

Spectrum

No. 43

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

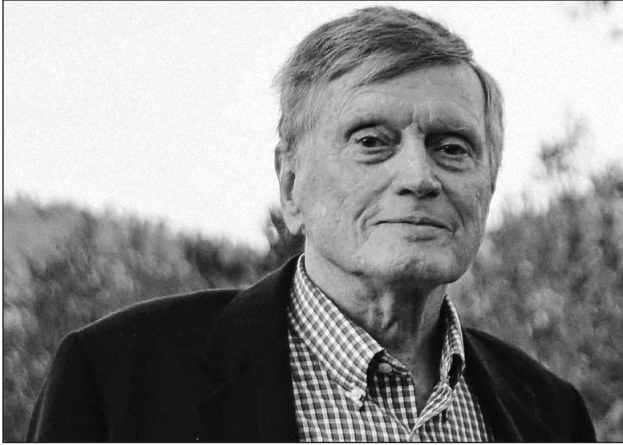
FRESNO STATE.

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 43rd annual Young Writers' Conference was scheduled for April 26, 2023 in the Satellite Student Union at Fresno State, with a keynote address from novelist Ethan Chatagnier.

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



DEDICATION

This year's 43rd edition of *Spectrum* is dedicated to the memory of Dr. H. Ray McKnight, professor emeritus of English at Fresno State. A gifted professor, beloved mentor, and visionary leader, he founded the Young Writers' Conference in 1980. Over more than four decades, the conference has inspired thousands of Central California students and teachers through creative writing. He also co-founded the San Joaquin Valley Writing Project, a network of K-16 educators who've supported the teaching and learning of writing in all disciplines since 1979.

Ray passed away Aug. 5, 2022. He was 88.

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A Letter From the Dean

Dear young writers,

Congratulations on your works being included in this journal and for participating in this year's Young Writers' Conference! For over 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, Ethan Chatagnier, who earned his bachelor's degree in English here and was also a President's Honors Scholar in the Smittcamp Family Honors College. He will surely inspire you towards a lifetime of creativity.

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 at Fresno State to find your passion and pursue your dreams.

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 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.

Finally, we all owe special thanks to Prof. Tanya Nichols, Fresno State's 2020-21 Outstanding Lecturer, for coordinating this excellent conference for her last time—please shower her with gratitude today for all her years of hard work and service to young writers. We also thank 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
California State University, Fresno

A Letter From the Chair

Welcome, everyone, to the 43rd annual Young Writers' Conference! Each spring, this conference brings together students from our area's high schools to develop your voices as writers and showcase your talents. We get to experience the world as you see it, hear what's on your mind, and to get a sense of what you – our future leaders – will make your focus as you take the reins and shape our region. It will be up to you to imagine new possibilities and chart the direction we will follow. As writers, you know that innovative ideas begin with words. They are the tools of your craft, which is why we are so pleased that today you've joined us here to develop those skills and, hopefully, to add a few more tools to your kit.

Each of us comes here today with our own unique stories and interests, but what gathers us as a community of writers is our passion for language – knowing the power of words to make us feel, express, connect, and effect change. We feed off the collective energy that emerges when we create new work together, support one another, and push the work to new heights. What's more, your writing gives voice to the unique experiences of the Central Valley and captures the beauty and struggle in all its diversity that deserves to be shared with the world. Trust that your voice is contributing a much-needed piece into the intricate tableau of our region.

We hope today's sessions provide an opportunity for you to grow as a writer – to meet new people and to take some risks with your writing. More than anything, we hope that you can experience what it means to be part of a larger writing community and that this experience will encourage you to continue on your path as a writer. Maybe that path will bring you to Fresno State, or maybe your time with the Young Writers' Conference will springboard you towards other successes. Whatever the future holds, know that you have the power to impact the world through your words and ideas, and the world will be richer for having heard your voice.

We hope today's conference will leave a positive and long-lasting impression that encourages you to continue to keep working at your craft. We are glad that you are here today!

Sincerely,

Dr. Melanie Hernandez
Chair, Department of English
California State University, Fresno

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Awards

PRESIDENT'S AWARDS

Ellanie Ruiz, Fowler High School | A Small White Truck

Margarita Guerrero, Porterville High School | Scrubbed Raw

PROVOST'S AWARD

Jude Hammouda, Edison High School | In Remembrance

DEAN'S AWARD

Giavanna Powell, Voyager Secondary School | You Were Just a Little Girl

LIBRARY AWARDS

Kaitlyn Woodruff, Mission Oak High School | Every Woman to Herself

Kaitlyn Pedraza, Mission Oak High School | Their King-Sized Bed

ARTS AND HUMANITIES ADVISORY BOARD AWARD

Audrey Reis, Mission Oak High School | Nitrogen Infection

CORRINNE CLEGG HALES AWARD FOR POETRY

Alessandra Ortiz, Los Banos High School | Repetition

H. RAY McKNIGHT AWARD

Sydney Mello-Hays, Liberty High School | Dearest Sun

WILLIAM SAROYAN AWARD

Mercedes Gonzalez Hernandez, Riverdale High School | Daleyza and Athena (Story for a First-Grader)

Awards

CHAIR'S AWARD

Evania Adame, Selma High School | The Wonder of Words
and Faults of the Mind

MIA BARRAZA MARTINEZ AWARDS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE WRITING

Jude Hammouda, Edison High School | World of War
Mason Roberts, Voyager Secondary School | Isolated While
Isolated

FRESNO POETS' ASSOCIATION AWARD

Martin Gonzalez, Mission Oak High School | Sycamore

THE NORMAL SCHOOL AWARD

Anahi Martinez, Edison High School | Julius the Cat

PHILIP LEVINE PRIZE AWARD

Annie Bryant, Mariposa County High School | There are Trees Here

HMONG AMERICAN INK AND STORIES AWARD

Lina Lee, Edison High School | A Letter to My Mom

FACET AWARDS

Susie Ortega, Mission Oak High School | The Everlasting Smile
Echo Martinez, Corcoran High School | Villanelle

MFA AWARD

Mary Johnson, University High School | The Beauty of Everyday
Life

SAN JOAQUIN LITERARY ASSOCIATION AWARD

Felicity Chavez, Sanger High School | Lies of Flora

Awards

CHICANX WRITERS AND ARTISTS ASSOCIATION AWARD

Juan Samuel Garnica, Mission Oak High School | Cartas de un hombre muerto

HMONG AMERICAN WRITERS' CIRCLE AWARD

Nkauj Hnub Jennifer Lee, Edison High School | Execution(er)

SHERLEY ANNE WILLIAMS AWARD

Kaitlyn Woodruff, Mission Oak High School | On the 60th Day
Flowers Bloomed

WENDY ROSE AWARD

Matthew Pitcher, Edison High School | The Way to Half Dome

HONORABLE MENTIONS

“Jasper” Cederlof, Mission Oak High School | The World was Born of Ink

Elsa “Merryn” Hammons, Sanger West High School | (Excerpt of)
The Manor and the Village

Owen Arnold, Mariposa County High School | Hopeful Hate

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Aiden Fernandez, Porterville High School | Solitude

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Riley Kurz, Mission Oak High School | For Her

SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY WRITING PROJECT TEACHER AWARDS

Miranda Powers, Fowler High School

Brooke Dobson, Mariposa County High School

A Small White Truck

ELLANIE RUIZ

Fowler High School
12th Grade

President's Award

Track practices these days usually go on longer than they should, creating more aches in my body than usual. It's the type of soreness that reminds me of my hard work, the ones that make my legs feel like weights when I walk. We ended the real part of practice almost an hour ago, only staying behind to continue the conversations we can never seem to finish. The group has decreased in numbers going from seven to five then finally to three. Now it's only Mireya, Ruben, and me accompanying Coach Randy as we walk to the parking lot. The aching in my legs continues with each step as they wobble from the work they put in that day. At this point, the sun has begun to set and there are rarely any cars left, perhaps the cars of some teachers and coaches that have stayed later for whatever reason, but here in the parking lot it's only us.

We bring the conversation with Coach to an end as the three of us all pile into this old white 2000 Tacoma truck. It was a hot day that's causing sweat to accumulate on my forehead and on the back of my clothes and I can see it on my friends as well, knowing well that they must be as hot as I am. Ruben gets into the truck first insisting that he sits in the backseat. We used to argue jokingly about who should go in first, playing rock paper scissors or pushing each other away until one of us found our way to the back. Seeing him go in first reminds me of those days making me chuckle softly to myself. I lift the seat back into the upright position and scoot it up ever so slightly to give him some leg room. When I sit down, the warmth of the seat meets the back of my legs making me wish that the cold air from the fall would come soon. I close the car door and stretch my exhausted body behind me to reach for the seatbelt, before I can grab it Ruben has already handed it to me. I smile. It's the smallest gesture of kindness and somehow it still makes me smile, it makes me feel warm inside, similar to the heat of a bonfire, or the warmth

of a towel as it wraps around me coming out of the pool.

Mireya puts the key in the ignition and the rumble of the truck is heard. The AC doesn't move as the dust continues to collect in the air vents. Mireya doesn't like turning it on because it wastes the gas in her old truck. Sometimes I think she's purposely trying to cook us to death, although with the windows down the heat is bearable, even though the passenger window no longer rolls down. I'm reminded of this when I press the button a few times hearing click click click. Nothing, the window refuses to move. "You need to get that fixed," I say half-jokingly.

"I know!" She giggles through her words as we pull out of the parking spot. We pass by Coach and wave our last goodbyes before exiting the lot. We drive, making the air begin to flow through the car, drying the sweat off our faces. I close my eyes as the air whiffs past me. All I can think of at this moment is that scene from *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* where Charlie climbs to the back of the truck and stands as the wind pushes him back. He stretches his arms, embracing his freedom. I can imagine the thrill and excitement he must have felt at that moment. That's when I'm pulled back into reality when I hear Mireya ask, "So, where are we going?" as if she isn't the one driving. The funny thing is we never know where we're going but we always end up where we want to be. After some back-and-forth suggestions, we decide on Coculas on Manning once again.

The breeze continues to brush in, it's not much but it's enough for us. Before the truck was cleaned, the air would move the smell of dust and dirt around the truck, but now it moves the smell of Little Tree's "blackberry clove" scent. A week before, Mireya and I had worked hard to clean our little home. We took it to the car wash, cleaned the back, vacuumed the floor, dusted the dashboard, wiped down the wheel and doors and sprayed Febreze on the seats. I look around at our hard work, a reflection of how we care about this little truck of ours, and possibly each other. The syrupy goop that was in the cup holder is finally gone, the seat behind Mireya is finally visible, and the aux cord that I found in the depths of my drawer is plugged in and playing our weird mix of music.

As the music passes from song to song I realize that the songs are a resemblance of our differences, a tiny piece of who we are. The playlist starts off with Mireya's Spanish music. In all its glory, I think it expresses who she is as a person and the love of her culture. The music is upbeat, exciting and beautiful just like her and I can see it live through her as she sings passionately to the music she loves. I smile. Ruben's music is fast, hyper, intense and exciting. When I look at him, his music fits him perfectly, it clicks in my head. When I listen to his music it reminds me of what it's like to be around him, reminding me of the burst of energy I get when I'm with him.

It makes me feel like I can be myself, creating a safe space to let out my energy just as he does. My music ranges from a soft yearning to an upbeat fast pace, mostly through the lyrics it encapsulates my longing for the feeling to belong. On our frequent rides I add our songs to this playlist and with each new song the truck grows into more of a sanctuary.

From the backseat Ruben pats the top of my head like a brother would do to a sister. His palm meets the top of my head, at first I'm a bit shocked, not knowing what it was or what to do but as the weight of his hand stays still on my head I relax. I smile. Maybe he notices, maybe he doesn't but that small touch means the world to me. That feeling of reassurance in our friendship warms me from the inside. It really is the small gestures that make me feel wanted, make me feel like I belong. He does one last squeeze on my head before he takes his hand back. I giggle because it makes me feel like I'm a bop-it toy. I look to my left and I see Mireya singing along to the music. I smile. The song comes to an end and changes from her Spanish music to his punk music. Ruben pats me on the shoulder a few times excitedly, when I look behind me he begins to start another what if I wasn't here scenario saying, "What if when I tapped your shoulder right now you looked back and I was no longer here. What would you do?" I smile, not knowing what to say at first. But I end up explaining something along the lines of searching the internet for signs of his existence. These silly little scenarios probably seem dumb to anyone else but to us we could go on and on for hours about these what if's.

The small conversations die down as the music fills the silence, the aux playing "Ring of Fire" by Johnny Cash. As separate and different as we all are, here we are. In the same car, listening to the same music, going to the same place. There is something special in the silence. There is a saying, "Silence speaks volumes," sitting here in this truck I feel that our silence is loud. It speaks of family, it says to me that we have a connection that doesn't need words. We pull into a parking spot as we arrive at the taco truck. When Mireya takes the keys out of the ignition Johnny's voice goes silent and the rumble of the truck stops. I look around the front seat to collect my things and as I do I glance at the truck once more. The clean cup holders, the AC vents with a bit of dust in them, the hanging purple tree on the rear view mirror. I look at Mireya as she gives us a thumbs up, shaking it up and down in the air as she always does. I look back at Ruben and smile. "What?" he asks.

"Nothing," I say, a smile still on my face. I get out of the truck basking in this moment. As mundane as our trip might have been, it has grown the love I have for them. This little old truck has created a space I have always craved through songs and movies and I realize in this moment, we are infinite.

Scrubbed Raw

MARGARITA GUERRERO

Porterville High School
10th Grade

President's Award

Your skin is dirty
How easily the words escaped
From the slivers that were her lips
Her tawny blonde pigtails pranced for themselves
She hurried away
So I went home, dirty

I was dirty

So that night I scrubbed
Vigorously
I scrubbed violently
As violently as a 6-year-old could
I scrubbed

With my dirty hands, I scrubbed

Molten lava streaming down my dirty face
Burning with spite
I deserve it, I thought
For *being dirty*
Until I was on fire, I scrubbed

If I scrubbed hard enough
I thought
I could scrub away the dirty

Her cold eyes haunt me
So I'll still scrub, and scrub, and scrub

Until I'm scrubbed raw

In Remembrance

JUDE HAMMOUDA

Edison High School
10th Grade

Provost's Award

Skin of olives, almond-shaped eyes. Characteristics inherited by generations of Palestinian ancestors. Traditional foods passed from plate to plate, but were seen as “odd” to others. The roots of the fruit trees run deep into the homeland, each branch growing as the family grows.

It is 1963, and 10-year-old Kamal Hamad Taha is annoying his sisters as usual. He was a rebel.

“Yalla,” his mother Sucar called to her children to come, while setting out their dinner. It was coosa stuffed with rice, meat, and spices in a hot soup. As Kamal was eating, he sneakily picked out the pieces of meat from the inside and wrapped them up in a napkin. Stuffing them into his pocket quickly. Later that day he snuck out into the street to find his friends. The feral cats awaited him on the corner around his home. Hissing at him until they realized who it was. They ran to him, greeting him by rubbing their faces on his legs. He bent down and pulled out the napkin of meat, laying it flat on the ground to expose the morsels to his friends. The hungry cats quickly finished it and thanked Kamal by licking their lips. Since his youth, my grandfather has always cared for others. Big or small, people or animals. He cared for everyone, until the very end.

* * *

In 1997, Kamal moved his family to the United States from Palestine, his wife Nabeeha, and their seven children. They moved into a humble home in Dinuba, California, ready to begin a new life. Even when their whole world got flipped upside down there was always one constant, cats have always had a soft spot in the heart of my grandfather. Whether it was when he lived in America or Palestine, cats were a reminder of his selflessness. In Dinuba,

they had 3 cats. Mostly being taken care of by *Sahar*, the youngest child. When the first grandchild was born, my sister *Niema*, they reluctantly got rid of the cats out of fear the newborn baby might catch some disease or bacteria from the outdoor cats. 14-year-old *Sahar* was furious at her parents for getting rid of her friends. When he moved back to Palestine, he had a colony of cats relying on him. And as the years went on, the more it began to grow, flocking around him as he walked outside. When one became sick, he would sneak some medicine into their food, or when he went into town to buy groceries, he always got them their favorite pita bread, canned sardines, and *mortadella*, a beef deli meat. My grandmother would occasionally complain because of the price of the meat, but at the end of the day, the price of his cats' health meant more to him than something as simple as money. Now, 3 of his children's family own and cherish cats. There is always a friendly neighborhood cat outside my window and I reminisce about the way my grandfather's love for cats stayed with him for decades. Not only did his love of felines get passed down to his children and grandchildren, it was left as a reminder of him.

While he lived in America, he became a grandfather to 10 grandchildren and 9 more after he and my grandmother moved back. Fond memories were made in the Dinuba home in the time he lived there. Family gatherings, Ramadan dinners, first birthdays, graduation parties, and more. Summer nights where everyone gathered in the family room, surrounding Kamal in his iconic plush brown rocking chair. Rested against his belly, a tray of fruits, some grown by him, some bought. Papayas were his favorite, even though no one else could stand the taste. While he enjoyed his fruit, he always made sure to have something for everyone. The abundance of oranges in the yard was a classic. My mom would always make sure to give me the small slices of oranges that grew between the full sized, something I will always cherish. His knife skills were used to peel fruits. The citrus sprays as he peels orange after orange with one hand. The smell fills the room, while he passes out each fraction of his love. The warm and loving atmosphere of the family home stayed even long after he moved away. It had gotten carried on by his only son, Jamal and his wife. Continuing the family tree, in the family home.

May 5th may be known to most people as Cinco de Mayo but in our family it was Grandpa's birthday. It's only one day after *Niema's* birthday, so it was only right that they celebrate together. The 48th birthday party was also a 1st birthday. Small *Niema* sitting on his lap with the silly cone birthday hats. The cake is in the middle of the table, surrounded by the clicking and shuttering of cameras. Capturing the memories on disposable cameras that became

more valuable than they'll ever know.

In elementary school, they always celebrated Grandparents' Day. This was almost as sad to me as when everyone would talk about their Christmas gifts. I couldn't talk to anyone about what I got for Eid. In second grade, we all wrote heartfelt poems to our grandparents that we are supposed to give to them on the day they come to visit. I went home that day and asked my mom if she could mail it out so they could get it. She said sure but just tucked them into her drawer. Four years later in 6th grade, my grandparents were actually in town when grandparents day came around. I was ecstatic. The memory of them coming to school with an In-n-Out bag in hand was so relieving, "I'm finally like the other kids." Although they were slightly confused as to what the purpose of this "celebration" was, they saw how happy it made me. To this day I am grateful that I was able to experience that with them, but sometimes I wonder, did they ever get my poem, or has it been in the drawer all these years.

* * *

When they migrated to America, my grandfather had opened a store with his brothers called, "Taha's." It was a grocery store where he was the butcher. He butchered halal cows and goats. Three years after they moved to America, my mother, Fadiyah, got married, bringing my father, Aref, into the family. They moved into a nearby apartment in Dinuba to remain close. While my mother stayed home or visited my grandmother, my father was in college but also working part-time in the grocery store. While he worked there, my grandfather taught him how to sharpen knives, the right way, in order to slaughter and skin animals. The gesture of teaching this technique oh so many years ago stuck with my father. Through thick and thin. Kamal taught him not only as a student and employee, but also as his son. Fond memories for my father were made in that store. Now every time he sharpens his knife, the sounds of my grandfather teaching him bubble up to the surface of his memories.

Food is one of the things that brings families closer together. Whether you cook or eat together as a family. food always brings you closer. There are the classic Palestinian dishes that are loved by everyone, including Kamal. Calling him a foodie would be an understatement. *Maqluba*, *mensaf*, *malfuf*, and *rashtaya* are family favorites but he had the biggest sweet tooth. The crispy sugary layers of the pistachio-filled baklava or the syrup-dripping coconut *herisa* that oozes sugar with every bite. But nothing compares to the sweet cheese of *kanafeh* covered in the crunchy orange-dyed filo dough. Even after he moved back home, food kept traditions alive. He and my grandmother not only grew their food together, but they cooked

together. The Friday morning pancakes were a staple in their lives away from their family. Food is a symbol of love when words are inadequate.

Growing your own food has been custom in many parts of Palestine, so when they moved here, it was only right to keep the tradition going. Lemon, orange, guava, plum, fig, olive, almond, grape, and apricot grew in the yards of my grandparents house in Dinuba. The gnarly branches of the olive tree that grew in the front yard provided years of olives for each of Kamal's childrens' families. And the great almond tree whose branches draped over the backyard. Every spring the children would take small bowls of salt out to the elderly almond tree and forage its green morsels. Biting off the point, revealing the tangy, crunchy insides before lightly tapping it into the bowl of salt. The second crunch releases the juice mixed with the salt, making the best savory treat. The taste of nostalgic, spring days summed up in the small green fragment of the tree that Kamal grew from his love for gardening and providing for his family. Following their movement back to Palestine, the abundance of crops only grew. Some years, the overflowing amount of apricots resulted in gallons of apricot jam supplied to their friends and neighbors. Homemade and homegrown, donated out of the goodness in their hearts.

After his absence, the apricot trees are barren, longing for his love. The cats were alone, awaiting his arrival around the corner. Grandchildren who will not remember the man who was their grandfather. Their parents are trying to keep his spirit alive as the world moves on. The memories of papayas when their smell fills my nostrils in grocery stores. The smell of his cologne paints memories in my mind. Sneaking my cat Oliver a piece of meat when my mom makes *coosa*, one of his famous knives with the worn-down wooden handle, which continues to be used by Aref and his family. The renamed Taha's building on 2624 S. Elm Ave. staring back at me on my way to school. The rush of nostalgia, the surge of sentiments, his love was infinite towards everyone around him. Seeing his reflection in Oliver's food bowl, smiling back at me.

You Were Just a Little Girl

GIAVANNA POWELL

Voyager Secondary School
12th Grade

Dean's Award

You were just a little girl
No one to help you
All alone
You were broken inside.

You were just a little girl
How would you know
When you were scared
All you could do was hide.

You were just a little girl
A monster filled your home
Just like Death, hour by hour
He took your pride.

You were just a little girl
Raising brothers and sisters
Trying to escape your own life.
Trying to escape the blood and tears
Shed both day and night.

You were just a little girl
Crying for help
Because a man did not see himself
In your face.
All you could do was ask, "Why?"

You were just a little girl
Who wanted love,
No need to cry.
Like a bluebird,
One day you will fly.

Their King-Sized Bed

KAITLYNN PEDRAZA

Mission Oak High School
10th Grade

Library Award

My mom was a single mom and there were nine of us. All of the kids worked in the fields. I started when I was twelve. We picked cucumbers, apples, corn, strawberries, all of them. None of us went to school. Nobody cared. Everything I did, I could say, I was unaware of because of never having interacted in the school environment, but that would be a lie. I was fully aware of everything. I planned it, thought it out *multiple times*, and surrounded myself with the idea of it. He hit her. He hit my mom, and I saw it. I saw their nights in their king bed, and I saw my mom force herself to stay. And even though it was not her fault, I felt a fire of hatred grow inside me every time I saw not only her, but her with him. I hated her. I hated him. And I swear my eyes turned red, and my ears grew hot out of the anger every time I'd see them. I didn't let my other siblings know because they had enough on their plates, worrying about my eldest brother and his drug addiction and our youngest sister throwing her fits. My mom never seemed to care about those things, though. She was

wrapped around his finger like a slinky wraps around the stairs as it climbs down each step. So one day, I planned it out. I'd kill both of them. My mom never gave a damn about us, why should she live? If she cared she'd get herself out of that horrid relationship for her kids, get herself out of this life of picking fruit that she says will get us somewhere, get me out of my head, and get my brother out of his addiction and give my sister the attention she needs and get us out of this. But she doesn't, so why spare her? As I said, I thought about it and surrounded myself with the idea of it. So as you would assume, I took time to make the plan. I would do it when we were finishing up the picking. I'd feed my little sister a plate of strawberries to calm her down and feed my brother's addiction for a little while. And while they were distracted, I'd sneak into their king-sized bed, wait for them to come in at night, and once they do, I'll cry. I'll cry for hours begging for my mom to hold me, begging for her to let me sleep with them because I am scared. And when they fall asleep, is when my plan unravels.

Every Woman to Herself

KAITLYN WOODRUFF

Mission Oak High School
11th Grade

Library Award

It is true. I have met the Sandman. The man of dust and dream. Hope and harmony, love and laughter. I am his daughter.

I have the sandy gold specks in my hair, harmony in my speech, and imagination that controls my surroundings. I glow in the dark and am domestic during the day. I try my hardest to make sure everyone enjoys life. Sometimes I fail.

The Sandman is dead, and all dreams have become crooked. Fear not, the people shall have another entertainer.

She has a smile of pearls, she is witty and wise, seductive and sardonic. My mother is picturesque and a pessimist. The Pied Piper she is. She holds the golden flute and tells a tale of vexation disguised as love. She lures in those who search for guidance and they never appear again. Into the river, lost in her undercurrent. She calls these people rats, they deserved to be forgotten. She always tackles enemies with a dove's grace.

I am not wise, but call me witty. I smile easily, lacking her angel-kissed teeth. I have a hate for pessimism, yet it is one of my strongest traits. I can hold the flute, but I lack the ability to attract. I want to be fearless. I usually fail.

My parents are both filled with storybook features. That is how I imagine them. It must be difficult to be fantasy in a non-fictional world. Their skin is sewn together by magic, their hearts beat with victim blood, and their genius brain is something I never inherited. I am nothing mythical, nothing beautiful, and everything confusing. Because of this, I am hidden away. Sleeping behind their arms, similar to how a dragon guards a dungeon. My life is that. Protected so that the darkness they've witnessed is only seen in other worlds, evil is locked away where I cannot reach.

I want to be in danger, I want to risk it all. I want to be a knight.

Nitrogen Infection

AUDREY REIS

Mission Oak High School
12th Grade

Arts and Humanities Advisory Board Award

The way a kidney filters the blood to rid the body of waste is different than what we think of filters. Unlike strainers, where the contents wanted are trapped so that the unwanted can sift through, the kidneys take everything out of the bloodstream and go through, one by one, deciding what is kept and what is dangerous. What it keeps is sugar, water, salts, sodium, calcium, etc. It gets rid of urea.

When the body consumes amino acids, it is broken down, leaving the nitrogen alone, which, by itself, is very dangerous to the body. To combat this, the body makes urea, nitrogen being one of its components, to contain the nitrogen and neutralize its destructive properties.

I could feel the nitrogen inside me. I could feel it burning its way out of my body from the inside. From my core.

The first time I felt its side effects was when a boy approached me at school. He complimented my sweater, and we had a conversation. I can't relay to you a single word that was said during that conversation. The moment we parted ways, I came to my senses, back to reality. Almost as if I had reentered my body. I didn't remember the contents of the interaction, the way he looked, what he was wearing; I don't remember his name, or if he even said it. I couldn't spot him from the crowd we had just dispersed into. I had dissociated for some strange reason, and I was left with nothing but a misty flash of a conversation.

It was time to filter. Take everything out and try to find the nitrogen intoxicating my social interactions. I found the kindness of sugar, salt, and its sarcasm, the attentiveness of sodium, and the compassion of calcium. All of which I decided to keep. After sifting, I found urea. People said it wasn't that big of a deal. Everyone has to suffer the embarrassment of urea. The shyness that comes with it is normal. But my urea was different. Mine was evasive with talk and

eye contact. Mine had panic trying to decide what to say. Mine had to think manually about social cues. When to laugh. When to nod. When to smile. Mine had nitrogen.

The side effects of nitrogen are torturing. It can make it hard to meet new people, and it exaggerates embarrassment to the point of social depletion. It makes you relive the awkward interaction you had while trick-or-treating two years ago. Cringing and reassessing, trying to figure out what you could have said that would have been better, not as awkward or strange. It makes you wonder what the other person thought of you. *He probably thinks I'm creepy. He must think I'm a weirdo. She must think I'm crazy. They must think I'm a loser. They must not want to hang out with me anymore. He probably doesn't want you around.* Nitrogen is full of hypotheticals and overthinking. It's the brain convincing itself that other brains don't like it. It's low confidence. It's unusually low levels of self-esteem.

Once nitrogen is located, society repeats to you it's just urea. Some people believe society and move on with their lives, letting nitrogen slowly decompose them from the inside.

But for me, whatever it was, I wanted it out.

I started filtering it out with the crush I had at the time. I forced myself to make eye contact, really tried using the attentiveness of sodium, and did my best suppressing the hypotheticals and the rants of overthinking. It would seep out here and there, and I found that the compounds "They Probably Don't Remember" and "It's Not That Big of a Deal" work best to dissolve nitrogen. Just as I was getting treatment, COVID hit.

Everyone was catching nitrogen during the pandemic. People with normal urea were having to deal with nitrogen on its own for the first time. One of my friends who was in the school play just the year before was scared of talking in front of a group of ten people. "What if I mess up?" he said, "I don't want people to make fun of me." He told me he had never had to deal with this before, "What is happening? What is this?"

"It's nitrogen," I told him, "I deal with it all the time."

To this day, I still deal with the side effects of nitrogen. *He's not interested. He doesn't want to talk to you. You're being annoying.* But people I've met since I have diagnosed it have slowly started helping me cure it, of course, not knowing that they are. I don't usually tell people when I'm dealing with it, and I especially don't tell them if they are the one healing it.

I don't think I'll ever fully recover. Social anxiety is a chronic illness. I've taken steps to reduce its effects, but I believe the prognosis is perennial.

Repetition

ALESSANDRA ORTIZ

Los Banos High School
10th Grade

Corrinne Clegg Hales Award for Poetry

The gloveless boxer is tossed
Against the side of the ring
She sees another blow come
And feels her face start to sting
As the black vision spots come
And she's dragged by her hair
Her battered body goes limp
Broken and in despair
Match after match
The boxer can't ever win
Against the opponent
Her husband
In the kitchen
The ring
But when the night falls
After the loss of a match
The boxer looks in the mirror
Inspecting each bruise and scratch
To her greatest surprise
Her reflection is spotless
And she gives her the strength
To make it out of the darkness
"Rinse, repeat
No matter what stay on your feet
Resist and fight your fight
Even if no one else can see
Your progression
You teach yourself your own lessons
At the end of the day
You're the only thing that you're left with."

Dearest Sun

SYDNEY MELLO-HAYS

Liberty High School
11th Grade

H. Ray McKnight Award

Some may consider rousing to the continuous drip of their ceiling a problem, their once rosy cheeks stained in grime. Perhaps there is a miniature leak, or the rainwater has seeped through the roof, but Ensol has enough sense to crush her desperate hope. Constant drops of something cold land underneath her eye, trailing down her face like tears.

She scrunches her nose, upset at the disturbance to her slumber, and hums. The permanent soreness residing at the back of her throat persuades her to breathe through her nose instead. She raises her arm and another droplet slides through her slender fingers. The murky glob, a mixture of soot and smoke, races into the sleeve of her nightgown. Around her, the damp brick walls of the room shine, a certain staleness permeating through the air.

Just outside of her window that's similar to an archer's slit, a murder of crows has become silhouetted in the twilight sky, the constant squawks able to be heard. Ensol turns to face them, using her fingers as a shield against the water. Though they can barely be seen, the sheen of their feathers makes them visible enough. They must have woken the townspeople, the usual rumble of the morning beginning to crescendo. Sounds of hammers and the distinct clink of knives accompany the smell of baked items from the village.

Ensol breathes in, chest nearly heaving with the effort. The sudden cold of the droplets against her skin rouses her more, and she can practically hear her mother berating her for remaining on the floor for such a long time. Her bare feet scrape the stone as she rises, the thin carpet underneath her doing nothing to protect her from the morning cold.

She saunters to the archer's slit, the desperate shouts from the townspeople reaching her. They beg, almost in complete unison, for her to grant them the sun. The early morning wind nips at her nose

as she releases a sigh.

Ensol steps across the threshold, feet numb from the frigid stone. A chestnut chest rests against the north wall, her slew of accessories around it. She brushes a fresh layer of dust from the top, the copper latch coated in grime. Though she roots through it each morning, the chest constantly remains dirty.

Her hands rest on the wooden chest before she pulls it open, a vast array of clothes ready to greet her. She fingers the fabric of one dress, the luxurious silk soft in her grasp. A smile graces her face and she hums, taking the item into her arms. She might as well be comfortable today, she supposes. The grand dress almost sweeps the floor as she adjusts it, pushing a crimson comb into her hair to match. Her slender fingers trace along the sun engraved into the base of it.

Ensol breathes in, remaining in the same place for minutes more before the multitude of shouts gains traction. She's forced to the stand, morning activities halted until the sun emerges. The thin curtains beside the wall rustle as she moves closer, a gentle smile precariously resting on her lips. Someone must spot her then, and screams erupt from below. To the townspeople, she is their goddess, never mind the other, more traditional ones.

She raises her hands to match the praises, mouth parted to speak. "My dearest friends," she says, "I apologize for the delay. You have waited long enough, have you not?" The capsule around her neck swings as she leans forward, and her fingers wrap around it. "I have come to provide the morning's bout of sunshine, so please prepare your lanterns."

Some of the townspeople scramble to gather their lanterns, hoping that a mere glimpse of sunshine will light them once again. As most of them disappear into their homes, Ensol glances around the village. The fields are lush this summer, and the crops are prepared for harvest. With Hiesolstium, their winter solstice, nearing, she hopes the returns are grand. Then, her gaze falls to the right, eyes discerning the many shadows of Beyan, the forest.

In her adolescence, her mother made her promise not to enter it, the various claims of the creatures inside making her fearful. And yet, Ensol is drawn to the eerie place each morning, something about the permanent darkness alluring her.

She shakes her head in a desperate attempt to expel the sense of longing from her mind. Many of the townspeople have returned, metal lanterns grasped in their hands. The shops around them gleam in the moonlight, doors ajar from the dawn's rush.

"Please," Ensol hums, content, "bring the sun."

A beautiful cast of sunshine pours over the mountainous horizon in no more than a moment. Pure, golden rays of light douse the

rustic village in splotches of orange and yellow, the accompanying tinge of ivory apparent. Some of the townspeople cheer, sending their thanks in the form of praises. Ensol allows one more precarious smile before she turns, wrenching the curtains closed.

She slumps against the nearest wall, her precious comb scraping the damp brick. The capsule dangles from her neck, glimmering with the morning sunshine. Ensol's chest heaves, breath coming in quick succession. The room spins in front of her, eyes bleary. Her sunshine, though treasured by many, strains her more each day. To them, she may seem godly, but to others, she's merely something to use.

A series of knocks against her door steals her attention, and she sighs. "Come in."

"Ensol," her mother croons, "my sunshine. You have done well this morning, hm?" In her hands, a small platter rests. Then, the object is set before her. "Eat, my dear. There's quite a busy day ahead."

"Of course, mother. Thank you."

An elegant hand comes to clutch her chin, nails imprinting miniature crescents on the underside of her jaw. "Some of the townspeople have made complaints about their lanterns. You can repair them, can you not?"

Ensol hums in response, swallowing thickly under her mother's stare. "I can, mother."

"That would be ideal, Ensol. Someone should be here to escort you shortly." The hand moves to her cheek, squeezing the flesh once before it's gone, her door slamming shut. Ensol breathes in and glares at the floor. She hasn't much desire to travel into town.

Nonetheless, she stands from her place against the wall, using the bricks to steady herself. She roots through her chest once more, accessories wrapping themselves around her slender fingers. Each is thrust against her dress, and the ones that don't match are cast aside for the moment.

The eventual placement of a pearl chain around her wrist causes a genuine smile to blossom on her face. The rosette fabrics flutter around Ensol, nearly giving her the appearance of floating. She hums approvingly at the material, smoothing it in some spots.

She sends a final glance toward the window before she turns, opening the door and sauntering through the main room.

"Good morning, my Dearest Sun," the town's resident gardener greets her as she climbs the stairs to his abode. He resides just outside of Beyan, on the outskirts of their village. A prominent limp presents itself when he ambles forward. "Some of the lanterns seem broken, but I couldn't be sure. Can you spare them a glance?"

“Of course,” Ensol nods, gaze falling on the forest once more. The mere presence of it comforts her, the prospect of returning to her damp room suddenly unappealing. “Could you guide me to them?”

The man turns, limping back up the stairs as she trails behind him. Amid his home, several lanterns sit on a lopsided table. The insides of them are dim, almost completely dark. She nods and raises her arms above the lanterns, eyes drifting closed.

“Return the sun.”

One at a time, the lanterns light, nearly too bright in comparison to those around the village. The man smiles at her, wincing as he squints his burning eyes. “Thank you, my Dearest Sun. Should I get any refreshments for you, perhaps some tea?”

“No, I’m quite alright. I must be going, though.”

The man nods at her, ushering her out of the humble abode. Ensol’s cherished dress sways around her as she saunters through his pristine yard. She glances over her shoulder, the pines of Beyan waving to her. She’s been instructed to leave the forest since her childhood, and though Ensol’s mother would surely scold her later, she isn’t here to admonish her.

The immense darkness is tempting, presenting Ensol with newfound confidence. She steps closer, crunching the dead leaves that reside on the ground. The sunshine seems to dim more with each step she takes, shadows becoming elongated. They drape themselves around her arms like a shall, and she hums under her breath. The dusk weaves through her, the grand frontier of Beyan ahead of her. If she so desired, she could flex her toes and meet it.

On the other side of the invisible boundary, the ground seems damper, almost resembling that of an unseen rain. Puddles, tarnished with mud and grime, tremble as she comes closer. The pines droop, branches almost touching the mud on the forest floor; the remaining needles on them are browning with the season. The silent forest moves in time with her breaths, and Ensol knows that she should run.

Instead, she smiles. The darkness maintains a certain beauty, the area making gooseflesh rise on her arms. She inhales, and the sweet scent of the forest permeates the air. If she were here, her mother would yank her backward. There’s a thrill, Ensol finds, in disobeying her.

Ensol should go back, though, and disregard the immense pull of the forest. She should turn around and pretend that Beyan is as wretched as their tales make it appear. But Ensol’s nothing if not mischievous, so she takes another step forward.

The forest comes alive as she breaks through the barrier, the distant chirp of birds and rumble of animals drone on. The rustle

of leaves is present in the background. Ensol sends one more glance over her shoulder before she turns around, and her clumsy feet trample the weeds on the ground. She'll be inside for no more than ten minutes, and then she'll leave. Her mother shouldn't notice her absence for another hour, anyway.

The remaining light dwindles behind her as Ensol saunters through the forest. The capsule around her neck even seems to dim, its shine the only thing preventing her from misstepping. The forest seems a bore; nothing particularly outstanding, other than the impenetrable darkness. She hums as the capsule bounces against her collar.

From inside the nearest bush, a frog croaks. The present hum of night swirls around her. Even her footsteps seem to echo, the crunch of leaves almost constant.

What?

Ensol halts, and mere seconds later, so does the crunching. She glances through the dark, the sliver of sunshine from behind her almost gone. Each of the surrounding pines looks the same, and none of the creatures are out of place, nor are the other sounds. None of the others echo, and the distinct chirps and rumbles are nearly absent.

"Is someone there?" She calls out, raising her voice.

"Just about, yes."

Ensol almost screams, turning around in an instant. Her balance falters and she slips, the damp ground doing nothing to assist her. She braces herself for the harsh impact of the forest floor when a hand catches her arm, long fingernails grasping the flesh. She squeezes her eyes shut, too petrified to face the other.

"Fret not, Dearest," the creature drawls, and his words slur together. "That is what they have named you, yes?" Ensol manages a nod, throat constricting as she attempts to speak. The monster in front of her clutches her forearm tighter, baring his teeth. "Mhm. Why are you here today, of all days, might I inquire? Perhaps yesterday was too busy, hm?"

"I had to help someone," Ensol says, "just outside of the forest. It seemed to lure me in."

The creature chuckles, a hearty laugh erupting from his throat. "Yes, it does that sometimes. Such a pity, that is." He reaches a monstrous claw up, brushing a piece of hair from her face. "Have you heard the many tales of the forest, Dearest?"

"Most of them, I suppose."

"Interesting, are they not? It has been said that the forest prevents you from leaving, and it becomes the monster in childish nightmares." The creature taps her shoulder. "Though, most of those are false. While the forest does lure you inside, it hardly

prevents you from leaving. That, Dearest, is my job.”

Ensol’s breath catches in the back of her throat. She can feel the warmth of the monster’s breath on her neck from the proximity, his scaled hands still upon her. Around them, the forest has gone silent again.

“The elders instruct you to fear ‘Beyan’ from such an innocent age. Mere wonder corrupted by human thought.” The monster glares at her, an impish smile on display. “Oh, but have you ever questioned what, exactly, Beyan is?”

Her eyebrows furrow and she desperately tries to steady her breathing. “Beyan is the forest.”

“Wrong, Dearest.” The creature chides. “Though it must be confusing when your people have thousands of names for one thing, hm? Monster and creature, brute and demon, those are the words you use to describe me, yes, but not once has someone of your ‘importance’ actually called me Beyan.”

In one movement, Ensol is flung to the ground. She gasps and meets the monster’s eyes, breath caught in her throat once more. The creature, Beyan, stares at her as she brushes clumps of mud from her dress. The forest around them sways with an unseen wind.

“You must know how that feels, Dearest. Your true name has not been uttered for ages, has it? Names,” Beyan hums to himself, “show respect. Yours and mine, they may as well not exist. Your people refuse to respect you.”

“My people respect me,” Ensol says.

Beyan scoffs at her. “You should rather spend your time insisting on creatures being treated as humans if you’d like to waste it. The townspeople idolize you, sure, but respect you?” He glances upward. “Names hold respect.”

“You haven’t addressed me by name.”

The creature glares at her, the corners of his mouth lifting in a scowl. “Nor have you, Dearest.” Beyan grasps her hand with his own. “Beyan. As your people say, nice to meet you.”

“Ensol,” she says. A precarious smile parts her lips. “Is the forest not also named Beyan?”

“Oh, that is precisely what you are taught to believe. The forest is not to fear.” The monstrous creature steps back. “I, on the other hand, could trap you here for eternity, but you have good fortune today. I am feeling especially kind this morning.”

She nearly blanches, fingers unconsciously grasping the capsule. “That is kind?”

“I could have already imprisoned you, Dearest. Would you prefer that?”

Ensol desperately shakes her head. She should have listened to her mother. “No, thank you.” She sends a glance over her shoulder

at the small beam of sunshine through the pines. A grateful smile graces her face as she turns to leave.

“Not so fast,” Beyan murmurs as he grabs her arm. “You must need a guide, hm? I would be delighted to assist you. Free of charge.”

“Oh, of course. Are you sure you’d escort me for free? I could muster the greatest riches in the village for you, or perhaps an array of delicacies delivered to the forest’s edge?” Ensol hums, overcome with apprehension. Something seems off about Beyan’s deal, but he’s right.

The monster removes his claw from her and strokes his chin instead. “That does sound lovely, but as I said, I am feeling nice today, Dearest.” He steps ahead, motioning for her to come along.

Ensol tentatively smiles, the sight of Beyan as he winds through the forest making her nervous. She hurries after him, bumping into him as he stops. Twigs and weeds crunch under them as they saunter through, the present chirp of birds returning. The authentic sunshine brightens with each step they take, and soon enough, they arrive at the boundary.

Beyan steps aside, making space for her to exit. “Here you are, Dearest.” The monster runs a claw over the back of her neck, sending an uneasy chill through her. “I believe you can handle yourself from here on out.”

She nods, taking a breath in time with the morning wind. “Yes, thank you.” Ensol turns around to smile at him, but she merely discovers the absence of the creature. She glances toward the forest, no movement able to be seen, and she sighs. “Nevermind,” she mumbles and starts the journey back to her abode.

The sunshine seems to dim as she saunters through the village. Ensol frowns and reaches to clutch the capsule on her neck, only she touches something papery instead. Startled, she glances downward; in the place of her capsule, a thin note resides.

Ensol gasps and rips it from the golden chain. She unfolds it, eyes met with scratchy writing.

*Some forest tales are true, my Dear,
Though creatures and monsters are not to fear.
Don't trust a brute that does something for free,
I hope you have learned this lesson from me.*

Daleyza and Athena

(Story for a First-Grader)

MERCEDES GONZALEZ HERNANDEZ

Riverdale High School

9th Grade

William Saroyan Award

After school one day, a little girl named Daleyza had some math homework to do. Doing math was not a problem for her because she really liked math. She was answering questions when she came across one she did not know how to solve, so she decided to skip it and go to the next problem. She was solving the next problem but then encountered a question that she did not know how to solve again. This time, she couldn't go to the next problem because the next question was almost the same as the two she was struggling with.

Daleyza decided she would ask her parents for help, but as soon as she saw her parents, she became embarrassed to ask for help. She went to her little brother's room, but he wasn't there when she walked in. She felt all alone and began to cry.

After crying for a while, Daleyza heard something. She stood up to see what was making the noise. It sounded as if someone was calling her or someone else. When she went closer to the sound, she saw something. She was scared and fell on her behind. Then a small creature with wings appeared.

"Oh, sorry if I scared you," the little creature said, looking worried.

Daleyza couldn't say anything because she was still a little scared of what she was seeing. She finally asked the little creature, "Who are you?"

"My name is Athena. I'm a fairy of intelligence and something else," Athena said with a big smile on her face.

Daleyza was no longer afraid of the fairy. "Why did you come here?" She asked.

"I came here because I heard someone's cries," Athena said,

with a kind smile.

Daleyza remembered what had happened before she met the fairy, and her eyes started to water. The fairy started to worry. "Are you ok?" She asked.

"Yeah, it's just that I needed help on some math questions," Daleyza said.

Athena thought for a moment and then asked, "Daleyza, what is your favorite thing to do?"

"My favorite thing to do is math homework. Why do you ask?" Daleyza said, curiously.

Athena smiled and asked if Daleyza would like to go somewhere with her. Daleyza looked confused but nodded anyway. Athena looked happy with this response. "Okay, then close your eyes!" Athena said. As soon as she closed her eyes, Daleyza felt something like a little wind.

Daleyza stopped feeling the wind, and that's when the fairy told her to open her eyes. When she did, she was shocked to see a place filled with math problems, including addition and subtraction. Her mouth dropped open while there were some numbers flying above her head. "What is this place?" Daleyza asked.

Athena giggled and said, "This is where you can do math problems and get candy once you solve them. This place is called, 'Delightful.'"

"Why is it called that?" Daleyza questioned.

"Because your name means delightful." Athena said, smiling at her. Athena suggested they solve some problems while there. Daleyza excitedly nodded her head in agreement. The numbers were all different colors.

As they entered a tall building, Athena said, "This place has six levels, and each level has harder math problems to solve."

Daleyza nodded her head, and they went through a door where she was given a problem to solve. She was excited to solve it. The problem was $1 + 2$. Daleyza said the answer was 3, and she received candy for her response. She then moved to the next level. Daleyza was solving the math questions without trouble. When she got to the fifth level, the question was $10 - 5$. She was having some trouble, but she used her fingers to subtract and got 5. She was feeling nervous until she got it right and was so happy to finally be on the last level. When she got to the last problem, it was $12 - 7$. She started to panic, as this was one of the problems she'd had on the math homework she had been stuck on.

Daleyza did not know how to solve the question. She looked at the fairy and was going to ask for help, but she became scared again and wanted to cry. Athena saw that she was having trouble and decided to help her. She told Daleyza to count from 7 and see how

many numbers she needed to get to 12. Daleyza did that and got 5. This was the correct answer. Daleyza was very happy and thanked Athena for helping her. Athena told her, "You're welcome," and escorted Daleyza back to her house.

Athena asked Daleyza what math problems she needed help with, and when Daleyza showed her, they both worked together to solve them. After a while, the fairy had to leave, but before she left, she told Daleyza, "It's okay to ask for help. You will never be alone because your family will always support you." Daleyza was very comforted by these words and never had trouble asking for help with her homework again. She waved goodbye to the fairy and slept well that night.

The Wonder of Words and Faults of the Mind

EVANIE ADAME

Selma High School
11th Grade

Chair's Award

From mind to paper, writing has always intrigued me. The way a well-written sentence flows and moves through pages all emerging from my thoughts is one of the most exhilarating feelings in the world. I have spent a great deal of my life reading words, yet it wasn't until recently that I took the time to study them, how certain words can be so short yet say so much, how they can enhance and define all at once. I love the beauty of poetry and the various meanings hidden within, and the rhythm to tie it all in, yet I remain afraid to truly explore the wonders of pretty writing as I'll never regard myself ready to attempt such a feat. If one were to dig deeper, they would find my trepidation culminating in fear of failure. I hesitate to ever think that I could ever write such wonders as I have read. This agitation keeps me from creating my own words and stories and this scares me even more.

However, I refuse to let this stop me any longer.

Since my revelation, I have joined my school newspaper in hopes of gaining confidence in myself and my neglected skill. My wish

is that it will give me the push I desperately need to bloom into my capabilities if I just try.

So far it has already put me to the test, forcing me to adapt to different writing styles for the competitive world of journalism. Time will only tell if this endeavor will be my saving grace or push me down further. Yet I can already tell with the knowledge I'm absorbing, be it through my regular reading or the skills taught in class, I'm slowly growing into a stronger writer. But in spite of that, the daunting task of my personal writing still looms before me. I have yet to find the courage to put my ideas into words as the thought of failing to do my stories justice holds me back. I find myself thinking that maybe it's finally time to put my motto into practice; take it one step at a time. I simply need to write.

And write I shall in the stolen hours between school and homework when I can simply sit down and be while surrounded by my own swirling thoughts and passion, working against my fleeting motivation.

World of War

JUDE HAMMOUDA

Edison High School
10th Grade

Mia Barraza Martinez Award for Social Justice Writing

I was born in America, but my blood is more than red, white, and blue
Lucky that I have a life and an education to pursue
I grew up with dolls and playgrounds
But others on war grounds

They saw on the news: terrorists and isis,
but they don't know about the real crisis
Kids complain about school and station
but they don't see how lucky they are to get an education

While Palestinian people fight under Israeli occupation
Israeli army marches on our land
Killing our people with their bare hands

Murdering children who were just walking to school
When Americans are skipping class, just for thinking it's cool
Some people don't have knowledge about Palestine, so I intend to teach
That there are children who have never seen a beach

News coverage paints you an image, that Palestinians are the scum
When people say “Israel,” I say “That is not where I’m from”
I may have sprouted in America, but my roots run deep into the Jerusalem
I was born into the warm sun of California in a hospital with doctors and more
While children are born into a world of war

Hearing lullaby songs and watching cartoons
When all they get is an Israeli platoon
Taking their home, having to leave everything behind
While the rest of the world turns a blind eye

Hearing only gunshots and screams
Makes the loneliness feel more extreme
Dreaming of a place where they can live everyday, not fearing the Israeli poisons
But not seeing anything except for smoke and explosions

Getting blinded by the darkness, and forgetting the colors
When fighting for your life, might end the life of another
Trying to focus on the happy moments in life, but forgetting what it is
Families being torn apart, women going from Mrs. to Ms.

It’s hard to imagine it any different
But regardless, Palestine will forever be magnificent

Isolated While Isolated

MASON ROBERTS

Voyager Secondary School
11th Grade

Mia Barraza Martinez Award for Social Justice Writing

Locked in my cell
Missing my family and friends
In my mind, I have failed
I know this is not how it ends.

Locked in my cell
Wondering if this is all I know
I'm just a juvenile who can't make bail
Not knowing where I am to go.

Locked in my cell
My mother is states away
Father finally made bail
No longer knowing my way.

Locked in my cell
This is the life I chose
Lifting my wings to the sky
Like the phoenix, I rose.

Sycamore

MARTIN GONZALEZ

Mission Oak High School
10th Grade

Fresno Poets' Association Award

Reading Russian poetry on the balcony of a man,
who screams, bring her back to me.

She is a sycamore, so sick of more.
Nothing new, well she presumed.
Well down she felt drowned in the overzealousness.
Of a man who left shades of brown.
Brown leaves left, creating fading memories.

She's sick of more, sick of more.
She's gone as seasons change, the sycamore dies down.
Writing Russian poetry on the balcony of a man,
Who cries, bring her back to me.

Julius the Cat

ANAHI MARTINEZ

Edison High School
10th Grade

The Normal School Award

It was dark out and everyone had been long asleep. The only sound outside was that of crickets, the wind, and Julius. Julius was a cat. He walked along the fence wondering where the night would take him. It eventually took him to his other house where the Moore family resided. The thing is Julius lived a double life. He would spend some time with his original family, the Duffy family, who adopted him as a kitten, and the Moores, who took him in thinking he was a stray. Now, Julius knew that having two families wasn't the most loyal thing a pet could do, but he loved having double the attention. His lives were far different at one house than it was at the other. The Duffys were a young couple who didn't have any kids yet, so they treated Julius like a baby and spoiled him. He loved being the center of attention with the Duffys, but he also loved playing with the Moore children, August and Harper. Although he wasn't the center of attention at his second home, he loved playing with the children and the feeling of family.

Once Julius arrived at the Moore home, a sense of familiarity rose in him as he saw the little green house with a bowl of cat food outside with the name "Tank" painted along the side. Tank was the name the Moores have given him and the only name they knew him by. Although he responded to the Tank, he preferred the name Julius, which he received at the age of 15 weeks. Julius climbed up to Harper's bedroom window, which had been cracked open to keep the room cool during the hot summer nights. He squeezed through the crevice between the frame and the window and entered the room. The illumination from Harper's lava lamp allowed Julius to see a stack of boxes piled up in the corner of the room. Those boxes had not been there two nights ago when Julius had last entered Harper's room. The boxes had been labeled *Toys*, *Clothes*, and *Furniture* with a black marker. Julius was too tired to wonder what the boxes were for,

so he didn't think much of them and instead curled up at the edge of Harper's bed and fell asleep.

He woke up in the morning to the sound of furniture being moved around and went into the living room to investigate. He was surprised to see the home in a state he had never seen before. The family's belongings had been packed away in boxes and the room seemed to be growing larger as furniture was being carried out the door by men in matching uniforms. Julius peeked out the front door and found that the family's items were being loaded into a big truck parked in the driveway. This confused Julius, so he decided he would go to August's room for some pets. Julius walked in to see August placing his toys into boxes and sealing them up with tape. As Julius entered the room, Harper followed behind him. He heard the children talk excitedly about moving into their new rooms and after further listening, he realized the Moores were moving into a new home. He too began to get excited about his new home. He couldn't wait to explore the new house and new neighborhood. He spent the rest of the day fantasizing about the adventures that awaited him.

Later that night, he decided he would go back to his home with the Duffys. He went up to the door and meowed until he was let in. He was content to be received by pets and pats. As he made his way to the couch, he looked around the room and felt his heart drop. He realized the Duffys' belongings were not packed away and it took him a second to realize the situation. It had finally settled in that only one family was moving. He had overheard the Moores mention moving across town which would be too far for Julius to travel on his own. Julius began to wonder what would happen once the Moores moved away. How would he visit both homes? When would he be able to spend time with both families? What would happen to Julius once the Moores moved? These questions raced through his mind and made him feel uneasy. He eventually decided it was best to not stress and he went to bed.

The next morning, Julius woke up and came to the conclusion that for now, his problems would sort themselves and he shouldn't overthink it.

He went about the next few days as usual going house to house and getting attention from both families. It took the whole week for the Moores to empty out their home. Julius came by everyday to watch their belongings slowly be taken out in boxes until the home was finally vacant. On the final day of the move, they said goodbye to their old home and began to load into the car to venture off to their new one. Just before getting in the car, Harper picked up Julius with relief thinking they almost forgot him, placing him in the backseat between her and August. Julius was excited to arrive at his new home, but the drive was far too long and began to worry him. That

being said, he settled in comfortably.

It wasn't until the next few nights that Julius began to miss the Duffys. He would whine at night to be let out and he attempted once to find his way back to the Duffys but didn't make it far until he decided to walk back to his new home scared and alone.

After a week and a half of not hearing from Julius, the Duffys began to worry. Julius would usually come and go but he would never leave the house for such long periods of time. Panicked, the Duffys decided to print out missing posters and post them around the town. Julius had a pretty unique birthmark on his chest that would be helpful in identifying him. The Duffys prayed he was okay.

Not long after the posters went up, the Duffys received a call from someone who spotted a cat across town that matched the description of Julius. Full of excitement and hope, the Duffys rushed across town in search of Julius. The Duffys immediately began looking for Julius once they arrived at the neighborhood where he had been seen. It didn't take long for them to come across Julius, he was just outside his new home. When the Duffys noticed Julius, they called out for him and he came running over excitedly. It had been weeks since they last saw each other, and they were all filled with joy. The Moores had come outside to see what the commotion was about when they saw the Duffys holding Julius. When they asked why the Duffys were holding their cat, the Duffys explained that Julius had run away and they came to look for him. Confused, the Moores explained that Julius (they referred to him as Tank) was their cat and had been their cat for the past two years. The Duffys argued with them and told them they had owned Julius since he was a kitten. The two families went back and forth until they finally came to the conclusion that Julius had been secretly going from house to house and was living with both families.

Although Julius' real owners were the Duffys, August and Harper had developed an especially close bond with the cat. The Duffys were surprised that the Moores even considered keeping the cat after discovering that it belonged to them. The Moores however believed that Julius should stay with them because he was just as much their cat as he was the Duffys'. After a while, they decided the cat should pick for himself. They placed Julius on the ground and had a representative from each family stand 10 steps away from him. Both representatives began to call out for the cat. The idea was that whoever Julius went to got to keep him. Julius hesitated a bit but ended up walking towards the Duffys. The Moore family was disappointed but understood that was what they had agreed upon. The Duffys let Julius say his final goodbyes and headed home.

Upon arriving back home, Julius noticed something interesting. A few doors down at the little green house there was a man

unloading boxes from his truck and into the home. Julius wondered what the man was doing there and decided that he would get to the bottom of it.

The next night, Julius squeezed out the window and headed off toward the little green house. He meowed at the door until it opened and when it did, that same man appeared behind it. The man looked down and smiled when he saw the cat. As he bent down to pet it he said, "I shall call you ... Bartholomeow."

There are Trees Here

ANNIE BRYANT

Mariposa County High School
10th Grade

Philip Levine Prize Award

Inspired by Jamaal May's "There are Birds Here"

For Mariposa

There are trees here.

Trees with thick leaves and

dark branches. And no,

not dark like the ashes left

on a fiery hillside. I mean the dark

of a sliver of shade on a warm day. And no,

I don't mean the day is warm like

the flames consuming a home. I said warm,

and not the sticky heat of a world without rain.

I mean the warmth of a cozy furnace,
or the sun slipping through the clouds. And no,
the clouds aren't composed of smoke. And no,
this town is not a pile of ashes.

I am trying to say that
there are trees here,
and people in the streets,
and clouds in the sky,
just like anywhere else.

A Letter to My Mom

LINA LEE

Edison High School
10th Grade

Hmong American Ink and Stories Award

The last trip we took together was a cruise to Catalina Island
I remember stepping out on the balcony and staring at the ocean
The ocean was dark and too vast, it was unsettling
I've never been one to be scared of darkness
In fact I was one who used to be drawn in by it
But, the ocean made me feel scared, it made me feel small
I stared into the ocean,
Not stopping till I felt too uncomfortable to breathe

Was that a glimpse into what I would be feeling in the near few months?
Was the universe preparing me for what was to come?
The night you left me the ocean took over

That darkness and emptiness swallowed me until I drowned
Then when I drowned, it captured me again
I pleaded and cried for you to save me

Or really for anybody to just throw me a life jacket
But nobody could hear me
No matter how loud I screamed, there was no noise
The roar of the waves was simply louder

You left at night and that's always when the tide rises
But now I have no choice in what I do
I'm soaked and exhausted
I plea for the ocean to not come
I beg for the sun to stay, for the tide to not rise tonight
But without remorse it always does

I've accepted this is my life now
I must learn to always have my goggles on
To not take off my wetsuit
I never know when the ocean will decide it will rise
I'm vulnerable to drowning at any moment
I don't know when I'll instantly be suffocated from water that fills my lungs
Water that'll burn as I cough it up in a few hours
Just as another cruel reminder that the ocean will always be there
A reminder that no matter what I do I'll never be dry again.

The Everlasting Smile

SUSIE ORTEGA

Mission Oak High School
12th Grade

FACET Award

The crisp October morning kept me from thinking of the long road ahead of us. I was newly divorced, left to take care of my 4-year-old daughter alone. My soon-to-be ex-husband Thomas left us for his mistress. I would never have imagined him loving someone more than his family. After being thrown out of our family home, we moved to a small town, Westford, Massachusetts. The house was older, but it was the best I could do. Eleanor's happiness was all that mattered, and I needed her room to be a happy place. I was lucky to have found the estate sale so close to home. As I entered the estate, it caught my eye. It was a beautiful white vintage vanity, perfect for Eleanor's room.

"May I help you ma'am?" The caretaker asked me as I walked in. I let her know that I was interested in the vanity. She gave me a curious look and went on to tell me that it had belonged to the now-deceased homeowner. I was surprised it cost so little. It almost seemed as if they wanted to get rid of the vanity as soon as possible. Since I was on a budget, I was more than happy to take such a treasure home.

My daughter was delighted with the vanity. I would comb her hair out every night in front of the mirror. It became a routine that we both looked forward to at the end of the day. After a few months, we got used to the house, the neighborhood, and our daily lives. Everything seemed to have fallen into place until that cold January night.

I was busy making hot chocolate and smores for Eleanor and me. This used to be our favorite family tradition in the winter. My heart raced thinking of all the old family memories we had. I heard Eleanor giggling from her room, it was nice to know that she was happy and had adjusted well.

“Stop, that tickles!” Eleanor shouted as her laughs echoed around the house.

I was taken aback by her comment. Who was she talking to? I walked down the hall to her room.

“Eleanor, sweetie, who are you talking to?” I walked into her room to find no one but her sitting at the vanity, gazing at her reflection.

Eleanor looked back at me and smiled. “Oh, I’m just talking to Ravenna.”

I scanned the room again, still no one. Perhaps an imaginary friend? I let it go and walked back into the kitchen. I shouldn’t be so quick to judge, maybe this was her way of coping since her friends weren’t around.

I wasn’t quite used to the single mom routine. It was difficult dealing with everything all by myself. I was more tired than usual but tried my best not to show it. I wanted to do my best to make sure Eleanor was content. I walked past Eleanor’s room. In the corner of my eye, I saw a woman sitting at the vanity. Startled, I looked back into the room ... no one there. I thought my eyes were playing games on me. There couldn’t have been — no I was just tired and I’m seeing things.

I dropped Eleanor off at her grandmother’s house. I needed time on my own. I spent most of the day cleaning the whole house. All that was left was Eleanor’s room. I picked up her toys, made her bed, and folded her laundry. Perfect! Everything was clean, well besides the vanity. I turned to the vanity and noticed some writing on it. Are you kidding me, I didn’t buy this so that Eleanor could write and scribble all over it.

Ravenna

Where have I heard that name? Eleanor ... she was taking this imaginary friend a little bit seriously. I scrubbed the writing off the desk, luckily it was written in washable markers. I sighed and sat down on the vanity chair. I was more tired than ever. My eyes gazed at my reflection in the mirror- what the hell?! A woman with a carved smile stood behind me staring at me. I jerked my head to look behind me. No one. I leaped off the seat and bolted out the door, slamming it behind me. I caught my breath and looked back at the door. I was probably as white as a ghost- I was completely petrified.

A few days had passed since I saw- whatever I saw. I kept this to myself. I had no one to tell. I convinced myself that I was seeing things. Maybe I needed help. Maybe this divorce was getting to me and putting stress on me. Eleanor was adjusting perfectly, but for some reason I couldn’t.

I decided to call a therapist, I needed someone to talk to. Eleanor

had her imaginary friend to talk to. I thought it was time I found someone to talk to as well.

“Good Afternoon Ms. Hulland.” The therapist was a lady around my age, with short blonde hair and pale peachy skin. “I heard you were having some trouble handling your divorce?”

I explained everything; how I felt while dealing with the divorce, how Eleanor’s happiness was all that mattered to me. I wanted to be brave like her, for her. She told me to try spending more time with Eleanor; and, when I got the chance, to take time to relax and enjoy time to myself.

I took her advice and spent more time with Eleanor, more time than usual. I was brushing her hair in front of the vanity.

“Ravenna told me you erased her name off of our vanity.” Eleanor’s tone changed, her voice darkened. She turned her head to look back at me and gave me a blank stare.

I was in complete shock, was I right about what I’ve been seeing? “How does- Ravenna know ...” My body was shaking.

“She said she saw you. She said to never touch our vanity ever again.” Eleanor suddenly had a wide smile on her face. She jumped off the chair and ran out of the room. I turned and watched her as the door slammed shut behind her. I heard the strokes of fingers smudging the mirror behind me. My body was frozen. I didn’t dare turn around. Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t. The noises stopped. My heart was racing. I gained the courage to turn around.

“OH MY GOD—” I screamed as tears ran down my face.

Ravenna was written on the vanity mirror with blood.

A woman appeared out of thin air, my eyes widened as she jumped right at me screaming and scratched my face.

I ran out of the room shouting for Eleanor. All I could hear were echoes of her laugh. The room felt like it was spinning, I couldn’t think straight.

I woke up. I woke up in a cold sweat and gazed at the room. Silence. It was so quiet I could hear myself think. I got out of bed and headed to the restroom. Looking at the mirror I saw this huge scratch on my face.

“What the hell ...” I whispered under my breath. I touched my cheek gently, the scratch was real. I ran to Eleanor’s room and barged through the door. She was sleeping peacefully. I looked at the vanity in fear- nothing, there was no blood or anything on that vanity. I was shaking, I closed the door and fell to my knees. All I could do was cry.

I needed to know what was going on, the therapist wasn’t going to help. I decided to drive to the estate. I needed answers

about the vanity.

I arrived at the estate. As I got out of the car, a cold breeze seemed to whisper a warning. I walked up to the door and rang the bell. I stood in the wind by myself for what felt like an eternity. The caretaker opened the door.

“May I help you ma’am?” It was the same cold response she gave me the last time we met.

“I have some questions about the vanity I purchased here.” She looked at me. Her eyes widened. She had this frightened expression on her face. She looked around before giving a response.

“Come in ...” She said almost in a whisper. She invited me inside the estate. The estate was dark and cold, and I felt anxious. She led me to the left wing of the house.

“Can I fix you something to drink?”

“Water will do, thank you.” She handed me a glass of ice-cold water. After taking a sip and clearing my throat, I was ready to get some questions answered. “About the vanity...” I was cut off by the worry in the caretaker’s voice.

“What have you done with it? Has ... she returned?” It seemed the caretaker had more questions than I did.

“I haven’t done anything to it- and returned? Who is she?” At this point in the conversation, I was more confused than ever.

“The vanity you purchased belonged to the original owner of this estate. Her name was Raveena Adams, and she was known as one of the most beautiful women in the area. She was a fair woman who had shiny black hair and icy blue eyes, as cold as the Arctic. One of her best features was her bright white smile. Everything about her was admirable. She was admired throughout Westford society. She loved to stare at herself in the vanity. Everytime she would stare, she would smile. Until one night, a horrible fire broke out in this estate. Raveena was trapped in the fire. Luckily she survived but was never the same again. Her elegant model-like face warped into a clay-like texture. Her face was covered in skin grafts. The town folks looked at Raveena in disgust, as if she was a monster. She was no longer the beautiful woman everyone admired. Over time, Raveena grew depressed. One night she finally had enough. She sat at her vanity and carved a smile on her face with a butcher knife.” The caretaker had tears rolling down her eyes.

I felt chills going down my spine. It was such a tragic story attached to a beautiful vanity.

“How do you know so much about this?” As scared as I was, I wanted to know more. I had to know more.

“Raveena Adams ... was my great great grandmother. My name is Amelia Adams, Raveena’s great great grandchild. The vanity was

her prized possession. After her death, my grandmother stored it in the attic. My family could tell there was definitely something sinister about the vanity. However, my mother was so attracted to it that she took possession of the vanity; or rather, the vanity took possession of her. That's when Raveena's ghost first made its appearance. It seemed that she was not happy that her vanity was being used by someone else. Great grandma Raveena became aggressive. She would attack my mother and leave scratch marks that resembled her carved smile. Her name would appear on the vanity, written in blood. Even some of our family members died with smiles on their faces, including my mother ..." Silence hit the room as Amelia began to weep.

My eyes widened in shock. The stuff the Adams family experienced was exactly what my family was going through. I felt sick. This evil thing was going to tear my family apart ... even more than it already was.

"How did ... you escape her?" I paused. I wasn't sure if my question came off as inconsiderate.

"Eventually my family grew tired of Raveena's ghost so we called a priest and locked the vanity away. Selling it to you was our escape. We did not think Raveena would follow it." Amelia pitifully looked at me. The expression on her face was apologetic and remorseful.

After leaving the estate, the sky was filled with dark clouds and a cold wind swept through the trees. I knew then what I had to do to protect my family.

"Hey mom, do you mind taking care of Eleanor? I need to take care of something." I hesitated. I hadn't told my mother about what was going on, I just needed time to get rid of the vanity.

"Erin, what's going on? You seem tense." My mother knew something was up.

"I just need Eleanor out of the house." My tone changed from nervous to serious.

"You aren't telling me what's going on." My mother's tone changed as well, the difference was she sounded angry.

"I can't explain it now ... I just need time."

I drove Eleanor to my mother's house. The car ride was silent. Eleanor paid no attention to me, only to what was outside the window.

"Raveena told me about the scratch." My eyes widened in shock. I slammed the car brakes and turned back at Eleanor.

"What ... did ... you say?" My heart was racing. I was almost shaking.

Eleanor started to giggle and a smile slowly started to appear on her face. Her eyes were glued to my face and she did not stop looking

at me. I called my mother and told her I couldn't leave Eleanor with her. It was clear something was wrong with her, and who knows what she would do to my mother.

I drove Eleanor back home. I was terrified, not only for myself but for my daughter. That's it! I barged through her room and grabbed the vanity.

Eleanor was playing with her dolls, her attention was focused on me when she heard the door slam open. "Mom, what are you doing?"

I ignored her. I grabbed everything that was on the vanity and threw it to the floor, attempting to carry the vanity. I won't lie, it was heavy.

"NO, LEAVE OUR VANITY ALONE!" Eleanor screamed at the top of her lungs. She ran towards me trying to pull the vanity out of my hands.

"Eleanor let go!"

"NO. LEAVE IT ALONE!!" Eleanor grabbed onto my leg scratching it like a cat. I stumbled holding onto the vanity. I lost my grip.

CRASH The vanity fell on its side and the mirror shattered.

There she stood. The tall fair lady with shiny black hair, icy cold eyes, and that daunting smile. I was frozen, I couldn't even process what I was seeing. Eleanor's cry snapped me out of my trance. Raveena's scream threw me against the wall before I could grab Eleanor. Raveena turned and faced my daughter. Eleanor stood there helplessly.

"LEAVE MY DAUGHTER ALONE!"

As I lay in pain on the floor, I watched Raveena grab Eleanor by her hair. She glanced at her peachy pale skin and amber hair. Eleanor's scream only grew louder.

"You ruined my prized possession ... now I'm going to ruin yours."

I watched helplessly as Raveena slammed my daughter into the broken vanity glass. I screamed with agony, seeing her blood everywhere broke my heart.

Raveena picked up my daughter once more, along with a piece of broken glass. My eyes widened with realization, as I remembered what the caretaker said.

"Even some of our family members died with smiles on their faces, including my mother ..." Time stopped. Everything was in slow-mo. I ran towards my daughter, I wasn't going to lose my baby. I dove to grab her, Raveena swung her arm and slashed my cheek.

So much blood on the floor. I scanned the room, my vision getting blurry.

"There ..." I thought to myself as I crawled to the nightstand. A

lit candle. I grabbed the candle and threw it towards the vanity with all the strength I had left. The candle rolled around, the flame hitting the floor and causing a fire.

Raveena's scream threw me back. I couldn't even see my daughter. Smoke filled the room, my vision getting worse.

Dizziness. The sounds of sirens became so muffled.

"HEY, IN HERE ... TWO PEOPLE!!" The voice of a man.

I opened my eyes as much as I could. The last thing I saw was a man in a uniform carrying my daughter away.

"Ms. Adams, you're awake!" I opened my eyes. I couldn't see anything. Something was covering my face.

"Where's my daughter!" I shouted. Eleanor was the only thing that mattered.

"Ms. Adams, your daughter passed away two years ago..." The tone of the nurse softened. My heart sank. Once again everything was dizzy, I was too confused to understand.

"It's been two years since the incident. We tried everything we could but, your daughter lost too much blood before we could get to her. You on the other hand; well, I suppose maybe now is an appropriate time so show you." The nurse took off the bandages that were covering my face and handed me a mirror.

"I'm sorry Ms. Adams, this was the best we could do." I held the mirror up to my face and I gasped in horror. My face warped into a clay-like texture, all that was left was a carved smile. An everlasting smile

Villanelle

ECHO MARTINEZ

Corcoran High School
10th Grade

FACET Award

May the stars at night forever shine
Till the sky falls and the moon collapses
Let the night sky with dreams prevail

For the stars hold the wishes of men
And they hold the hopes of humanity
May the stars at night shine forever

And when you look up to the dark sky of the night
Men are infected with its beauty and women with its grace
Let the night sky with dreams prevail

And the young lovers wish beneath the stars
They wish upon the stars for their love forever last, so
May the stars at night forever shine

And the old lovers gaze through the darkness of the night
Eyes filled with wisdom and knowledge praying that the gods
may listen,
Let the night sky with dreams prevail

And as the stars don't falter, and the night sky stays stable
The dreams and wishes of many are granted, therefore
May the stars at night forever shine
Let the night sky with dreams prevail

The Beauty of Everyday Life

MARY JOHNSON

University High School

11th Grade

MFA Award

When I was younger, I didn't understand how people could just be. How you were expected to grow up, go to school, get a job, and then work for the rest of your life until you die. Is that all there is to it? Why then, do we have over 7 billion people on our planet, simultaneously growing, working, living and dying? Is it the fear of death that caused them all to continue this vicious cycle of growing-working-living-and-dying? There has to be something more, I thought. To keep them all from going insane and doing irreparable damage to themselves or others before they have the chance to grow-live-work-and-die.

The older I got, the more I kept questioning the cycle and questioning myself, questioning why I had joined and kept the path of the cycle I have spent so long trying to unravel and make sense of.

The older I got, the more I began to rely on the romanticism of the mundane, everyday growing-living-and-working I had to do to keep myself afloat.

The older I got, the more time I spent trying to take the perfect picture of the sky to help me feel better about my life and growing-living-and-working.

The older I got, the more beauty I began to see in the everyday car driving past, the cat on the outside window sill and the glow of the T.V. late at night.

The older I got, the more I began to realize that the only way to cope with growing-living-working-and-dying is to see the hidden beauty lying in the fresh raindrops on the stop sign, the intricate

folds of a warm Starbucks buttered croissant and the hypnotic ocean blue of a kitchen hand soap.

The older I got, the more I began to sympathize with those around me who hadn't come to the same realization I had. With those who were barely making their way along, their fragile porcelain beings being chiseled away faster and faster by every failed Chemistry exam, every birthday spent in isolation or every burnt piece of toast.

The older I got, the more I understood the importance of using my knowledge and appreciation of my worldly surroundings to help support those around me.

I believe in always trying my hardest to plant my appreciation of life in others for the purpose of making their lives more pleasant. I know that I can't force others to see and understand the world in the way that I do. But I also know that I can share what others will accept and understand of my belief, knowing that it will help them cope with the growing-living-working-dying cycle better. I know that nobody appreciates the complex threads woven within each shoelace or the smooth yet sandy texture of the cover of *There, There*, or the golden reflection of my own being on my bathroom door knob the way that I do. I know that although they don't understand these things the way that I do, that doesn't prevent me from doing whatever I can to help ease the heartbreak of the growing-living-working-and-dying. I will always spread my optimism and appreciation for my surroundings to those around me because I believe in the beauty of the normal life.

Lies of Flora

FELICITY CHAVEZ

Sanger High School
9th Grade

San Joaquin Literary Association Award

I step into the ominous garden
Entrance warnings I'd forgotten
The path I'm following
Is warm and calming
Cold breezes begin to form
Flower bushes bees had swarmed
The red of roses

As I race, my embrace encloses
A lovely scent to chase
It was kind and full of grace
I laughed and smiled
Vulnerability compiled
Vines of agility
Pulled me up unsteadily
Then their thorns had pierced me
They held my neck tightly

My life began to melt
All feelings I'd felt
Bleeding and crying
Rose thorns like lying
I can't pull away
I am lost and scathed
I am far from the ground
My heartbeat is loud
The garden is empty

Freedom I'm struggling
It's my fault I'm bleeding
My body is weakening
My hands are shaking
My hope fell away with the aching
I couldn't feel a thing
I didn't try to stay alive
I died in the lies flowers try to hide

Cartas de un hombre muerto

JUAN SAMUEL GARNICA

Mission Oak High School
12th Grade

Chicanx Writers and Artists Association Award

Marzo 20/2004

Mi vida colgaba de tus manos, siempre esperaba ser acariciado por la suavidad de tu amor, siempre te protegí, te amé. Era un hombre vacío que siempre quería ver el mundo de una mejor manera, ahora estoy en un mundo de falsedad, lo único que tenía seguro era el amor que yo sentía por ti. Dime si faltaron palabras de apoyo, si faltó cariño y responsabilidad mía. Siempre fuiste mi sol que iluminaba mi vida con tu dulzura y amabilidad. No entiendo el por que ese sol decidió simplemente apagarse. No pude detenerte, no pude ayudarte, mi amor no fue suficiente para reanimar una vida de miseria pasada. Los planes que te contaba con entusiasmo, esos mismos planes que te motivaban a estar en este mundo un día más, dejaron de funcionar. Nunca me di cuenta en qué momento te estaba perdiendo, cuál fue mi sorpresa que todo esto no fue suficiente para evitar que tu ya no estes aquí.

Aun puedo sentir tu mirada de cariño, tu atención en mi cuando te contaba mis momentos interesantes del día, así que por favor déjame contarte como ha sido mi día. Hoy volvi a ver a nuestro amigo, cada dia mas alejado de mi, piensa que estoy loco al querer cambiar el pasado, se que estoy perdiendo mi vida y no se como detenerme. Me siento desolado cuando veo hacia el jardín y ya no veo tu figura cortando flores con delicadeza. Quisiera volver a abrazarte, y volver a sentir tu calor que me mantenía vivo.

Abril 06/2004

Hoy, el dia de tu cumpleaños senti un alivio de que no llores por la manana, asi como lo hacias cada cumpleaños, acompañado de una profunda nostalgia al no poder hacerte sentir bien en tu dia especial, como cada ano corte las flores más bonitas del jardín con la delicadeza que lo hacías, pero ahora esas flores se marchitan en una repisa vacía al igual que el jardín. Si llegas a leer esto, quiero que

sepas que siempre creí ser el soporte en tu vida, pero ahora me doy cuenta que tu igual eres el mio. Sabes que nunca fui un hombre que expresaba sus sentimientos, pero ahora no tengo a nadie más que los escuche, eras la única persona en mi vida que me escuchaba y me entendía. No sabía que yo dependía más de ti, realmente nunca fui la persona que intentaba curarse, sino que fui el herido que tu ayudaste. Me sigo preguntando cuánto tiempo podré estar sin ti, ahora que me doy cuenta que yo nunca te ayude, tu fuiste la que me salvó de mi. Espero poder estar contigo en tu próximo cumpleaños.

Junio 12/2004

Sé que hoy es nuestro aniversario, estoy intentando cumplir lo que te prometí alguna vez, solo que esta vez lo hago sin ti. Como le explico a mi mente que necesito volver a estar solo, me llena de lágrimas el verte siempre en mis recuerdos, es difícil aceptar que aunque tu recuerdo sigue presente, tu ya no sigues en el. Ahora me encuentro esperando en la misma colina del atardecer en la que solíamos venir cada aniversario, este es el primer aniversario que no olvidaré. Y el primer atardecer que me destruía al esconderse el sol. Lo que antes me daba más vida para vivir un día más, ahora me susurra el beneficio de ir a visitarte. Con tristeza y soledad veo las fotografías en las que nos veíamos tan felices juntos, y es difícil, aunque me duele ahora que estás sin vida, al menos siempre estaremos juntos en las fotografías. No se cuanto esperar, necesito que estés a mi lado, no puedo continuar mi vida, y es que es difícil explicarle a mi cuerpo que ya no será abrazado, y aún más difícil el decirle a mi mente que ya no podra verte.

Noviembre 2/2004

Mi vida ha empeorado, simplemente perdí, lo he perdido todo. Se fue contigo nuestro hogar, mis sueños, nuestro futuro se marchó al momento que decidiste irte. Tengo miedo, tengo miedo de empezar a odiar algo que ame con cada parte de mi ser. Pero simplemente es difícil entender que la persona que más amaste ya no esté contigo. Quisiera decir que no estoy molesto por que tomaras esa decisión, pero mi corazón simplemente no para de sentirse traicionado, no entiendo, por qué abandonar todas esas promesas y sueños que teníamos juntos. Me odio igual a mi, por no llegar a tiempo ese día, y no dejo de pensar en poder solucionar el pasado. Me niego a olvidar, sabes, no he querido terminar el libro que me recomendaste, ¿por qué querría terminar algo que me dejaste?. Hay días en los que amanezco sintiéndolo todo, otros en los que amanezco sintiendo nada. no se cual es peor, solo se que hace muy difícil el poder levantarme de la cama. Mi vida parece insignificante, realmente yo morí contigo ese día, solo mi cuerpo y mente se la han pasado esperando a que les avisen que es hora de irse. Lo único que me queda es este papel y lápiz, escribiendo una carta que ya jamás podrás leer.

Execution(er)

NKAUJ HNUB JENNIFER LEE

Edison High School

11th Grade

Hmong American Writers' Circle Award

The executioner holds the rope of loose lace(s)
while I lay my head in this guillotine.
Sixteen years, the neck turns iron-rust and forest-moss.
Before the sun comes to kiss the moon unrepentantly,
I'll become an eclipse and come to rest with the stars.

I'm hung from the poisonous tip of tongue
in which she owns and grasps like anglerfishes
and I, hollow.

Of what became pebbles were meteors, and streams, rivers.
These double-edged words welcome themselves
into my accepting, putrefying brain.

The loosely lace(d) rope holds me, injects me with IV fluid
that reeks of cremation—ablaze pandemonium.
One by one with each string, the upbringing weight
finally conquers these hills, relief.
Breath on the misty air of illusion.

Am I the Executioner?
Fisheyes gazing beyond the horizon
compressed between white lilies and purple hyacinths.

Alas the execution(er) awaits; iron-rust and forest-moss heads come
tumbling down dreaded black dahlia-covered hills.
I'm all but a hydrating, begging, kneeling fish.

On the 60th Day, Flowers Bloomed

KAITLYN WOODRUFF

Mission Oak High School

11th Grade

Sherley Anne Williams Award

My grandmother bloomed kindness
On her knees, she planted the seeds
And made beauty out of dirt
Soil under my fingernails
Reminding me of the love I was to share
While I held her hand
It was a lesson seasons could only teach
But then the ground went gray
And earth went quiet
And it seemed all emotion had died
“The good days are worth more than the bad”
She chanted
On nights of gloom
I had to remind myself that one day the sky would once again be blue
I have to keep hope that soon happiness will be spread throughout
my garden
So many tears prepared the sun
For his return
And when he tapped my shoulders on a new May morning
My soul took its first breath
Within sixty days
Colors became feelings
Petals held laughter
And scents cured a frosted heart
Flowers resurrected a valley
By mending our thorns
And my grandmother grew kindness from anger

The Way to Half Dome

MATTHEW PITCHER

Edison High School
11th Grade

Wendy Rose Award

After N. Scott Momaday

The granite slope reveals itself
over the Valley of Yosemite,
east along the central Sierra Nevadas.
Known by the Native people,
the Ahwahnechee, as Tis-sa-ack—
it was given the name Cleft Rock.

One of the most challenging climbs is there.
The ascent to the peak through cracks in the rock is treacherous,
an 8.2-mile hike, 4,800 feet of elevation gain,
and murderous lightning threatens to take lives.

The top lays flat and spacious,
and very little life grows beneath your feet.
There are innocent, shallow streams

of melted snowfall, which lead to
thunderous yet majestic waterfalls
crashing throughout the Valley.

Large gray and white deer
can be spotted throughout the brush,
too scared to approach the strangers,
and squirrels that are full of life show no fear.

Connectedness is the theme of the land.
All organisms in the park are in harmony;
there is much diversity among the entities in sight,
but one mountain reigns above all.
On top of Half Dome, everything inside you is awakened,
and this, you believe, is where tranquility is found.

The World Was Born Of Ink

“JASPER” CEDERLOF

Mission Oak High School
12th Grade

Honorable Mention

Once, the world was nothing but white. An off-white at that. The white held no suffering, for how could it? A pale void of nothing. How could you get tired of nothing? Despite this, the blankness of the world became restless. It looked at itself and longed to understand. It did not know what touch was, though it was sure if it did, its touch would be smooth, yet contrarily grainy. But how could that be? Those textures are opposing? That's not possible. The world became overwhelmed by this thought. It did not know where the idea of touch, nor texture came from. What could that be?

While the world was stressing over the imaginative thought of touch, it saw. It had seen before, but it had only seen white. There was a contrast above it. A sense it had never felt. The world saw black. The black came closer and darker, getting bigger and bigger until the page was struck. A feeling, entirely new to the world, smothered it and swirled around on its face. And the world knew words. And touch. The world understood as the black whipped around on its surface. Black? No, a pen. The white began to realize that it existed as a page. A book. Though a book, it was still a world. A new world that none had seen or thought up before. It understood. Above it, it saw. The scent of dirt, the color of ink, as faces and words were scribed onto its body.

The world was born of ink.

(Excerpt of) The Manor and the Village

ELSA “MERRY” HAMMONS

Sanger West High School
11th Grade

Honorable Mention

Addison stood at the threshold of Whitlock Manor. “Ughhhh,” she muttered under her breath. “I can’t believe these people.”

The Manor was ... gaudy, to say it politely. A stone brick and iron fence surrounded it and its stupid hedged grounds, with little gravel paths and at least three gardeners that Addison could see. For the manor itself, the builders *could not pick a style*, the finished product having wood, brick, stone, and *gold*. Why gold? *Because these people are stupid rich and love reminding us*, Addison told herself.

The gates were opened by two guards for Addison’s family and their wagons. A stroke of bad luck, it truly was, that the family who *usually* took the Whitlock family their weekly supplies were unable to do so for the next few months, seeing as they had just welcomed twins. So the other families in the village were trading off the “privilege” read *chore*, and this week happened to be Addison’s turn. *Great*.

Inside the manor, it was even *worse*. Addison hadn’t thought that was possible, but... it was. Rich red carpet formed a path on the parquet floors, guiding the family of five and their two carts through the “stately” colosseum of stone, wood, scattered wealth, tacky paintings (that were *intended* to be very serious), and gaudy furniture. Seriously, who thought that deep purple and birch wood went with lime green and *orange tourmaline*?!

And the *smell*. Like fresh bread, flowers, and *feet*. Couldn’t they just open a window? But maybe a little wind would ruin the orange tourmaline.

Addison wanted to throw up. But that would cause a *scene*.

After almost an eternity walking down the same hallway, the little procession reached the “Audience Room.” It even had a stupid

gold-plated sign with fancy writing that *nobody could read*. It was just to make the townspeople feel inferior, Addison decided, that's it. And since *apparently* they also couldn't open doors, why not have some guards there to open them and make the people feel even *more hapless*.

"Boys, be quiet," Addison's mother told her two youngest, who were whining about the smell and the disgustingly decorated dark hallway. "Just until we leave. I'll make cookies when we get home if you behave. That means *no faces*, Connor."

The six-year-old pouted.

Addison hadn't even realized that her brothers were complaining, she was so busy trying to zone everything out. She sighed, then immediately regretted it, trying not to gag.

They approached the large wooden doors, also decorated with orange tourmaline, and the guards didn't move. "No children allowed in the Audience Hall unless they are vital to your audience," one of them said.

"We can escort them outside for you," the other guard said. "Your audience shouldn't take very long." Before either of Addison's parents could say anything, the guard snapped his fingers and another guard appeared.

"Alright. That would be great. Stay by the guards, kids," Addison's mother said.

Addison nodded, then grabbed each of her brothers' hands and followed the guard back outside, out of the gaudy halls and into the fresh air. Once it hit her face, Addison wanted to gasp it in and fall on the ground to let her body absorb all of the early spring air. But of course, that would cause a scene.

So Addison elected to wander in the closest garden. Sure, it was stupid and way too manicured, but nature was still nature, probably. And it was better than looking at the manor. She wasn't really defying her mother's orders, either; there were guards *everywhere*. Why? No idea.

Addison bent down to look at a flower she decided was either fake or painted somehow, and when she started to stand, she collided with a warm body and was nearly concussed by some bony thing. Probably a chin.

"Watch it!" Addison grumbled, rubbing her head.

"Sorry!" the other voice, very light, yelped. The unfortunately pretty blonde girl gasped and her blue eyes widened. "Oh, did I hurt you?"

"Nah, it's not like brains are important," Addison replied sarcastically.

"Oh. Wait—"

Addison laughed. She didn't know why, it just came out.

Something about this rich girl in a fancy dress with jewels in her hair not understanding *sarcasm* was just so hilarious.

“Are you okay?” the girl asked.

“Yeah, hopefully you didn’t give me a concussion,” Addison said darkly. “Anyway, I’ve got to get back. Have fun in your garden.”

She turned and began to walk away with as much dignity as she could muster before the girl cried, “Wait!” Addison should have kept walking. But something about this girl made her stop. Slowly, very slowly, Addison turned around to face her. “You’re from the village, right?”

Addison rolled her eyes. *Obviously*. “Yes.”

“Wow! I’ve never met someone from the village before! I’m Charlotte! What’s your name?”

“...Addison.”

“Hi! What do you do? What does your family do?”

“...They’re bakers. I help them when I’m not at school.” Probably not the wisest to just give her family’s place of work out, but the Whitlocks probably had access to all of the employment documents of the village. Charlotte could find out anyway.

“That’s so cool! I’ve never met a baker before! I mean, we have one, but I’m not allowed to talk to the lower servants. I wish I could. They know what the village is like. I’m so interested in that. Isn’t it just amazing? Doesn’t my father just do such a good job running it?”

Addison didn’t know whether to laugh again or be offended. She decided on a little bit of both. “Uh, it’s alright, and *no. Definitely not*. We could probably govern ourselves and be better off without his stupid taxes on everything and all of the food we have to give to you. You know that those two wagons could feed half the village for two days? Yet you use all that for *four people* and twenty servants. It makes me sick, honestly. You need to learn how to actually do stuff, and earn your food, like the rest of us. We can’t just tax everyone when we want silk from Barlowe!”

Charlotte looked like she’d seen a ghost. “You ... don’t love it?”

“*NO!* Almost every waking minute is spent trying to get by under your *death grip!* We barely have enough food because you take so much of it! We barely have enough money because you take it for your *stupid silks* and *orange tourmaline!*”

Charlotte was silent. Addison took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’m sorry. I don’t know you, I don’t know why I thought it was a good idea to—”

“I want proof.”

“Excuse me?”

“My father told me the exact opposite for all my life. Obviously I believe him, but I think you’re too upset to be lying. I want to know who’s right.” Charlotte had this look in her eye that Addison couldn’t

quite decipher. It looked familiar, but where she'd seen it before, Addison didn't know—

The front doors started to open with loud creaks, and both girls jumped. "Uh, I've got to go!" Addison yelled, running off through the garden and back to her brothers.

"I'll see you, then!"

Yeah right, Addison thought, only with a twinge of ... guilt? Sadness? Something. She sighed and rid her mind of it, taking her place beside her brothers as her parents stepped out of the manor with two empty carts.

Thoughts of Addison whirled through Charlotte's head all day. She couldn't stop thinking about the girl who revealed that what she had believed for her entire life might have been a lie.

Charlotte skipped lunch, in favor of "studying". In reality, she was sneaking through her father's office in search of any documents that might prove who was correct while her family ate. After a heart-stopping creak that ended up just being the manor settling, nothing was found.

The rest of the day was spent thinking. Mostly about Addison, but a significant amount of that thinking was about what Charlotte would do. She couldn't just pretend that nothing had happened, that much was certain. Should she confront her father? To be honest, that would accomplish nothing.

"Charlotte, are you alright? You missed lunch, and now you're barely eating," her mother asked that evening over dinner.

Charlotte poked the food on her plate: a juicy slice of steak, mashed potatoes, salad, and fresh bread drenched in butter. "I'm fine," she replied. "Just not very hungry." How could she say she felt guilty without solid evidence that there was something to feel guilty for?

"Are you sure it's not your studies?" her father queried. "There's only so much you ought to learn: just what's important for your life."

Just the things *he said* that were important for her life, is what he really meant. Which would include lies about the town she was forbidden to visit.

"I'm sure." Charlotte would have said more, but her older brother decided that then would be a wonderful time to begin a sword fight with both of their steak knives. Charlotte's words died on her tongue as the sound of her father's immediate scolding filled the room.

Later that night, as she was getting ready for bed, more unrelenting thoughts of Addison flooded Charlotte's head. Maybe it was because she'd forced herself to eat, hunger outweighing her

guilt, and now that her stomach was full she realized that maybe Addison's never was.

Water did nothing to cleanse Charlotte of these thoughts. By the time she climbed into bed, her sole focus was Addison's words.

"We barely have enough food because you take so much of it!"

Charlotte's stomach was very full.

"You know that those two wagons could feed half the village for two days?"

She was quite tired.

"You need to learn how to actually do stuff, and earn your food, like the rest of us."

The skirt of her nightgown brushed against her legs as she settled into the mattress and closed her eyes.

"We can't just tax everyone when we want silk from Barlowe!"

Charlotte pulled the soft sheets closer around her. "We barely have enough money because you take it for your stupid silks and orange tourmaline!"

"Almost every waking minute is spent trying to get by under your death grip!"

That was it. Charlotte's eyes flew open again and she flung her silky-soft sheets away from her. There was no way she was going to just go back to a normal life now.

She had to see for herself.

Almost without thinking, Charlotte dressed again, this time in her riding outfit. It was the only outfit she had that even closely resembled what Addison was wearing. Maybe the trousers were a little too snug, the shirt was white, and the boots were polished, but it was good enough. The jacket was also entirely too well-tailored, though a cloak or a shawl could hide that.

After grabbing her toothbrush, Charlotte glanced around her room, scanning for anything else she needed to take. Nothing, honestly. Why go to the extra trouble?

The night was frigid, which Charlotte realized as soon as she opened her window. "Oh, it's cold!" she yelped quietly, wishing it was summer. The near-freezing temperature didn't deter her though, it only made her think of how cold Addison must be.

It was extremely fortunate that there was a large tree just outside Charlotte's window, close enough to climb onto.

Standing on the large stone windowsill, Charlotte closed her window, then paused, mind racing as she figured out how to get onto the tree. Luckily, there was a large branch that almost reached the wall, and another, smaller branch leading straight to her window.

Charlotte pulled down on the smaller branch, testing its weight. It would hold her, hopefully. The ground wasn't so far that a fall would surely be deadly, there was just the possibility of death if

multiple things went wrong.

“Okay,” Charlotte whispered to herself. “Here goes nothing.” She grabbed hold of the smaller branch and swung her body towards the larger one.

Her toes barely missed it.

“Darn it!”

Trying again, Charlotte swung her legs to give herself more momentum, and again, and again, but she was just too far away. She sighed, letting her body fall limp, save for her arms and hands.

Once she was mostly still, Charlotte edged her hands forward on the branch, scraping them slightly on the bark. They stung, but it could be worse.

After a long moment, Charlotte reached out with her leg, smiling when her toes settled on the branch below her. She shuffled along the small branch much more easily, still keeping her hands on it when both feet were planted on the lower one.

Charlotte edged along, using other branches as supports, until she got to the trunk of the tree. In the moonlight, she could barely make out a path down, but it looked safe enough.

She began to slowly climb down. Her hands were almost numb from the cold and the scrapes on her palms, though they somehow worked enough to be of use.

As she reached the bottom of the tree, Charlotte’s foot slipped and she fell onto one of the lower branches. “Uff!” she wheezed as the air was knocked out of her.

Through eyes squinted in pain, she could see the dark grass a short distance past her shiny boots; probably only a foot or two. Charlotte began to edge herself off of the branch, feet reaching for the ground. It was only a foot or two, a fine distance to fall and land on her feet.

Or so she thought. Only once she had fallen square on her butt did Charlotte register that it was probably five feet between the ground and the tree branch.

She wanted to sit there until the pain went away. Or rather, go back inside and place hot water bottles on her injured and cold body parts. But she couldn’t do that.

So instead, Charlotte stood up, wiped off her face, and looked for the lights of the village. They were quite blurry through her reforming tears, but visible enough.

Charlotte took a deep breath to steel herself, then started jogging off towards the village.

Addison was trying *so hard* to erase all memory of Whitlock Manor. Making dinner and listening to one of Connor’s *outrageous* stories about wolves in the forest didn’t do it (also, Addison didn’t

really want to tell him that there *were* no wolves in the forest. They'd been driven out when the fence around Whitlock had been built).

Reading her favorite book with the cookies promised to her brothers under her nose, however, *did*. It was late, and everyone else in the house had gone to sleep already, but with candles and her book, Addison was content. She'd go to bed soon, for sure, since she would get woken up *before sunrise* to bake some bread for the village. She just *refused* to dream about Whitlock Manor or that girl.

Charlotte, right? Addison didn't want to care. That *rich, snobby, spoiled* girl—

Addison's mind was ripped out of its little wander around her subconscious by a knock on the bakery door. It wasn't very loud, but Addison was easily distracted. *Obviously*. She had just distracted *herself* from reading. *Wow*.

Another knock. Addison rolled her eyes. Probably just some villager wanting to know when they'd have apple pies again for a family member's birthday. *Hate to break it to you, but you've got to give us the apples if you want one out of season*, Addison thought. She turned back to her book.

On the third knock, Addison shoved a paper into her book, slammed it shut on the table, and stormed down the stairs to the bakery. "We have a closed sign for a *reason, idiot*," she muttered as she threw the door open and ran through the cold bakery. Shoes would have been a *wonderful* idea, but it was too late for that. Some pointing at the closed sign, making the offender of said sign feel terrible, and stalking back up to her house would *hopefully* be worth it.

Instead of some random villager, there was an obviously tired, shivering blonde wreck outside, blue eyes slightly rimmed with red. Addison cursed.

You're kidding me!

It was Charlotte.

Addison unlocked the door and wrenched it open. "*What* are you doing?"

"See-seeing for m-m-mys-self what your l-life is l-like," Charlotte said through chattering teeth. "P-please let m-me in!"

Addison sighed and opened the door enough for the blonde to squeeze in. She slammed the door shut against the wind and locked it, then rounded on Charlotte. "Are you *kidding* me? Why would you *do this*?"

"I-I wanted to see w-what it's like," Charlotte replied. "I s-still do."

"*See?! Look around! This is how poor people barely eking by live!*" Addison spread her arms and gestured to the dark bakery.

"Now go home. We have enough issues *already*, without someone

who doesn't know how to do *anything* to take care of."

"Why are you so mean?"

Addison froze. The real answer flashed through her mind so fast she couldn't stop it: *Because I don't want to fall for the person hurting me.* "To stop you from *bothering* me!" she lied a moment later, still angry. "I wish it *worked*."

Charlotte was clearly mulling it over. "Okay, *fine*. You can stay the night. *Maybe* longer. Having someone else to help wouldn't hurt." Charlotte sighed with a smile. "But the *second* you start acting like a spoiled brat, you're leaving," Addison warned with a finger flicking from the other girl to the direction of the door.

Charlotte tried to shrug but failed because she was shivering so much. "S-sounds fair."

"Come on. You're going to get sick." Addison led the way up to the house part of the building, which was much warmer, gave Charlotte a blanket, and sat her down by the embers of the evening's fire. "You're right, though, I *was* really mean. It *probably* doesn't mean anything to you, but I'm sorry. I was just ... *mad*, at everything your family—well, your *father*, has done, and ... I took it out on you."

"I forgive you," Charlotte replied, completely shocking Addison. That was *really* not expected.

The two girls exchanged small smiles, then Addison turned to grab two cookies off the plate on the table.

"... You know ... you're kind of cute when you're sarcastic," Charlotte said nervously.

Addison almost dropped the cookie. Staying turned around to hide her furiously red face, she replied, "You—you don't even know what sarcastic *means*."

Charlotte sighed. "That's true."

Addison rolled her eyes and shoved one of the cookies toward Charlotte. "Eat."

Charlotte took it from her hand and nibbled it. "Wow, this is *really* good!"

Hoping that the lack of burning in her face *also* meant a lack of redness, Addison turned back around. "I know. I didn't make them, though, my mom did."

There was a moment of silence as the girls ate their cookies.

"Thank you. For letting me in and letting me stay," Charlotte said. "And for the blanket and the cookie."

"You're welcome," Addison replied, a little surprised that Charlotte knew what those words meant. "I'll get you another blanket for the night. You can sleep on the couch."

So she did, but not without a look back at Charlotte before heading into her own room to make sure she was going to sleep.

Hopeful Hate

OWEN ARNOLD

Mariposa County High School
10th Grade

Honorable Mention

What if? What if two towers didn't fall,
The planes didn't turn, the hate didn't spark?
Would the world still burn, ignited from diversity?
Would the towers still fall, knocked over by the flames?
Would we still find them sleeping under the rubble,
Broken, bloody, and scared?
What if the giants didn't get scared, didn't start fighting.
The people didn't instigate, didn't fan the flames,
But let them cool and shrink, dull and darken, die out from harmony
and understanding.
Would the planes still turn?

And It is Beautiful

LEVON MELKONYAN

Career Technical Education Charter
10th Grade

Honorable Mention

Waking up is a beautiful thing. When Man sleeps, he entrusts himself to the void of slumber so that he will awake once more the next day. He has no reassurance, no proof that this result will come, and yet it does. Nothing is felt and nothing is done, but he drifts into the unknown and trusts that he shall return with the sunrise, energized anew. And he does. And it is beautiful.

Education is a beautiful thing. The collective knowledge gleaned from nature and peace and disaster throughout humanity's existence is brought to the youth of our race so that they shall learn our past and brighten our future. Information is taught, skills practiced, and the inkling of a people formed. There is infinity hereafter to explore, but this effort to provide a glimpse of it all shows what this world is capable of. And it is beautiful.

Movement is a beautiful thing. The minute impulses of electricity in Man's body signal collections of tissue to expand or contract, allowing Man to move. The coordination that allows him to stand up straight being the same principle that allows him to brush his teeth, the same one to pull and push his body through this world and its natural laws. The beauty of the ability to kick a soccer ball, to swing a table tennis racket, to climb a wall, to travel through life. A limitless array of possibilities is open for the physical artist in Man to perform and practice. And it is beautiful.

Nature is a beautiful thing. All of the trees and plants and creatures that inhabit this world coexist in striking balance. The randomness and chaos that lead to perfect harmony. The wonderful greens and hazels and blues that can only be attempted to be mimicked by the stroke of an artist's brush. The muted browns and

tans elicit no immediate charm but are detailed and complex and intricate such that no onlooker can dream to capture their fullness. The bitter winds and cool breezes. The scorching sun and the warm spring day. It is beautiful.

Humor is a beautiful thing. Finding entertainment in the absurd. Man can make his fellows laugh and smile and enjoy life, if simply for a few moments. It can be practiced and learned and is joy itself compounded when others join in. It provides an outlet for good when all else seems lost and adds greatness when life is going smoothly. It is beautiful.

Music is a beautiful thing. Simple waves of air, in its purest essence. The consistent vibrations that lead to sugar for Man's ears and mind. Such a basic concept has the power to change emotions and intentions. Like humor, it provides hope to the disturbed and strength to the well. Through music, Man can be motivated, comforted, energized, consoled, and related to. It is a beautiful thing.

Human interaction and thought are beautiful things. All of Man's fellows focused on their own small worlds, giving their best attempts to make it through life, naively assuming their issues and revelations are exclusive to them. But these personal journeys are beautiful. Over the course of time, Man needs both himself and his collective to improve. And the way the collective can help each other is simply stunning. Each contributing his own bit to the world, serving the whole of humanity. But even more breathtaking is the smaller personal interactions. Humans can advise each other, reassure each other, laugh with each other, discuss and innovate with each other, comfort each other, teach each other, and simply be there for each other. In every interaction. The amount of assistance Man is given every time he sees his fellows while being completely unaware of it is astounding. It shapes him as he grows and learns. And he may never realize it. But if he does, it is a beautiful thing.

Oh, all this beauty! So much in this world is a beautiful thing. And therein lies the intrinsic beauty of life. If it is sought to be quantified and exhaustively discovered, the extent of it shall elude its searcher. The searcher must commit himself to the full exploration of all that which holds beauty. He shall find no end! And the prospect of this endless search is beautiful.

Solitude

AIDEN FERNANDEZ

Porterville High School
10th Grade

Honorable Mention

“Houston, we have a problem.”

“Houston, we have a problem.”

The radio keeps replaying this same message as though I don't know we have a problem, I think to myself as I scratch off another chalk line on the wall adjacent to me which is already littered with 48 other lines. What's worse is it's my own voice repeating the same 5 words. It's almost as though God, if there even is one, is taunting me. Mimicking me and my own personal thoughts with the same 5 words, and the same 21 letters. I announce out loud, “Today marks the 7th week without instructions nor communication between me and the NASA Space Center in Houston. With each passing day I see lights from cities across the globe go dark. The light's from the bustling cities of Cape Town, Mumbai, and New York are all dimming. Something has gone wrong. I can't do anything to fix it, I can only choose to stay up here and wonder. Something has gone wrong, I just can't place it.”

I write on a piece of paper, *“Today marks one year I have been alone on the Starship. A one manned solo 3 month trip that has turned into a whole year of being alone. I have enough food for 2 more months, I am dying, the world has gone quiet, I have been given no explanation as to what had happened. I am forced to imagine ways that I think my family died. If they even are dead.”* I scream out in frustration as I bash the instruments that control the Starship in front of me. Then I hear it. I hear static coming from the contact radio. I grasp the radio in my hands and speak into it. *“This is Starship 1, I have been stuck floating above the Earth, send help please, over.”* The radio comes back on and I hear a voice woven into the static, then it becomes clear. And I recognize the voice, that voice being mine, I break down as I hear the same 5 words, and the same 21 letters.

“Houston, we have a problem.”

“Houston, we have a problem.”

Dear Keisha

AJHAR ELLIS

East Bay Innovation Academy
9th Grade

Honorable Mention

Dear Keisha,

I will die soon, and because of this, a confession is due. A great confession at that. It was June 19 of all the days it could have been. I was young then. It changed my life like nothing else could. It is the day that turned me into a hero. However, this story has never been told in its entirety. It has never been told truthfully. Now is the time for truth though, for if not now, never.

June's hot air sat thick on the highway. The wind from a faraway storm brought us some solace from the sweltering temperature. We sang along to the various songs on the radio in benign joy, distracting each other from our dread. An old 2Pac song was put on. A listener's request I assume. The opening lines stuck with me.

A coward dies a thousand deaths

A soldier dies but once

I turned off the radio before the song continued and we found each other's gaze. Her green eyes were beautiful. As she turned to face the road again, her kinky brown hair brushed against the car ceiling.

Thunder from a distant storm shattered the peace. It was followed by a long silence.

Keisha sighed, her eyes softening. She stuck one arm out the window, leaving her right arm to steer the car on its own.

I sighed in benevolent mimicry. "Let's just stay on the freeway."

Keisha tossed me a glance. I shifted my feet.

"I just don't want to have to play the 'white boyfriend' role again at the party. I me—"

"And you think I want you to?" She asked dryly while staring out at the road. She had raised a good point.

"They hate me. It seems like everyone does ... except you." We

shared smiles. I changed the subject, not wanting to linger on the unpleasant future any longer.

“I wish I could be famous,” I said longingly. “Then everyone would love me.” Keisha let out a forced, humorless chuckle, as if she supported, yet disagreed with me. Pause.

“When are you going back home?” I had already asked this question many times before with no success. If it was my choice, she’d never leave.

“I’m *still* not sure, and I probably won’t be the next time you ask.” Silence. I fidgeted with the air conditioning. “Soon,” she added quickly, recognizing my innocence.

“What’s going on with you?” I drummed my fingers on my dark jeans. My next words sprinted out of me, stumbling over one another. I soon lost my breath. “It seems like the only words I can get out of you are sour rebuttals. I mean I know you can get serious sometimes, but I prefer the talkative you. Here we are having a good time singing and next thing you know you’re acting like Lakeith Stanfield having an introspective, weed-driven spiritual adventure. I mean we’ve known each other for at least a decade now and I’ve never seen you like this-”

“The storm.” She said solemnly. I began wringing my hands. “It’s giving me weird ... vibes. You feel it too.”

“Yeah, I guess I do.”

Pause. More fidgeting. More faraway looks.

Suddenly, Keisha snapped back to life, focusing on a horse trailer pulled by a pickup truck. “What now?” I asked, breaking the concerning silence.

“Oh my god, look!” She pointed to the trailer window where a dark covering had been meticulously peeled off. In the semi-clear gap that they left, a person was visibly crying and screaming, her face pressed up against the tinted glass. “What?” I asked again in confusion.

“I think she’s been abducted! We have to go get her!” Keisha switched on her turn signal.

“Wait!” I was too shocked by my friend’s immediate need to run into danger.

“What?”

“I just-” I gathered my thoughts. “How do you know they’ve been kidnapped?”

Keisha gave me a look that bored into me. “A woman is in a horse trailer crying her heart out and pounding on the window as she’s being taken down the freeway in the middle of nowhere. What other explanation do you have?” She was frustrated with my ignorance.

We switched lanes so we were a few cars behind the trailer.

“I’m sorry,” I said meekly. “Shouldn’t we call the police?”

“Sure, but they won’t know where to go. The nearest police station could be too far in a rural area like this. The best thing we can do is follow them.” She looked at me for a second. “We can even do a citizen’s arrest.” I shuddered at the thought of a confrontation with kidnappers. I waited for a minute or so, allowing her to cool down. I was fidgeting even more now.

“We could get killed,” I whispered, my voice weakening. She took a deep breath.

“You know I can fight well. And the police will come. A few thugs won’t be able to hurt me.” She spoke strongly and confidently. Her hand rested on the middle console.

We followed the truck off the highway, keeping a safe distance. I prayed that the drivers wouldn’t suspect us of tailing them. Luckily there was a truck stop just a few miles off the exit, so it wasn’t too suspicious for us to be driving on this particular road.

I called 911 and let them know about our situation. I even asked, to Keisha’s surprise, if I could try and help the captured before the police arrived. They of course said no, and this seemed to be the final push that I needed to keep Keisha in the car.

After an uncomfortably slow and miserable drive, we arrived at a green patch of woods that bordered a wide lake. We parked far away from a cabin where the truck parked, staying hidden, but within eyesight. We waited for only a few moments before we were snapped to attention.

Bang.

A jarring gunshot rang through the patch of woods and echoed off the trees, causing small animals to scatter. We both let out surprised yelps and covered our ears. I had never heard a gunshot before. Movies always showed characters firing heavy guns and pistols unflinching. Even though we were far away and protected by our car doors and windows, the sound was still louder and sharper than almost anything I had heard before.

I soon let my hands fall from my head. Keisha exited the car before I had fully recovered from my sound-induced daze. The middle console was open. “Wait!” I unsuccessfully reached for her arm with desperation in my eyes. She gave me a look that told me everything I needed to know. I couldn’t let her leave now when the police were so close. I couldn’t let her leave without knowing what she planned to do. I couldn’t let her leave knowing that I might never see her alive again. But I did.

I wanted to get up desperately to go help her, but sadness and guilt weighed me down. And as the seconds passed, the guilt only grew.

I stared at my watch, hoping it would ground me to reality. 87 seconds passed before the familiar crack of a gunshot hit my ears.

This time, it was quickly followed by a few more – 4 to be exact. After the shots, the tension met its quota and I burst out of the car. I partly ran, partly stumbled through the grove. It was dark and windy now, the storm rolling in. The anxiety was messing with my ability to move. Another gunshot stung my ears, and I dropped to my knees. Tears streamed down my face as I curled into my legs. I took in quick, shallow breaths. Adrenaline was in my blood. I wasn't sure if I was losing it or gaining it.

I waited for a long time like this. Face in my knees. Snot and tears desecrating my face. It took a while for me to return to some level of tranquility.

I slowly walked towards the cabin, shaking with every step. I wasn't sure if the scene was safe, but I saw no sign of movement from the cabin. Searching the area, I discovered that no one was in the trailer or truck, or outside of the cabin at all. I approached the door, fearing what I would find inside. I paused, shifting my stance and catching my breath. Pushing past the entrance, I yelled.

Three figures lay about on the floor and furniture, dead. One was on the floor next to a broken window, glass covering him, his throat cut. Blood spilled down his torso and onto the wooden floor of the cabin. His eyes were open in a state of shock. Another was on a table. Pencils, a cup, paper, and a laptop were on the floor, having been expelled from the table by the unconscious man. He was lying on his stomach with his head and lower legs hanging off the table. Any wounds he had weren't visible to me. I took a few steps into the cabin, still reeling in shock. When I turned around towards the corner that the door had blocked, I saw the worst of the scene.

Keisha lay slumped against the final kidnapper with a splotch of blood on her lower back. I let out another scream and ran to her pushing her onto her back. She had been shot in the stomach at least once. I held her wrist, searching for a heartbeat. I began to cry. Her green eyes were open and seemed less vivid than normal. I frantically moved my hands to her chest and my ear to her mouth. No breathing. No heartbeat. I repeatedly pressed on her chest, hoping it might do something, knowing that it wouldn't.

“Oh no. Oh God no,” I wept. In a sudden flash of anger, I pounded my fists into the wooden floor. “I knew it! I knew this would happen!” I tightened my fists and curled into myself, suppressing screams. I sat in the putrid odors, with absolutely no idea what to do.

So I held her and wept, blood staining my clothes and hands. After a moment I looked at her and closed her now-pale eyes. I also picked up the knife she had used and pocketed it.

In the stillness, I heard something. It wasn't the storm, or my cries, or the distant highway. Cries for help were coming from below the floorboards. The kidnapped!

I drew in several deep breaths to calm myself as I wiped salty tears from my eyes and thick snot from my lips. My eyes darted around, looking for a clue to their location. In doing so, I noticed that all the criminals suffered from several knife wounds. The one in the corner seemed to have been nearly eviscerated by a gash in the stomach.

Groping around the floor, I eventually found a hidden hatch. A trapdoor to some kind of basement. It was a wooden plank with a hole large enough for me to fit my hand through it. It was hidden under a rug. Sticking my hand through the hole and pulling the floorboard up allowed passage to the underground area. I climbed down a ladder that was nailed to the wall under the trapdoor. The walls were lined with soundproof foam. Some of it had been torn away by the captives huddled in the far corner.

I flicked on a light switch, illuminating the fearful faces of the hostages. I was a stranger to them and could have been one of their kidnapers. They didn't know. Each of them was chained together by the neck and had each of their hands bound individually. All of them, through the common chain, were bound to the wall farthest from the exit.

A period of silence occurred. I had no means of freeing them, and they were still unsure of my intentions. It didn't feel like a heroic moment of success the way movies had promised it would be. The uncomfortable quiet was broken by the faint sounds of sirens drifting down from the road and through the open hole in the floor. Smiles grew on the red, puffy faces of the detainees.

Soon we were outdoors, the wind and rain battering our bodies. The captured people were thanking me profusely. Or at least I thought they were. I couldn't understand their language. I didn't understand why they praised me at the time. An officer had then walked over to me, while I was sitting alone. "You have done a great service to humanity, son," he had said. "Most people wouldn't be brave enough to do what you did tonight." Brave? I was cowardly, still shaking with fear long after the threat was gone. "You will get what you deserve for this," he had stated.

I was determined unfit for questioning at the scene of the crime and was taken to a station where I could solidify my thoughts. I wept on the long journey, falling in and out of apathy, fear, and grief.

We arrived at the station. I walked through the door and followed a detective down the halls into a dark, well-furnished room with a sofa, a standing lamp, and two chairs on either side of a coffee table. I sat down with the detective. She was a young woman with straight blond hair tied up in a bun low on her head. Someone followed us in and placed two cups of coffee on either side of the table. I made myself comfortable at the table and began to sip the bitter liquid. She

did as well.

She introduced herself as Detective Turner. She was kind and her words were soft and comforting. It was easy to talk to her, as easy as it could have been. After we built a rapport through polite conversation, she began the formal questioning.

“So, can you tell me what happened tonight?”

“Well-” I stopped and waited for a long time. My mind was alive and frantic again, jumping from scene to scene, moment to moment, thought to thought. I made a spontaneous decision.

“Mister White ... could you tell me what happened?”

“I was driving on my way to a party when I spotted a trailer with a hostage. I followed it and called the police. When I heard a gunshot, I rushed in and I ... fought them. I had to save those people, no matter the cost. It was the right thing to do.”

I was partially relieved by this. I turned these lemons into lemonade, but there was a nagging voice at the back of my head that condemned me. It’s that nagging that would drive me mad for the rest of my life.

I continued with the interview, filling in details and solidifying the new story in my mind. She seemed to believe it. I also began to internalize this false narrative. Why wouldn’t I?

Detective Turner informed me sometime later that these criminals were human traffickers. Buying, selling, and moving human beings used by them for whatever purposes they liked. Modern slave traders, of a sort.

I later learned through the news that the people had assumed Keisha as their captor and me as their savior. This helped silence my nagging voice. I was just playing my part in the story after all. People finally seemed to love me. I talked with the press and got showered in compliments and online support. There were times when I forgot the real story, only to be violently reminded each time I saw those deep green eyes in another person or was bored on a long drive.

It was telling Keisha’s parents that nearly broke me. The police had been spread thin over the county, so I agreed to inform Keisha’s family. We already knew each other so we thought it would be better if they heard it from me.

I knocked three times on a dark wooden door. Keisha’s mother opened the door. “Come on in! Take a seat!” She spoke cheerily and was grinning. When I made the appointment, I decided not to tell them the reason for my visit. Maybe that was a mistake. I flashed her a quick smile before entering and thanking her. We landed on couches in the living room that faced each other. Keisha’s father was already seated. Various snacks sat on a table between the two couches, within arm’s reach.

“Good evening Robert,” Keisha’s father spoke softly.

“Good evening Mr. DuBois.” Three deep breaths stilled me. Just thinking about Keisha made me turn red. Made me sweat. Made me cry. “I have some terrible news for you.” Silence. A long pause where I built up the courage to say the words that scared me the most. “Keisha is dead,” I muttered, releasing some of my anxiety.

I looked at the floor for as long as possible attempting to avoid their reactions. I heard the crack of thunder far off. It was raining somewhere else.

They never showed this part in the movies either.

I lifted my head to face them. They were holding each other tight as tears streamed down their faces. Ms. Du Bois was on the edge of exploding in tears, already quietly sobbing. Grief was building up behind a dam in her, and it would soon burst. Mr. DuBois however seemed as though nearly all emotion was sucked from him. The only indication of his sadness were the tears streaming down his stoic face. I continued my explanation, breaking the silence.

“She was shot in the stomach.” This drew a sharp inhale from Ms. DuBois and a deep exhale from Mr. DuBois. “On my way to the Juneteenth party, I followed a trailer with some kidnapped persons. I followed them to a cabin in the woods. I followed them inside and ... and I fought them. Keisha was there. We don’t know what she was doing there - if she was kidnapped or ...” I trailed off, preparing myself to speak the words I dreaded most. “I know she would never do this, but the police want me to tell you that ... that is possible ... It’s possible Keisha was involved in the crime.”

The tension grew in the room. Not only their grief, but their anger was growing.

I followed up my statement hastily before receiving any verbal abuse, “I already told them that she would never do such a thing. I already told them that wasn’t who she was ... but they insisted that I tell you the possibility.” I hung my head in shame. I felt powerless. It would have been so easy, to tell the truth, yet so hard to retell the narrative. The story was set in stone the second I accepted the credit.

I left the house not long after the conversation. They needed some space. I walked away feeling both guilty and wronged by the police.

The weather was clear. It was a warm night. Barely any clouds lingered in the sky. The weather seemed almost apathetic, except for a rainstorm somewhere else.

For the rest of my life, I told the story where I was the hero. I went out of my way to follow a suspicious car. I alerted the police to the criminals. I fought off the criminals and saved the lives of the kidnapped. I was a hero in a way. But, as grim as it is, it is the truth. Not the fiction that I would like to tell or the glorified fantasy most would like to hear.

A lot of good came from this traumatic experience. I went on to become an activist, researching human trafficking and writing about it. I went back to school to become a detective and police officer. I never really helped anyone in this way though. I was never the best at my job. I was never the bravest around. I got stuck with patrol and mundane jobs.

I gained a minor amount of national news as the man who risked his life to save the lives of others. The people I'd saved went on to live full lives. I couldn't say the same about myself.

I only did these things because I had to though. I never wanted to. I knew it was what I should do. What people expected of me. I had to fulfill what people wanted. If people weren't constantly reminded of my heroism, they might begin to question the narrative. Or I would always be known as "that guy who was on the news a long time ago." People would ask me why I never utilized my new platform.

If it was my choice, I would have left the experience in the past.

But that's only the tip of the iceberg. My whole life, I thought I knew the success story. An artist paints a good picture, people love it, the artist gets more resources, paints more pictures, and lives a happy life. If I never tried to ride my fame, I would have always thought about what could have been. The good I could have done with the opportunities I could have had. I couldn't live with the constant shoving and wrenching between the pain of what happened and the temptation of what could have been.

But perhaps my story is less like that of an artist, and more like a viral video. I had my moment in the sun, and then I'm left on the shelf, forgotten.

I tried to hide from the guilt. I buried myself in fiction — books, movies, music, art. I hoped I would be able to escape this world. My realization of mortality has stopped that though.

It was the nagging that ultimately got me though. The only advocate for truth wouldn't stop, no matter how much I was confirmed to be doing the right thing by society.

It's funny. My therapist told me to write out the story in hopes it would help me move past my trauma. I never gave it any thought until recently. I hoped the nagging voice would stop. I hoped I would be able to attain some level of peace before I die. Now I see that's not possible. I contracted myself to a life of suffering when I told Detective Turner my story.

What I can see now is that I suffered from this as much as anyone. I would have told the truth if those officers hadn't forced me to take the credit. It was as hard for me to hold this secret for as long as I did. I felt like I could never tell anyone the truth because nobody wanted to hear it. Not to mention what would happen to me if I

told the truth after a while had passed. I would have been attacked!
Abused!

I lie now, disease crippling my once beautiful body. I feel decrepit, lost in a sea of intangible thoughts. What goes around, comes around, I suppose.

It's stormy now, like that day all those years ago. Only the deathbed provides solace from the storm. Only the deathbed provides safety.

— *Robert White*

For Her

RILEY KURZ

Mission Oak High School
11th Grade

Honorable Mention

Funny things start to happen once you lose everything. The days get longer and duller. It's as if God took a straw and sucked all the color out. Where had it all gone? My happiness just washed down the drain. If only I had more time. If only *she* had more time. I remember it all that day, the way she laughed and danced, not caring what people thought. Only I cared, cared so much it hurt, because I loved her.

The way the innocence shone in her eyes, reflecting everyone's impurities. If you stared long enough you'd be able to catch the impurity within her; I never did. Some days it swallowed her whole, shutting her away from the world, but she'd play it off as being sick. I believed it. I believed she was fine. I believed she was perfect. I believed she was happy. I believed that she *wanted* to live. I was wrong. Falling victim to her foolish lies, I hid, hid away from the impurities of the world.

I remember the day that bright flame was quickly snuffed. She fought so hard for so long, but without avail, she was gone. My days continue to drag on, never-ending. How could they end? I *want* them to end. I *want* to be taken away from this place. I *want* to *feel* something again. I *want her*.

The agonizing pain that fills my heart grows steadier with each passing second, waiting to stop, to never let loose a single beat ever again, but it doesn't. Why? How hard was it for her to claim her life? Did it really relieve her of the burdens she carried? The guilt? The painful sorrow?

She had lost the most strainful battle to ever be fought. First

letting it steal away her smile, the smile that brightened a room. The smile that made my life worth living, worth everything bestowed upon me. Now, I sit at the kitchen table with a small bottle of medication that helps numb myself. I'm alone, just as she was. Even the pounding sun can't bring warmth into my life. My heart is an empty cage, a basin that can't hold water. A road that carries you nowhere. Without her I am *nothing*.

Years will pass and each day I'll be thinking of her, of her smile, her laughter, and the sweet nothings she'd used to whisper to me in the late hours of the night. The way she sang off-key. The way she twirled her hair when she was nervous. Even the way she'd never step on the sidewalk cracks, afraid it put some sort of burden on her poor mother's back.

Oh how I'll miss you. I will learn to find love again and I *promise* to win your battle. The battle you fought for so long. The battle against an enemy that everyone falls victim to. The enemy that will *never* take me hostage.

Oh Depression, you made my life a living hell, but I won't let you take my Happiness *ever* again.