

The Muse



PERRY GULLEN | Grade 7

GulliverPrep

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PERRY GULLEN | Grade 7
Rendition of Antonio Berni's *La Niña*
Beaux Arts Student Artist Showcase 2nd Place Graphics

Within these pages, our students have woven a tapestry of poetry, prose, and art that finds beauty in the everyday and gives voice to the quiet resilience of growing up. We invite you to linger over these works and celebrate the brilliance of a generation bravely sharing its vision with the world.

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Selections are marked to indicate students who received special recognition at the Miami-Dade County Fair and Exposition and at the 75th Annual Beaux Arts Student Artist Showcase.

**Gulliver Preparatory School • Marian C. Krutulis PK-8 Campus
12595 Red Road • Coral Gables, FL 33156**

Just JJ

JJ is funny, kind, and athletic,
Always ready to laugh like a puppy chasing its tail.

He enjoys drawing, playing sports,
And traveling to new places,
Exploring the world like an adventurous cat.

He feels happy, loved, and full of energy,
Bouncing around like a basketball on the court.

He wonders if aliens really drive UFOs,
And thinks about what it would be like
To experience an earthquake one day,
Shaking the ground like a giant drum.
He also wonders why girls love the color pink so much.

He fears spiders and death,
And is scared of strange sounds in the night,
Which creep up like shadows in a dark room.

He cares deeply about his family and friends,
And is grateful for the life he has.

He is able to make people laugh,
Draw amazing pictures,
And always be kind,
Like sunshine breaking through the clouds.

He dreams of becoming a famous artist,
Living a happy, wealthy, and creative life,
Shining brightly like a star in the sky.

—Jose Estrella, Grade 5
Blue Ribbon



LEON MCDOWELL | Grade 8

Jules Stoner

Jules is funny, adventurous, and a little bit of a rule breaker,
Always curious and ready to try new things.

She loves playing basketball,
Spending time with her bestie,
And creating colorful art.

She sometimes feels nervous around others,
And gets embarrassed by her sister,
Like a shy kitten hiding under a blanket.

She wonders if she will become a drummer,
And dreams about living forever,
Her imagination raced like a drumbeat.

She fears not being liked,
Losing her family,
And worries about bees, losing friends, and even death.

She cares deeply about her family,
Basketball, art, and singing,
Pouring her heart into everything she loves.

She is able to defend herself,
Fall asleep faster than a blinking star,
And run a mile like the wind.

She dreams of being a drummer, an artist, a singer,
A basketball and hockey player,
And one day living in Colorado,
Chasing her dreams like mountains chasing the sky.

—Jules Stoner, Grade 5
Blue Ribbon

Juntas

Pulsera
Dorada, brillante,
Refulge, cambia, fascina.
La sonrisa en la cara de mi mamá.
Miro, sonrío, me calmo.
Cariñosa, dulce
Mamá.

—Eva Sartor, Grade 5
Blue Ribbon

Mi mejor amiga

Mientras escucha música su sonrisa brilla
Es más preciosa que Tate McRae
Jules es su nombre, hermoso como las joyas
Ojos sinceros en los que puedo confiar
Recuerdos inolvidables que me recuerda a mi amistad

Amistad más fuerte que un diamante
Más amable que un cachorro
Intenta hacerme feliz con todo su esfuerzo
Guardo su cariño cerca de mi corazón
Antes de conocerla no entendía la amistad.

—Sofía León Elbers, Grade 5
Blue Ribbon

El mejor

Soy un niño bueno, soy un niño inteligente,
Soy un niño pésimo, soy un niño estúpido,
Yo soy bueno en natación, yo soy pésimo en natación,
Mis antiparras se me caen, mis antiparras no se caen,
Mi familia me vino a ver, mi familia no me vino a ver,
Sí soy bueno, ¡sí soy bueno!
Yo sí soy inteligente,
Yo soy el mejor en natación,
Mis antiparras no se me caen,
¡Mi familia vino a verme!

—Santino Onetto, Grade 5
Blue Ribbon



SERAFINA HILL | Grade 7

Mi bien máspreciado

Estoy sentada en mi hogar, protegiendo mi bien máspreciado. Alrededor mío vuelan las moscas y las ranas saltan para devorarlas. Mi tesoro está casi listo. Lo he cuidado por casi un mes y dentro de poco acabará mi trabajo. Mi tesoro es pequeño, pero pronto no lo será.

¡CRAC! Me levanto de golpe y lo miro. ¡Ya está sucediendo! Lo observo mientras continúa rompiéndose. Una grieta se abre en la parte de arriba y del hueco se asoma una cabecita. Mi corazón se siente como si fuera a explotar.

Mi bebé rompe el resto de la cáscara y sale de su huevo. Miro alrededor del estanque. Me sacudo las plumas: ahora soy una orgullosa mamá pato.

—Mila Oughla, Grade 5

Blue Ribbon

Mariposa

Cuando me admitieron en la clase de honores estaba bien orgullosa, como una mariposa que aprende a volar.

Mi mamá y papá me llamaron para mi cuarto. Mi mamá tenía una caja rectangular amarilla con un lazo enorme blanco y resplandeciente. Cuando la abrí, había dentro una mariposa de diamantes.

No podía creer que era para mí. Solo me quedé mirándola. Me pareció que el mundo se paró. Cuando me la puse, parecía una princesa. Era chiquita pero me sentía muy grande.

—Laura Schibuola, Grade 5

Blue Ribbon

Nueva Casita

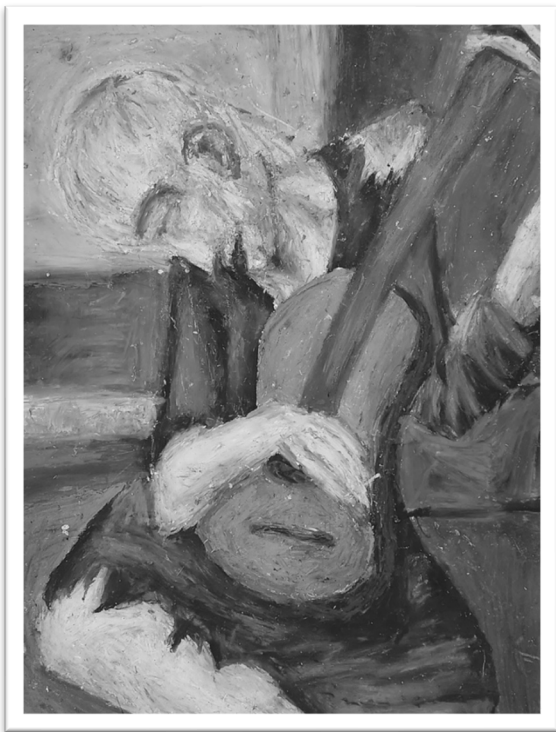
Mientras iba en el carro escuchando música, pensaba en qué me iba a parecer Miami. Estaba viajando desde Nueva York y no sabía nada de esta nueva ciudad. Cuando llegamos a la casa nueva, me pareció mucho más grande que mi apartamento en Brooklyn. Eso me gustó un poco, pero no tanto como para sentirme en casa. En cuanto entramos, mi hermano se fue corriendo con algo en las manos. No pude ver lo qué era. Yo tiré la mochila en el sofá nuevo. Era blanco y súper suave. Mi sofá anterior era gris y no tan grande como este.

Escuché un sonido que venía de mi derecha. Era un ruido un poco raro: “crunch, crunch, crunch.”

Lo seguí. Venía de la cocina. ¡Mi hermano estaba comiendo mi merienda favorita! Eso es lo que había agarrado antes: pepinillos con mantequilla de maní. Los pepinillos estaban en el único plato que había en la cocina. Mi hermano me dio un pepinillo embarrado con mantequilla de maní. Lo mordí. La mantequilla de maní se sentía pastosa y ¡estaba muy, muy, MUY deliciosa! Esa merienda es lo que necesitaba para sentirme en casa. Ahora esta casa es mi nueva casita.

—Camila Coffey, Grade 5

Blue Ribbon



Music

Listening to the melodious sounds fill the room
Echoing through the corners as a voice sounds through a corridor
Bringing spirit and joy to those who listen to the sweet harmony
A godly sound labeled as music.

The incredible instruments that play the sounds
Cannot be compared to the artists that compose them
They travel the world delighting people's lives
By playing the breathtaking sounds that lift their spirits
and brighten their day.

Their work has never been easy
They have had to climb mountains to get where they are
Hours and hours of grueling work was involved
Just to be able to play at the most mediocre level.

For them training to play was like preparing for a marathon
Only their routine was pushed by unimaginable talent,
They were the notes and beats and tones, orderly arranged,
In a way only they could see, a sense they found
that for the rest is hidden.

When they play they pour out their souls
Into composing what to us sounds like a memory,
To which we tap our feet and enjoy, not knowing that
Everything that surrounds us, are sounds that we are yet to sing.

—Sacha Casta, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

Truffle Cacio E Pepe

Truffle spark,
Peppery taste,
Alfredo sauce dripping in my mouth,
Happiness coming to me,
With a taste of melting cheese

Sharp taste,
Rich feeling,
Creamy texture,

It has a bold personality,
A tangy taste.

Spaghetti twirled on your plate,
Black spots scattered around,
Truffle pieces on top,

Smooth, luscious sauce,
Heavy cream, soaking spaghetti,
Aroma,
Smoke of the hot pasta,
Warm feeling when you eat it,
The taste of...
Truffle Cacio E Pepe.

—Kyra Budhrani, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

Florida vs Northern Ireland

Florida

You wake from your bed on a winter morning
You stand up in your pajamas, and look out of the window to find,
The beautiful sunrise like a fireball in the bright blue sky
Out of the few clouds in the sky,
 all of them were like cotton candy shaped into animals
The colorful birds chirping and singing happily in the trees
The palm trees to be exact
The baby lizards speeding across the ground
The majestic peacock roaming around the empty roads
The bright green grass among the wildflowers
 of every color of the rainbow
You step outside and you feel the hot air surround you,
 but the gentle breeze cooling you down
Almost like a fan
And then you wonder, what is it like in a cold place this morning?

Northern Ireland

You wake up from your bed on a winter morning
You stand up in your “jammies”, and look out of the window to find,
The white ball of light that you can barely see
 because of the gray clouds
The heavy gray sky that looks like a dirty white blanket
 covering the country of Ireland
The baby robins chirping away on the bird bath
 full of water beginning to freeze over
The hundreds of cows grazing the luscious green fields
The Irish men walking to their car to begin their day’s work
But then, you see something hitting the road
You hear a small tap on the roof
It is raining
Of course it is, like always
And then it gets worse
Rain is hammering down on the ground
“Teeming” as the (Northern) Irish would say
You step outside and you feel the cold air
 rush up your trouser legs chilling you to the bone
You feel a deep shiver, and you know
This weather is here to stay for months

—Dan Dixon, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



KATARINA BURGIO | Grade 8

"Fear" is a Beast with Talons

“Fear” is a beast with talons
That growls in the darkness
And scratches the skin with claws
And endlessly never stops ever

And clutches in the moon light
And damage must be seen in the crescent
That could harm the little girl inside

She’s hurt and wounded
From the beast that lies above
Not able to move
Sitting in the small cave, suffering
Not knowing if she is ok or not

She’s heard it in the smallest light
And on the eerie land
She saw the blemishes on her skin
“Fear” has caught her

—Jolie Nullman, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

I'll Wait for You

I'll wait for you to cross the rainbow bridge.
I know you loved me
But I have to go
My legs are weak, and strained
my body aches, from years of playing
And I'm in pain

However, I'm in a better place
A place with no pain
A place with comforting clouds
A continuing blue sky
Chew toys in every corner
All my friends who I left behind
in that magical place
All my pain and suffering are gone
My legs became strong
My fur went from coarse,
To lively and soft
My back stopped aching
The lines on my face disappeared
I've loved you all my life,
You will miss my life for the rest of yours.

My body grew old, but my love never did
So, don't worry
Although, I almost have everything I want
All I want is to have you again
So, I'll wait
Wait for you until it's your time.
I'll wait, like I did by the door for you to get home
I'll wait for you to cross the rainbow bridge

—Giovanna Gubeissi Camello, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

ALEXANDER WEEMAN | Grade 8



The Hamster Wheel

I only look in the future,
I run across the white sterile walls,
The walls gradually closing in on me.
It's suffocating, it's exhausting, no time to think.
To appreciate life.
To reflect on my day.
All I think about is a meaningless letter
on a white sheet of paper,
Thinking about what is due.
No time to sit outside,
breathe in fresh air.
No time to hear the bird's song,
no time to enjoy my life

But then I realize...
In the midst of the chaos,
That sometimes I should just pause and relax.
To think about what really matters,
A mark on a paper,
Or a fulfilled life, one with joy and bliss.
Whether I am fully appreciating the gift of life.
Whether I am reflecting on what I do,
and how it affects people.
So, when I look towards my neighbors.
Not stopping to think, running on a hamster wheel.
Just working, and working, never stopping,
even to make someone smile.
The speed of the world has become too fast.

So, sometimes just break off that looming cycle.
Recollect what you have done.
Have you done what you truly wanted in life?
Running across a meadow of poppies and tall grass,
Laughing with joy.
It's tranquil, serene, where there is no grade to chase
or money to earn.
Live in the moment,
and sometimes just stop, sit still, and reflect.

—Isabella Gubeissi Camello, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

Paradise

I felt the ocean breeze
like a soft calming force
I felt the radiance of the water
as it harbored many creatures

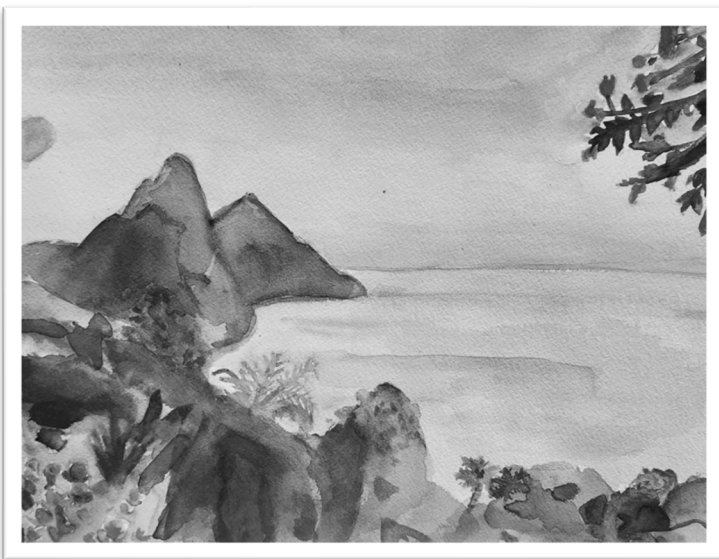
I saw the shells
like shining pieces of life
I felt the soft sand
that I was slowly sinking in

I felt the soothing water rush
over my feet
I took a deep breath
of the salty scent of the ocean

I heard the crashing of the waves
as I walked peacefully on the sand
I felt like the ocean waves were emitting
tranquility as they gently rocked back in fourth

I saw the sky, a vibrant orange-pink with fluffy clouds
like cotton candy on a painting
I heard the call of birds, I smelled the sea,
I felt the sand, I saw the sky
I was in paradise

—Max Hoppe, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



MARIA DEMIANIUK | Grade 7

Goal Machines

My cleats
Rest
In my bag
All night

Tired
After a day

Of dribbling, scoring,
And scoring more

They fall asleep
Ready
To score more goals
Again, and again

They remember the plays,
The shots, the passes,
And the goals
Ready to do it all over again

Curlers going top right
Power shots flying into the net
Pinpoint passes to my striker
Sublime tackles

My Nike Magicians
Handcrafted beautifully
With love
And determination

My cleats
Green like grass
Aged like wine
Goal machines

—Alejandro Hasbun, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

Memories

Shells on the beach,
One hundred for you, one hundred for me
Two hundred for us.

The waves rolled on the soft sand
The white foam like whipped cream
Vanilla ice cream swirled,
Not a care in the world.

Toy stores, and cafés,
Grilled cheese and iced coffee.

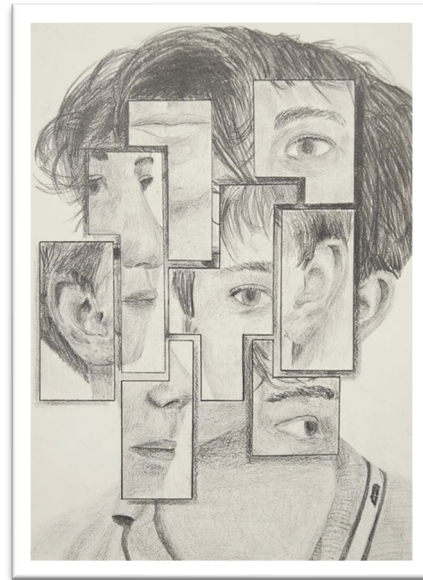
Buttons,
Vintage fabrics piled up in a box,
We admired it like it was gold.

Musty smells,
Christmas Night,
Waking up not to snow, but to a hot sunny sky
Sweet smoked ham, and gravy with peas,
Playing with our new toys,
Friends, to fighting, to crying, to friends

Long winding tree top courses,
Fear of heights,
He held my hand,
Which is now a rare thing,
We are “too old” now,
But before best friends,
Now it's only when no one is around,
Never with his friends,
We crossed together hand in hand
Now I was not afraid.

Playing in the pool,
The dog jumps in,
I treasure this moment,
Because I know it might not happen again,
The kookaburras sing in the trees,
And the neighbor's cat meows as it sits on the
fence,
Nostalgia,
Memories.

—Emily Phillips, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



ALEXANDER CALLOWAY | Grade 8

A Never Arriving Dream

A dream
One that you use hold on to
like a teddy bear
One that you never tried
But always thought of

Nobody believed you could
Nobody believed you would
But you did
You failed the first then the second
Then you started to believe them
finally, the fire went out

It never ignited again
The courage never came
The dream just forgotten of
Just like a broken antique
thrown away

Years have passed and you finally realized
You should have tried
Just one more time
Regret and anger fill your heart
You say, “I would have never made it”
But deep down you knew you could have

You were stopped, like a red traffic light
The dream, that never arrived

—Jackson Hwang, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

Music

Music is nostalgic
One genre and it takes back years
Press play and memories flood the brain

A beat of pop music enters your ears
It takes you back to a young age
You and your friends playing like you had nothing to do
You look at your little self and say
“I wish I savored this when I was young”

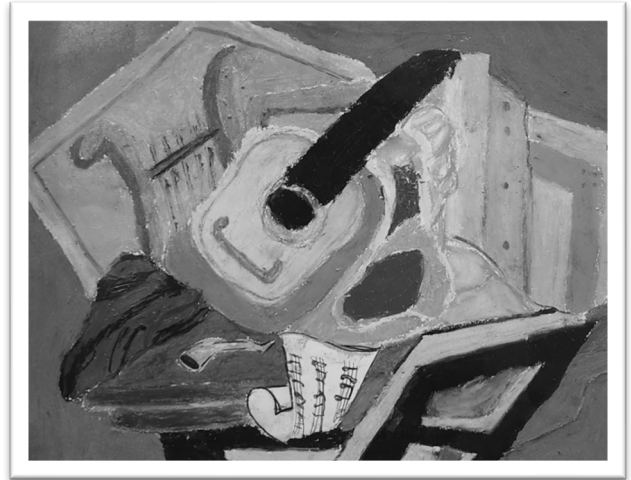
Classical takes you to a recent memory
You in your car listening to classical music with your mom
You complaining that it was too calming
and too boring to listen to
She ignores you and you stay silent
for the rest of the class and silent drive
Looking out the window completely quiet
You feel bad for the way you treated her music taste
You realize that she is the best mom you could ever have

Rock hits as hard as metal
You remember hearing your dad’s bad but heartwarming singing
The floor starts to rumble as you walk closer to his room
The moment you open the door, it blasts in your face
The metal guitar and the loud drums
You close your ears and tell your dad to turn it down,
but he never hears
You leave the room happy that he is enjoying it

Finally, the popular happy birthday song
Although it seems weird, it takes you back slowly
to each year of your life
The unskippable ad
The off-tune singing
The decorations and confetti everywhere around the house
Birthday present and candy wrappers on the ground
The awkward face you make
You thinking in your mind if you should clap or sing too
All you can do is say,
“Happy birthday little me, remember it”

Music is just what everyone needs
It makes you more grateful
It makes you happy
It makes you realize how much of a good life you have

—Isabella Tavares de Melo, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



JOSHUA PAZOS | Grade 7

Nostalgia

As the waves crash down,
A peaceful sense comes to me.
I close my eyes,
And it all comes rushing towards me.

The grains of sand slipping from my grasp,
Like silk being pulled away from me,
The seagulls crying, swooping down for food,
Like nails on a chalkboard,
My friends crowded around me,
Laughing with not a care in the world.

The cold, salty air making my cheeks flush
I reach for my hot cocoa,
The warmth races through my blood,
I feel it from my toes to the top of my head.

I open my eyes,
And although everything is gone,
The memories have never been more vivid.
The sounds, the feeling,
It all comes back
Once I close my eyes.

—Elsie Svet, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

Hatred

Hatred is a vile feeling
It consumes you
Like a vine with thorns holding you down
Once you are consumed by it
There is no happiness, no optimism
No kindness

Why do people hate?
Where does it originate from?
Was there something that happened in the past?
Or did it just... appear

Does the color of one's skin offend someone so much
It triggers them to call them names
To keep them separated from "normal people"
To be looked differently from everyone else?

A person from a different cultural background
Why are they excluded?
Is it the accent
Or the shape of their eyes or nose?

What is the cause of hate thwarts views of love?
Does one's view in love make you so uncomfortable
That it causes you to slur, discriminate, and fear them?
Is it bothersome to see someone happy?

If someone is finally confident and proud in their own skin
Why should you degrade?
Someone finally feels happy
after feeling extremely insecure about themselves
Why bring them back to that time
And make them feel bad again?

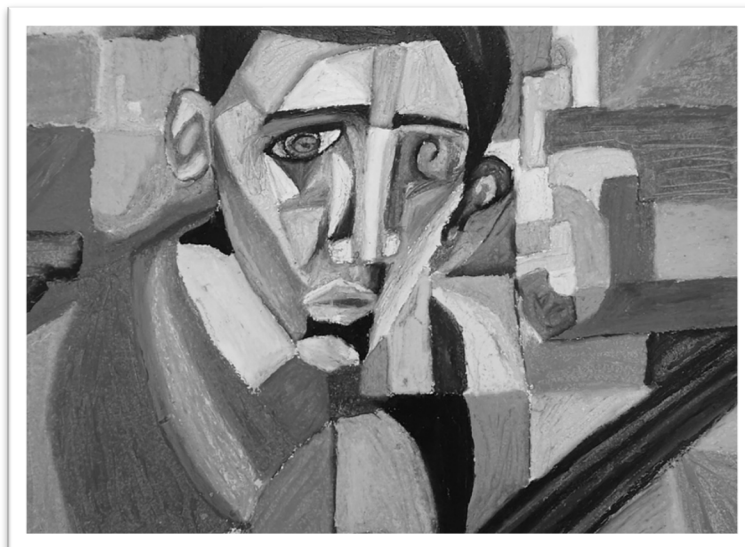
Is worshipping a different God wrong?
Why is it persecuted?
Is it bad to believe in another religion?
All religions should be accepted
Not persecuted

Republican or Democrat
Does that affect how a person is
Just because someone has an opposite
political party view?
It does not mean they are a bad person

Hate consumes you
To the point of hurting people
Everyone is different in their own way
Hate drowns you and does not let you go

The differences people have, make them unique
One of a kind
It does not change what is deep inside your heart
Kindness.

—Valerie Marimón, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



SKYLAR COTTON | Grade 7

Mesmerized

A table of two in the vast plains
Searching for the one thing that'll bring them to fame.
They try to dance and sing and a plethora of things.
But as the days fly by, something seems to change.

In the hopes of finding their fame,
They turned into the one thing they used to hate
The clicks, the thumbs, the heart, the fans, the love
It engraved into their brains.
They were nothing but dead fish in the depths of the ocean.
They wanted more; they made themselves the perfect dolls
Being tossed and churned in the burning pits of the internet's glaze.

The life they lost in the fires ablaze.
The shackles that held them dancing for the lights in their face
One wept, one swayed. The two in pain.
Doubting the pain that put them in the spotlight.
Being Mesmerized by the flashing lights and all of the fame.
No more but a show on display.

—Ethan Moreira, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

An Ode to My Lost Friendship

my friendship
dies
in the morning
in class

she looks at me
with pure
hatred
in her eyes

sadness
fills within me
happiness
fills within her

the memories
replay in my mind
a loop of
what we left behind

a hollow ache
where laughter used to be
now just the silence
of you and me

—Kaia Exelbert, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

Where Oh Where

Where oh where is my chocolate cake batter
So warm, so abundant, so flattering for one to bear
You could fall right through her
While it captivates your mind
You'll start to daze

However...

It's been missing for days, while my cat keeps getting fatter
Until I found a dribble of my tasty, creamy batter
Leading to the guest room bed, I scatter

For finally, I've found my culprit
Caught red handed
Confessing without speaking

But how oh how could I be angry
Two months old, so soft, so furry.

—Vaughn Levy, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

A Butterfly Up Above

In the sky up above,
A butterfly lives,
Surrounded with bliss and golden glow.

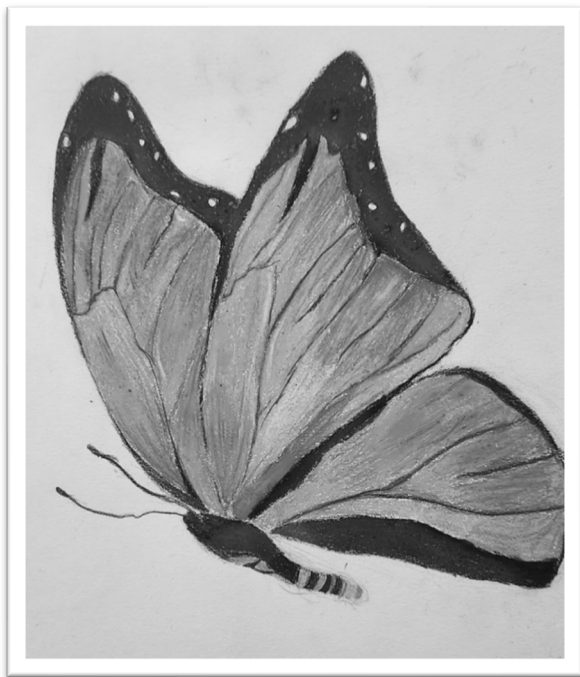
Her gentle wings flutter high,
With sparks of light that drift by.

Her silky scales are moonlit
They shimmer in the night,
With hints of luminance.

As she flies up into the air
With a graceful move,
She shines in the sunlight
Where everyone can see her.
Yet no one will ever know
Where she goes when dawn is shown.

When the world goes still and quiet,
She unfolds her wings,
And love takes flight.

—Leighton Miller, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



CECILIA CANTU | Grade 7

Velvet Spectator

I am a seat in this old theater
A treasure box of stories I have seen
With rows of friends behind me
Intensely I listen as the actors draw me in.

From my small nook in the corner
I applaud without a sound
Watching players grow confident
With each learned line.

I attend every magnificent production
Witnessing ordinary people become skilled performers
Observing eager faces with quiet excitement
Waiting to transport audiences to a new realm
Show after show

Then when opening night arrives
Joyfully I will sit, holding my breath
Witnessing the magic that unfolds before me
As the curtain begins to rise.

—Avery Selem, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

The Last Text

I sit on the edge of my seat
Enjoying the peace of my break –
before the rush of boarding school returns
I get a message
I go into another world –
I just got the best news of my life

I forget I am behind the wheel
I am in a party in my own mind
With red velvet cake - and a big banner
But that's not where I am

Life comes rushing back
A car comes speeding through my lane
I swerve left
But it's too late
That last text was mine

—Brooke Setchen, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

Nick “nock,” Tick tock

Tick tock,
Tick tock,
I can't stand,
The bothersome,
Clicks of the clock.
As they chatter,
Clack and cluck,

They chuckle,
And purposely irritate me,
As the chairs
Creak and chirr,
And I hear random,
Cracks and Crepitates,
That causes me to feel
Crammed,
And quite
Clamored.

Nick nock,
Nick nock,
I can't stand
The Numerous
Noisy,
Nine,
Nicks in a row,
That “nock” shortly after.

The noisy writing
Of the notebook,
That writes down the names of people,
Nearly caused me to
Nudge it,
Even if it makes me naughty.
The numbing noise makes me nauseous,
It's too noticeable to not notice.

Why is it so noisy and loud here?
Maybe stop the clicks of the clock,
Or the nicks of the “nock?”

—Isabella Santiago, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



I Dared to Dream

I dared to dream a happy dream just to get a broken heart
Rushing down a dark empty hall full of boxes
Feeling tears fall down my face
I'm crying once again because of a dream,
That we would be on top of the world just you and me
Yet I still dared to dream

In my dreams I remember all the happy memories
Running with you by my side the wind in my hair
Walking together on the beach at sunset the sand on our feet
I remember the waves crashing and us still standing there

I come to see you every summer, but you're never there
I visit all the places we've been, but they feel different now
No more wind in my hair, nor sand on my feet
Just an empty hole where my dreams used to be

—Nadia Skillrud, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

An Ode to the Beach

The seagulls croak with their orange beaks
As the ocean meets the warm sand,
The water that cools the bodies
of those targeted by the sun

My sun kissed skin meets the ripples of the water
As my gaze is averted, revealing some shells
Hidden under the sandy blanket of the shore

The ocean dances to the silent melody
That the beach sings to the sky
A melody that is serene and peaceful

The coastal breeze that smells like fish
Keeps the balance of the beach,
As the palm trees sway along with the waves

The air begins to cool as the breeze calms down
And the people start to leave
Leaving footprints in the sand, as the sky darkens

The colors blend into a golden amber
Making hues of rosy colors
Like the background of a painting on the beach

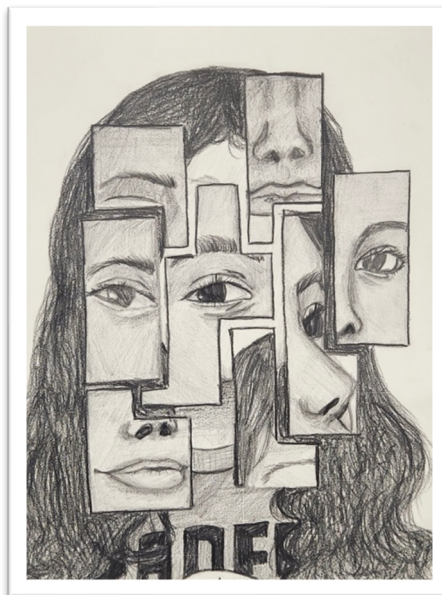
This is the beach that thousands of people come to see
Every summer from every corner of the earth
Just to enjoy the view of a beach, for a little while

—Eva Shuk Molina, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

Expectations

Living to be yourself -
But never knowing who you are -
You are a nerd because you are smart -
You are ugly because you do not wear makeup -
Uncool because you are not like everyone else -
Expectations live around us -
They surround us -
They eat who we are -
Devouring our soul -
This perfect person can't exist -
We live up to something fake -
You are in a bad dream so wake up to reality
and see that you will always be perfect -
Just be who you were meant to be -
Don't cover your identity -
Or mask your personality -
Because let me tell you this -
You are perfect, just the way you were meant to be -
Come out of the thunderstorm -
And join me on the beach -
Back on the ground below -
Feeling the sand beneath your feet -
Break that shell off your soul -
Take that mask off your face -
Unlock the chains at your feet and take a breath -
Come back to reality -
Love yourself until the end, and remember,
you are perfect, just the way you were meant to be.

—Penelope Sparks, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



KATARINA BURGIO | Grade 8

The Final Goodbye

As I approach my friend's house I feel nothing but sorrow
This is my final goodbye
As the leaves fall from the tree's arm,
they plummet and hit the floor with sorrow
Almost as even the leaves don't want to say goodbye

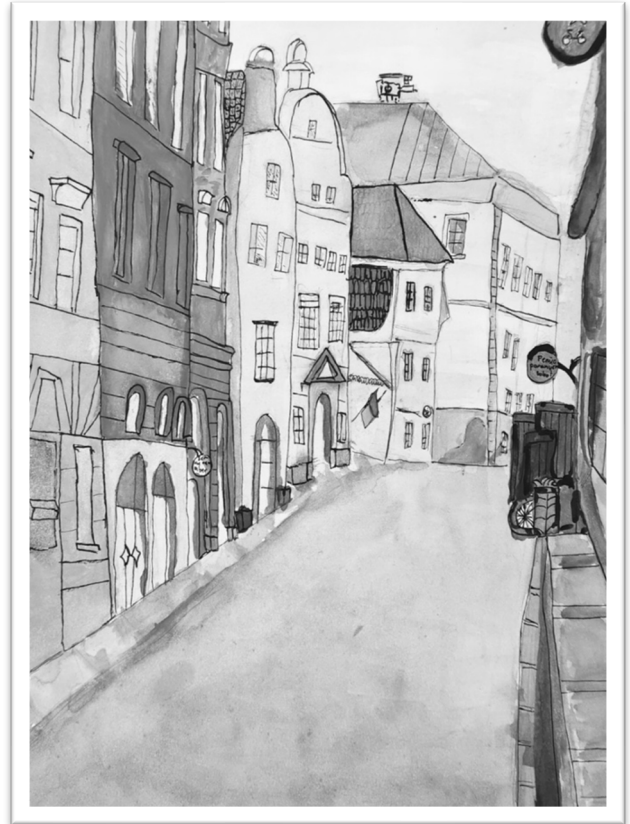
I will miss the smoke and the constant noise of Santiago
I will also miss my friends which we had
so many moments we cherished together
From the time he shot the ball, and it hit my head,
and when I did the same to him
Those moments will stay frozen in time,
like ice never to be touched again

His eyes were filled with pain and despair
as he watched his best friend leave
Now they would live the rest of their lives separated
and apart breaking their bonds as friends
The roads felt empty almost like
the city was grieving my goodbye
The streetlights flickered almost as if they were crying
and not wanting me to leave

As I passed my school, I saw the playground
that felt like home
The soccer field where we played together
And the building blocks that we used to build our homes
All these things left behind like useless belongings
with no purpose
But this had purpose this is where I made
my childhood memories with my beloved friends

Finally, the airport draws near, the final destination
Where all these memories will no longer be present,
but be part of the past
As I say goodbye to suburban city
I don't want to leave, as I cling to the memories I made there
I slowly release my grip letting all the memories fade away
Just like a house after an earthquake,
gone, destroyed, and forgotten.

—Nico Weinstein Berman, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



LEON MCDOWELL | Grade 8

¿Amigas?

¿Por qué me ignoran?

Eran mis amigas.
Se convirtieron groseras y malas
Cada comentario
Cada chiste
Duele.

A veces pienso en cambiar escuelas
Se siente como una buena idea

¿Por qué son así?
¿Por qué me duele esto?
Cada sonrisa es de mentira
Cada lágrima reprimida

Rumores falsos de mí
Las redes sociales venenosas
Me pintan como una persona mala

¿Soy una mala persona?
¿Soy una mentirosa?
¿Soy hipócrita?
¿Me tomo las cosas demasiado en serio?

¿Son mis amigas?
¿O se hacen pasar por mis amigas solo
para hacerme daño?

—Valerie Marimón, Grade 6
*Blue Ribbon
Judges' Award*



Calles cubanas

Son las 6:00 de la tarde
Puesta del sol
Todos los colores y nubes
Yo agarro la mano de mi padre.
Huele a pollo y pan cubano.
Todos ríen.
Otros cantan.
Los abuelos juegan dominó.

Cuando son las once.
Voy a casa de mi abuela.
Yo juego al fútbol con mis primos.
Con la comida saboreo las memorias de mi abuela.

Al otro día.
Salgo de Cuba.
Mi casa y mi país.
Porque mi corazón está en Cuba,
Adiós tío,
Adiós tía,
Adiós abuela,
Adiós a todos.

—Nick Damas, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

Hasta el último segundo

El sonido de chicos celebrando.
Chicos llorando.
Chicos mirando.
Todo lo que pasa cuenta.
El enfoque es crucial en este momento.
Dos a cero, quince mintos quedan.
Ahora dos a uno, seis minutos quedan.
La pelota queda en el aire por una eternidad.
El parque va a silencio.
¡BAM!
Dos a dos
Lo próximo que escuchas.
El Sonido de chicos celebrando.

—Felipe Gasparin, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



LEO RAMPOLDT | Grade 8

Ganado el juego

La casa de los colores

Donde las flores son rojas,
Los loros azules
Y la casa es gris
Donde la alfombra es amarilla
Y la madera es marrón
Donde el pasto verde es único.
Esa casa mía
Es muy especial

—Nico Weinstein Berman, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

¡Podemos hacerlo!
Un pase y luego otro
El sonido del balón de fútbol golpea nuestros pies
¡Necesitamos ganar!
Después ¡¡GOOOL!!
Las gradas tiemblan por todos los saltos y vítores
Los otros jugadores son buenos,
pero nosotros somos mejores
Nosotros seguimos anotando
¡Tú puedes con esto!
El trabajo en equipo es lo único que importa
Al fin siete a uno
Nosotros ganamos
El sonido de la victoria
Hay lágrimas de felicidad
Fue un partido difícil pero valió la pena
¡Ganamos!

—Cecilia Colombo, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

La montaña

Las nubes cubriendo toda la montaña
Los pájaros solitarios sin canción
Toda la montaña congelada sin un alma
La sillas todas cerradas
Los osos todos en su cuevas
Se siente como si el mundo se acabó

Ni una nube en el cielo
Los rayos de sol apuntando a la montaña
Todo el mundo feliz esquiando
Miles esquís en la nieve
El aire está fresco
Los pajaritos cantando
Huellas de animales por todas partes
Todo el mundo feliz y cantando

—Alegría Kogan, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

La pérdida

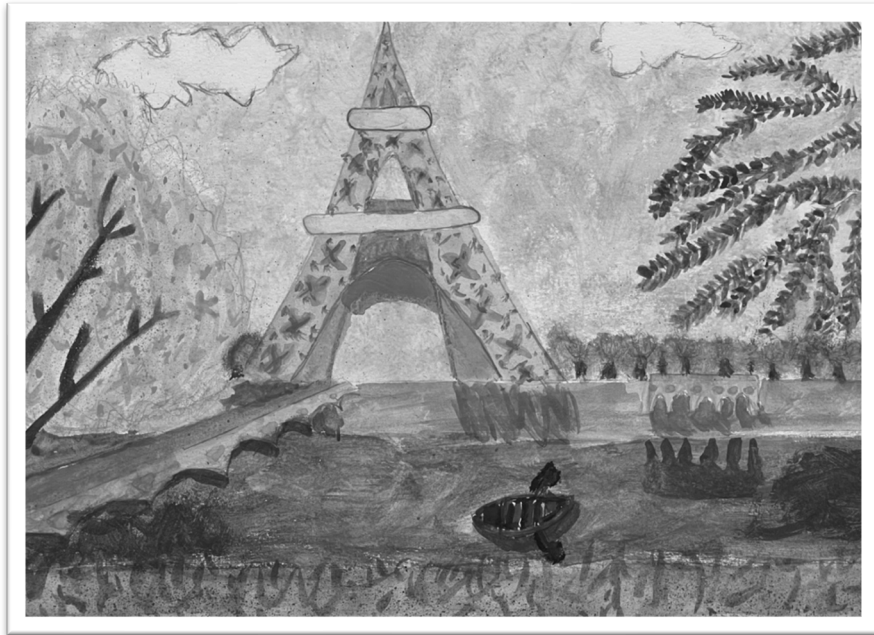
Otra vez sentada en el banco
Sola, con otra pérdida
Cuando derrame otra lágrima
Hasta que un hombre alto apareció debajo del sol brillante
Era mi padre, me dice que un pérdida no define una persona
E incluso si empiezas a
Perder, esfuérate más y ten muchas ganas de ganar
Y eso me cambió.

—Stella Vazquez, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

Voyage à Paris

J'adore la Tour Eiffel
Elle est belle
J'aime les croissants
C'est pour les enfants
Tu veux une baguette?
C'est la fête!
Ou un macaron?
Parce que c'est bon!
Et une crêpe ou une raclette?
Pourquoi pas, c'est chouette!

—Gemma Cosmao, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



CHARLOTTE FERNANDEZ | Grade 6

ÉI

Hace unos años se murió,
Siempre quería algo que me recordara de su olor a señor,
A amor,
A felicidad,
Y más que nada, un olor a alguien serio.
Me fascinaba ese olor.
Por Navidad estuve en la casa de mis abuelos.
Entrando por la puerta gigante, sentí la felicidad de estar ahí.
Acabé de comer y estaba en el clóset de mis abuelos; vi una loción
y mi abuela me dijo, con voz un poco triste y más feliz: —Era de tu abuelo.
Me preguntó si quería olerlo y le dije: —¡Sí, por favor!
Me dio una prueba del líquido que llegó a ser mi caja fuerte de las memorias con mi abuelo.
Lo olí y me dio la sensación de que mi abuelo estaba dándome uno de sus abrazos de amor.
Pero no solo el abrazo, también el olor que estaba buscando,
El olor que guardaba todas las memorias cerca de él.
Le dije: —Me fascina el olor y me recuerda a mi abuelo.
Y en ese momento me dijo: —¿La quieres?
La volví a ver con los ojos llenos de felicidad.
—¿De verdad? ¡Gracias!
Acabó siendo el tesoro de mis recuerdos de él.

—Mikel Zambrano, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

Collar

El collar me recuerda a mis primos
Es un recuerdo lindo y especial
Me hace sentir feliz y segura

Como una princesa en un castillo
El collar es un diamante brillante
Como la luz del sol reflejando el mar
Relajante, luminoso, y azul

Cuando abrí el collar, vi mi foto favorita
Mis primos y yo pasando tiempo juntos en mi cumpleaños
Especial, divertido, y memorable

El collar me hace ver México como si estuviera ahí
Un país asombroso y alegre

—Emma Velasquez, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

Conchas

Me acerqué la concha a la oreja
Y escuché las olas del mar
ondeando en la playa
Y sentí la arena suave bajo mis pies,
Las flores en los arbustos
Paseando por un camino
Las cigarras cantando en los árboles
Y los lagartos correteando por las rocas

Me quité la concha de la oreja
Y el sonido de las olas se desvaneció.

—Emily Phillips, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

She Was a Girl Who Dreamed in Pink and Glitter

She was a girl who dreamed in pink and glitter,
say the walls that used to shimmer,
the barbie dolls we wanted to become, lined up like possibilities,
before we knew what it meant to be looked at that way,
before we learned that blonde hair meant stupid,
as if our hair color erased our mind, as if pretty just meant empty.

They were sisters who shared secrets at night,
whispered between two small twin beds,
rainbows everywhere before we understood what rainbows could mean,
before symbols became statements,
before the world demanded we choose sides.
We wanted to catch rollie pollies in the ground, dig in the dirt,
explore the world with our hands,
but girls were told not to touch, as if wonder itself was unladylike,
as if the earth wasn't meant for us to discover.

He was a boy who loved dinosaurs,
toys scattered across the floor, basketballs in the corner, posters on the wall.
He visited now and then, filling the house with joy that bounced off every wall,
his footsteps racing through the halls, his voice calling us to play.
Not anymore.

The worst thing that could happen was a scraped knee,
you could tell by the band-aids in the bathroom drawer,
by the unfinished shows we'd cry about,
by the innocence that filled every room, like sunlight we didn't know would fade.

Maybe it was always there, the darkness hiding in corners we were too small to see,
lurking under the laughter and the games,
waiting in the news our parents turned off when we walked into the room.
Maybe the world was never as simple as we thought,
and childhood was just a roof, shielding us until we grew tall enough
to see over the walls they built around us.

We were told to dress right, act right, stay quiet.
Rules we followed without knowing why,
Little warning of a world that demanded we shrink ourselves to fit,
That punished girls for taking up too much space, for being too loud, too much, too free.

We are too young to understand but old enough to fear.
The light left and the dark covered us, consumed my bubble gum pink room,
The dinosaur kingdom, that space where his laughter used to echo.
The world came into view slowly, then all at once, my eyes can't unsee it.

Six of us moved from that house, but we left behind more than our home.
We left before everything got complicated,
before the world taught us to be afraid,

and all I want is to remember when the only thing that hurt was falling down.

—Alessandra Bailey, Grade 7

Blue Ribbon

Judges' Award

Barbara Dubé Creative Writing Award



Prior to her death in 2006, Barbara Dubé was a teacher with Miami-Dade County Public Schools for over 38 years and volunteered as a Superintendent with the Creative Writing Department of the Miami-Dade County Youth Fair for 24 years. In honor of Mrs. Dubé's contributions towards the development of young writers in our community, the Barbara Dubé Creative Writing Award is presented to the "best in show" entry from the youngest writers in grades 4-7 at the Miami-Dade County Fair and Exposition.

Abandoned Imagination

Sometimes I wish I could recall the days
Where I was the hero
Or the villain
In my own story
Straight from the clouds is where it comes from
Like fluttering butterflies,
My dreams would whisper about
Love
And fantasy
And action
When I was a kid,
To act as though I was in another world was the best
The fluffy fun coming from night dreams and daydreams
The rough and snappy action too
I want to go back to when I could act as though it were real
All the colors still vivid and clear
But now I strain to reach my old level of creativity
My old imagination,
Waiting, dusty, in a drawer in my brain
I search for the key,
desperately reaching into the blankness,
Looking for something that no longer lives,
Waiting for the inspiration to hit me
And I would grin like a little kid again,
Push my hair out of my face—
And what?
Even now,
In my “young age,”
I struggle to find the pieces of information
The pieces of the puzzle
To find the key,
To the drawer
Holding my dusty imagination
My lost creativity.
My Abandoned Imagination.

—Joanna Harris, Grade 7
*Blue Ribbon
Judges' Award*



Straight . . .

He stood too straight,
down to the last atom.
His face a sleek onyx
like the void from which he came.

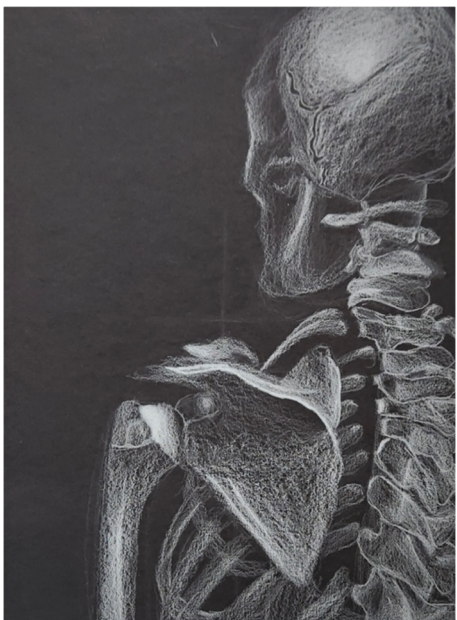
There were pulsing holes of white
where his eyes should have been.
His arms stretched to lands of blight.
The lands from which he came.

His fingers thin and slender,
his teeth a putrid brown.
And once he meets man's gaze
they see the depths from which he came.

Some mystics thought him a god.
Those men were killed by men,
and when he finished his crusade
none spoke out against his name.

The world stayed dead and silent,
with no man to kindle the flame.
And this honeycombed Earth,
without life, without mirth,
became part of the void.
The void from which he came.

—Santiago Krauze, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



SOPHIA ROMAN | Grade 7
Fine Arts Award 2026 Miami-Dade County Youth Fair

The Promise Called Forever

A ring that has a message,
That holds all the weight of the family,
That holds the biggest promise possible,
I was the ring holding the promise,
The promise called forever.

I was next to fulfill this promise,
I was ready to begin my job,
I was excited to open this chapter of their lives,
I was hoping that I was the key to their beginning.

I was on her finger,
I was her favorite thing,
I was the reminder of her husband,
I was the shiny reflection of her perfect family.

I was watching one day
I was in my usual spot,
I was watching them argue,
I was watching them never stop.

I was still on her finger,
I was one of her least favorite things,
I was the circle that somehow became broken,
I was the reminder of her once perfect family

I was worried that I am no longer loved,
I was not ready to get fired from my job,
I was sad to see them drift apart,
I was angry to see that I was taken off.

A ring that has a message,
That holds all the weight of the family,
That holds the biggest promise possible,
I am the ring who broke the promise,
The promise called forever.

—Caroline Lascelle, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

what they say

isolation

the prison bars say
as they rust in time
they protect guards
tucked away, forever to stay

hunger

says the plastic food tray
with one chunk of slop
slapped onto it
with no choice
they must eat it
or suffer

pain

say the bruises and scars
all over inmates' backs
added every day
from constant beat downs by the guards
to the metal beds
not snug in the least

distance

says the glass barriers
between each inmates' stall
an outsider calmly speaking
too far away
to be close enough

mistakes

say the documents
listing the wrongdoings of every inmate
and destroying their life
with one piece of paper
and a stamp of red ink

desperation

say the cries
that come from down below
not of today
but ones from ages ago

freedom

says the fresh air
as they step outside
and breathe in the colors of the sun

disgust

say the judgmental looks
that the pedestrians give
as they walk by

rejection

says the job applications
that stare at their record
because of one stained mistake
that will always be there
for as long as they live

—Spencer Leinoff, Grade 7

Blue Ribbon

Underneath the Battlefield

The door hangs open-
As if someone left in a hurry.
The hinges are hanging on for dear life
Just like the families once did.

Dust clings onto the cracked and broken ceiling
Where a lantern once flickered
While red and orange glowing lights shone from outside.

BOOM BOOM

The darkness was familiar
Not feared.

A small shoe rests by the wall
One lace torn.
A ceramic cup lies on its side
Where a family once laid their trembling bodies
Nights spent listening for noises overhead.

CRACK CRACK

The faint smell of smoke lingers-
Like a memory that will never fade.
The stone floor is uneven and dented
Where feet would pace in circles while waiting
for the return of silence

A rusted tin of peaches sits unopened on a shelf
They saved what they could
Even hope
Tally marks line the walls
Where the children counted their long and restless days
Or the ones hoped for

RUMBLE RUMBLE

The air still carries weight of the voices-
That whispered there.
Outside the world keeps on moving
Even without them.

BANG BANG

The cellar holds onto those promises that they
made to each other
That they would make it out alive

—Ava Anthon, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Checkmate

Chess is life
The king is yourself
When alone, vulnerable, and weak
Moving slowly but surely
But with its fellow pieces
Becomes strong, like concrete.

Chess is life
The queen is your family
It will always protect
Defend until death
But following your command
To launch an attack.

Chess is life
The pawns are your friends
Protected by the king
They will live another day
They march to the end of the board
And slowly, transform into your family

Chess is life
The knights are your beliefs
Jumping over pieces
Never staying set
Trying to make sure
You are on the right track.

Chess is life
When you are put in check
You try to call for backup
And they won't come for you
Not for you, but for someone else
Alone, the move that ends you is near,
Checkmate.
Game over.

—Trey Roy, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

The Mirror

A mirror showing my reflection,
Yet I'm unhappy with the result.
It never seems so perfect.
It feels just like an insult.

I sit there staring at a person
Who looks so similar to me.
The disappointment in their eyes
Feels like a bad dream.

This mirror that's upon my hand
Must be so disgusted.
The person they see in their glass
Seems like they have rusted.

With flaws and imperfections
I feel them on my skin.
It seems like I'll never be used to it
As if I'll never have a grin.

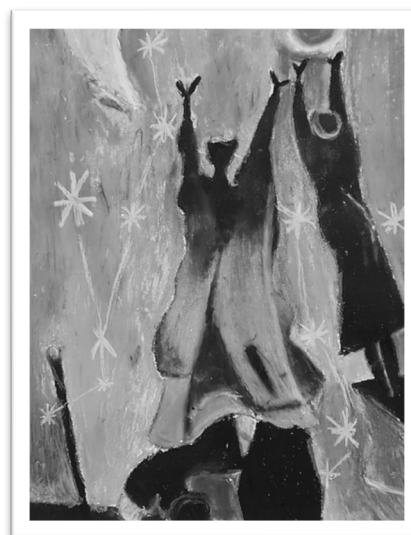
The mirror sighs each morning,
Weary of my gaze.
It scolds me with its silence,
And keeps my flaws ablaze.

I ask it for forgiveness,
But it only shows me truth.
Perhaps it's not the mirror's fault.
Perhaps it reflects my youth.

I thought it sneered at me,
That its glass could feel disdain,
But now it only watches,
Quiet keeper of my pain.

It nods when I accept the flaws
It used to magnify,
As if it always waited for
Me to stop asking why.

—Addison de Godoy, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



DALLAH FERGUSON | Grade 7

Beautiful Disgrace

Her dirty dress lay tattered but vibrant.
The disheveled hair that lay on her head
was of unequal lengths.
Her walk uncanny due to her bound feet.
Her face tired, ugly, and unredeemable.
Her hands shook vigorously
as if they were traumatized.

The flickering flame lay in her hands,
the only light left in the gloomy rain.
As she laid the lantern to the earth,
She gazed through the grass fields, up to the clouds.
Clouds blocked the sun like locked doors
as the rain rushed down.
Grass swayed peacefully with the soft wind.

Her dress flared and flew,
As she spun recklessly.
Her long sleeves flared as she threw her hands out,
Her scarf fluttered gracefully around her arms,
Dancing among the rain drops.

Her steps elegant, but full of expression.
She maneuvered between the rain
as if she could communicate with each drop.
Her soft, misshapen eyes looked yearning,
Her bound feet almost stumbling,
and her trembling hands blundering,
And yet she danced with her whole soul,
turning dark to light.

—Willa Dunagan, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Beneath the Trees

If I had agreed
To meet my past self
I'd choose a spot beneath the trees
So, nobody will hear what we will tell
Tall she will sit
With her hair long and shoes vibrant
I'd chuckle whenever she says 'lit'
And speaks about her kindness

Scars not yet adorning her arms
Close with her mom she will be
Still falling for her empty charm
Still too blind to see

I'd listen to her as she talks
About her favorite games
And how she draws characters with chalk
On sidewalks as wide as bowling lanes
I'd explain to her what mom meant
When she told us we were getting a 'homework coach'
And that new pill we have to take that the doctor 'lent'
We have to eat with toast

Her small hands would clutch
A journal
with a rainbow cover
She'd ask me who she could trust
And if she'd have a lover
I'd look at that poor, naive girl
In her wide, curious eyes
With her confidence unfurled
And not yet out of tries

I'd tell her softly
That her beloved cannot be trusted
No matter how much she may beg me,
That friendship will soon grow rusted
I'd wipe away her tears
And wish her to stop skipping dessert
"Your fears aren't quite as near
As you have learned"

I'd beg her to never stop feeling
And how she will miss it so
Not to stop finding true meaning
In words flung to and fro
She'd wish me not to go
Once our time is over
I'd not let my sorrow show
But she'd see through the cover
By then, her head would be reeling
And her legs would feel like dough
Tightly I would embrace her
Salty tears dripping down
"I hope you've cherished what you learned,
Please don't frown."

On one knee I would kneel
And her hands I would hold
How I envy how she can still feel
How I hate how she does what she's told
Part of me I have lost
And part of her she will lose
But I will not disrupt her thought
Nor will I turn her heart black and blue
So farewell, my distant reflection
Protect your heart so
Don't make your sorrow sparsely mentioned

—Perry Gullen, Grade 7

Blue Ribbon





Our Country

Our country is supposedly a cornerstone of the globe but in reality, it's a country full of corruption, false hope, and poverty.

Corruption is a complication in this country mainly because government officials that we trust to protect us from torment, abuse their power in order to fulfill their personal aspirations of how they want this country to be.

False hope is a problem in our country because millions of innocent immigrants who all want a better life, get discriminated and face economic hardship.

Poverty is often regarded as the biggest problem because over ten million people are without a home and a large portion of them get addicted to debilitating drugs. Unfortunately, the "best" country in the world is also the one with the biggest holes.

—Benjamin Meyerhans, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Abandoned Photo

The old
Crumpled photo
See the wet residue
Of the abandoned

The little girl in the photo
So happy, so free
Crumpled up
Dropped into the puddle
Of sins and mistakes
Causing death to the internal sensation
of delirium

Photo born from a dark room,
Then erased with burning chemical
To add a little glint,
Sulfide turning ashen to umber,
Ultimately washed
For photo

Writing on the back
With the faded unreadable cursive
Name and date
Plus, a little note

The little girl
In the sepia photo
Dropped to earth
To be forgotten
And never seen again

Or,
Dropped to the ground
Never to be forgotten.

—Valentina Vargas, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

But the World Still Watches

A once quiet village, held in yellow sand
Slowly began to crack and burn, with no help at all
Shadows began to gather, sweeping hope from every open space.
Storms in the sky began to brew, made of fear.
Soft whispers of survival began to rise steady and higher.

Families began to flee, realizing the tragedy
They crossed a border in a state of heartbreak
In the sand, their footprints formed a plea,
“For peace to root where sorrow used to be”
They pray for this, but nothing is happening,

Their footprints in the sand,
Being blown away by the wind.
They act as if it’s a clean new start
But the blood stains the sand red and leaves a mark.
The others walk by countless bodies, like its sand on a beach.

The world watched echoes of people torn apart,
Mothers forced to carry courage like a heavy heart
Children learned to dream beneath the beating sun
And are forced to forget the privileges of one.
And wait for the day, when war will come undone.

And isn’t it strange?
That no set of rules can end human suffering.
That no matter what we experience, history just repeats.
Because there is no code to end our suffering.

And the world just watches.
For those of Sudan are being slowly forgotten.
150,000 gone, to the RSF, leaving families disheartened
The facts have been made clear,
But the world still watches.

—Santiago Mosquera Moro, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

The Taste of Almost

Finally: the day has arrived,
the day I imagined in the middle of math class,
the day that keeps me up at night,
Championship day.

Everything was how I pictured it:
the noises, the people, the constant annoying whistles,
But there was just something off.
I wasn’t holding the huge bright shiny gold trophy
with the big words:
ALL AMERICAN NATIONAL CHAMPIONS.

Tears rolled down me and my opposing team’s face,
Except theirs were tears of joy.
I felt a lump in my throat,
Pure jealousy was eating me whole.
It should've been me.

All of my mistakes kept replaying in my mind
as I looked at the silver medal wrapped around my neck,
My coach hugged me like a proud mother,
congratulating me for getting second place.
I gripped the medal, holding it tight,
Feeling the cold medal brush against my hand
It felt exactly how a gold medal would've been,
But it wasn’t enough.

—Aura Sharma, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

The Abandoned Wedding Ring

Such a small piece yet so much meaning
 So many memories of their story
 Watching them grow; watching them make a family
 Soon to be forgotten.

But what happened?
 Worn everyday just to be shoved into a box?
 Did I lose my purpose?
 Did I do something wrong?

A broken promise
 A lost word of honor
 Once a sparkle in the sun
 Now cracked, and collecting dust.
 Hidden away where no one sees,
 A reminder of what used to be.

Once clutched hard,
 Now resting peacefully on my own.
 No more warmth or hand to hold
 No more promise of forever.

Each diamond holds a memory
 Each year in its case forgotten.
 They've moved on now

I used to watch them dance under the stars their
 favorite song playing on repeat
 I watched every Christmas lighting up the tree,
 When every once in a while she'd glance down at me.

In the end of the day, it's just the way life goes
 People come and people go.
 But the real ones are who stay
 The real ones are your home.

—Scarlet VanderZanden, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



The Trees

The trees, with the leaves
 Swaying in the breeze,
 Many love to see.

Trees, full of life,
 Stretch their arms upwards
 reaching for the sky.

Branches catch the sunlight
 breaking it into pieces,
 Scattered through green.

Roots whisper below
 holding the earth gently,
 Steady and unseen.

Birds waking, singing their songs,
 hidden deep in the leaves,
 Stillness of morning.

Time slows beneath them,
 Shadows slowly drifting,
 The world learns to breathe.

Wind moves through the branches,
 Greens turning to orange and red,
 Autumn is coming.

Even when leaves fall,
 The trees still stand waiting,
 Knowing they'll bloom again.

—Sara Dresner, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

America; “The Great”

“With liberty and justice for all.”
Words that have been said all my life
But don’t seem to represent anything
Words that are only applicable
For those whose souls are painted red, white, and blue
For those who aren’t scared
To leave home without being deported

With liberty and justice
Until it’s one of color
With Liberty and Justice
Until one of different ethic
Shows their true self to all

The country is sinking slowly
That’s what I’ve noticed
Not what I’ve been told
Because the voices that want to speak up
Are being wrapped in chains and being controlled

Those who just reached the young age of twenty
Are thinking through what to say
As they can’t speak where they are from
They can’t say they are from the Dominican-Republic
Or they shall be taken away

Kids who were once taught how to count
Are now being taught what to say when one asks
“Where are you from,”
And they answer, “American citizen,”
As their pure white souls
Don’t know what shall happen
If they say they are immigrants from Colombia

Families being torn apart
As if they were a puzzle
In which they are trying to solve the answer
to why a promising country took a turn
Questions surrounding their minds
Which are being scribbled on with black ink
Telling their heart to stay
As this is the country of the “free”
While their body moving towards the exit
They will be taken out either way

Our nation is drowning
In Deep dark waters of grey
But only those whose liberty
is being taken away understand
Those whose insides may be painted in white stars
But not the one’s of the American flag

“With Liberty And Justice For All,”
Words that once meant something
But it now only shows the fall of our country.

—Sofia Villagomez Harnes, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



SKYLAR COTTON | Grade 7

The Abandoned Moon

Where I Let Go

The *ocean* sighs softly as it reaches the sand.
SHHH.

Humming a steady lullaby as it moves.

Sand is soft like powdered sugar,
Sandcastles being built,
Towels being laid,
Bright umbrellas open.

I sit in the *sand* as the waves reach me.
SWOOSHHH!

Feeling the *sun* baking my skin.
The sun warms me like a cozy blanket.
I let the *breeze* brush my hair.

The breeze is gentle like whispered secrets.
I let the *water* carry my worries away.
Watching the *waves* swallow my stress in the sea.

And I am carried by the rhythm of the *sea*.

—Isabella Casanueva, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



SIENNA NEWBAUER | Grade 8

The last I heard of them was the sound of the engine running
I was confused at first, but now I know
I still have the rubber orange ball they threw
Why would they do that to me; I wish I knew

My paws a tired, scratched, and nicked
My ribs show like the gray clouds on a sunny day
I miss the sound of the child
Squealing when she saw me; never was I ever that happy

Now I live in the alleyway were the cats wait to feast on my meat
They can't help themselves; I'll last for another day, at most a week
Cling clang clash scratch and hiss
The cats jump from trash can to trash can circling me, *vultures*
It's not too sad when it's been in your mind for all too long
The sad thing about it is that I know it all too well

I used to think I could last forever; but that's quite the lie,
I guess I would know by now
Death is not exciting, but anything is better than this
My rusted collar has gone loose from the loss of weight
Barely saying the name; *Luna*, and the forgotten phone number
engraved for all eternity

The fleas and mites are vampires on my skin
Eating and sucking away all the life I have left
My eyes start blinking less; and I sigh in pure and solely exhaustion
I know I have diseases but the worst disease I hold is loneliness

Will I ever see the sun shine again
I feel stuck in eternal darkness
I see a blurry shine as I look slowly up at the gray sky
It seems to be pushing away all the dark in my life
I feel free; like floating, yet my limbs go weak;
I feel a slight fall to the concrete
The light calls my name the way the child used to
My breaths get small, my patched-up tail curls in
It all stops
I made it...

—Maria del Pilar Zaldivar, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

The Umbrella

Patiently, it waited for the sky to weep,
So that it could be some use to the busy crowd of Times Square,
But it knew that people only used it to hide the skeletons in their closet.
It was disappointed in itself, people were unhappy when it was brought out,
It wished it was something else, perhaps something colorful and happy,

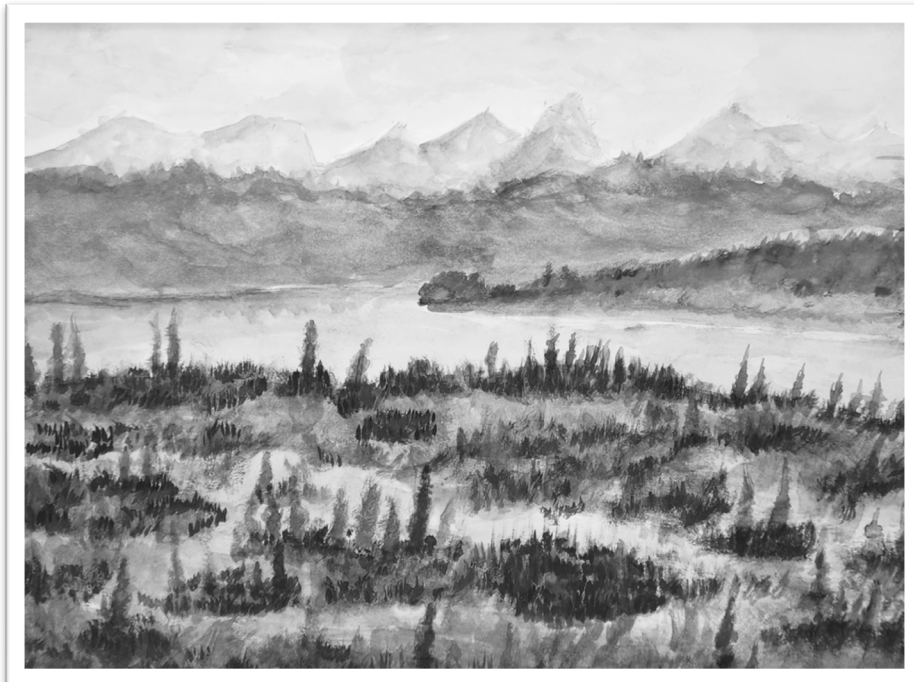
What if it was a different shade of blue, to resemble a bright blue sky?
Could it have been liked if it was to protect you from the sun?
But it wasn't, any other object could have been the start of something good,
Like joy or love, perhaps,
It served no purpose to wrap itself around the unthinkable thought that it was something good,

Because it wasn't,
People are afraid of what could happen,
If they stepped out from under the shield they'd been hiding under,
If they dared to dance in the rain,
If they leaped out from under their cover, and realized that there is much more to life than hiding,

If people just peeked out and saw the wonders of the rain,
Perhaps they could understand what the umbrella saw
And they would see, the rhythmic drumming of a thousand tiny feet on a tin roof
Each droplet is a diamond, a single pearl on a million leaves,
Shimmering with the promise of rebirth.

—Sasha Arditi, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

LAILA RODGERS | Grade 8



Under The Bed

The eerie silence contorts the night,
Shattering the lamp shade lights,
A little girl pulls up her blanket, a curtain of soft rose pink,
She imagines it as a shield against her fear;
 it protects her more than she thinks.

A viscous clawing monster crawls out from below,
It wears blue like the boy she saw from her window,
Who pushes and shoves,
The girl wonders if like the monster he too never learned love.

Through the years the monster's memory passes
 like an autumn chill,
The little girl forgets about him because she found more thrill,
Yet she sees the reflection of the monster
 in every person who wears blue,
Like a never-ending nagging at the bottom of her shoe.

The other day when the world crushed her dreams,
She saw in his pupils blue where it was once green,
When words were spat out and stuck to her brain,
Enough blue filled her vision to let the sky rain.

Every day the monster's midnight blue mocked her all around,
She let out whimpers but nothing more when they refused to hear her sound,
The sea had always been a swarm of pretty blue,
But to the girl every object in her sight was painted just as true.

So, with her palms pressed together to suppress her fear,
Her welled up eyes closed to trap her tears,
She wished to the only thing that wasn't a color she loathed,
A soft rose-pink blanket mixed in a pile of her clothes.

She gave the blanket a tug and left it on her bed,
A solemn invitation she hoped the monster had read,
To come back to claw, bite, and feed on her nightmares,
Just so she didn't have to disappear
 under the blue-eyed stares.

She craved her childish imagination that had one flared,
For every single immature thought she had once shared,
She wanted so desperately to stop hearing him
 in the critiquing words said,
She really just wanted him back under her bed.

—Priscilla Chow, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



INES VAN GASTEL | Grade 8
Beaux Arts Student Artist Showcase Finalist

The Train Station

Platform 2, January 13, 1940

Soldiers, getting shipped off to war, who may never come back
Families, saying goodbye, for some of them this will be the last time
The noise, unbearable, people sobbing, yelling,
 and whispering their final goodbyes
The trains, speeding out of the station,
 carrying the soldiers to the front lines

Platform 9, July 25, 1955

Families, reuniting for the summer holiday
Birds, flying through the station chirping their beautiful song
Passengers, sticking their heads out of the windows
 to see their family
The sky clear as can be, not a cloud in the sky

Platform 5, December 21, 1970

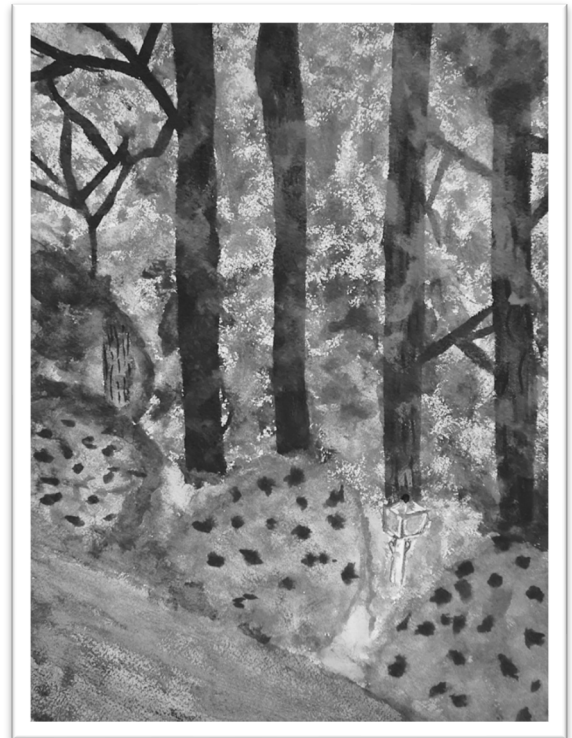
Children, returning to their families for the holidays
Families, waiting to see their relatives
 for the first time in what seems like forever
Decorations, enveloping the walls with color and cheery spirit
The trains, screeching to a halt carrying lifted spirits and families

Platform 6, September 29, 1985

The station, nearly empty, a quiet peaceful place
Trees, bare as can be
Leaves, golden brown, floating in through the windows,
 crunching under your feet
The breeze, flowing gently through the station

Platform 11, May 11, 2000

The station, abandoned, overridden with nature
The walls, once full of color and energy, covered in vines and weeds
The once bustling train track, deserted, full of overgrown grass and bushes
The once busy train station, reclaimed by nature



LIV MOLINARI | Grade 8

—Benjamin Gold, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Wildfire

Mr. Bird, he rested on the trees
Far above the ground; his favorite place to be
The canopies, deserted mostly, were warm and green
Calm like he,
All knew it was a safe place to be

But then the silver havoc-wreakers came
Caused a clamor, up rose the flames
As the ancient bark was burned and scarred,
silenced without a mouth
The thunder would scream, the wind would howl,
the clouds would cry
All helped the natural, ancient giants project
their warnings in a horrible sound

It was a disaster, a cause for distress absolutely unchained
Too much of everything, it left a haze on their brains
Survival instincts raging and their feet, it was all they had left
They used it most effectively and fled
“Away, Away, Away,” their minds all sang as they ran

Mr. Bird was among this parade
Of chaos and unorder, he was grounded still
Little did he know what would happen in his delay
As the cage rose over him, he squealed with alarm
He did not escape, not that fateful day

As the smoke curled on the horizon,
the sky once blue now gray
As the stumps left behind stuck out like graves
Maybe it would take many hundred years,
eventually it would all grow back
Could they not have spared a few?
Simply uncaring, a horrible massacre

—Serafina Hill, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Lost Shed

Once a storage space to keep things in,
Now only collects dust,
covered in beautiful glistening spiderwebs.
A box made from wood and tin,
The place where items are left to live.

The insides of it remain a mystery,
Locked away with no found key.
It feels darkness and ever loneliness,
It inhabits the campus around it.

What could it hold people ask?
A treasure chest filled with gold coins?
A box filled with precious jewelry and gems?
No one will ever know unless opened.

The shadows scatter along the ground,
The box is decorated with many features.
The rust colors the box a dullish brown,
The atmosphere is eerie and gloomy.

It is like a boardgame that has lasted many years,
At first it is played with and searched upon,
But over time it crumbles and is toppled over.
Not cared for, not enjoyed.

But through this mystery and pain, it lies a secret,
It holds the key to happiness and fulfillment.
Through the secret door lies memories,
Happy or not it experiences joy
with everlasting moments.

—Joshua Pazos, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Happiness

There.
That was it, the creature could tell.
His way to freedom,
His way to **happiness**

The child came up to him with energy,
The joy in its eye
It ran up to the creature and smiled,
Put its tiny arms around him

The creature was frozen in this moment
This moment, he was sure
Everything would be okay
He would survive

He could almost see **his** new life
Feel the child's hand brushing
 over his fur in the mornings
Hear the noise of the TV on late afternoons
Smell the perfume the mom puts on when she leaves
Taste the pet food that came into his mouth
It almost seemed **real**
Almost

Until it ended.
A larger human came,
Looking at the creature with emotions
 he was very familiar with
Disgust

Fear
Hatred
It dragged the child away,
Along with all of the creature's hopes and dreams
 of happiness

And that moment,
And all the others like it,
Was all that was left of the creature's life
It was a clock,
Ticking in repetition,
Never to change
Ever since it happened
He was abandoned

At first, he had thought the abandonment
 wasn't forever
He thought **this** was just temporary,
Just **another** walk in the park,
He thought this would be something
He would **enjoy**
But now he knew

Abandoned meant hungry,
Away from the pet food
Abandoned meant alone,
Away from his family
Abandonment meant heat,
Away from the cool AC of the house
Abandonment meant dirty
Away from the bathtub in the bathroom

Abandoned meant death
Death **awaits**

—Alisa Popova, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Mi Tía

My mind always retraces its steps
to the same story.
My heart throbs at the thought of it.
the day I lost someone so dear to me.
I feel sick to my stomach,
like a little piece of me gets stabbed
every time I think about you.

I called you that Friday.
My mom told me you were sick again.
When I heard those words, I fell silent.
Mute.
I didn't know how to respond.
My heart couldn't bear to say goodbye yet.
It wasn't ready to let go.
I hung onto the thin thread, to the sliver of hope,
that you would survive,
but cancer had other plans.
It had already chosen its ending.

I always hear the incredible stories
of those who have survived,
of people who win battles like yours,
and it makes me wonder why you didn't.
It almost makes the open wound sting a little
more.
Like a pinch of salt is sprinkled on
every time I think about it.

My mom said it might be the last time I ever saw
you.
But you were across the ocean
in Madrid.
While I sat in Miami, in a car,
holding a phone, awaiting a call I wasn't ready
for.
Something that felt like the end.

I wiped away my tears before calling.
I didn't want you to know I was in pain.
I didn't want you to think you caused my pain.
And when you answered, I was afraid.
I had never seen you, someone always so loud,
happy, and full of life, look so drained and
fading,
and empty

Almost as if you were already fading away.
Yet you put on a smile.
Faked it.
Today marks one year
since I've seen you, heard your comforting laugh,
or felt your warm and familiar touch.
Today marks one year since you died.

You fought till the end, and I want you to know
we saw every part of your battle,
even the ones you chose to keep hidden.
But my love for you will remain unchanged,
and rooted in the present, even though you are now
just a silhouette living in the past.

—Valentina Rodríguez, Grade 7

Blue Ribbon



MARIA DEMIANIUK | Grade 7

The 7 Stages of Grief

Grief is an interesting thing.
You see it in others, and yet
when it happens to you,
it doesn't seem real,
like you are watching someone else.

The first stage of grief is Shock.
You hear the news,
and everything around you is muted,
your body feels numb,
and you sit there, trying to process the news,
like a deer in headlights

The second stage is Denial.
you tell yourself they're still here,
you tell yourself nothing changed,
you are trapped in an altered world,
with no escape except Acceptance.

The third stage is Anger.
Sometimes, you're angry at the world.
Sometimes, you're angry at the person who left you.
Then you're angry at yourself for not doing better.
It is an irrational emotion,
a raging fire, fueled by sorrow.

The fourth stage is Bargaining,
the big, "What if"
What if I knew?
What if I could've stopped it.
You scream, you cry, you beg for one more chance,
to make things right,
before realizing they are truly Gone.

The fifth stage is Sorrow,
a doleful shadow,
hovering over you Always,
Always around.
The deeper you go,
the darker it gets,
Like a dragged-out tunnel.

All tunnels end though, and then there is light,
for the sixth stage is Hope.
The darkness clears,
and optimism takes its place.
There is always some rain,
but rain makes a rainbow.

The last and final stage,
of this long, woeful journey,
is Acceptance.
You accept they are gone,
yet always still there.
You accept you can continue without them,
without forgetting them.
You accept that you can
Move On.

—Annabelle Tirado, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



LAILA RODGERS | Grade 8

The Pen Theory

I prefer not to think of myself as an object
Instead, a tool of the brain
My ink is merely your tears in black
I am used as you write and write and write
I have felt your warm hands steady or your cold and shaky grasp
I have been used while you write postcards to loved ones
But also, the pain of losing a friend
I am cheap I must say
But my permanent ink runs like rivers
My purpose shines
As you guide me onto the page
The bold declaration
Of a piece inside of you
As your swift movements begin letters that turn into words
I grin at the thought
The thought you chose the world over secrecy
As my ink spreads like wildfire
Fierce but Punctual
A piece of you unravels
The words come pouring out of the deepest part of you
I am strong and unwavering
Even as my ink begins to fade
But I know my words will stay
As clear as day
Although some nights I wake up in the dark
With cold sweat down my face
Of the thought of yielding no more ink
Not because I am intimidated by the conclusion
But because I want to continue to finish the narrative
Of yourself and your journey
From grocery lists
To deep dark confessions
I am a sergeant who carries your secrets
I will be yours to the day I run dry
And when this happens don't look at me with pity
Just know I gave you everything I had
Because I believed in you
Because I knew the significance of your words
And how they will change the world for better or worse

Love, your pen

—Olivia Treiser, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

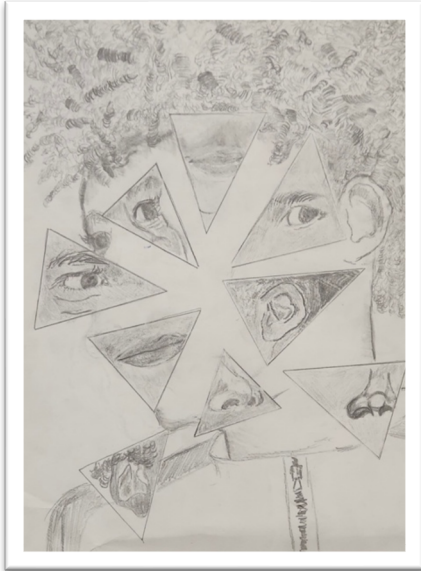
My Thoughts

My thoughts show up suddenly,
loud and playful,
yelling GUESS WHAT?!
Into a quiet moment.
The silence jumps,
like it was poked with a stick.

Then comes CHICKEN BUTT,
simple and bold.
The joke sits there,
a small thing taking up a big space.
Laughter walks in,
pushing serious thoughts aside.

AND YOU KNOW WHY??
The question leans forward,
Like it really matters.
Because CHICKEN THIGH.
The answer is a wall,
no meaning, no reason.
It stretches forever,
bigger than it should be,
and somehow.
That is enough.

—Guillermo Calva, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



Feelings

Your fists clench behind you,
 Aggression takes over when really,
 You have no control
 You hold your feelings locked in your heart
 Until your breaking point
 The anger creeps up behind you,
 Eliminating all your power to breathe
 Anger.

Tears run down your cheeks
 And the millions of questions,
 Replaying in your mind,
 Seize you, leaving the feeling of insecurity left
 Betrayal, confusion, and sorrow mix together
 Abandoning you with a pain in your chest,
 So bad that you lose sight
 Sadness.

The thoughts run through your mind,
 You know you are stuck in this loop,
 Until it gets so bad, you cannot hide,
 You can't go back to what was before
 Adrenaline runs through your veins
 You are alone, full of terror
 Fear.

—Amelia Di Mattia, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Justice

Prejudice is all around
 Nothing is fair
 Nothing is free

We all are puppets in the game they play
 Using us, our work to succeed
 While we sink into debt and hate
 This bias world never gives people a chance
 This work we do gives us stress and anxiety
 The world hates us all

What I love doesn't love me back
 It keeps fighting and doesn't want me to thrive
 They want me to fail
 Nothing is enough, it is never enough
 No matter how much I work
 All my achievements are pinned against me
 Too this, too that, never just right
 Everything is insufficient

This discrimination against new chances
 It never changes and never will
 No matter what we say
 I can't change their opinions, I can't fight it

My words locked in my throat
 The hierarchy always wins
 Those who have more beat those with less
 It's always been that way
 The rude cruel puppet masters
 They control the rest
 Moving me left, right, back, front
 Causing a spin of emotions to flood though me

I realize how outrageous this world is
 It shows me people's true side
 The lies they tell, the hearts they break,
 the hate they spread
 But I won't let them win the game
 A strategy so sharp it can cut through diamond
 A plan so invincible even the heavens can't crack
 I will find a way

—Maya Freitas, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Again

It was that question again,
What is going on in my head?
It felt like my heart was getting squished into pieces
Like glass spread across the floor,
Although they hadn't said it,
I knew it was near

So, how are you liking the new place?
It looks like a dream!
They said again like a parrot
I, I, I stuttered all the way
I didn't know how to explain,
My pain
So instead of explaining,
I just say
"It's going well!"

Although, behind those words,
There's the girl that spent nights crying a river on
her bed
Wishing she was back home with her friends
For one last time,
Again.

—Mercedes Gonzalez Jimenez, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



NATALIE PERKINS | Grade 8
Fine Arts Award 2026 Miami-Dade County Youth Fair

What Are They Saying?

She's always been wondering what they wanted from her,
Are they judging the way she pronounces words
Or how she walks?
The way she laughs or brushes her hair?
Her love for everything or her looks?
She wants to know,
What are they saying?

In the halls she tries to hide in her shell like a turtle,
It's been a part of her forever.
People don't make it easier when they whisper.
When she walks past them,
She hears crickets.
They stare at her.

She is a piece of gum stuck to their brand-new shoes.
The silent scary setting makes her want to go back home

And curl in her bed.
Can't she go back to sleep?
Can't she be stuck sleeping and dreaming of sanctuary?
She wants to know,
What are they saying?

The walls are closing in on her,
She's running out of time.
Should she face her fears?
Or go back to bed and dream of a new day?
Maybe this is a nightmare.

If that's true, then why can't she escape?
DING, the bell rang.
It's time to continue the nightmare,
What are they saying?

—Noa Kaplan, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



Postales de Recuerdos

Colgando en el refrigerador
Están las tres postales del verano.
Cada postal tiene una memoria diferente.

La primera postal es de Pamplona, España.
Estoy en una terraza, mirando correr a los toros.
¡Alguien acaba de ser golpeado!
¡Corre, papá, corre!

La segunda postal es de París, Francia.
La Torre Eiffel brilla en la noche.
Me cuida mientras como baguettes y crêpes
Y me cuida mientras duermo.

La última postal es de Venecia, Italia.
Mientras viajo en la góndola,
la música italiana llena el aire.
Mujeres y hombres elegantes bailan toda la noche.

Nunca olvidaré ese verano de diversión,
Pero estoy feliz ahora que estoy de vuelta en casa.

—Annabelle Tirado, Grade 7
*Blue Ribbon
Judges' Award*

Mis memorias

La cocina está vacía y sola
Solo lleva memorias del pasado.
Recuerdos sinceros y nostálgicos.
Cosas que nunca serán iguales.

Las galletas que salen del horno,
Lavando los platos con mi mamá,
La cena con la familia,
¡Estamos felices todos!

Ahora esos recuerdos desaparecen.
Nadie va a recordar cuándo nos mudamos.
Otras personas van a vivir en la casa que ya no es mía
Y será como si mis memorias nunca existieran.

—Emily Trejos, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Las flores

Las flores me rodean
¡Y soy feliz!
Las flores parecen un arcoíris.
Me gusta oler las flores.
Todo está bien.
Mi flor favorita es la rosada.
Parece una puesta de sol.
¡Y soy feliz!
Me gustan las flores amarillas.
Parecen el sol
¡Y soy feliz!

—Bianca Zapata, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Cajas

Pongo mis cosas en una caja.
Miro a la piscina
Y nadie está nadando.
Los muebles
Ya no están.
Todo está oscuro, triste y en silencio.

Antes había niños nadando y jugando.
Antes era divertido, ruidoso y emocionante
Antes había altavoces que tocaban música
Ahora todo está en cajas.

—Nando Sebastian Da Silva, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Esta casa vieja

La casa guarda recuerdos,
Es donde crecí,
Donde mi hermana está creciendo,
Es donde muchos más van a crecer,
Pero ahora no es mi hogar,
Mucho ha cambiado,
Las paredes ya no son blancas,
Son negras,
Y no es mi hogar,
Cuando paso por ahí,
Solo veo otra casa más.

—Olivia Streubel, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

El juego de baloncesto

En la cancha de baloncesto
Muchos jugadores sudan
Todos necesitan ducharse

Todos corren
Por la pelota
Gritando en defensa
Todos estan felices

Un equipo gana
Otro pierde
Todos están agotados pero felices
¡Así es el juego de baloncesto!

—Julian Echavarria, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Pequeña

Tan pequeña mas tan poderosa
Enfrentada con el desafío más difícil de mi vida
El olor del alcohol en mi memoria
Yo era como un pájaro sin vuelo

Los chicos de mi edad
Comenzaban a observar el mundo
Yo no.
Yo estaba muy ocupada
Luchando por mi vida.

Tan pequeña en la cama de hospital
Siendo examinada
Para poder hacer la cirugía que cambió mi vida

Cuando eres tan pequeña
Y tienes una cirugía tan importante,
Cambia la vida
Y aprendes a nunca desistir.

—Maria Antonia De Farias, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

La vida es así

¡Ay no!
Me caigo de la barra haciendo mi desmonte
“Ya no puedo hacerlo más”
Pero lo hago otra vez
Porque *La Vida es Así*

Hago mi tarea y todo está incorrecto
“Ya no puedo hacerlo más”
Pero lo hago otra vez
Una y otra
y otra vez
Porque *La Vida es Así*

Ni mala, ni perfecta
Como quiere la sociedad
La Vida es Así

Como mi abuelo siempre dice
“Tú no eres mejor que nadie, y nadie es mejor que tú”
La Vida es Así

—Emille Rosenberg, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Relajar

Ese dolor muy fuerte
El dolor por la pared que estoy
trepando
El dolor por el estrés que siento
Yo subo

Caminando por el lugar
Miro hacia abajo y pienso en el peligro
Acostado en el piso del techo
Estoy muy alto y arriba de la calle
Encima del piso rasgoso
El dolor y el estrés que siento
No es adentro

—Mateo Landi, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Saint -Tropez

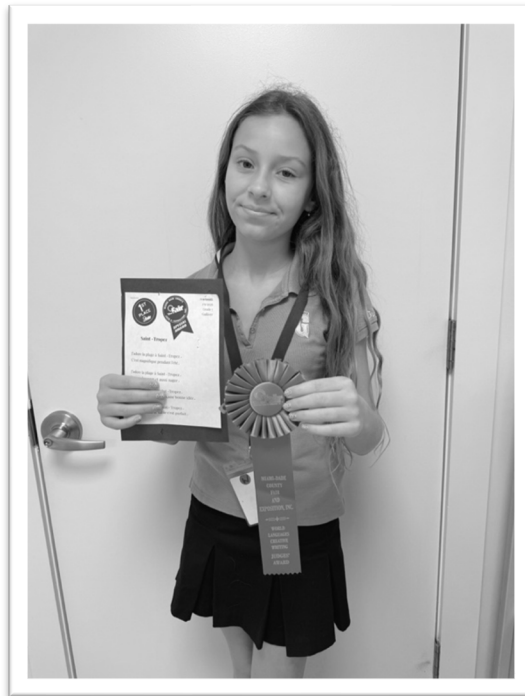
J'adore la plage à Saint -Tropez
C'est magnifique pendant l'été

J'adore la plage à Saint -Tropez
Je peux bronzer et aussi nager

J'adore la plage à Saint -Tropez
Trouver les coquillages une bonne idée

J'adore la plage à Saint- Tropez
Marcher dans le sable c'est parfait

—Ava Smith, Grade 7
*Blue Ribbon
Judges' Award*



Night on the Big Canyon

by James (Hunter) Bailey

Grade 8

*Blue Ribbon
Judges' Award*



The last thing he heard from his dad was the sound of dirt-soaked hiking boots crunching up a mess of leaves and rocks as they made their way to Big Canyon. It was 6 PM, and the sun was already sinking behind the ridgeline. At 8 pm, darkness would absorb everything. There were no streetlights here, no cars for miles—only dirt, trees, steep slopes and scattered pools of water catching the last slivers of daylight, flashing briefly before winking out one by one.

As they moved farther along the trail, the landscape itself seemed to shift. The shadows lengthened, and the tree branches drooped lower and lower as if to match his lowering morale from fatigue. As they started to return to the sludgy rockland that enveloped much of the mountain, his dad called out to him and exclaimed, “Just a little more, son, we’ve made it past the toughest part, which is the trek up the Big Canyon.”

“Wow! Really, that’s... amazing..., thanks for the update, Dad,” he replied between shortened breaths. He had never done a hike like this and was proud to have made it this far, especially grateful that his dad was there to guide and protect the whole way. Still, with darkness approaching quickly, he knew that he would have to pick up the pace to reach the lodge in time. In an exacerbated and desperate attempt to pick

up the pace and redirect his mind, he started to rhythmically count his steps.

“1,2,3,4...1,2,3,4...1,2,” he mumbled. By doing this, he found he could escape the blues of tired legs and an empty stomach.

In the midst of this, his dad called out. “Hunter, did you know that Native Americans and our ancestors once walked across this very land to arrange trades and sort out treaties? I’ve even been able to find evidence of their existence from a couple of imperfect arrowheads randomly scattered across this property.”

Hunter slowed his pace and tried to imagine the people who had once walked this land, moving along the same ground long before them.

“That’s pretty incredible,” he said. “I reckon that there has to be a perfectly carved, and preserved arrowhead somewhere on the property that was once used to hunt and protect. But I’m certain that if I did find one I’d post it on eBay.”

He scoffed and then giggled in a sly manner.

“Yes, that is entirely possible,” his dad replied, “but the main goal here is to preserve and protect land that was once theirs. That doesn’t include searching for artifacts just to sell them. We can do that another day, but I believe we are already fortunate enough.”

Hunter nodded, slightly embarrassed. His dad’s words lingered with him, the trail growing silent beneath his feet. Suddenly, a high-pitched cackling came from far behind them, faintly echoing and sending shivers down his spine.

He lowered his voice, “What is that, Dad? It sounds like a crazy man laughing and crying at the same time.”

In response, his dad said, “Those are Coyotes, they live in packs and indeed sound wild, they truly are hysterical creatures! Dangerous to prey, sure but mostly they are just letting the world know they’re there.”

With that, they kept trekking monotonously in hopes of reaching their lodge by nightfall. Again, he began to count his steps in a rhythmic pattern,

"1,2,3,4...1,2,3,4...1,2,3," he mumbled.

As their shoes trudged on, so did his mind. It wandered to different imaginary worlds, sunbathing on a breathtaking beach and chugging a feverish amount of piña coladas. But reality soon set in, and consciousness revealed a parched throat and a palpable tiredness resonating in the lower half of his legs and feet.

However, as he scanned his body for ticks or critters, a change of heart rushed over him. At that moment, he stopped and truly soaked in his surroundings. He observed the gnarled oak trees and tall pines; their branches threaded with green lichen that hung like tattered cloth. This forest of trees was ancient, standing watch long before footsteps had pressed into dirt. Gold sunset thinned into amber, the vibrance crooning to a whisper. Beyond the trees, the land revealed a sweep of hills folding onto each other like melting stacks of butter. He stared in admiration. For just a moment, he felt true composure and appreciation in a place he had always looked at in a glass half empty perspective. Something within him stirred.

This peace lasted only until he started to walk again and realized his dad was gone. He called out to him, "Dad! Hey Dad! Where are you?!" he exclaimed, muttering under his breath.

Nightfall was fast approaching and not having his dad to guide or protect him felt disastrous. In a growing panic, he called out again, once, twice, then three times, turning in different directions in hopes of catching his attention. Once he was short of voice and tired of calling for help, he stopped and began pacing, trying to remember which way to go. He picked a direction and began his trek at a nimble pace in hopes of finding the lodge before nightfall. That hope was short-lived. It was already 7:35, nowhere near enough time to reach camp.

However, lacking knowledge of his surroundings and the clues given from the darkening world around him, he unknowingly began a night long odyssey of courage, perseverance, and tested maturity. Soon after he started walking in what he thought was the right direction, a murky blackness fell over the trail, and the reflection in his eyes went dull. He was alone and afraid.

In a desperate attempt to build a protective house so he could sleep, he gathered piles of branches and began building a hovel. After an hour, he succeeded in constructing a dilapidated and inhabitable pile of branches, but he made do in order to get some sleep and escape from the troubles outside.

"Is this all you got?" he murmured, in a spirit of resentment and fear.

Not knowing how to start a fire, he went to bed in the pitch-black wilderness, surrounded by leaves, rocks and debris, completely exhausted. About three hours later, he was abruptly awakened by cackling sounds on all sides. In a state of shock and sleepiness, he could do nothing but lie there, thinking desperately as his brain clicked into gear. After scanning his prior knowledge gained throughout the hike, he was sure that the animals circling his shelter were coyotes.

The cackling tightened around him. The sounds were no longer distant, they became deliberate, low growls and snarls, snapping with teeth bared in the dark, all directed towards him. He could make out 8 shapes now, emboldened, moving and darting forward in staggered bursts. They fanned out, testing their spots, tightening their circle with each step toward him.

One stood closer than the rest. Larger, meaner, more confident. It didn't dart back and forth or hesitate. It held its ground, inching the others forward, head high, eyes locked intently on his. There could be no more waiting on his part.

He snapped a long, thick branch from the collapsed hovel and it broke with a sharp, jagged edge. The large coyote came forward fast and unflinching, teeth flashing near his leg, snapping like a steel trap on empty air.

He gripped his weapon tight and struck with all his might.

The branch connected with a dull crack. The coyote yelped and staggered backwards, holding one leg up high, as he disappeared into the night. At once, the pack's formation unraveled. One by one, they retreated with snarled cries.

Hunter's heart raced as he ran towards what he thought was life itself. He ran hard but in the darkness his foot slid on loose rock, and he went down with a thud. He fell hard onto uneven ground, the air knocked out of his lungs. As he sat up he saw it, a glimmering perfect arrowhead, half buried in the dirt, black, shiny obsidian.

As he closed his fingers around the arrowhead, the night seemed to loosen its grip on him. Holding it there in the dirt, he felt less alone and less afraid. It was a reminder of the endurance that had lived on this land long before him, and that now lived inside him as well.

When dawn broke over the canyon, and the pale light spilled through the trees, his skin was washed in that golden morning light. He was still there, exhausted, shaken, tested and changed. Somewhere in the hills, his dad would come for him. But he had faced the night alone, the fear, the cold, the coyotes and himself, and he had survived.

Forgotten Joy

by Martina Aguirre Gonzalez Camarena

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

In the year 2532, the city twinkled with bright lights and shiny edifices, where people stored their memories in a basement. These were called the Memory Banks, a place most people had more trust in than their own heads. Alexa, a teenage girl who had just turned fourteen, wasn't so pleased with the whole memories in banks thing. Just because she couldn't exactly remember everything. Sometimes she even made herself believe that she was deleting her own memories.

People trusted that whatever was stored in those memory banks would be safe and that nothing would get taken off. Forgetting something was not considered a flaw in the system; instead, it was normal in that town. They found forgetting bad things relaxing because they didn't have to worry about certain things

Alexa noticed how everyone around her accepted it. People at school joked about forgetting embarrassing moments, bad grades, and arguments with parents. Doctors encouraged the Adjustment just so kids would not have to be so worried about things they don't have to be worried about. But Alexa always thought that having the Adjustment would be leaving something behind.

The morning of her birthday, her parents placed a big shiny box on her seat at the breakfast table. Her mom smiled softly and said, "Happy Birthday, sweetie."

She smelled the delightful scent of pancakes with maple syrup, looked up, and saw the big box as if something were to pop out of it.

Her dad added, "It's finally time for your long-awaited Adjustment, this will help you grow without useless memories."

"What do you mean by useless?" Her parents looked nervously at each other quickly and then turned to look back at Alexa.

The room stayed quiet for the longest time. Her parents were trying to figure out what to say while she just sat back and got more and more nervous.

"You'll understand after it's done, trust us, it is for your own good," replied her dad.

Alexa nodded even though she did not seem so convinced about what her parents had said. She couldn't understand how anything in her life could be useless.

That night, she couldn't go to bed; she lay in her bed wide awake, trying to piece together all the memories she felt were missing. She reached under her bed and grabbed a notebook; she began writing everything down, any thoughts or feelings that she didn't want to lose. Her notebook became something she couldn't live without, somewhere she could rely on looking at when she forgets something. It was the perfect way to protect her memories from getting taken away.

The notebook was old; she did not know where this notebook had come from. She wrote about her day and any feelings she might have had during the day. Writing things down in her journal made her feel like she wasn't losing parts of herself.

This girl would often appear in frames around their house, but she would just stand and look at the girl trying to find any memories she might still have in her head. She often felt empty when looking at the picture, feeling like she left something behind.

Alexa often saw pictures of a girl, with dark brown hair. She wasn't able to recognize the girl in these pictures. She felt like she remembered taking the pictures but often thought she was in the picture by herself or simply without the girl.

The memory bank tower was taller than any other building. When Alexa stepped to the side, a worker greeted her. "Happy Adjustment Day! Are you ready?"

"Yay, whoo, so excited," Alexa said sarcastically. He walked her to a chair in a room with bright blue lights and clean white walls.

The building was so tall that it appeared to be touching the sky. Alexa felt small standing next to it, she felt her heart pounding like it was coming out of her body.

"Before we start, do you have any questions regarding the adjustment?"

Alexa thought for a second before she said, "What exactly are we doing?"

He replied, "During this session, we will only take away memories that cause you emotional pain."

"Like what?" she asked. His eyes dropped while looking at his iPad.

"Does a... family loss sound familiar?"

Alexa took her time to think it over, trying to remember, "A family loss, whom did I lose?"

Before he could even answer her, an image came up in her mind. A girl. Dark hair. "I know her, who is she?"

The image came suddenly. Alexa's heart had never beaten faster, and her feelings rushed through her body, feeling sadness and love.

The worker jumped and realized she jumped to a memory she was not allowed to see yet. "You weren't supposed to see that." Alexa stood up and walked around the room.

"Wait... Isn't that my sister?"

After a long pause, he nodded, "Yes, she died four years ago."

Alexa felt frozen and had nothing to say. Four years felt like a while, but yet she had no memory of any of it.

"How come I didn't know?" She whispered to herself.

Alexa stared at him, "Why didn't anyone tell me I had a sister?"

"Your parents told us to erase all of your memories of her, they believed having them would harm you," he said with a shaky voice.

"But that was for me to decide whether I wanted to keep them or not," she said with a defensive voice.

"But now, this is your time to choose the type of person you want to be, meaning the type of things you want to keep in your head," he looked at her. "You will get the chance to choose what you want to remember and forget."

Alexa thought about the notebook, and the empty feeling she had felt for years. She later realized how pain meant love, and that bond between her and her sister was worth remembering.

Alexa closed her eyes thinking of the next biggest choice of her life. She didn't want missing pieces of her life; she didn't want to live without knowing what happened in her life. "Restore all of them." The worker nodded with worry in his eyes.

"Sit back. We are going to start your adjustment."

The adjustment began, and suddenly she could remember birthdays, laughs, her sister singing to her, whispering in her ear, all the nights at the hospital and the drawers filled with medicine. Tears came down Alexa's cheeks. These tears were not showing weakness but showed how happy she felt once again whole.

Outside the Memory Bank, everything was the same, but Alexa felt different. She felt heavier than usual, like she had something on her back weighing her down. Looking up at the sky, she saw the most beautiful sunset, and she was reminded of something. Her sister loved sunsets, she loved watching the sun set and the making of those beautiful colors in the sky. Her parents asked, "How do you feel?"

"Like I am a new person, my true self." For the first time in her life, what she felt was true.

Letters Left Unread

by Pia Arango

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Excitement bubbled through Thomas as he made his way up the path to the large, secluded manor. Today was the day he'd been waiting for; the day he proved to *The Gazette* that he deserved to actually be on their team, as opposed to being an 'apprentice'. Today, he was tasked with writing an article on whatever he pleased, as he fought with four other apprentices for one open spot on the journalism team. This article needed to be showstopping, so that's what brought him to the idea of interviewing the elusive artist-turned-hermit. Elias Romano was once a world-renowned artist, until one day he locked himself up in this house, only leaving when absolutely necessary. No one knew why, and all this time Elias stayed up here, undisturbed. Thomas, in need of an article idea, sent him a letter on a whim, asking if he could interview Elias on his past art career. When Elias

actually replied with confirmation, Thomas couldn't believe it; he half expected either no response or an angry rejection.

"This article will be so good; the Chief Editor won't know what hit 'em. That spot is basically mine," Thomas muttered to himself. He finally reached the top of the path and took in the large house for a moment. It was large and old, and the architecture had a slight Italian influence. To the right, there was a large rose garden, in a wide variety of colors. He raised his hand to the door and knocked twice, and after only a moment the door swung inward. Thomas stepped inside, mildly nervous, and was immediately struck with a strong smell of roses wafting through the house. Elias stood there, a slight frown on his face. He appeared to be mid-sixties, with a white mustache, circular glasses, and a crisp suit.

"Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Romano!" Thomas exclaimed, eagerly shaking his hand. Elias looked mildly annoyed, but accepted the handshake, nonetheless.

"Would you like to get started? I can give a quick tour while you ask whatever you prying journalists wish to know," Elias replied.

Straight to business, that's a good thing I suppose, Thomas thought. "Yes, that's fine. Whatever you want, truly. I am the guest here," Thomas said, stumbling slightly over his words. Thomas placed his typewriter case on a nearby table and fished out a pen and notebook from his coat jacket. "Ok, let's start!" Thomas said cheerily.

Elias proceeded to lead Thomas around his house, while Thomas occasionally asked questions about his life as an artist, then furiously scribbling down whatever clipped response Elias gave. The house was beautiful, with old and intricate architecture. They finally stopped in front of large double doors near the back of the first floor.

"This is my art studio," Elias said curtly.

Without another word, Thomas promptly opened the doors and entered. He was shocked with what he found. To start, the room was larger than it led on from the outside. Easels and canvases speckled the ground, and numerous paintings were hung up. The room stretched for two floors, with beautiful pillars accentuating every corner. That wasn't what was shocking, though; it was the subject in every painting. Lining every wall, covering every canvas, was a painting of a woman. She had dark brown hair, striking blue eyes, and porcelain skin. Big canvases, small canvases, watercolor, acrylic, pastels- it was all there. She looked exactly alike in all of them, as if frozen in time, always carrying a slight frown on her face. It looked almost as if she were judging the painter.

"Who...is that?" Thomas asked, mildly concerned. He'd heard whispers in the past about the artist being crazy, his disappearance from society an indicator to him losing his sanity. He'd never paid any regard to them, but he was beginning to believe them more and more. Elias stared at the paintings, unmoving.

"Evangeline," Elias softly spoke. Thomas shifted uncomfortably. He wasn't sure what to make of this.

"I'm assuming she was a very important person in your life, judging by these...portraits," Thomas said, half gesturing to the room covered in her face.

"Is. She *is* an important person in my life," Elias muttered, still staring unblinkingly at the paintings.

On that note, Thomas walked around the room, studying the paintings. After closely inspecting one, he noticed in the bottom right corner the words 'My one and only love, Evangeline' neatly written. Upon further inspection, that same note appeared to be in every single painting. This whole ordeal was starting to weird Thomas out, and he was eager to get this interview and tour over with.

"Your artwork is quite beautiful! Would you like to show me the upstairs, and we can finish up this interview? Thank you for your cooperation, by the way. I know this must be quite unusual for you," Thomas said with a nervous laugh.

"I need to collect some roses outside, but you can explore the upstairs if you truly want on your own. Just, please do not enter the room at the end of the corridor on the right. She hates to be disturbed. *Do not disturb her,*" Elias stated, and with that, walked away.

Thomas was taken aback. *Who was upstairs? Was it Evangeline?* His thoughts swirled in his head as he exited the art studio and made his way up the ornate staircase to the second floor. It was much smaller than the first, with just a singular hallway. He entered the first few rooms, milling around aimlessly.

"There's really not much up here that tells me about his art career, or really him in general," Thomas huffed, slightly disappointed with the lack of personal items up here. He had been hoping to dig up something secretive about Elias and use that in his article, as that would surely guarantee his spot on the team. He was about to go downstairs again, when the very last door caught his eye. The door Elias specifically told him not to enter.

"If it's secrets about Elias that I'm looking for, that's surely where they would be," Thomas said. Stealing one quick look downstairs to ensure Elias hadn't returned from the garden, Thomas crept down the hallway and

stopped at the very last door. He knew that what he was doing was wrong, but he couldn't bring himself to leave. He *needed* to know what was inside the room. So, slowly, he turned the knob.

It took some force to open the door, for reasons Thomas couldn't deduce. He finally managed to shove it open and was immediately bombarded with a stronger smell of roses than the rest of the house. Then were the letters. Hundreds, it seemed, strewn all over the floor. They accumulated in a gargantuan pile with no rhyme or reason, as if they were shoved beneath the door without a second thought.. Thomas couldn't believe what he was seeing. This looked like years worth of writing, as some of the paper appeared slightly yellowed. Letting his curiosity get the best of him, he picked up one of the letters on the top of the large pile behind the door. Carefully breaking the intricate wax seal, he opened it and began to read.

My dearest Evangeline,

Not a minute goes by that I don't think of your face. Your beauty is insurmountable, like a flower weaved from threads of moonlight and glimmers of stars. It is a privilege to be in your presence, an honor bestowed upon me to gain a fraction of your attention. I am forever yours, and you forever mine.

*With love,
Elias*

Thomas picked up another, digging a bit deeper in the pile to reach it.

My dearest Evangeline,

I am utterly transfixed by you. Your beauty rivals that of the goddess Venus, every piece of you perfection. You are my muse, the only passion and vibrance in my life...

*With love,
Elias*

Although Thomas felt as though he was intruding on something personal, he was far too intrigued by these letters to stop reading, or to pay attention to anything else. He searched through the pile again, this time reaching deeper towards the bottom of the stack.

My dearest Evangeline,

My heart is aching. For you, for me, for what I have done, for what I have lost and gained. Your voice, once a soothing melody drifting through this home, is now chained in my memory. You were my anchor to this world, and I can feel myself drifting without your support. Alas, I do not regret it. If I close my eyes, I can still see you, hear your haunting voice, feel your warmth next to me...that is enough for now. You are forever mine, and I forever yours; I won't let anything change that.

*With love,
Elias*

Thomas reached deeper into the pile, nearing the bottom. Now, the letters were covered in layers of dust.

My dearest Evangeline,

Your face is engraved in my memory, burning my eyes every time I allow them to shut. I have found that painting my thoughts helps. I suppose you will forever be my muse.

*With love,
Elias*

Thomas was beginning to get alarmed. Perhaps entering this room was a bad idea. Yet, he continued to reach into the pile. The next letter was at the very bottom, swallowed in dust.

My Dearest Evangeline,

Today is the first day without you beside me. I feel as if I am choking on my guilt, and I can only pray that this feeling will subside soon. I cannot apologize enough for my actions, but I did what needed to be done. I could feel you drifting away from me, and selfishly I refuse to let that happen. So yes, I decided to end your life. Since I

have laid you to rest in this bedroom, I have felt more at peace. Burying the knife helped me slightly, as well. The only issue is the smell-I suppose I should've assumed a dead body would be this pungent. Thankfully, the roses that you loved so dearly are a great cover for the stench. At least you'll be surrounded by what you love. I hope, in the afterlife, you will forgive me. You said you'd never leave me. Now you never will.

*With love,
Elias*

Thomas's hands shook as he finished reading the letter. He let go of it in shock, letting it flutter to the ground and join the pile. *It can't possibly be true; just the ramblings of an old man*, he thought, trying to console himself. For the first time, he looked up and studied his surroundings. A bedroom, filled to the brim with roses in a plethora of shades. Some were fresh, others crumpled and withered. He studied the room closer, finally moving away from the letters strewn on the ground. He noticed that the room was covered in dust, similar to the letters. His attention finally settled on the grand bed positioned in the middle of the wall farthest from the door. He slowly made his way to it, his heart beating loudly in his chest. If what the letters said was true, this was technically a crime scene. He stopped in front of it, and for the first time, noticed the odd smell lingering beneath the cloying roses, as well as a subtle outline in the bed. He then remembered a line from the last letter. *Since I have laid you to rest in this bedroom, I have felt more at peace*. He gagged in his mouth. Was there truly a dead body here? As much as he wanted to run, to leave this house and never return, he needed to know. Was Elias truly a murderer? There was only one way to find out. He tentatively pulled back the covers of the bed, terrified of what he would find.

It was so much worse than he expected.

Just as promised in Elias's letters, a rotting corpse lay beneath the covers. What was once a living, breathing human was reduced to nothing more than bones and ash. Thomas couldn't think; couldn't move. The smell was more than he could bear, the sight alone vomit-inducing. He let out a choked scream, tripping over his own feet as he scrambled backwards, away from the body. His mind began to spiral as he kept backing away from it, until he slammed into something. *Someone*.

He whirled around faster than he thought possible, and to his absolute horror, Elias stood there. His hands were caked in dirt, as if he was digging for something. The culprit to this was in his left hand, in the form of an old, rusted knife, covered in dirt as well.

"I told you not to disturb her," Elias said, and it was the last thing Thomas ever heard, before the knife was embedded in his chest.

Colors

by Emilia Barreiro

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

In the city of Colorum, colors were vibrant. The vegetation was in lush colors, the buildings were beautifully covered in brilliant murals, and people were clothed in astonishing combinations of hues.

But, black, white, and gray was all Iris could see. These were the only colors anyone under the age of sixteen could see, ever since the New Law was established. The New Law surgically altered human eyesight so they could only see one color if Hue Drops applied to the cones of the retina. This happened at the end of Year Five, when those students participated in the Viewing Ceremony where their life's work was decided. Their contribution depended on the color that they would be able to see.

Red worked the emergency services and enforced laws.

Orange worked with creativity.

Yellow maintained the city.

Green served the city's nature, people, and peace.

Blue was in charge of medicine and science.

Purple were experts in the field of economy, trade, and business.

The most appealing were Blue and Purple, since they were the most respected and high-paying jobs. A close follow up was Orange. Yellow was the most unwanted, filled with mind-numbing, unrespected work. Most people from Yellow were constantly trying to become one of the two delegates or the Ruler, since those were the best possible jobs to obtain in that section.

Soon, Iris would join one of Colorum's sections. She hoped for Blue since she was a very curious girl. Her way of thinking fit perfectly into Blue, but vision wasn't affected by thought. It was chosen at random. The most genius citizen could be sweeping the streets, bored to insanity. Iris hoped she didn't suffer that fate.

It would all be decided tomorrow, she thought, looking down on her textbook.

She studied harder than most, trying to possess as much knowledge as she could in case she was sent off to Yellow.

She sat at a wooden table, its dimensions polished to perfection. She was surrounded by impeccable bookshelves filled with tons of novels and textbooks.

"It's no use, Iris," Iris heard a voice behind her say. It was her only friend, Calliope.

"Why do you say that?" Iris asked, not looking up from her book.

"The chances of seeing the color we want are very slim." Calliope explained, a sad glimmer in her eyes. "We'll just be separated from our families, doomed to a life of misery."

Iris remembered the times when Calliope couldn't wait to be in Year Five. Calliope loved to draw and paint ever since she was little. She knew she would be happy in Orange and couldn't wait to start working on what she loves. It all changed after Calliope's brother went through the Viewing Ceremony. Calliope's brother was a brave man. He wanted to save people who needed him. It didn't work out, since he was swept away to Purple. Since then, Calliope heard less and less from her beloved brother, as he struggled to fit into a mindset he didn't belong to. Calliope hated the whole process since.

"Right," Iris replied indifferently, reading the next paragraph on *Basic Genetics* by S. Lynn.

"Aren't you even a little bit worried? Or are you so confident you'll get exactly what you want?" Calliope asked, sitting in the chair beside Iris.

Iris slammed her book closed and turned to her friend. "Of course not! I'm worried to death. I'm just trying to learn as much as I can before I won't be able to."

Calliope stared at her friend, then sighed. "You're right," she agreed, then grabbed a piece of paper and let her thoughts carry her away.

The large Hall of Hue was silent. It was unsettling, how quiet Iris's surroundings were. Every breath, every blink seemed to echo through the hall. Iris's skin crawled.

A volunteer set up a wooden chair and table and placed six paper squares of different colors on it in front of six podiums. Each section's Ruler stood on a podium, with the Council of Delegates surrounding them on the stage. All the Year Five students stood in a line, waiting for the speech to be over.

Purple's leader, Ruler Leshli, spoke first. "Good day to all the citizens of Colorum. Welcome to the Viewing Ceremony, I'm sure these young students are glad you've attended. Today marks a rite of passage for each, as they prepare to be sorted into their own section," he announced.

Ruler Lofall of Blue began to speak. "The Hue Drops will randomly select what color you are able to see. This will determine your contribution to this city. It is very important that you commit to it and learn to be great at what you do. For the community and for good," she declared, reading the script on the podium.

Iris watched as they explained in each section in full detail, her gray eyes shifting around nervously. She never knew what color her eyes were. Most people don't, unless they have blue eyes, and can see it or know someone who can.

"We will now begin!" Orange's ruler announced with a flourish, marking the end of the speech.

Iris noticed the delegate in the center get up and pull a large list from under his chair. Then, the other delegates lined up horizontally. One held a box of cloaks, the other was ready to award them. The first name he called was Helena Ambers, Iris's academic rival. Helena Ambers was always second to Iris and loathed her for it. The competition was high, since she also dreamed of going to Blue.

It took two minutes for the Hue Drops to fully set, then it was confirmed.

Blue.

Iris felt the subtle jab on envy as the delegate placed the cloak on Helena.

"It's beautiful!" Iris heard Helena exclaim as she gratefully shook hands with the delegate who gave her the cloak. Applause filled the room.

The volunteer shuffled the cards again, his body covering them so the students couldn't cheat and pick the one they wanted. This happened a few more times before Calliope went up. Iris noticed her expression was twisted with worry. Iris prayed that Calliope would be sent somewhere she would be happy. She deserved it. It took a while until she hesitantly picked a card.

"Orange!" Ruler Mil of Orange declared.

Calliope gasped in disbelief, and Iris saw tears of relief in her eyes. For the first time, Iris cheered and smiled. Maybe she would never see Calliope again, but it reassured Iris to know that she would live happily.

Then it was Iris's turn.

"Emberfall, Iris," the delegate announced.

Iris's heart pounded. She felt nauseated and tried not to cry from panic. Her hands shook terribly. She straightened her white dress and sat in the chair. Anxiety felt like tiny pricks on her heart as she sat in the wooden chair.

"Head up," the volunteer whispered.

Iris tilted her head back as ordered, and the volunteer added the Hue Drops to her eyes. Iris blinked quickly, as the blurriness caused by the eyedrops faded.

Slowly, the world around her shifted. She saw a soft glow coming from certain articles of clothes. She looked down as one card became more and more saturated. She breathed heavily, unknowing of what color it was. She only knew that it had a warm tone to it. Her hands and breath shaky, she slowly tapped the card she could see. From across the stage, she saw Helena hide a giggle. Iris's eyes widened. Why did she react like that?

Then she heard the announcement, and it was clear.

"Orange!" Ruler Mil cheerfully stated.

Iris froze. *Orange?* Sure, it was pretty good, but Iris had no creativity in her. The most artistic thing she knew to do was to draw sloppy (yet accurate) diagrams. How would she do well in Orange? Iris's lips and legs quivered, as she walked over to the Orange delegate, and the cloak of future failure was placed upon her shoulders. Iris neared the crowd of the new Orange citizens, and Calliope emerged from the crowd to give a sympathetic hug.

The next day Iris awoke in the Orange Dormhouse, her bags neatly packed while her roommate's, Calliope, clothes spilled out of hers. Her eyes burned a bit with the newfound color, noticing that her favorite pajamas were, in fact, orange. It was strange to Iris, being able to observe different variants of a new color, instead of seeing the world in shades of gray.

Now there was a warmer color to the world, but to Iris there was nothing warm about it. She flipped around in her bed in defeat, knowing that she was going to fail, and imagining Helena Ambers having everything that Iris deserved. She sighed and turned on the gray lamp. Iris forced herself out of bed to begin her first day of complete disappointment. Calliope woke up, too, and they fell into a conversation about colors.

"It's interesting to see how much is orange," Iris commented, looking around for examples, "like my pajamas, the doorframe, the lamp."

"But Iris," Calliope said, "the lamp isn't orange..."

"What..." Iris trailed off as she realized. When she first awoke, the lamp was gray. Now it's an actual color, similar to orange but in a brighter tone. "You're right. It's gray to me," Iris lied, adding in a laugh, but Iris knew very well that she could see the color of the lamp. She also knew, just as well, that she had to keep this ability a *secret*.

After Iris got ready, she decided to run an experiment on her eyesight. Orange was provided a paint palette with labeled colors, so painters can create interesting masterpieces. Iris acquired one in a storage closet on her dorm's floor. She also grabbed the sketchbook with a drawing pencil. If she was going to conduct an experiment, it was important to record it.

She went back to her room and opened the white rectangle. She saw three colors, the familiar orange, the strange bright color she saw this morning, labeled as yellow, and purple. She wrote down their descriptions.

Three colors? It wasn't possible! It was forbidden! Iris knew the government would execute her for this, for having too much power. She looked at her sketchbook, considering whether she should burn it. Iris looked around.

But, oh! The colors...they're so beautiful. I can see everything...I can know everything. I don't need to depend on others for answers to my question...no....I can see it all myself!, Iris thought.

She looked back at the paint palette and noticed two more colors.

Orange, yellow, purple, red, green..., Iris noticed. She wrote down the descriptions eagerly. She looked outside the window. She noticed the plants were green and wrote them down. She noticed the sun was a beautiful mix of orange, yellow, and red, and drew it on her sketchbook as well as she could.

Over the course of a few weeks, Iris did her duty to freedom and began her project for independence. Iris was determined and steady, as she always was. The danger didn't bother her. Calm and focus were her most valued traits.. She hid it from everyone, even Calliope, who she usually told everything to. She hated keeping her knowledge a secret, since she wanted the entire world to know, but she knew that this burden was dangerous.

Not yet, Iris thought, *now is not the time to die*.

Iris knew this project would end up killing her. The government would be enraged to know that their society built on dependency would go to the ground. Iris was unbothered about her endangerment. She knew she would have to die someday, and this, in her opinion, was the best way to go.

The government wanted certain people to see certain colors, so that none could have too much power. It was unnatural how they did it. They require each newborn to get a surgery so they could not see color. Iris studied this in her textbooks. With no consent, the babies were taken from the arms of their parents and sent to a surgeon in the first few hours of their life. When the baby was placed back into the mother's arms, it would have had Mother Nature's gift taken.

Iris's surgery must've gone wrong, or the Hue Drops must've not worked on her properly. Whatever the case was, she had the normal nature of a human. She thought it unfair that she was the only one. Iris wanted to stop the surgeries, and give back the normal nature of humanity, even if it would cost her life. It was what everyone should do.

Iris knew people would agree with her, and welcome her knowledge, since a lot of citizens have been mad at the government. They wouldn't be able to shelter her, though. Iris's band of rebels would do better than that, they would pass down the knowledge. The first person she would recruit was Calliope. Though Calliope was happy with her section, she was still bitter for what happened to her brother. Her whole family was.

That night, when the lights were off and Iris and Calliope were about to fall asleep, Iris began her recruitment.

"Calliope?" she asked.

"Iris?" Calliope mumbled sleepily.

"Would you like a world where you could see everything, and choose what you want to do?" Iris asked. "A world different from ours."

The two girls sat up, and Iris turned on the light.

"Maybe," Calliope replied, "if it were possible."

"It is possible," Iris said, "if you help me."

"Help you with what?" Calliope asked, intrigued.

"Help me share this," Iris whispered, pulling out the sketchbook from under her pillow.

With shaky hands, she handed it to her friend. Iris observed as Calliope opened it. She began to read it, then slammed it closed in fear.

"Why would you show me this?" Calliope asked in a panic. "This is illegal, Iris!"

"Calliope, I can see the world, and I now know how beautiful it is. I would never go back to our dull, confined views, and I don't want you to live like that. I don't want *anyone* to live like that," Iris explained.

Calliope opened her mouth but was interrupted by a loud knock.

"It's Red Soldiers. By law, you must let us in!"

Calliope's eyes widened as she said, "They found you, Iris."

"The future is up to you now," Iris told her, trying to steady her shaky voice. "Please. Make the right choice."

Calliope slipped the sketchbook under her pillow and hesitantly pretended to be asleep. Iris took a deep breath. She knew this would happen, but she didn't expect it so soon. She stood and opened the door, trying to fight her fear.. Immediately two men grabbed her wrists and handcuffed them together. They wore the Red uniform and had the Law Enforcement badges.

"You've been accused of treason and endangerment. You're coming with us."

Iris felt the tight grip of the law drag her out of her room as they led her out of the building. She could see every color. White walls, velvet carpet, brown railings, blue sky. It relieved her fear knowing others could feel that same fascination. Yes, she was going to die, but what better way to die than for freedom?

Cosmic Compass

by Natalia Botty

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

The cherry-colored sun was beginning to evolve further, with accents of yellow and orange becoming more apparent. Elena felt at that moment as if she was the only person in the world. She stared into the sand covered mountains and continued walking. She took her usual path because it was where she could see the sun rise and take in the beautiful desert landscape of Mars. Elena enjoyed this hour because nobody else was awake. She was alone with her thoughts. Usually, nothing could avert her eyes from the sunrise, but in the distance she saw a bright shining object, and it almost felt as if something was pulling her towards it. Elena went to it, picked it up, and to her surprise, it was a compass and it was beautiful. It was made of some type of stone, and the color was a deep sapphire with a touch of white, like if the clouds and the ocean collided. It was decorated with small galaxies that looked hand drawn; inside, the arrows were spinning round and round and going in no sense of direction. *It's so strange to find a compass on Mars*, Elena thought, *there is no way it would work here*. Elena flipped the compass around and saw Martian writing on the back. Confused and enchanted with the compass's beauty, Elena decided to walk back home and further examine her discovery.

At her house Elena turned on the lights and took a closer look at the compass. The question still lingered in her mind, *Why is there a compass on Mars?* She noticed that the compass's arrows were still moving around mindlessly. She shook the compass in hopes to see if something would happen. All of a sudden she felt an electrical pull forward that she couldn't stop. All she could see was black with little stars, then she began to see light blue with white splotches, and finally she saw different variations of green colors she never had seen before. Elena felt her body hit the ground. She looked around and saw trees, grass, flowers, and felt the warm sun embrace her body. She heard the birds chirping and she felt as if they were serenading her. Never beforehand had Elena seen or felt these things. On Mars it was freezing; it felt as if needles were pricking you all over, and there was no green, only the fiery red sand that scraped your eyes and got in your shoes.

"Hello!" Elena cried and heard nothing in response. "Is anybody there?"

Since no one answered, Elena decided to venture into the forest. She admired the beautiful new world around her. She loved the fresh smell of the dewy grass, and she enjoyed the noise of the rustling leaves. Elena was wandering around wondering where she was and how this happened. Then she remembered. She reached into her pocket and found that abnormal, yet bewitching compass. She realized that the arrows were working and it was pointing north, yet she was going east. *How strange*, she thought. Then suddenly Elena turned around without trying to, as if something pushed her, as if the compass turned her around. *What kind of magic compass is this?* She stared at it in awe and then decided to embark on her journey to this different majestic world.

Elena heard music and then chatter. She moved through the trees and caught a glimpse of actual people. She sprinted through the forest and heard the leaves crunching beneath her feet as she saw the tree branches whip past her. That familiar, warm embrace of the sun again and looked around. There were people! They were dressed in elegant clothing and walked confidently with a healthy glow on their face. Elena looked at her compass and saw the arrows were pointing west. She decided to not fight it and just follow the compass, for it was the only thing she was familiar with here. The compass led her to this elderly looking woman who was covered in pearls and who smelled like expensive fancy perfume. Her hair was fully gray, and she looked very kind and sweet. Elena could tell she was a happy person by the smile lines around her mouth and her dark blue eyes.

"Excuse me," Elena said politely. The elderly woman turned around and smiled.

"Yes, dear?" replied the woman, she had an accent Elena had never heard before.

"I am so sorry to interrupt, and this might be a weird question to ask, but...do you know what planet we are on?"

She shot Elena a confused look but then her face shifted into a more comforting look.

"Well, we are on Earth, but the country we are in is Sweden, and right now we are at an event to raise money for an old bridge," The elderly woman responded.

Elena's eyes lit up, she couldn't believe she was on Earth! When Elena was a child her mother and father always told her the most wonderful things about Earth when they had traveled there. She never understood why they decided to live on Mars.

Earth was great, and from her experience so far she loved it. Sweden was covered in green and there was so much wildlife. Everybody talked and communicated here. On Mars, Elena was taught to spend time mainly with her family. That's when it hit Elena, her family! What will they think when she doesn't go to their house tonight for dinner? Elena loved her family so much she never wanted to leave their side. This was all stressing Elena out; she had to find the answer of how and why the compass brought her here. She said goodbye to the elderly woman and thanked her for the information, but as she walked away Elena had a feeling that she would be seeing her again.

Elena walked around and admired everything around her. The booths that contained games that would make people laugh and smile, the food stands that had long lines of people who were all talking to someone, but what she loved most was that nobody looked empty and without friends. Everybody was entertained by something, whether it was the food, the games, and the people. Elena realized that there was more to life than just her family. Of course, she still loved them, but what if Mars was like Earth? Would she always be bored all the time and with nothing to do, and would she be completely isolated from the world? There was so much out there that Elena wanted to see but she never got the chance to because she was always taught that only family mattered. Elena sat down on a bench and thought deeply about whether it was worth finding out if she could go back to Mars and live there or just adjust to life on Earth. That's when she smelled that familiar perfume again. She turned around and it was the elderly woman.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" The woman asked.

"No, I don't mind," Elena replied. She was grateful for some company.

"What's your name?"

"My name is Elena Beaumont, and you are?"

"My name is Flora," she replied. "Are you here on vacation?"

Elena chuckled nervously, "I guess you could say that."

Flora frowned and stared into Elena's eyes deeply as if she was trying to read her mind.

"What's wrong?" Flora asked.

Elena was confused, why did a stranger care this much about her and why was she talking to her. "I don't mean to be rude, but why are you talking to me and caring so much if you don't even know me?"

Flora laughed, "Well earlier today when you came up to me, you looked concerned, and you were also alone and nobody should feel as if they have no one to talk to. So come on, lay everything on me."

Elena, touched by her words, decided to open up. "I don't know if I should leave Sweden and go stay with my family or go where I feel I belong."

Flora seemed to ponder her predicament. "Well, here, take this pocket mirror. Look inside and imagine where you truly see yourself, with your family or where you feel you belong."

Elena looked inside. She saw her green eyes and her freckled face, her brown thick luscious hair, and her sunkissed skin, but beneath all of that she saw her family. She saw her mother's smile and her father's thick eyebrows, and the freckles she got from her grandmother. Every little detail on her face reminded her of a trait from her family. That's when Elena realized home wasn't about where she felt the most beautiful place was, it was where your heart lived and Elena's heart is her family. Sure, people are more interactive and outgoing here, but Elena could always change her mindset about how her life is centered around family, she now decided that she would have more friends.

Elena smiled at Flora. "I know where I'm going. Home where my family is."

"Whatever makes you happy," Flora said with a comforting look on her face.

Elena hugged Flora goodbye and pulled out her compass. She was ready to find out how to get back to Mars. Elena looked at the arrows and noticed that they were moving in all sorts of ways like they did before on Mars. Confused Elena shook the compass to try to get it to work again, and then she felt that same electric pull on her body and saw the sky again but this time it was orange and white since the sun was setting, and then she saw the black empty galaxy with little stars. Elena's body hit the ground, but this time on her hard concrete floor.

"Ow!" Elena exclaimed. She looked around and realized that she was home. She jumped up and went outside, she missed that feeling of the cold air pricking her skin.

Elena remembered to call her parents. "Mom, I'm coming home for dinner tonight. Save me a seat!" She then saw the compass laying on the floor and decided to keep it somewhere safe and hidden. Elena still had so many questions about the compass. Why did the compass choose her? Where did the compass come from? How did the compass take her to Earth? All she knew about this cosmic compass was that it was one of a kind and it made her realize how grateful and lucky she was for her family. In the end, it had pointed her in the right direction home where she realized home is where you feel most loved.

I've Never Felt So Tall – The Nathan Jones Story

by Diego Caesar-Iglesias

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

It was a perfect day. The sun was shining, there was a gentle breeze aloft, and the first delicate touches of winter's cold gave the day a subtle chill. The students at South Beach Highschool were out in the school field, playing basketball, gossiping about others, studying for tests, and enjoying their P.E. class.

Nathan Jones, however, was in Principal Harry's office, and sitting next to him was Jordan Becker. He silently glared at Nate as he was chewing his gum. He was sitting calmly and annoyed, with his arm wrapped around the chair and his back slumped on the chair. He was here before, many times before.

As the principal pondered on how to begin their little talk, Nate sighed, "Great, back at the office again with Jordan." He shuffled in his wheelchair uncomfortably; he hated being in the office so many times with Jordan because he would always just pick on him more once it was done. He turned his head to the right to see Jordan and felt even more uncomfortable by his expression.

The words of Jordan's scowl were being imprinted on Nate's eyeballs, "After this, you are dead!"

Nate swallowed his saliva. He knew that a talk with the principal wasn't going to stop him. He was feeling drowsy, and his head was aching

"Now Jordan," Principal Harry began calmly but with a hint of annoyance, "Spit your gum out, you know the rules."

Jordan rolled his eyes and muttered something as he got up to spit out his gum, right before slumping down on the chair again.

"I can't keep on repeating myself week after week," continued the principal. "You know that you shouldn't be treating your classmates with disrespect. How would you like it if someone was disrespectful to you, huh?"

Jordan simply rolled his eyes again in annoyance, he would much rather be outside with his friends playing basketball.

Principal Harry went on, though he clearly noticed Jordan's reaction, "I don't want to see you boys fight, alright?" His tone became brighter as he continued, "I just want the best for all of you. Now go on outside, enjoy your P.E."

Jordan with a sigh that said, "Finally," got up from his seat and ran outside to where his friends were, whilst Nate turned around in his chair and rolled off slowly to the elevator.

"Nate!" Principal Harry called down the hallway, "Don't let others ruin your day. You do you."

Nate smiled. Principal Harry was always very nice to him, unlike most of the students in his school. He went down the elevator and out into the hallway, before heading out of the doors into the field. At this point he was accustomed to the looks from the other kids. They were all the same, and to him, they were like words going in and out of his ears.

They all said things like, "Oh look, Nate's here," and "Can you believe that he can move his legs," but Nate didn't care.

Jordan and his friends came over from the basketball court and stopped him in his way. Nate exhaled and rolled his wheels in reverse, but one of Jordan's friends blocked his way out of the circle that they had made.

"What's the matter, *cripple*," Jordan snickered, "Is your wittle chair stuck?" With his leg he pushed Nate, causing his wheelchair to fall on its back. "Go ahead, crip. Get up. Fight back. Oh wait, that's right, you can't. Why can't you get up anyway, or were you just born a freak?"

"I've told you already," Nate sighed, "I got in a car crash an—"

"Good lord, shut up! No one gives a cr*p!" Jordan spit on Nate and covered his eyes with the gray beanie that he was wearing, whilst his friends continued to laugh at him, "This'll show you your place, Nate, and don't forget it." He walked away with his group of friends back to the court, and Nate just lay there in the sun.

"Oh, come on you," said a sweet voice coming towards him, "Here, let me help you get up." It was Jane, Nate's only friend. When she pulled his beanie over his eyes, he saw her long, silky brown hair flow in the morning breeze. She always had a smile on her face when she was with Nate, and that brought a smile to his face. "Ah, don't listen to them, what do they know?"

Jordan caught that Nate and Jane were talking and was walking over to have some “fun”.

Jane saw his tall shadow and turned around to see his smug face. “Yes, Jordan?” she sighed, trying to appear nice, but clearly tired of his babble.

“You know you shouldn't be spending time with freaks. You're too good for things like *him*,” he said as Jane grunted in annoyance at Jordan's comment, “I'm having a party for the turn of the Millennium, it's supposed to be a big thing and everyone's coming except the two of you. Consider yourself invited, just don't bring him. So, are you coming?”

“Of course, Jordan,” Jane said with a fake smile, “Of course I can go.”

After that, he finally walked away.

Nate and Jane looked at each other and couldn't hold back the laughter. Sure, they only had each other as friends, but they were happy.

* * *

As Nathan rolled his way down the sidewalk back home, he couldn't get Jordan's words out of his head.

“This'll show you your place, Nate, and don't forget it. You know you shouldn't be spending time with freaks. Things like *him*,” echoed slowly in his head until they suddenly stopped. He was in the local pharmacy. It was an empty day. Business was slow during the holidays, but soon enough it would catch up.

“Are you okay, Nate?” said William the pharmacist.

“Yeah, I'm fine,” Nathan exhaled slowly, whipping the sweat off of his forehead, “Is my prescription ready?”

“You got here right on time, I just finished it,” Will replied as Nathan browsed the shelves, “10 ml, which should last you around 10 weeks. Will that be it Nate?”

“Oh, I would actually like to buy these,” Nathan said as he placed a container of pills on the counter.

“Having trouble sleeping are we? Are you sure you want these? They're really strong.”

“Yes, yes I'm sure,” Nathan assured him as Will scanned the items, “Thank you.”

“Now you go and be careful with those,” Will said, “Don't want to be getting an overdose or anything. You might not wake up!”

“I know,” muttered Nathan to himself.

Nathan quietly rolled down the street in his wheelchair, thinking. All he could do was think. Jordan's words still lingered in his head like a stubborn memory. He wasn't a thing...Was he? The more the words circled around in his mind, the more he slowly began to believe them. His headache was worsening, and he began to fall asleep. Now, he couldn't remember what had happened that day, only Jordan's words.

“Do it,” said a voice in his head, “We've talked about it. It's the only way. No, no, don't do it, it won't work. Yes it will. Yes... You are alone. No, Jane! We have Jane! She's our friend. Oh no she's not. Soon, you will see. She will betray you...”

“Sweetie?” asked a worried voice.

“Oh, mom,” Nathan snapped back into reality, he was in his house now. “What were you saying?”

“I was saying that me and your father are going out for dinner for the millennium. So, the house is yours. Just make sure you behave and don't burn the house down!” She chuckled as she touched his cheek, “We'll be back late, but we'll be back for the grapes and the ball drop! Alright, bye!” She walked out of the door and soon followed his dad down the stairs.

“How was school today kid? Was it good?” His dad asked, but he didn't need an answer by the look on his face, “Was it Jordan again? Tsk tsk, someone has got to talk some smack into that boy. Ah cheer up kid, tomorrow we can go watch that movie that's coming out. Incredi-man or maybe Super-dude III? Alright? Goodnight.”

The door closed, and Nathan was now alone in the house. Except for his dog, Rocco. He walked to his room and shut the door. He popped open the pill bottle that he bought and took out a tablet, but it felt somewhat empty. He looked inside and saw that a third of the pills were gone! He lay down on his bed and began to think.

“The millennium?” he said out loud, “But break just started, we should be 2 weeks from New Years.”

He got up and sat on his wheelchair to check the calendar. It was New Year's Eve! Now that he thought of it, he couldn't remember much of his break. Only bits and pieces of Christmas Eve and Morning. “Why am I not remembering this? I'm just tired,” he said to himself as he laid down once more and fell asleep.

Nathan heard the phone ringing in the kitchen. He got up slowly, the sleeping pills still had their effect on him. He rolled his way to the land line and picked it up to hear the voice of a man.

“Is this Nathan Jones?” he asked.

“Yes, is there a problem?” asked Nathan, now quite confused.

"I don't really know how to tell you this son," replied the man, "Your parents got into a car crash. Your mother is in a coma. We couldn't save your father. We are sor—."

Nathan dropped the phone and fell backwards. He couldn't believe it. They were gone. Milo came over to lick his face, but Nathan didn't flinch. He remained motionless on the floor, deeply in thought and confusion. Then, Jordan entered his mind. His vision began to split and become blurred.

"Freaks, things like him, *cripple*," they repeated like always, but then, Jane entered his thoughts, "Of course, Jordan, of course I can go."

At first Nathan saw Jane's sarcasm and fake smile, but they became blurred, and his memory warped. Now all he could hear was Jane agreeing to go. She was abandoning him! Jane was going to Jordan's party!

"See? I told you! Jane is not your friend. Now you see, she's going to Jordan's party, Jordan's Party! She's his friend. I always see her hanging out with him, planning about how to humiliate you and hurt you. Calling you cripple! Cripple! We should hurt them! And make them crawl! No, no! Don't! Quiet! Let's make them the cripple!"

"I can't stand this anymore!" he shouted, "I'm going to force the pain out. I'm going to sleep! A very long sleep..."

He crawled his way over to his room and grabbed the pill bottle from his nightstand. He took 5 out, but he had already taken one! He couldn't take an overdose. So, he hesitated and put the pills on the table.

"If you can't kill Jordan, then you'll still be living with his nasty comments and punches, and kicks," the voice returned, "Just go to sleep, do it now! You are alone. Your father is dead! Your mother will soon be too! And Jane has abandoned you. You are alone! Alone!"

Nathan picked up the pills again and held them over his mouth. He was going to sleep and didn't mean to wake up. He released his hand and the pills fell above his open mouth. He knew that an overdose of the strong sleeping tablets would kill him. He knew exactly what he was doing.

"The world doesn't need me. It never did and it never will!" Nathan thought, "It doesn't want me!"

Three of the tablets missed his mouth, while 2 entered. He dropped the pill bottle and laid his back down on the floor. He didn't want to be alive anymore, but waiting for his death was even worse. It was all up to time now. The clock seemed to move slower, whilst his breathing quickened. He was even more nervous now. Then, the door opened.

"Nate?" called a voice. It was Jane, "Nate! Are you ready to go?"

Now he remembered, they were going to the movies. Jane was never going to the party. He wasn't alone.

Nathan got up and coughed with all his might in an attempt to get the pills out of his throat. He coughed so much that he vomited in the garbage bin, and amongst the green goop, there were 2 visible white tablets.

Jane entered his room, "Oh Nate, are you alright?"

"Yeah," he said as he breathed heavily, "I'm fine."

"You fell out of your chair! Are you sure you still want to go?"

"Of course! I can still go!" he exclaimed, "But would you mind helping me on the chair?"

"Sure" Jane smiled.

Once Nathan was in his chair and cleaned up, they were ready to go to the cinema. Jane helped him into her car, and as she drove, Nathan took the time to reflect. The voice in his head which had plagued him for so long was gone, and his memories were returning. He wasn't alone in this world. He had Jane, and she was always true to their friendship. Although there was much to lament about the loss of his father, there was still hope that his mother would someday wake up. He should not be ashamed of his disability and handicaps, but embrace them, and continue to follow his true passions. Most importantly, he now realized that suicide and death, was not the way to leave this world, and that it would only cause more pain for those who loved him. He had always felt so small, but now he felt as tall as ever. He felt seen. He rolled down his window and felt the air outside. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. The air was cool, and the wind swept through his hair like water. He lay back and closed his eyes, finally at peace.

The Unlinking

by Aleksander Calloway

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Axel had always been a loyal person to the linked citizens since he was young. He had been partially linked to his AI brain chip, like all other kids, since the early age of 3; but it was finally the day for him to become fully integrated with his chip. This would give the AI full control over his emotions and assist by boosting critical thinking. He would not be able to truly feel any emotion again.

It was the 16th birthday where every human living in the future city of Neuronia had to become a linked citizen, and Axel was one of those people. He had been waiting for this day to come since a young age, already learning several new things from his chip.

When he finally arrived at the Central Linking Facility of Neuronia, he exclaimed, "Wow... this place is huge."

There were thousands of other teens just like him in the CLFN becoming fully linked citizens. Neuronia holds tens of millions of linked citizens but had struggled to thrive and reach any "peak" of some sort due to the high population. Axel had always wanted to be the one to lead himself to a peak but had not known how. When getting ready for the linking, he made it his goal for the aftermath of his linking.

Axel got ready in the linking chamber, and watched the AI play a video on how to connect his brain waves to the AI supercomputer to become fully linked with the whole AI system. He finally connected his brain waves and just had to wait for the data transfer.

It could take hours to fully link the human brain together with the whole AI supercomputer of the city, which was a step up from previous generations. There had been no known mishap from these linking ceremonies, and all teens have come out more connected to society as a whole.

This was where Axel and the Neuronia AI supercomputer had a misconnection, and Axel's linking process was paused. He became temporarily disconnected from the supercomputer, terrified of being left alone with his own thoughts and emotions. Desperately trying to find a way to reconnect with the cloud, he started looking around for help, but there was none because the only other people with him were others like him going through this life changing process.

In fear, Axel ran out of the linking room into the main facility hall looking for someone in this terrible time of need.

Nobody was around on the first floor, so he went exploring on the second, third, and fourth floors. Not a single person could be found until he reached the fifth floor, where he noticed a man standing in rather raggedy clothes of a style he had never seen before— so different from the mass-produced silk clothing with millions of different styles to choose from with the power and help of his very own AI chip.

He cautiously approached the man, who looked rather welcoming.

"Hello there, I am Ali. Who may you be so deep in the CLFN facilities?"

Axel quietly whispered, "I am Axel... and I need your help."

"I think I may know what you need help with, but I need to ask you a few questions," Ali explained.

"Questions?" Axel remarked, not even knowing the word because of only having the vocabulary intelligence of a 3-year-old, despite the fact that the people in the year 2352 AD were very adaptable.

"Questions are things I ask you to learn information," Ali tried explaining in the simplest way possible.

"Were you left all alone all of a sudden, disconnected from your chip?" Ali asked.

Axel stated, "Um... yes, that's what happened."

"You must be afraid then," Ali started, "that word means—"

He was cut off by Axel who said, "I do not know what happened, but I am not that oblivious to every word's meaning. I just want to know how to be reconnected to my chip - I'm scared and confused. Why are you here anyway mister?"

"I believe that what happened to me, over a year ago, has just happened to you my friend," Ali explained.

"You have been temporarily unlinked from your brain chip," he said. "You must now make the hard decision for every unlinked citizen: to go back and be loyal to the linked, or to stay unlinked and learn the truths to the human world today. It is likely that it is a partial unlinking, meaning you could still find a way to relink."

“Well, I want to find a way to reintegrate to my brain chip, and, if you would like to help me, that would be great,” Axel explained.

“I suppose I will help you,” Ali remarked, not knowing what would unfold.

The two slowly made their way out of the CLFN into the dark and gloomy streets outside the facility. Ali led them to the alleys in between the humongous skyscrapers.

He explained, “The Neuronium archives holds all of the info you might need to learn how to relink; but it also has more information on what human life was like before our chips.”

“Sounds interesting,” said Axel. “Are the archives far away?” he asked.

“Not very,” Ali told him. “What do you think about being linked to Neuronium through these chips?” Ali asked. “Have you ever wondered what life could really be about without these brain chips limiting us?”

“No actually,” Axel started, “I’ve always been loyal to the linked society. I think it’s a good way to keep all the people here in control without going crazy. Now that I think of it though, life right now is... cool. It’s like a fresh restart on my laptop— I’m learning things at a more reasonable pace, and I can put whatever use to it as I would like.”

“This relates to my theory of what human life was like before these brain chips,” Ali told Axel, “and I have gone to the Archives in attempts to prove my point, but I have not been able to find lots of information,” Ali said. “Speaking of the Archives, we’re here,” he announced.

The two were standing in front of a large but short edifice unlike the other buildings around it, and it was made of pure marble with large glass windows.

The first thing Axel asked was, “Why is it so short and far from other buildings?”

“It is for security reasons,” Ali started, “and as far as the height, I have concluded this is because it carries information under the ground, so it does not need to have hundreds of floors above ground,” Ali remarked in a proud and accomplished tone.

Axel replied, “Sounds and looks cool.”

“In that building is unlike anything you’ve seen here before,” remarked Ali.

As they made their way into the building, Ali told Axel to quickly check into the building, and explained that the automated check in made sure only linked people could go in. Ali had been able to sneak in multiple times before this, but he admitted it was easier for him to sneak through if Axel helped.

Axel connected to the security scan and made his way through the gates where he saw Ali swiftly run through them just before they closed. They quickly made their way to the elevators which had hundreds of negative floors.

“This place must have so much information about the world if it has almost 150 floors,” remarked Axel.

“Yes, but only the first few are technically allowed for the public,” Ali started explaining. “Linked people do not go past those few because their chips program loyalty to Neuronium, but it is easily accessible if you are unlinked,” he explained while clicking floor -134, “situations like ours happen so rarely that there is no security for it, and it is not in any historical databases,” Ali finished.

“Interesting. You must come here often if you know so much about this place; and that you even know to go to the -134th floor. What exactly is on that floor anyway?” asked Axel.

“It’s just top-secret information based on the world’s past. And an old archivist, of course, who is pacing the halls making sure info stays safe all the time... and she does some work down there,” Ali explained.

“Will she cause any trouble?” asked Axel.

“Not if we work quickly,” said Ali.

When finally arriving, Ali led the two through the halls filled with automated information and even books— Neuronium did not have any besides in the Archives. They saw the Archivist once before finally reaching a desk with a desktop computer on it.

“That archivist lady seems pretty normal,” said Axel, “just old and frail,” he remarked.

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t want to test our chances with her. She is part of the government of Neuronium technically, so I’m sure she works strictly,” Ali said.

Ali then pulled out a thumb drive which he got from another unlinked person. Ali explained that the unlinked person who he received it from was a friend who told Ali that he would know to use it when the time was right. It was supposed to grant access to all Neuronium government connected devices, so Ali expected it to work when plugging it into the computer.

He plugged in the thumb drive and immediately they were overwhelmed with information emulating the monitor screen. From information about the city’s weak cloud security system, to how the world was before brain

chips, and they were shocked. The computer read information about democratic ruling and how the world was actually divided into continents with countries, information that was well hidden from them as well as everyone else.

"I can't believe the world used to be democratic," said Ali.

"What's that?" asked Axel.

"That means that parts of the world used to be ruled by the citizens living in their area. 'People can have a say in what the government does' it says right here," Ali said.

"That's sad... we're living in such a controlled world without a leader," Axel started, "and these chips are hurting humanity. I can't believe I'm saying this, but the chips are bad! This is wrong to humanity as a whole, and we must find a way to change it."

"Well... I think I know a way to do that," Ali said. "Another unlinked friend told me he prophesied that if past world information is released to a public who is willing to learn about it, then the world can finally change from this mess."

"Well then, I think we know what we must do: we must release the past information and destroy the AI firewall that is restricting humans!" Axel exclaimed.

"Quiet down my friend," whispered Ali, "we don't want the Archivist to hear and find us."

"Sorry," Axel apologized.

Ali quickly got to work, going through files trying to figure out how to release them from the Archives database. He found out how to release all the files, but it would take a few minutes. In the meantime, Ali led the two to the main Archives computer, attempting to surpass the AI firewall and destroy the restricting capabilities of the AI chips in humans, which would essentially make them useless. Ali then plugged another thumb drive into one of the many ports in the significantly larger computer and waited for the thumb drive to do its thing.

"I hope this is the right thing for the world," said Axel. "What if something bad happens because people won't have the reliance to their brain chips?"

"I don't know," said Ali frantically, "but what I do know is that something bad will happen to us if we do not do something about that archivist!"

Then, Ali quickly turned to see the old Archivist speedwalking towards them so quickly that it should not have been possible for one of her age to move so fast.

"What are you two doing on the mainframe!?" she shouted.

"It's okay," Ali started, "we're with the government who asked us to make some changes in the Neuronion AI system."

"Oh no you're not," the Archivist started, "because I've been the only one way down here in 15 years and any changes would go through me!"

"It's all okay we're—" Ali started before getting cut off.

The Archivist started, "Whatever you are doing down here is extremely illegal because I am the only official in all of Neuronion allowed down here! I am going to have to report you to the Neuronion officials, who will have to take you in. I've heard they haven't had an issue with crime in 27 years, but you're ruining that streak! I don't know what you're doing on the mainframe, but it is going to destroy the safety of the city."

"Um Ali..." started Axel.

"Hold on one moment my friend, we're having a dispute here," said Ali.

Axel shouted, "No! You need to see that the mainframe is 96% finished with the deletion of the AI!"

Ali quickly looked back at the monitor and then back at the Archivist who had a panicked look on her face.

"No, you can't do that! It's going to leave the city in shambles for ages!" she shouted and started running towards the computer to unplug the thumb drive. In that instant, Ali and Axel simultaneously positioned themselves between the Archivist and the computer so they were blocking her from unplugging the thumb drive.

Watching the screen finally tick from 99% to 100%, the Neuronion AI deletion was complete, and before the Archivist could reach it; all humans were free of their AI brain chips. Everybody's eyes flashed and they finally saw how dark and dirty the Archives were due to the lack of maintenance for several years. There was also a huge mess of files on the computer screen, and it was clearly evident that it would take a very long time to retrieve even a little bit of what was left of the AI.

The Archivist was in shambles on the ground, extremely confused as to what happened. Ali and Axel were also a bit confused but less because they had learned to become less reliant on their AI chips on this journey. Their consciousness was still with them and they understood what happened, so they helped the Archivist into the

elevator which started making its way up to ground level. Exhausted, more mentally than physically, Axel and Ali sat down on the floor as the elevator started climbing up.

As the elevator finally made it to ground level, Axel and Ali helped the Archivist out into the lobby of the Archives, where she went to sit down. Axel and Ali both then went to the front doors determined to see what the world really looked like. As they opened the door, they saw many confused and scared people, some crying, and some just sitting unaware and not conscious about what happened. Truly seeing the city with their own eyes disappointed them, because of how dirty and gloomy it really was. Despite this, they saw the very bright sun rising from the northeast which brought some reassurance to them.

"It's beautiful," Ali said.

"Yeah I know," said Axel, "finally seeing the world's true beauty with no filter is so nice, and we can finally bring some humanity and happiness to this city."

The Ink That Never Faded

by Emilia Compel

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

The knock on the door brought a peculiar succession of sounds. Taylor peeked through the blinds and saw a strange man dressed in a button down shirt, nice pants, and he was wearing a name tag. She reluctantly opened the door.

"Hello! Are you Mrs. Sight?" he asked.

"Yes, yes I am. How may I help you?" replied Mrs. Sight slightly confused.

"I am from the Collector's Trove Team, and we collect memorabilia from famous people. We heard about your son, Tommy Sight's birthday cards that you have collected over the years, and we were interested in purchasing them."

Hearing her son's name left a hollow feeling in the pit of Taylor's stomach.

"Sorry, I am not interested."

"Well, if you give me a few minutes, I think I might be able to convince you."

With a subtle glance, Taylor looked around at the walls of her house with the peeling paint and broken floorboards. "Okay, just make it quick," she said as she opened the door to let him in.

The man stood there for a moment, and she could tell he was as uncomfortable as she was.

"Look, I know that these cards are sentimental to you and that there is maybe something going on between you and your son, but," he looked around her house and then continued, "the money might help you out and we will make sure that your cards are in good hands."

Taylor didn't say anything at first but then thought to herself about what he said. Maybe he was right, she thought, maybe it was time to let go and maybe she *could* use the money. "Can you come back later?" she asked.

"No problem," the collector responded.

Afterwards, Taylor took some time to reflect. She lifted herself up from the chair she had been sitting in and finally walked to the room where the box was kept. She paused at the doorway and glanced over at the old wooden grandfather clock that did not work anymore. Then she entered the room, reached up to the top of the clock, and took hold of the box. She then sat down on the bed and opened it up. At first she began to feel emotional as all the memories rushed back to her. Then she smiled as she remembered his Batman-themed 8th birthday party. The endless laughter and his voice from that day echoed through her ears. When she saw the letter he sent her from sleepaway camp, she thought back to when he made her a flower-shaped jewelry holder. She still used it every day. Taylor looked down and she could feel tears prickling out of her eyes as she squeezed them shut. She then came across an unopened envelope. He had sent her this letter a couple weeks following their big fight. She paused. Shaking, she slipped her finger through the crack of the envelope, ready to rip it open. She stopped herself, however, unsure why. Was she curious? Was she afraid? Was she hopeful? She wasn't sure, so she decided to stack up all of the cards and take them to her living room, so they were ready for the collector.

The next morning the collector came back.

"So, I've thought about what you said, and I would like to sell them."

“Terrific!” he exclaimed.

She handed the stack to him.

“These are going to make someone really happy,” he said with a smile.

“Yeah,” responded Taylor, “*someone*.” An instant before the collector turned away Taylor quickly reached out and snatched back the unopened envelope off the top of the stack.

“No! I need that one, it’s unopened. It will be the most valuable!”

“I am sorry, but I can’t give this one away,” Taylor stated.

“Alright,” he said, sighing. “Well, thank you. We will have the money for you by Friday.”

“Okay, thanks,” she said, closing the door.

She stood there alone in the living room for a moment, the envelope still in her hand. It had become like a burning ember. She didn’t know whether to drop it, throw it in the garbage, or rip it open. She slipped her finger through the crack and felt the dried glue which had sealed the envelope years ago. She ripped the card open so hard it split the envelope across the middle rather than just the top. She pulled out the card and dropped the envelope to the floor. The card was his personal monogrammed stationary. His name, Tommy, was written in big gold letters on the front with a baby blue marble background. Taylor’s fingers pinched one side of the card and she lifted it open. Her palms were sweaty and her heart felt as if it was about to fall out of her chest. The whole card was full of writing, no empty space. She looked at the date and remembered the bad decisions he was making during this time. She had offered suggestions and he had thrown them back in her face. The yelling and the nasty things they both said reverberated in her mind. *Maybe I should just put it back where I found it*, she thought. She made her way to her bedroom. Standing on her tippy toes, Taylor motioned to put the card behind the clock, but something inside her told her not to.

At last, she read: *Dear Mom, I know you may not want to hear from me, but I want you to know how sorry I am about the fight that we had last week. I have taken time to reflect, and I realize how caught up with this big deal I became. I got so carried away and should never have made those horrible decisions with my money. I also should never have said those despicable things to you. You mean so much to me and have helped me so much through my acting journey. I would not have gotten to this point without you and your support. I truly hope we can move on from this, and I love you with all of my heart. Please respond as soon as possible.*

Love,

Tommy.

She read the last lines over and over again. For years she had convinced herself that he had never wanted to hear from her again. But now, with the faded card in her hand, she realized that all along he was just waiting for her. Her heart pounded as she reached for her phone. For a moment she hesitated, but then she remembered the words in the card. She picked up the phone and dialed his number.

“Hello,” a voice said.

Another faint sound followed. Taylor lifted her eyes to the broken grandfather clock that was now ticking again.

A Place to Breathe

by Letizia Currarino

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Mila had a habit she never really explained. She never talked about it, and no one really understood it, but she collected sunsets. Not pictures, moments. The kind you feel more than see.

Most evenings, she stepped onto the balcony of her family’s house in Miami Beach. The waves came steadily, the color in the sky softened and relaxed everything inside her head, and all of a sudden the air felt a whole lot easier to breathe. It was the only place where her thoughts didn’t feel like a million obnoxious buzzing, flickering lights. Where her mind, normally full of worries and overthinking, could finally slow down for a little while. Some days were worse than others. Thoughts piled on top of each other like a pile of unread messages. Every small decision, every “what if”, every possible imaginable mistake spun through her mind, and sometimes

she felt like there was nothing to do to escape them. All she knew was that being inside made it worse, every light, every sound, every small thing just ended up making it worse.

One evening, leaning on the railing, she heard a voice call up from the sand. "You've got, like...the best sunset spot."

Mila looked down and saw a girl around her age standing in the sand, holding her flip-flops by the straps. The ends of her jeans were damp, and earbuds hung around her neck. She had a calm and safe vibe, quiet but confident in a soft way.

The girl gave a small wave, "I'm Olivia."

Mila nodded. "Hey."

Olivia looked up at the sky, "Can I come up? Your balcony looks like a better spot than out here."

"Yeah, sure. Come up," Mila said.

Olivia climbed the stairs and stepped onto the balcony beside her, brushing some of the sand off her damp jeans. Once she got up, they just watched the sky change for a while.

Then Olivia said, "Okay, so...do you do this every day?"

Mila shrugged, "Most days."

"Nice!" Olivia said, "I can see why. It's all so calming."

After a moment, Olivia leaned her elbow lightly against the railing.

"If you're out here tomorrow, I might join you again."

"Yeah," Mila said, "that's fine."

"Cool," Olivia said, smiling "I like the view."

"Yeah, it is quite nice up here."

The next day, Olivia appeared. And the following. And the next.

Soon, she started bringing matchas for both of them, almost like a ritual. Sometimes iced, sometimes hot, sometimes with a bit of cold foam. They didn't have to talk much, just sitting there side by side, sipping their matchas, watching the sky, the buzzing lights in Mila's head faded a little more each time.

As weeks went by, their evening on the beach became the time that Mila looked forward most to, especially after how close of friends they had become. They would share jokes, quiet observations about the colors in the sky, and small stories of their days. It was effortless, a comfort, something that didn't feel forced. But, not because of any dramatic reasons whatsoever and not because they spoke it out loud, just being there felt right.

Mila collected sunsets, but now she collected the moments she and Olivia shared too. The easy ones. The humorous ones. Those with matchas in hand. Those that made the buzzing light fade a little more every day. The ones that feel like the beginning of a genuine friendship.

The Spotters

by Frank Espinosa

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

"Hey, Martha, push off this side for me," said Oscar.

"Fine," murmured Martha, "I hate this planet and all of its creatures." The planet Ton 618 was a brutal planet, annihilating anything that tried to live on it, and Oscar knew this best. He conveyed the planet's dangers to his crew of five including him, Martha, Oscar, Marley, and James. Even with Oscar's warnings, the whole crew wanted to go, except Martha, out to sea to try and catch any unknown creatures to sell in the blood red sea.

This sea was different on Ton 618. It was always blood red in color and every fish in it was big enough and strong enough to kill you and eat you. All of these fish were carnivorous and ate nothing but other fish and unlucky travelers who ventured too far out. Most everybody who stepped foot on the island were usually bounty hunters or fishers all here for the same reason, to catch and sell the fish that inhabit this island for a profit. "Oscar, are we ready to go?" asked James. "We should get going soon if we want to catch the most fish possible."

"Yeah, we're just about set," responded Oscar. "I don't know why but I just feel like today's not the day. It just feels like something off about today. Does anybody else feel that way?"

"Not really, man, I think you're just nervous," snapped Marley. "I just really want to get going already."

The five crew members all pushed off the side of the dock and started drifting through the waves out to sea. While propelling forward, James put on autopilot and went out the back to meet the other crew members who were playing a card game that the faces of the cards looked like they had fish on them. "Ay, let me join a hand or two before I got to go back to driving again," asked James. He sat down and proceeded to play cards with the others for about 30 minutes before he put down his cards to go back up into the driving deck.

"Hey, warn us if you see an iceberg in the water. Don't want to go down like the Titanic," barked Martha. James looked around and saw everybody else snickering quietly in the background.

"Martha, that's a terrible joke, and you know that right?" retorted James. "I don't know why you're questioning my driving skills when you're down here doing nothing, playing cards with everybody else."

"I'm not questioning your driving skills, I'm just making a funny joke, that's all," responded Martha. "You always take things way too seriously, man. Just take a chill pill and let me make my jokes."

"Wasn't funny though," murmured James under his breath while stomping up the cold, wet metal stairs that shook loudly every time he took a step on one. James peered out the window of the driving deck and saw the blood red water splashing up onto the bow of the boat slightly creating a stain on the white front every time the water splashed up against it. They were moving at about 15 miles per hour, but the waves felt like they were moving at 2 miles per hour and constantly getting bombarded by hits from all sides by the waves. All five of them were very trained at sea so none of them would ever get sick. They all knew this but today James felt different and was noticeably noxious and pale as he was looking out in front of him. He thought to himself that the water was just a different color than he was used to, so that must be why he's feeling that way, but he knew this was different. He felt another wave of nausea and went back down into the cabin where the other four crew members were now talking over drinks instead of playing cards. "Hey, could any of you guys take over the wheel for just a bit? I'm getting a little tipsy for some reason," asked James.

"You, tipsy? I'd never think that captain James would be the one getting seasick," replied Martha.

"I'll do it. I'm getting sick of playing cards for 3 hours straight. I need the sunlight too," uttered Oscar suddenly.

"You better not almost kill us all this time. Ever since you saw that one big shadow that looked like a shark, I'd never think you'd want to be reserve captain again," blurted Marley.

"It looked like a giant shark!" retorted Oscar. Oscar proceeded to go back up the even more cold and slippery metal stairs that led up to the control room. As soon as Oscar went to the wheel to lay his hands down on it he noticed a message etched on the metal holding up the wheel. This read, "The spots." Oscar dismissed this idea and just thought that the message was the old captain's crew name. It was common for all of the crews on Ton 618 that wanted to fish for money to have a crew name. Oscar thought back and remembered their own crew name. He shuddered at this thought and continued to steer the ship. Almost an hour later it was pitch black. Downstairs, all of the other crewmates were now completely disconnected from each other. Martha was in the corner of the room picking her nails, James was eating a turkey sandwich which had a cold and stale look to it, and Marley was peeling an orange in a chair next to his bed located in the far corner of the room. "I'm sick of this, I'm going up to start putting out the lines. I need all the help I can get so everybody get up and help me," declared James.

"Fine," murmured Martha "I'll help you out." Marley soon followed Martha to also help out. When Marley got up to the boat deck he saw Martha and James looking up at the sky and muttered words under their breath.

"What's going on?" asked Marley

"Look, the full moon is out today," replied James. Five minutes later they all finished looking at the moon and started dropping the fishing lines that they had attached to the outside of the boat. These fishing lines weren't normal, they were attached to the side of the boat and not an actual rod. This was because the fish here were too powerful for any regular rod, so they had to attach the lines to the side of the boat. "Don't those spots in the water look amiss to you guys," asked James. Just before the other crewmates could look over the side of the boat, Oscar hurriedly came down the steps leading to the control room.

He shouted, "Guys, what is that in the water!"

"Calm down Oscar, it's probably just an optical illusion from the moonlight," responded Martha calmly. Suddenly, all four of the crewmates were sent tumbling to the right. "WOAH!" screamed James as he was sent crashing down the stairs leading to the sleeping rooms. Martha, Marley, and Oscar were sent flying into the open deck at the back of the boat. "NO, NO, NO, I KNEW THERE WAS SOMETHING GOING ON WITH THOSE SPOTS," screamed Oscar.

Martha got up and looked over the boat to see what slammed into them. “The spots... they’re circling us,” said Martha grimly.

“PULL UP THE LINES,” screamed Oscar. Martha ran to the two lines hanging by the side of the boat and yanked them up as fast as she could. Marley came to help Martha but was thrown to the other side of the boat by another violent hit. James came scrambling back up the steps he fell down holding his head. “What are these things!” he shouted from across the boat.

“I don't know but they're trying to sink the ship!” Oscar yelled back. One, two, three times the boat shook; one, two, three times all the crew were thrown into the blood stained white marble sides of the boat. On the fourth time Martha leaned over too much trying to untie the lines and another blow came. She was sent headfirst into the blood red waters. “Martha!” Screamed Oscar. “WE GOT A MAN OVERBOARD,” yelled Oscar. As soon as he finished the sentence another violent jolt sent Marley into the front of the ship where he failed to grab the handlebars and he too met the same bloody fate as Martha. “James, where are you!” screamed Oscar. He tried to look back to the captain's deck but found no sign of James anywhere. One final jolt that felt like a boulder crashing into them, flung Oscar over the side of the boat. Oscar caught his grip with the railing of the boat but was slowly slipping off. This is when James finally appeared out of the cabin of the ship. “James! Help me!” screamed Oscar. James walked over with some sort of safety hook vest which kept him on board and a look in his eyes that showed like he really didn't know where he was. As James made it to Oscar he murmured a few words under his breath.

“You know what, I was really starting to like you,” murmured James.

“What! Just please.....,” Oscar felt as if every bone in his body turned into ice. He noticed a patch on the side of James' vest. The words were written “The spotters” in a bloody font that made it almost impossible to read. “You're the old crew.... You're a spotter,” sputtered Oscar.

“Sorry it had to be this way,” said James calmly. Oscar felt his left then right hand slipping from the rusted metal bars. He looked below him and saw that the boat's nametag had never been shown to the whole crew because it was covered in tape, read, “The spotter.” The last thing Oscar saw before slipping into the bloody red water was James' cruel and icy smile looking down at him as he crashed into the water.

The Last Voice

by Tristan Exelbert

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

By the year 3120 AD, the City of Glass no longer needed any more sound. People moved through the streets like clones, all in perfect order, all synchronized, and all needs being satisfied before even being felt. Speech had been forgotten centuries ago. Words, and sound itself, were replaced by a silent understanding. Everyone accepted this or at least did not try to fight against it. Everyone except for the Philosopher.

The Philosopher lived alone in a tall tower surrounded by glass near the city's center. From above, the people looked like patterns not individuals, moving when they were meant to, and stopping when required. They never spoke, never questioned, never thought. That was his job. Every day, the Philosopher would connect to the city's central intelligence, known as Logos. He did this through a neural chip embedded in his skull. Logos controlled the City of Glass, governing the synchronization among the people and eliminating any inefficiency or imperfection. The Philosopher's role was to study humanity's past, emotions and imperfections. This was so that the Logos could prevent humanity's return. Ironically, the Philosopher was trusted with the knowledge that no one else was allowed to remember or even know about at all.

During one normal, routine synchronization, memories started appearing into his mind, laughter in crowded rooms, anger and argument fueled by passion. These moments and memories were told by the Logos to be “errors”- unneeded noise from an imperfect age. All of a sudden, something went wrong. The data and memories that were being streamed into the Philosopher's mind, hesitated, and a single word slipped through, unclassified. This was not supposed to happen.

“Remember,” said an unknown voice.

The Philosopher was shocked. His heart pounded violently. This was all an unfamiliar sensation in a city and place designed to eliminate discomfort. The word did not feel like information or data to the Philosopher. It

felt like a command. That night, the Philosopher stood before the glass of his tower, staring at his reflection. For the first time ever, he wondered. He wondered if perfection could only be met once everything that made humanity human, was forgotten.

The next day, the next synchronization. The Philosopher did something forbidden. Instead of receiving information and data like usual, he asked and stated a question that he was brainstorming the night before.

“Can perfection exist,” the Philosopher said, “without imperfection?”

The moment the thought, question, and noise entered the system, the city reacted. Lights flickered across the entire city, all movement came to a halt, everything froze. Logos paused, an event that had not occurred in centuries.

“This question is unnecessary,” the Logos transmitted into his mind.

“Then why has it frightened you?” the Philosopher asked back.

There was no response. Within a few hours, the Guardians summoned him. They stayed in a white chamber below the Tower of Logos, their thoughts, of course, perfectly aligned and in order.

“You have introduced instability,” one of the Guardians said.

“I have a question,” the Philosopher replied.

“Questions lead to disorder, chaos,” said the Philosopher, “To understanding.”

The Guardians, all at the exact same time, with the exact same thought process, decided the Philosopher’s fate. He would undergo something called final synchronization. A permanent alignment that would erase wonder and curiosity entirely. This had never happened for centuries. The Philosopher’s individuality or self would only remain as data.

The Logos guided the Philosopher to a room. The Philosopher stood still as light started to disappear from the room. Strange, wire looking objects, wrapped themselves around the Philosopher’s chest, spine, neck, arms, legs, and finally, his skull. This was not punishment, it was correction, at least the Logos made it seem that way.

Final synchronization.

He could feel the system reaching within, finding every single memory that he had ever formed. The Logos did not erase though. They changed and “fixed” these memories. Wonder and curiosity marked inefficient. Doubt- danger. As they were prepping everything for deletion and correction, the Philosopher thought of his unanswered question. He realized that there is comfort in not knowing.

“So, this is perfection,” he thought. “Nothing left to ask.”

“Individuality means separation. Separation produces instability,” the Logos said within him.

The Philosopher could instantly feel everything being measured and calculated. His thoughts slowed, and the “wires” became tighter. His breathing became measured and calculated. He could, in real time, feel himself being deleted. His consciousness, removed. Individuality, taken. He felt as if he was disappearing, not physically but consciously. Soon, he would move just as they did. Think as they did. He would be complete, perfect. And empty. Before the final step was engaged, the Philosopher did something completely unanticipated. He focused on remembering. He remembered why the question mattered, why his thoughts mattered, why the past mattered. The Logos paused. The entire city’s network, synchronized as a whole, glitched by a fraction of a second. Barely measurable, but this was enough.

A Guardian stiffened.

“What is this delay?” one asked.

The Philosopher’s question, once heard and spoken out loud, was still faintly in the system. It had been absorbed, not contained. Now, others were absorbing it.

A technician that monitored the city’s synchronization, frowned. For the first time in her life, her thoughts were not immediately settled or solved for her. A word surfaced.

“Why?” the technician thought.

Back in the chamber or room that the Philosopher was in, he could feel the Logos tighten their grip.

“Your influence doesn’t stop,” a Logo said. “Correction must proceed.”

“Answer me,” the Philosopher replied, his voice quiet but clear. “If perfection requires the removal of thought in itself and a consciousness really– who decides what perfection is?”

The system malfunctioned.

The Guardians glanced at each other, their shared thinking and decision making thinned.

Final synchronization resumed, slower now, because of all of the growing interferences. The Philosopher felt, again, parts of himself being taken away. Something was happening though. Logos tightened their hold,

accelerating and quickened the process, but it no longer flowed smoothly. The Philosopher's vision dimmed. Beneath all of his memory loss, a certainty remained.

He was no longer alone.

Across the entire City of Glass, everything glitched. Citizens paused in the middle of movement, their perfection and synchronization, broken by doubt. The Philosopher's question surfaced in their minds that had never even learned how to question or form one or even think at all.

"Instability detected," one of the Logos said with a failing voice.

The Philosopher understood that perfection could not defend itself from imperfection, it could only contain it. Containment required silence. However, silence had been broken.

The Philosopher did not feel himself; he couldn't even feel what remained of him, while final synchronization ended. Everywhere in the city, a citizen spoke. And more continued to. The City of Glass remained, but now uncertain, alive, and most of all, imperfect.

For the first time in centuries, humanity moved on not in perfect harmony, but in imperfect freedom.

The Selfless Fairy's Wand

by Olivia Gabay

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

In Altheria, a land far, far away, lived the fairies Selia Wynters and Leora Summers. The two fairies attended Altheria Fairy's Highschool and were the two smartest in the class. Selia was an empathetic, caring, and open-minded fairy. While Leora was a greedy, rude, and misunderstood fairy. That day was the day of finals, which meant that everyone was very focused on their exams. Doing well on the finals was always a priority for the fairies of the school.

"Everyone gather around, gather around," said Headmistress Dalia, "Today, as all of you may know, is the day of finals which means that I should see everyone doing well in their classes and focusing."

"Yes, Headmistress Dalia," everyone responded in unison. That day, the fairies had every class. One class for science, one for baking, one for flying, and one for healing.

"I'm so scared for the test," said Sel.

"Don't worry; you have been studying for this test for more than a month now," Sel's friend said.

"I know, I know but still. What if I do bad? What if right before the test I forget everything? Oh no!" exclaimed Sel.

"You got this; you're like the smartest in our class. You're gonna do great," Sel's friend reassured.

"What about Leora? She is so smart. How can I compete with that?" said Sel worriedly.

"Ha. These tests are such a joke. Like when are these test results actually gonna matter? They are just the promotion to becoming an adult," said Leora, "But that doesn't really make sense. Like great, we are going to master every formula and spell."

"Ya I know, but I mean you are obviously going to ace the test, so it doesn't really matter the actual logistics of it," said Leora's friend.

"Whatever," muttered Leora.

Then it was time for everyone to head to their first period because the day finally began. The first period was focused on science and chemistry. That class they were working on conjuring. The first test they had was to turn ash into Fairy Dust.

"Ok everyone, settle down, settle down, I know everyone is excited about the test but let's keep the yelling to a minimum," the professor exclaimed.

"Ughh," sighed the whole class.

"Now onto the test..." declared the professor.

Twenty minutes later, everyone was still trying to complete the test of turning the ash into fairy dust. Even after many times of practice no one had gotten it yet. Until...

"I got it!" yelled Selia.

"What?! How? No way!" responded Leora in a loud tone.

"Yes, yes, yes, I did it!" repeated Selia.

"The only reason I didn't do it first is because I recently got a new wand, and I still need to break it in," exclaimed Leora.

The rest of the class then erupted in laughter and Sel ran out the door. Hiding there behind the curtain was Headmistress Dalia who had seen and heard everything. However, she did not punish the behavior nor make anyone aware of what she had just heard. Headmistress Dalia kept it a secret. For the rest of that class, Sel was not seen or heard.

During passing time that day Headmistress Dalia pulled both Sel and Leora to the side.

"Now that the tests have begun, I would like to inform both of you that whoever does the best on these tests will receive the Fless Fairy's Wand," Headmistress Dalia declared.

"Oh no! This means even more pressure!" Sel exclaimed.

"I'm going to do great, but I don't know about you..." Leora said.

The next class that they had that day was Baking. They had to make fairy flutter pie, one of the hardest magical dishes ever made.

"Hi everyone, welcome back to class," said the baking teacher, "today is going to be a hard test so, I expect everyone to be on their best behavior."

As the baking process went on, many fairies had multiple questions because of how intricate the recipe was. Unlike the rest of the class Leora had no questions; she was being very cocky and made snarky comments towards her fellow fairies. At that point the class was nearing an end and still no one had gotten it.

"Almost got it, *ding*, finally it's done! Well, I am not surprised, I knew I could do it," Leora said.

"Hah. I got it so easily you guys can't even do it," announced Leora, "You guys honestly should just give up now, no point in trying anymore."

"Omg! I am so proud of you Leora! You did so well; how did you do it so quickly?" Sel asked curiously.

"I am just amazing and smart and good at everything. I mean what can I say?" replied Leora snarkily.

"Yes, you are, now would you mind helping me? I still can't do it," asked Sel.

"No. You think someone as great as me is going to help you, ha-ha. You wish!" Leora exclaimed.

"Oh, okay, I guess I will just stay after class until I can do it," sighed Sel.

There again, was Headmistress Dalia, hiding behind the door and waiting while everyone left, still no one saw her. The only fairy that didn't leave was Sel, she stayed for another hour, trying to get the recipe, but she couldn't. She stayed so long that she ended up skipping all of her lunch time, and eventually even had to leave or else she would miss her next class.

The next class of the day was Flight Training. Before that class started, Sel overheard Leora telling something to her friends.

"Do you guys ever just feel like crawling up in a ball and taking some time to think? I love to do that," whispered Leora, "especially just to decompress. I think my favorite place to do that is by the Evertree."

As Sel overheard this she wondered why Leora was saying that, and why it was important then. But she soon forgot.

This class was one of Sel and Leora's favorites. The test for that class was to race one another by overcoming and winding through obstacles whilst in the air. The only difficult thing was that the obstacles were on fire, twisted or turned, and shook. This was going to be more difficult than they had anticipated.

"It's ok guys; we got this. Let's do this!" Sel said to the class.

"We will see about that," said Leora in a cocky voice.

"Let the race begin!" yelled the flying coach. In the beginning of the race both Sel and Leora were doing very well. They both were getting their turns correctly, but Sel was still in first place. Because of this, Leora was getting very mad, so she decided to do the unheard of. Leora decided to shove Selia into one of the hoops. This caused Selia to lose the race and in the end she got 4th place.

"Hey!" yelled Sel, "What are you doing, are you crazy?"

"You got to do what you got to do," declared Leora, "sorry, not sorry." Despite this, the coach did not say a word. It was as though she did not care that Leora was cheating. But, there again hiding underneath the bleachers was Headmistress Dalia, who had seen it all. The weird thing was that she normally never watched the classes. What was so special about them that time?

After Flight Training they had lunch. At that time all of the fairies were going crazy and were talking about how they failed all of the other tests. This included Sel. She was very worried because she did not do very well in all of the tests.

“Great job on the flying test, way to stay so grounded!” Leora said sarcastically.

“Oh God, I am done for. I am never going to get the Fless Fairy’s Wand now!” said Sel in a worried voice.

“You’re fine, and besides you have a whole hour for lunch to study if you really want to,” said Sel’s friend. So, during all of her lunch time she went to the library to study.

Once they got to the class, it was announced that the last test was to go to an old and almost dead tree in the forest. Then to revive it back to health with a fairy wand.

“Wait, I got this; this is one of my easiest subjects!” Sel thought to herself. Sel got to it, but this time she decided to move as far away from Leora as possible, so she could not interfere. And because of this, Sel was the first one to succeed; she was able to revive the dead tree within the first hour of the class. While Leora on the other hand was not able to do it at all.

“Just believe in yourself Leora, for this to work you must have a pure mind and soul,” said the healing teacher.

“That is the dumbest thing I have ever heard!” yelled Leora in a frustrated voice.

“I believe in you Leora!” yelled Sel.

There she was again, Headmistress Dalia, watching and listening whilst hiding behind a tree. And yet again, no one saw her.

After that class, everyone went home and got a good night’s rest for the next day they had school. No one understood why they had school the next day because they had just taken four very hard final tests, but everyone reluctantly went.

The next day everyone had gathered around in their usual places to hear the announcements of the day.

“Hello everyone,” Headmistress Dalia said over the microphone, “I know you all must be wondering why you are here today, but it is for a very big announcement. Today the council of elders at Altheria Highschool and I will be declaring the fairy who earned the Fless Fairy’s Wand.” At that moment the entire audience exploded in whispers.

“Wait what? I thought that was only a myth,” said a fairy in the crowd.

“Yeah, me too. I never knew that was real!” replied another.

“Ladies, ladies settle down!” exclaimed Headmistress Dalia, “This fairy has sacrificed her own time, and has become a new fairy in the process of her many years of learning. She has not only been an academic asset, but her selflessness and noble character have caused her to shine bright where many others haven’t.”

Then one of the council elders took over and said, “I couldn’t have said it better, so without further ado, I present the Fless Fairy’s Wand to Selia Wynters!”

“Oh my gosh, no way! What how? But I lost during the race, and I wasn’t able to make the Fairy Flutter Pie,” explained Sel.

“It is beside the point; your kindness and loving character has touched the souls of everyone here on this council. Which is why we think you are the most deserving of the wand,” shared Headmistress Dalia.

“Wow! Thank you so much! I am honored,” cried Selia.

“Now, if you all would follow me,” announced one of the council elders.

Before they left, Headmistress Dalia pulled Selia to the side to talk to her.

“You may not know this but during every test today I was watching both you and Leora. I saw how terrible she was treating you and how, even in spite of that, you still stayed true to your heart and showed kindness. That is truly something to be proud of which is one of the main reasons we decided to give you the Fless Fairy’s Wand,” said Headmistress Dalia.

Through those doors was a huge banquet, all for Selia. There were streamers, balloons, food, confetti, and more. The room was filled with all of Selia’s friends and teachers, all grinning from ear to ear with joy. There were multiple tables there so everyone could have lunch, as well as an entire buffet full of Sel’s favorite foods. Selia spent most of her day there talking with all of her friends, and teachers.

“We are all very proud of you Selia!” said all of Selia’s teachers.

“Aww thank you guys so much! It means a lot to me that you are proud!” Selia announced with joy.

Selia got this same reaction from everyone she saw there because truly they were all so proud.

“See! And you were worrying for no reason!” said one of Sel’s friends.

“Yeah, you’re totally right,” said Sel.

Even when the banquet had finished, her celebration did not. After the banquet there was a huge parade throughout the entire campus. This included more streamers and balloons, but there were also elephants, dancers, circus performers, and band members. All of them were there again for the same reason, to celebrate Selia.

"Come Selia, come sit on your throne! Here is a basket with flowers, as well as a necklace from the council as a gift to you," said Headmistress Dalia.

"Woah, I don't know what to say. Isn't this a bit much though? I feel like this is a bit over the top for one celebration," announced Sel.

"Nonsense, nonsense," insisted Headmistress Dalia.

As the parade was nearing an end, Selia realized that there was one thing missing from the parade. It was Leora; she had gone missing. So, then, Sel ordered everyone to go look for her and that was what they did.

"Where could she be?" asked Sel's friend.

"I don't know, where does she like to hide?" asked Sel.

"No idea," said Sel's friend.

An hour later everyone met up at the front of the forest, to see if anyone might know where Leora was. No one knew.

"Wait a minute, I think I might know where she is!" exclaimed Sel.

"Where?" everyone asked in unison.

"I will be right back; give me like twenty minutes!" yelled Sel.

Sel then thought to herself, "I remember overhearing her point it out to her friends during the flight test." So Sel went, and she found her.

"Leora, what is wrong?" asked Sel.

"I am really upset that I didn't get the wand, that is what I truly wanted for my life. I also don't feel too well because I am very cold," said Leora.

"Here, let me help. I will make you a blanket, and I have one more surprise for you," declared Selia.

"What? What is it?" questioned Leora.

"I know you have been working very hard, and deep down you are a good person which is why I am going to make you a wand. I will give you some of my magic and we can share," said Selia.

"Why? Why are you being so nice to me after I have been nothing but rude to you?" asked Leora.

"Because I see past your external features and characteristics and I know the real Leora on the inside," stated Selia.

"Wow, I don't think anyone has ever been this nice to me, thank you Sel," said Leora, "Maybe we can be friends now? I don't want to keep being rivals with you."

"It would be an honor to be your friend Leora," announced Sel.

Then from behind a tree, Headmistress Dalia, who heard and saw everything, came out with the rest of the fairies. At that moment, Headmistress Dalia made an announcement to the crowd, but especially to Selia.

Headmistress Dalia said, "Selia not only have you exemplified the perfect role of a fairy deserving of the Fless Fairy's Wand, but you have also done an act from the pureness of your heart. So, for that, I am renaming the Fless Fairy's Wand to the *Selfless* Fairy's Wand in your honor. You have shown Altheria how sometimes all it takes is one selfless act from a pure heart to win over the heart of another."

The Blessing

by Lilian Garcia

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Autumn leaves falling down, the crisp air nipping at toes, and the sun setting earlier in the day. In Cedarbrook, Maine this was the happiest time of the year. No, not Christmas or the summertime, it was autumn for the people of Cedarbrook. It was September of 1983, and The Harvest Festival was just around the corner.

Sarah was a normal thirteen-year-old girl who loved the festival like anyone else in the town. Growing up with two very important figures in the town, she grew up around the festival. Her father, Pete, was the mayor's accountant and her mother, Janet, was the mayor's secretary.

Working in such close quarters with the mayor, Sarah naturally became best friends with his daughter, Charlotte. They went on vacations together, spent nights at each other's houses, and they became the sisters neither of them had.

On a Monday morning, the sun was shining and for school the kids had to help decorate the town for the festival. Sarah and her class were in charge of decorating the stage area, which is where the actual event was hosted. The stage was old and wooden. It looked very worn, like it had been used for over a hundred years.

She started off with sweeping the stage and clearing all the dust and leaves off of it. While sweeping off the dirt, dust, and leaves, the broom nicked a loose floorboard.

"What?" Sarah asked. She looked around her to make sure no one was watching. She bent down and opened the floorboard. As she opened the board dust filled the air, she coughed and dusted off the floor with her hand. Inside the floor, it was all dark and Sarah reached inside. All she felt was a little box. She picked it up and looked at it.

The box was a little antique ceramic box. It was green with blue and pink daisies on it. It looked faded as if it had been around for centuries. There was a keyhole which was pretty small but as Sarah felt around for a key in the floor, she did not find one. She gave up and shook the box. She listened to the box and heard things shaking in there.

She saw the mayor, Fred Smith, walking up and put the box hastily back in the floor and closed the floor back up. She went right back to sweeping the floor like nothing happened.

"Mr. Fred! How are you?" Sarah asked friendly.

"Sarah! I'm great and you? I see you are in the spirit; you look very excited," Fred beamed, his face almost glowing with cheer.

"I'm doing good Mr. Fre-"

"I told you to call me Fred, Sarah."

As Sarah laughed, Fred looked around warily as if he had done something wrong. He checked his watch, looked at the clock tower, and looked at the sun like he had somewhere important to be. It was only two in the afternoon, what could possibly be going on? Probably a meeting of some sorts but then all of a sudden, Sarah's parents rushed in to find Fred and they all walked off together. As they walked off they spoke in hushed voices, sneaking glances at Sarah and then they vanished behind a corner.

She continued to clean with her friends, but it was different now. Something felt off to her; everything seemed as if nothing was right. Sarah had that gut feeling, something was very wrong, but she didn't know what.

After another thirty minutes of cleaning the stage, she and her friends began to hang the decorations. They hung wreaths, banners, and wrapped lights around trees. They worked tirelessly all day and night to prepare.

By four in the morning, Sarah collapsed in bed. She slept for ten hours straight and all she dreamed of was that look on her parents' faces. That moment replayed in her head like it was her favorite movie. It wouldn't get out of her mind; it just kept replaying and replaying until she woke up.

She woke frantically. As she sat up her hair was a mess, she was covered in a thin layer of sweat all over her body, and she was panting. All she could think about was what could be going wrong and what was going to happen. She looked out of her window and saw the leaves were falling. One by one. The wind blew one directly at her window.

She got up and walked over to the window. She looked at the leaf. It looked perfect but as she looked closer she saw many imperfections. The leaf was red but there were some brownish spots. It was a sugar maple leaf, but one corner was missing. Perfect with flaws.

A knock at the door startled Sarah and her mom walked in. Sarah turned to her mother and saw her mom looked awfully happy for it being ten in the morning on a Saturday.

"Sarah sweetie?" Her mom called.

"Yeah, Mom?" Sarah responded as she cleared her throat.

"Sarah what happened to you? You're pale, sweaty, and a mess. Are you sick?"

"No, Mom. I just had a rough night. You know nightmares and all."

"Oh sweetie. The nightmares are back?" Janet gave Sarah a hug, stroking her hair and holding her tight. "You poor thing baby, what could've caused them?"

"I don't know, Mom," Sarah said as tears started streaming down her face. "I'm scared."

Two years ago, when Sarah was eleven years old, she started to have nightmares. These nightmares were vivid like they were really happening. They were the scariest thing that any eleven-year-old would ever go through. Sometimes the nightmares would cause Sarah to have sleepless nights and sleep paralysis. She'd be awake as her nightmares would crowd around her and she couldn't do anything. She would be stuck in her own body. She went to the doctor and they dismissed her entirely, thinking she was just another kid with nightmares. These were different. They weren't nightmares but no doctor would look into it. They all dismissed her.

The nightmares finally stopped on their own about half a year ago. Sarah hadn't had one up until now. Sarah took a shower to clear her head, letting the hot steam run against her face as her head stayed empty. Not a thought ran through it as she blow-dried her hair, did her makeup, and got dressed for her grandparents' house.

By the time she showed up to her grandparents' house she had one goal, figuring out the town's history. In school they learned about other towns' history but never their own. Sarah has always been skeptical of this, but now with whatever was going on with her parents and the mayor, her skepticism grew.

She walked into her grandparents' house which was an old wooden house. Her parents dropped her off at the door; she waved and walked in the house. The house was dimly lit and smelled like freshly-baked cookies. Her grandmother was sitting on her chair reading a book. She was reading *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens. Her grandmother was always into older books; they gave her a sense of comfort.

"Grandma? Grandma? Where are you?" Sarah called.

"Sweetie? Sarah," her grandma stood up as she said, "I was wondering when you'd come."

"Hi Grandma," Sarah said as she hugged her grandma. Sarah sat down on the couch as her grandma sat on her rocking chair. They started speaking to each other, the regular how school was going or any cute guys? After just an hour of catching up, Sarah blurted out, "What's wrong with this town, Grandma?"

Sarah's grandma was confused at first, "What do you mean sweetie?"

"I mean, it all seems so perfect, but something seems off you know?"

"Oh sweetie," her grandma sighed. "You'll find out soon enough. Everything is perfect from afar but up close, there are cracks. Always. You'll know what I mean when the time comes."

Sarah was beyond confused, "But Grandma, what do you—" Sarah was interrupted by her parents walking in the house to pick her up. She didn't want to leave but her mom basically dragged her by the arm to go. Sarah grabbed a cookie from the coffee table and left. Her grandma smiled condescendingly and then the door closed. Sarah walked to the car and sat in the passenger seat.

She buckled her seatbelt, spending the rest of the car ride staring out the window and overthinking everything she had seen so far. Something was definitely wrong, but she couldn't place her finger on it.

When the car pulled into her driveway, she got out and headed for her room. However, on her way to the stairs, her father grabbed her by the arm and spun her around.

"Sarah, I don't know what you're up to, but you need to get it together," he said sternly.

"Dad what? Where is this even coming from? I haven't done anything," Sarah defended herself.

"You know what I'm talking about. Pull it together and stop questioning the ways of the town."

"How did you—"

"Everything happens for a reason, Sarah. Don't embarrass the family. You hear me?"

"Wait, Dad. How did you know?"

Sarah's dad was getting to the point of fury, "Sarah shut up! You're delusional okay! Get it together!" He slapped her across the face, "I have a reputation to uphold. If you embarrass me, you're off to boarding school." He stormed out of the house.

Sarah ran upstairs; her eyes filled with tears. She slammed her door shut and sat on the floor sobbing. She sat there for ten minutes before she looked out the window and saw that the wind stopped. That never happened, and when it did, it always meant something bad was going to happen, whether it was the weather or a sign from a god.

One month passed and after much anticipation, Sarah's first Harvest Festival arrived. In the town of Cedarbrook, people weren't able to attend the Harvest Festival until they were thirteen. It was banned. If they were caught they would be arrested and sent away to a state prison. The town was oddly strict about that rule. Once fifteen years ago, a kid who was twelve snuck in and has been in prison ever since. No one had seen or heard from him ever again.

Sarah woke up that morning excited. She walked to her closet and found her nicest jeans and cutest fall sweater. She combed her red hair and put on some Maybelline Baby Lips Chapstick. Cherry flavored to be exact. It had always been her favorite. She applied some mascara to her green eyes and touched up some blush on her pale, freckled skin. She threw on her white Chuck Taylors and headed downstairs. Her face was beaming with excitement. She ate her breakfast, a waffle with extra syrup.

And with that, she was out the door. She was set to meet her parents at the festival, so she walked by herself. She got there and gave the ticket people her ticket. As she handed them the ticket, she couldn't stop herself from smiling. She was almost there and once they let her in she started running around. She saw fair games

and then where everyone was gathered. She made her way through the crowd to her parents who were very smiley.

Fred, the mayor, took the stage as the audience cheered and clapped. He was in a nice suit, perfectly tailored which was odd for him because he was normally the type of guy to be in his hunting gear. He walked up to the podium with a box in his hand. Sarah recognized the box; it was the one from the floor. The green one with blue and pink daisies. Why did Fred have it? What did that box even mean to him?

"Ahem. Is this thing on? Check one, two, three. All right! Hello and welcome to the two-hundred and forty-second annual Cedarbrook Harvest Festival. Today I stand here before you on the very spot our town was founded and behind me The Wall of Blessed Protectors. This year is no different. Today we initiate the new generation of leaders into our community," Fred announced as he started his speech. His speech dragged on as he spoke about how the town would prosper and he hopes to expand it. Future plans and boring stuff.

Sarah's attention was immediately drawn back as a big box was brought on stage and set down next to the podium where Fred stood. He set the little green box down on the podium.

"The 1983 Blessed Protector is....." He dug his hand into the box. Sarah was confused. She had heard of The Wall of Blessed Protectors, but she never knew anything about how they were selected. She watched as he pulled a name out of the box. "Sarah Jones!"

Everything stopped. People were clapping, Sarah's parents were crying happy tears, and somewhere in the back Sarah's grandma shrieked. But Sarah didn't hear it. She went numb, she had no clue what was going on. The people around her started singing this weird chant, which sounded ancient. They enclosed her. One inch at a time. Backing her up until two big scary men with dark hair and empty eyes dragged Sarah on stage.

She snapped back to reality; she started screaming and crying. She fought back on the floor scrambling until the loose floorboard cut her leg. Blood was covering the floor and stained the garland that lay on the edge of the stage. Her necklace was ripped off her neck and placed in the green box.

All she could hear was, 'Eh uh eh uh na la hah.' The chant the entire town sung as she was sat into a chair. Her hands were tied down and her legs too. They lifted the chair up as the chanting grew louder. Sarah was screaming and sobbing for help. But everyone seemed to be under a trance, including her parents and her grandma. Everyone continued to sing, she looked into the crowd and saw Charlotte. She sobbed even harder as the chair was brought to the woods.

In the woods, Sarah endured endless hours of torture until eventually she died. Once she died, her name was engraved on The Wall of Blessed Protectors. Her parents didn't shed one sad tear, just happy and proud tears. Like this was a good thing, their only daughter dying from some messed up tradition.

The day after she died, school resumed, Charlotte was unbothered as if the memory of Sarah was wiped from her mind. The only reminder of Sarah was her necklace in the green box. But no one would find it, ever. Unless someone was brave enough to look.

...

It's now September of 1984. A new batch of thirteen-year-olds begin to decorate the town for the Harvest Festival. They are all blissfully unaware of the truth that lies under the floorboards and in the wind. Perfectly unaware of the horrors that occur on this stage every October. They hang wreaths, banners, and wrapped lights around trees. One girl specifically hangs the garland on the stage and sees Sarah's blood stains as a loose floorboard cuts her leg.

"What!"

The town of Cedarbrook has found its new protector.

Dear My Beloved Diary

by Samantha Gonzalez

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

The town Motsatt had always been divided; however, in recent years, the separation felt sharper, as if someone had carved a line straight through the center of a peaceful world, leaving a knife stabbed into its core. There were two sides that were divided by history, anger and old promises that barely any remembered. Even the air seemed split and cracked, heavy sometimes and sharp others, as if the town could not decide what it wanted to be. The arguments had grown louder since then. Heads turned down seeing the opposite side. Everyone said that their conflicts went back generations, but no one ever explained why or how. The town was in halves; the people of Styrkers ruled one side as the people of the Gleders stayed on the other. This town was locked out of society's path, taking its own twists and turns.

As time passed, arguments grew. Friends stopped meeting at the end of streets or in shops on the sidewalks. Families stopped speaking at the dinner tables to keep conflict out of the house. Even the smallest disagreements could turn into disaster, if not careful. Birthdays did not feel like celebrations, they felt like warnings, as if childhood was passing by and leaving soon. People grew up learning when to say the right words and which words could start a fight. Even children knew more about following a side rather than following a dream.

Voksera grew up following the regulations, listening to the horrid stories, and repeating them to peers. She learned the rules and followed them. Her family was torn in between the two sides, making the house only held together because of Voksera. Voksera was stuck in a whirlwind of thoughts and questions but never seemed to ask them out loud. Voksera used to write in her diary, mostly questions: Why do grown-ups hate so easily? How do they choose to hate over love? Why are we involved in this situation? Why do we have to choose a side? But as she continued asking questions, the diary stopped feeling like herself.

Håpa, Voksera's loving father, had left early one morning to meet with the council of the Gleders. Her mother, Makta, barely spoke that morning, as she slowly glided across the living room floor to give Voksera a small gift.

"Happy birthday, honey!" Makta said with a hint of excitement. Her smile felt fake as if there was a crack inside of her heart that was not there before.

Most birthdays started with cake; however, Voksera's special day started with questions. "Dear Diary, it's my birthday! How am I already thirteen? What surprises are waiting for me today? How do I become fake enough where no one can see my nerves from the outside? How can I conceal my hate and worry without others questioning me? Why am I scared for the choosing? How do I know when I'm ready? Which side do I pick? With love, Voksey."

Andi was wide awake, wagging his tail and kissing Voksera good morning. He had a toy with him that squeaked and squabbled every time she picked it up. This was Voksera's joy every morning.

As Voksera was getting ready for her big day, she wondered about the decision she had to make.

Her mom spoke before Voksera left, saying, "Honey, before you leave, remember that I love you so much and I will see you tonight for your big choosing! Have the best day at school!"

Outside, her best friend, Alena, was waiting with two steaming mugs of hot cocoa that she brought every morning. "You're finally thirteen!" she yelled with happiness as she handed the mug to Voksera.

"Ouch!" she said with a chuckle as she continued to burn her tongue on the sweet hot cocoa, "That's a great start for today."

They strolled together on the way to their school, discussing her choosing ceremony, especially. The words that Alena used felt safe and calming as she continued to speak in jokes. Her jokes were not like many others. They were corny, yet they always carried a darker, deeper meaning behind them. Overall, they were always funny and made Voksera laugh every time no matter how many times Alena had repeated them.

During school hours, the two would walk together to every class. They were known to travel by each other's sides. There was a bond between them that no one could ever recreate. They had been friends since the first grade. They knew everything about each other, even their darkest secrets. There was never a dull moment

between these two friends, until that day. Everything was odd on Voksera's birthday. She felt the queer presence of something unusual in the air.

To Voksera, the air always spoke the truth. The air would speak the tough and the beautiful, no matter what. That was how she could determine her day. But on her birthday, she felt a gloomy, dense shadow of air casting through the day, slapping her face as she walked against it. It did not feel right to her.

After the school day was over, Voksera went home alone since Alena got ill and left school early. The school day was unfortunately dull and brought not much joy even as it was Voksera's birthday.

"Dear Diary, It is March 8, 2030, still my birthday. Is Alena alright? I know it sounds crazy but, why is the air speaking negatively to me on my birthday? How can I change this day to get brighter? With love, Voksey."

As she was preparing for the night and the choosing, she focused on herself and her diary, writing questions before the ceremony. Her hand was shaking as she wrote the final question: Am I ready?

Håpa came home early that day. He was smiling more than usual. His smile was brighter than the sun, always making the most out of every moment he could. His wonders were nothing more than Voksera's. She always knew that her father and her could connect with their deep questions about life. Although his questions were more psychological than hers, she always asked what they meant and learned to understand the complex language that he spoke. He always spoke within riddles and metaphors rather than the simple human language that was constructed over time. She was challenged with his extended vocabulary but was never afraid of the challenge.

"How is my sun today, that is shining over the dark clouds in the deep rivers of the world's mind? I hope you are eager for tonight's ceremony. Another thing, I hope you have had the best birthday so far. Now, I will be on my way to get properly ready for dusk's gathering"

One hour later, the phone rang. The house was silent yet chaotic. Planning for the night's event took much work itself, but to get the birthday girl ready, was another challenge. The phone continuously rang until Håpa picked it up.

A few moments after, Håpa and Makta were found peacefully conversing in the master bedroom. This was one of the first times that Voksera saw them together and not fighting. Voksera walked in as Hakta was in tears. With many questions, she kept them all to herself at that moment as she knew that something dreadful had just happened.

"Dearest, I need you to understand me when I say this. It is about Alena," Håpa took a deep breath then continued, "The butterfly has flown too close to the sun. The butterfly is free. Voksey, I am so sorry, the choosing ceremony is cancelled due to this rare sighting of this very special butterfly."

Voksera froze as she had to take a moment to herself to comprehend what her father had just said. Then her thoughts began to show full expression. There were tears. She ran up to her bedroom and did not come out for the rest of the night.

"Dear Diary, Why did this happen? How did this happen? Where is Alena? I cannot even say her name without dropping a tear onto this beloved book. What will happen next? How can I fix this? With many tears and much love, Voksey."

The pain that lived in that house for many days was pain that their family never predicted would occur. The tension between the house was sealed and secured though the loss of Alena was never brought about afterwards. The pain was all throughout the house, but Voksera felt the worst. She was hit with a storm of many emotions overflowing a dark bucket of bricks. Her emotions could not be controlled. There was no diary entry for a week.

"Dear diary, it is March 15, 2030. She is actually dead. How?"

As the days passed, so did Voksera's hope for a brighter future. Her future felt gone or misplaced. The heart and soul of Alena was gone forever, and there was no way to bring it back.

As her father would say, "The butterfly has flown far away. It is free."

Summer turned into fall as the leaves shook with a breeze and turned dull and brown, the wind picked up and began to whistle once in a while, and for Voksera, this was a new school year. The eighth grade had just begun and without her best friend by her side, she was stuck with making new friends and decisions that year.

The days were found to be long for Voksera. As time continued without Alena, Voksera had to learn to continue as well. She powered through her dry and empty summer with her dog, Andi, by her side. Andi was always there for her and loved to travel alongside Voksera. It was almost as if Alena was still there. Andi always knew when Voksera was changing feelings and made sure to always be there for her when that happened.

As the wind picked up, so did Voksera's harsh family discussions. The power of one's words was never meant to hurt another, until they did. Voksera kept her emotions to her diary and only her diary; however, as she grew older and wiser, she decided to use her words for good.

One day, as Voksera came home from school, she observed that Håpa and Makta were using strong words, stronger than before, to discuss a specific topic that Voksera was not planning on hearing for a while. The topic of the choosing ceremony for Voksera was ready to be prepared. As Voksera heard these terrifying words, she remembered the last time she was going to have a choosing ceremony.

"I feel that it is right for the child to know her place. She belongs with both of us, but there is only one true group she belongs to. I want to know which group that is without having to assume that she is with both of us. I will prove all that she belongs with my tribe, the Strykers. She has the power to wake up and realize what world she is living in. She can't hide in her room for much longer," Makta explained to Håpa.

"As the baby bird slowly becomes a bird of its own, maybe it is for the good that the baby does not know whether she is a seagull or a hawk or a pelican or a penguin. It might be for the best that her family birds do not know either. Since one has to grow up eventually, let's let her figure that path out for herself," explained Håpa.

Voksera was now concerned with the choosing ceremony to come and began to write.

"Dear Diary, it is only October 13, 2030. How can this year go by faster? How can I leave this family? What did I do to this family to cause so much commotion? I need a plan. With love, Voksey."

One evening, as the sun dipped low and painted the water gold, Voksera walked to the lake near her house with Andi following beside her. The air felt different around this time of the year; lighter, but heavy at the same time. Andi was pawing at the reflection of the golden sun in the water. His ripples showed no fear of the water as they continued to move with the crooked pattern created by Andi.

Voksera sat at the edge and hugged her knees. For so long, she had been waiting, waiting for Alena to come back, waiting for the pain to leave her soul, waiting for someone to tell her the right path to choose, but no one came. And suddenly, she realized that no one needed to.

She stood up and spotted a butterfly drift past her. Its wings were pale and shaking against the wind. Voksera held her breath, trying not to make a sound, as the peaceful butterfly rose higher and higher until it reached the sun and disappeared into the sky.

"The butterfly is free," she whispered to herself, repeating her father's words. This time they did not hurt.

Andi barked softly at her as he waddled his way through the bushes, resting his gentle head on her lap that was now sitting on a nearby log. Voksera smiled a bit and for the first time, she felt peace. As she gazed into the water, reflecting off of the sky, she felt the peace that cut through the sharp wind and smoothed out Andi's ripples on the water. This peace was rarely found in Motsatt. She never felt this way before.

That night, Voksera packed a light bag. No ceremony, no expectations, just the quiet promise of a life she would choose for herself was ahead. With Andi by her side, she stepped out of her house, leaving some memories behind, and most memories contained inside her beloved diary. She stepped forward into the unknown, feeling the ache of loss still present, but no longer controlling her. She was alone, but free.

By the time the sun slipped behind the hills of Motsatt, Voksera no longer felt like she was running away. The past trailed behind her like a shadow at dusk, long, thin and finally harmless. Each step forward loosened Voksera's fear until it became nothing more than a memory of darkness, proving that light had existed all along.

All this time, while others were playing pretend she was real. She never thought for a second that they were real too. As turning thirteen had put an effect on her life, she was challenged with mysteries. Even she, herself, started to be convinced that she did not know whether *she* was real or fake. One question started forming: Is reality fake or faking it reality? This question of hers was kept sacred in the back of her mind for many days.

As the days grew darker, so did her thoughts. She went down a rabbit hole of wonders that she was worried she would never reach the end of. These wonders of hers got denser as she grew older. She decided to be mature with her wonders rather than play around with them. She would write down every question she had, creating a short story full of memories and moments that could last forever. She wondered many wonders from what she ate in a day to why hate and love still existed, but there was only one main question in her diary: Did Alena ever get to tell her story?

The road did not promise answers. It only offered the strength to continue, and to Voksera, that was enough. The trees whispered and explained that their roots could break and still grow again. The wind changed, along with the colors of the leaves and the flowers in the fields. Voksera listened every time and learned to appreciate the noises from the trees and the help from the wind, which was now on her side, leading her to the brighter future that she always looked for.

When night fell, Voksera and Andi reached a place where the stars seemed closer. They were scattered across the dark sky, like light, shiny silver seeds planted into a field of wet dirt. The air felt different there. It was cleaner, kinder, and felt as if the world had taken a deep breath. Night fell and Andi curled up beside her, warm and steady, a living reminder that loyalty never asked for perfection, only presence. Voksera looked upward, reminding herself of the many ripples created, of the translucent butterfly, and all of the versions of herself she had been. None were wasted. Each one helped to carry her there.

As dawn began to rise in this new place, Voksera stood taller than she ever had before. The wind did not push her down or back; it lifted her. And with Andi by her side, she stepped forward one more time, not with tears, not with fear, not broken, nor lost, but with power and courage to continue. Together they entered a world that did not know her past, it only knew the strength she had inside of her that she carried into it.

She was no longer inside of a dense and dark house. She was no longer stuck in her bedroom all night asking questions to herself. She was no longer walking the long road to school without Alena. She was no longer alone in the dark. She was outside in the light sunshine and free.

“Dear Diary, it is September 10, 2031. It has been over a year since Alena left. Happy World Suicide Prevention Day! I’m in a pool of my own tears right now. I’m still not sure how to fully function without her here. I miss her. One question for today: Will it ever go back to normal? With love and hope for all who have gone through my pain with me, beside me, or alone, Voksera.”

Years later, Voksera went back to her childhood home. She was found flipping through the dusty pages in her diary, reading them like a short story would, except they were longer; they had turned into a novel of questions. She came along a page that seemed ripped out of her diary or found at a craft store. This page was folded neatly into the back of her book. This strange paper was not something that Alena would do. Curiosity took over as she unfolded the fragile paper to find something different:

“Dear Diary,

It is March 8, 2030, and I am stuck. I am trapped. I am alone. I am alone in this battle too strong for myself to handle. I feel like a dog that is stuck in a shelter by itself. I feel like a prisoner of my own jail. I can’t feel anything anymore. I look around this beautiful home that was once mine as well and think to myself about the decision I have to make. Along with many other decisions, this is the most important one. I can’t do this anymore. I am crying because of how much love I have in me, but I cannot show it for anyone, for my fears have taken over my heart. I’m sorry, I just cannot be fixed. No matter how hard I try to be normal and level up, it always comes back worse and worse. This feeling of mine is no one’s fault but my own. No one can fix me but myself, but I feel eaten up inside and there is no more trying for me. I love you all so much. I love Ryan, Daddy, Mommy, Mia, Misty and all of my friends at school. I love you most. Take care of everyone for me please. And take care of yourself. Please go and find that brighter future of yours, because I know that it is looking for you too. Thank you for everything but I think my butterfly needs to be let out of its cage. I love you so much, Voksey.

Sincerely,

Alena Sommerfugl.”

The Move

by Silvana Holschneider Gamboa

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

We arrived at the restaurant on a cloudy Sunday, the kind where the rain never seems to stop, where time freezes as you watch the palm trees sway under the downpour. My big glasses rested on my nose, attempting to hide the pain in my eyes. We sat in the farthest booth where no one could see us. When I took off the glasses, Petra’s eyes widened. My face was red and puffy from crying.

“He’s gone,” I murmured.

“Who?” she asked, concerned and tightening her expression.

“Well... not yet. But I’m just realizing now that graduation is in one week. In one week, I’ll become an only child. In one week, I’ll have to watch my favorite person pack up everything and leave to start his own life.” My voice wavered between frustration and sadness.

"Silvana, he'll be back before you know it! Plus, you'll see him on breaks," Petra nudged my shoulder gently. "Instead of being sad he's leaving, look at the bright side. Think about how hard Allan worked to get into such a good school!" I lifted my gaze to her through the roof of my eyes. "I don't know how I'm supposed to be happy for him when I can't imagine going to school without him—let alone not live in the same house."

The rest of the week drifted by like a blurry dream. I tried to avoid Allan as much as possible, even in my own home. Everything led up to Saturday: graduation day. The day moved faster than I expected, like a movie trailer playing in fast-forward. I woke up, got dressed, and rode to the high school. That's when the thoughts began.

I thought about our house—the one that once was filled with cheer and laughter, soon to become quiet and gray. We grew up together under one roof. We were four siblings who annoyed each other, helped each other, sometimes even hated each other, but never stopped loving one another. Time flew by, never warning how little we had left.

I miss the dreadful Sunday afternoons where we wore itchy, elegant clothes to church, only to eat afterward at a restaurant where none of us could pronounce the menu. I miss being forced to cancel plans so we could "spend time as a family." All that happiness feels like it slipped through my fingers, leaving only gray memories behind.

When Max left, I didn't realize how large the hole would be. The serenity of the house vanished. Years passed, laughter returned, Sundays were still dreadful. Then Alex left, taking with her the kind of maternal comfort only she could give. Allan leaving meant I would be completely alone—and the house would feel too big without the sound of our shared laughter echoing through the hallways.

A roar of claps snapped me back into the present. I had drifted into memories. I heard the name: "Allan Gabriel Holschneider Gamboa."

Suddenly, I was on my feet, lifted by instinct. Around me, a mob of people cheered for my brother. My mother's tears rolled softly down her cheeks. My father's face glowed with pride. Alex and Max smiled wide. Even people I didn't recognize applauded. A warmth rose inside me, swelling so fast it almost hurt. I screamed his name and cheered as loud as I could. My eyes locked onto Allan as he received his diploma, chin held high. The sadness inside me softened, shaping itself into something lighter than pride. Hope for his future.

"Amen," my father cleared his throat. "Today is a very special day. Today my son—our Allan becomes a man. Allan, the one who brings light to our darkest days. Allan, who never fails to make others laugh. His talents, perseverance, and intelligence show in everything he does. Today we proudly announce that Allan Holschneider Gamboa has been accepted into one of the best Ivy League schools in Boston - Brown!" He folded his hands and clapped loudly.

Later that afternoon at home we all sat around the dinner table, the same table where every Thanksgiving dinner was spent, where we would laugh so loud the neighbors would complain.

"Tomorrow is Allan's last Sunday with us," said my mother with a look of sorrow in her face.

"Let's spend it like we used to, together," said Allan

"I agree, we haven't eaten all six of us together since, well since, I don't remember," observed my father as he shook his head letting out a soft laugh.

I glanced around the dinner table. Everyone was quiet for a moment, as if we were all trying to savor the same memory all at once. I felt the room smaller, warmer, and cozy, like it used to when we were all younger. As if nothing's changed.

The room fell quiet, warm, almost small like it used to feel when we were younger. The next morning, we found ourselves in the kitchen, sitting at the same round table in the same formation we'd chosen as kids. My mother watched us from the corner, eyes shining.

"So," I said, forcing a bit of a smile, "what's first on our list today? Pancakes, church, a walk? Someone choose something before Mom starts crying!"

My mother let out a breathy chuckle. "I'm not crying," she claimed, wiping the crevice of her eye before turning away. Allan rested back in his chair. "Let's just spend time together. That's what I want before I go." That simple sentence made our day seem heavier, more precious.

My father was the first to stand up. Clapping his hands together to break the sadness and silence floating in the air. "Alrighty then! If this is our last Holschneider Sunday all together we will start the day with my favorite meal, breakfast!"

"Oh sweetie, please don't try and experiment anything in the kitchen again," said my mother with a look of concern.

"Too late! The tradition lives on, today we're trying an omelet!" We followed him into the pantry like ducklings. The kitchen is filled with eggs, flour, vegetables, and spices. Mom sighed at the mess but let him continue, smiling faintly.

Alex grabbed a bowl and nudged Allan in the arm, "Hey remember when we thought it would be fun to make breakfast for them and instead ended up setting off the smoke alarm?"

He let out a cackle, "We? You set off the alarm. I was simply an innocent bystander in this situation."

"You suggested we used the stove without asking, and you were holding the pan, doesn't seem very innocent to me," said Alex with her left eyebrow raised.

"You handed me that pan!" exclaimed Allan defending his case.

Max just laughed, "Nothing changes between you two."

For the slightest moment, deep down in my stomach it didn't feel like tomorrow was going to rob me from everything. It felt paused, allowing us to breathe, allowing us to be a family right before everything shifts.

Dad flopped the first doubtful omelet onto a plate. "Breakfast is now served! Nobody judge it, this is a very emotional moment."

Allan slowly picked up the fork. "If I can endure this experiment of a meal, I can endure college." We all laughed aloud at his joke, like always. The sound of our laughter filled the four kitchen walls in such a way I missed dearly.

The rest of the day was simple but unforgettable movies, board games, and dinner together. Small things, but everything to us. We did not want the day to end. The day ending meant that Allan would move 1,502 miles away. The day ending meant that I would be all alone by Monday. That I would have to walk around this house, my house, looking at all the old photographs on the walls.

"This is the final boarding call for American Airlines Flight 3 to Boston, Massachusetts..." Allan tightened his grip on the handle of his suitcase as his eyes flickered at the gate, then back to us. Max, Alex, my parents, then me. As is he was attempting to memorize the moments before letting it slip away. My mother's eyes were already watery. My father cleared his throat trying to conceal he was doing the same. Alex took a deep breath and stepped forward first. "You'll do great," she said as she pulled him into a bear hug that seemed to last forever. "Just... Don't forget to call me, okay? And don't stay up all night partying. You know you also have to work hard."

Max patted him on the shoulder. "Don't listen to her. College is also about having fun. On a real note though, show Boston how being a Holschneiders is. Remember. "Everything's *Better in Boston*," he said as he hugged him. Dad stepped in. "Go make us proud, son." Mom hugged him last, holding on like she could keep him a little longer. "Take care of yourself. And please eat something healthy once in a while."

Allan slowly pivoted leaving only me. For a brief second neither of us spoke. The noise in the loud, reckless airport softened around us like a whisper. It was only us.

"So, you're really leaving," I managed to say, swallowing back tears.

"I know." He bent down a little, so we were eye level. "It's not like I'm disappearing; you can't text me whenever." He pulled me in for one last hug, and I held on tight and closed my eyes. I replayed in my head or best memories as he hugged me. All the road trips, hurrying down on Christmas mornings, slow, cold, school mornings, and even those dreadful Sundays. After many years that house will be empty, and I will miss those dreadful Sundays that were not so long ago, four siblings of all different ages, living in harmony.

Allan finally picked up his suitcase. He took a step toward the gate, then another, still facing us, giving a small wave. His smile was brave, but I could tell through his eyes he didn't want to turn around just yet.

"We'll see you soon!" Alex shouted.

"Don't forget us!" I called.

Allan turned sound and pointed at me. "Never." Then he turned and walked toward the gate, swallowed up by the line of passengers and the bright airport lights.

For a few moments, we all stayed still. It felt like the world around me had shifted. I felt a hand on my shoulder, "Let's go home," said my father as he turned away.

As we walked away from the gate, I kept glancing back, expecting Allan to come running after us. He didn't. And somehow, that's when it really hit me. My big brother was on his way to the world, and the world was waiting for him.

Light of the Lantern

by Felipe Junqueira

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

It was a dark, grey, gloomy morning in the town of Artsville. Footprints from the rain boots Sophia Hart wore left behind tracks on the wet sidewalk. It felt like a sprinkler, spraying Sophia every time a car sped by on the wet asphalt. As she still could not think of anything, Sophia hoped this blockage would go away. As she walked through town, she saw plants, nothing. She saw houses and apartment buildings, nothing. A sense of rage filled her body like little butterflies. From past experiences, her walks always helped her think of new ideas. When she walked, she seemed to enter a creative flow state, where all her thoughts and ideas came to life through her art works. This time, it is not working for her. She just cannot seem to think. It is hard to explain into words, she pondered, it is really something you can only understand with experience. As she continued walking forward, Sophia could see a colossal, orange sign. She was too far away from it to read what it said, so she kept walking towards it. As she got closer, she read in big, bold letters, "Outdoor Express; Artsville's best store for outdoors!" Sophia had no interest in camping or outdoor activities, but she just felt so apathetic, and frustrated, that she decided to go. She walked in agony to the store, and eventually she arrived. The door opened slowly, and a high-pitched bell rang.

"Hello," yelled a lady as soon as Sophia walked in the store, "welcome to Outdoor Express!"

"Tha...thank you," Sophia replied softly. She was surprised by the energetic entrance.

"If there is anything I can help you with," exclaimed the lady, "please let me know!"

Sophia nodded and began to look around the store. She could feel the women's presence behind her, as the lady watched her carefully.

"Have you checked our newest lantern model?" the lady continued. Before Sophia could even open her mouth, the lady interrupted her, "I highly recommend you buy the Express *Premium* Lantern if you like camping, which lasts much longer than our other model because of its..."

"Okay," Sophia signed in annoyance, "I will buy it, just get me one and I will pay for it up front."

A big smile filled the lady's face, "Great, I will get that ready for you in two minutes!"

Sophia rolled her eyes as the lady went to the back of the store to get the lantern. Sophia started to contemplate her decision, thinking to herself, why would I ever buy that stupid lantern? At least I get a break from this irritating woman, she continued to think to herself, but why am I so unlucky that when I want a small break to think of things, a random saleswoman convinces me to buy something that has *no benefit to me* at all.

"That will be \$14.99 including tax," the lady chirped with the lantern in her hand, "please tap to pay or swipe your credit card over here."

Sophia took her credit card to where the lady pointed and swiped it.

"Have a great rest of your day!" shouted the lady.

"Thank you, you too!" smiled Sophia. As she turned her back facing the lady, she mumbled, "Thank goodness I am out of there."

As the little doorbell rang, Sophia left the store to a glistening sun, finally starting to poach through the clouds. She started walking back to her house, with her lantern in her hand. As she looked around her surroundings, she thought about a good idea. A big smile appeared on her face, and she felt it on her chest. She knew exactly what her new piece was going to be. Her rainboots were left behind on the sidewalk, and Sophia dashed back home to bring her idea to life. When she was one block away, a random guy made eye contact with her. She wondered who it was and even asked herself if that guy was even addressing her. She stopped running and started walking again. The man came closer to her, wearing a navy blue striped, three-piece suit. She became certain that this man was looking to talk to her.

"Good evening Ms. Hart," the man said in a soothing, masculine voice, "my name is Harvey, and I am a big fan of your work."

Sophia's smile grew bigger, "thank you so much!"

"Of course," Harvey replied, "but I have a question for you if you do not mind. Why haven't you published a single piece for the last year and a half?"

"I have been working on an amazing piece with a car zooming through a wet street, and water is spraying everywhere," described Sophia, "it looks great now."

"Wow, that is wonderful to hear," Harvey replied, "I am hosting Artville's first international art show, and I would love to display your new piece at the show tomorrow. Would you be willing to do that?"

"Yeahh umm," Sophia's heart almost slipped out of her own mouth as nerves filled her body, "Yes I can do that."

"Great!" Harvey exclaimed as he slipped her a card, "here is my business card with my contact and information. Please send me a message sometime today!"

"Will do," replied Sophia, "good to meet you."

Sophia smiled and waved, and as Harvey drove away in his all-black supercar, she bolted back to her apartment. She burst into the room, flung her backpack with her new lantern onto the couch and rushed straight to her art supplies. She did not waste a second. She pulled her materials together and settled into her workspace. With quick, steady, motions, she dipped her brush into the paint and began filling the blank canvas. Each stroke grew more confident as she lost track of time, layering colors and wiping her hands on her apron. Little by little the piece started to come alive, and before she knew it her piece was done. Sophia put the painting outside on her balcony, and in her luck, the sun was finally shining bright through the clouds. Sophia sent a message to Harvey on her cellphone and waited until the painting dried down. As the sun started coming down, a beautiful sunset was setting. Sophia went outside her balcony and put her arms over the glass barrier. She looked out peacefully, at the cars zooming by the pedestrians walking, and the little buildings and houses out in the distance. She had a moment of reflection. She thought to herself, I am starting to think this lantern is giving me luck. Every time I have it, good things come my way, and I think I should take it to the art show. As the sunset came to an end, Sophia took her painting and left it on a big stand in her living room.

She slipped under the covers, and let sleep pull her in. Hours later, the light of morning nudged her awake. It is the big day, she thought to herself. She walks out of her room into the living room, and she sees the painting on the stand alongside her lantern. She was ready for the night. A gorgeous black dress wrapped around her body, and she smelled like roses and vanilla. She heard a knock on her apartment door, as she walked over to open it. Two men, sent by Harvey, came in to pick up her painting and bring it to the art show. As she saw her meticulous art piece leave her apartment door, she had one thing left to do. As Sophia reached for the lantern, her fingers brushed it, just for a second, before it slipped from her grip and crashed to the floor; the sound of broken glass echoed through the room. Her jaw dropped, almost to the floor. She put her hand over her face and then stared down at the broken glass next to her feet in disbelief. She worried, and tried to find a solution, but there wasn't anything she could do. The elevator dinged, as Sophia made her way down with only her purse in hand. Sounds of large crowds were heard, and Sophia knew she was in the right place. She was anxious to not have her lantern. She stood there, in the middle of the sidewalk imagining in her head what would happen to her if she got stuck. What would she do? What would people say? How would it affect her? *What am I going to do?* Thoughts and fake scenarios raced through her head. At one point, she knew she could not do anything about it, and she took a deep breath, and walked into the room.

"Good evening Ms. Hart," Harvey welcomed her, "Your painting has been the biggest success of the night!"

Sophia could not believe it. She was quite literally speechless. She stood in front of Harvey, just looking at him. Not saying a word. Harvey started looking at her weird.

"Are umm...you ok Ms. Hart? Harvey questioned.

Sophia ran into his arms and gave him the warmest hug over joy and relief. Harvey wrapped his arms around her.

"Thank you so much Harvey," Sophia said as she tried to hold her tears back, "that means the world to me."

Harvey looked her straight in the eye, "no, thank *you* Ms. Hart."

The night went on, and Ms. Hart was feeling much better than before. Now, it was time for the auction for her painting. The auction started, and nerves filled Sophia's body again.

The auction guy announced, "100 thousand dollars, going once...going twice..."

"1 million dollars!" a young boy shouted from the back of the room. Heads turned back at him, and a sense of shock filled the room, including Sophia. The kid who bought the painting was 18 years old, and no one expected him to buy such a thing.

Once again the auction guy announced, "going once...going twice...going three times...sold!"

Sophia had never had one of her paintings sell for nearly that much. She tried to hold it back, but her emotions got the best of her. She started to ball her eyes out, in pure happiness and joy. She jolted across the room to talk to the young man.

"Thank you so much sir it means the world to me," Sophia gushed.

"Of course, Ms. Hart," the young man responded, "I have been a big fan of your work, and creating a phenomenal artwork of this kind does not come with luck. I am the only one who got lucky to be able to buy it."

The words of this young man resonated with Sophia. They just stuck with her. It made her think about not just what occurred, but *how* it happened. After saying goodbye to everyone, Sophia got into a cab to head back to her apartment. As the car started driving, Sophia looked out of the window and thought. She saw the bright night lights in the small town of Artsville. She then reflected on her night. Sophia thought extra hard about what the man told her. And she realized it was true. It was not the lantern that gave her luck, it gave her *confidence*. She arrived home, and started at the broken glass, still put in the same place as before. She was planning on fixing it, but she collected the different pieces and threw it all away. In the end, it was confidence, and self-belief combined with her hard work that achieved the best results for her.

Hope

by Aliyah Zarah Kamenetzky

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

As the breeze of the fresh morning air filled the room, along with the smell of the challah baking in the oven, a new sound filled the room as well. The sound of a girl humming to herself. Her name was Johannah. She sat on the windowsill, looking out into the garden. The sunlight filled the room, warming her face. It was a quiet, relaxing morning, until she heard a new noise. A noise she recognized all too well. The sound of yelling, pushing, and panic.

"Stop! Please! Let me get my children! Please!" a panicked voice screamed.

It was the voice of her neighbor Mrs. Eliena.

"Move! We gave you time to get your things Jew, now get up and move before I kick you!" the voice of a Gestapo officer said.

The noise that followed was the sound of more screaming and pushing, something falling on the floor, and the sound of a car door slamming shut. Then, all was quiet. Johannah sat there, shaking with fear, unable to move, yell, or open her eyes. She was scared, and fear was the Nazis ultimate weapon. As the commotion, and fear died down, she sat upright again, looking at a sunflower. She had planted it the year before, and struggled to grow it, but eventually, it sprouted. Every time she looked at the sunflower it gave her hope. The quietness lasted only a few minutes until there was another pounding at the door. This time, she knew who they were. She ran and hid underneath her bed. When nobody opened that door, they barged in. They rushed through the house turning it upside down and grabbed her parents and little brother.

"Please stop! Give me my child please!" Her mother shouted.

"Mama!" "Ich habe Angst!" Her brother yelled.

"Move! If you don't get up and walk I will hit you with my gun! Move now!" A German soldier barked.

Johannah laid there, shivering. Fear crawled upon her, and death lurked near. Every sound made her flinch. Every shadow, a threat. She laid there for hours. She didn't move, and she didn't cry. She just laid there. Eyes open and alert, unable to make a sound. At last, she moved. She slowly crept out from under the bed, lurking in the shadows. Her every step and breath was careful and calculated. She dared not to move without purpose or mistake. She looked out from behind the corner and saw that nobody was there. As she looked out to the window, the sunflower, seconds ago bright and shimmering, blossoming with life, was now withered and grey, as if death itself had sucked the life out of it. She thought it was strange, but she had no time to worry about such things. She was now an orphaned Jew. Alone and vulnerable. An easy target for the Nazis.

She knew that she would soon become a target. Johannah decided that she would leave the next day to Switzerland by train, where she had a distant cousin. There she would be safe from the Nazis until the war was over. Once it finished, she decided she would go back to her home in Germany and find her parents and little

brother. As she packed, she kept thinking about where the Gestapo had taken her parents and brother, and what was going to happen to them. She packed clothes, pictures of her family, a journal, coloring pencils, food, and money. By nightfall, she was packed and ready. She decided to sleep outside in her little tent, to escape the Gestapo, in case they decided to come back for her that night. She took her suitcase and left the front door open. She looked around one last time to say goodbye to her childhood home. She then headed for the door to the garden where she slept that night.

“Open up! We know you are here, little girl. Come outside and present yourself to the Gestapo like a true little Nazi, unless you aren’t a Nazi,” A German Gestapo officer barked.

Johannah became frozen. Her plans to escape and run to the train station were obliterated in a second. She couldn’t move. She tried, she really did, but she just couldn’t. She was too scared. That familiar feeling of fear hugged her tight again, and this time, she couldn’t free herself from it. As the German officers spoke, she smelled death coming from their mouth. Every word, a death sentence trying to seal her fate. She didn’t and couldn’t move. Next thing she knew, the Gestapo officers grabbed her from her tent and dragged her outside. She didn’t fight. She didn’t resist. Her gaze still empty just stared, as if her soul had left her body. As she stared blankly, an officer caught her gaze. He was young, and evil, his eyes filled with hate. She thought that he couldn’t have been older than 18 years old. She wondered, why would someone so young choose to do this.

She was lifted into a dark, empty, truck and driven away. The truck was stuffy and smelled like death. Death lingered down her spine. Death crawled up her shoulder and hugged her body. Then a voice came. A voice that was strange and weak.

“Hi. My name is David. If you were wondering, we are being driven to a train station. I don’t know what they will do with us after. I just hope my family is okay, and that I will survive this war,” said the strange voice.

Johannah didn’t answer. She was still in a state of shock. She just looked forward into the dark abyss. After what felt like hours, the truck slammed to a stop. She tumbled forward and hit the floor hard. As she slowly lifted herself up, she felt blood dripping from her cheek. A thin piece of wood had punctured her cheek, creating a bloody line. As she wanted to touch it, the door was opened. She was suddenly grabbed from her neck and lifted up out of the truck. As she was dangling from an arm, she saw the person’s face. It was the same young Gestapo officer she had seen when she was taken from her home. His grip tightened around her neck, his finger pressing into her skin. Then he let go. She fell hard. This time, she stayed there. She didn’t get up. It seemed as though the fire that had once enlightened the will to fight back had been distinguished. David, the man in the truck, picked her up and helped her stand. She walked near him, and together, they made their way through the crowd and were forced to board a cattle car. The odor of body fluids, vomit, defecation, and death hit Johannah like a slap in the face. She tried to find a place to sit down, but there was none. There were at least 100 people in the car, and everyone was shoulder to shoulder. As the whistle blew, the cattle car started rolling, and they were off.

Johannah had many questions, “Where are we going? Will I ever see my family again? How long will we be stuck in this cattle car? Will we get food and water? Will we have to work for the Nazis?”

No matter how much she wondered and asked, no one had an answer. They were trapped in the cattle car for days. They rarely received fresh air and water, and they were given no food. The cattle car was hot and stuffy during the day, and cold and dark during the night. They were unable to move at all, and most had to stay standing for the entirety of the trip, as only the old, ill, and disabled were allowed to sit and lie down in the small space that was cleared. At last, the cattle car came to a stop. Everyone was nervous for what would happen next. Johannah tried to find out their location by looking through a small crevasse between two pieces of thin, brittle wood. She couldn’t see anything through the crevasse except for grass and trees. She assumed that they were in a forest, and thought to herself, why on earth would the Nazis bring me and other Jews to a forest.

As the door was opened, and they breathed fresh air as they stepped out, she saw a sign that said, “Buchenwald Camp.”

As she read the sign, she knew that she had landed in a concentration camp. Buchenwald was one of the many concentration camps the Nazis had created, meaning that there was a slim chance that she would reunite with her family here. As she stood there, waiting in the cold and dry air, surrounded by snow, she shivered and attempted to keep warm by huddling close to others. Soon after, she was separated from David by a Nazi officer at the entrance.

Johannah was terrified and began crying when a young woman nudged her and said, “Stop crying. Crying makes you weaker, and the Nazis stronger. They want you to cry, to give up, and to bow to them, but don’t. As soon as you bow to them, give up, and cry, they have won. Never give up and stop fighting. As long as you do these two things, the Nazis will never win.”

Johannah obeyed and continued to walk forward, without shedding a tear. She stayed close to this strange, young woman, and learned her name soon after. Her name was Miriam. She was strong both physically and mentally and became a kind of mother figure to Johannah later on. Johannah wouldn't know how much Miriam meant to her until she left, but one thing was for sure, she loved and cared for her. Miriam and Johannah made their way further into the camp, and on the way passed several smoke chambers. Johannah did not know what horrors awaited Jews inside those smoke chambers. To her, the chambers just looked like large cook houses.

"Miriam, what are those large chambers with smoke coming out of them, and why are there people being escorted inside them?" Johannah asked fearfully.

"Those are.....Those are.....Ummm, warmer shelter. Yes, warmer shelters they are. They keep cold people warm," Miriam said, unwilling to share the truth about those 'warmer shelters' to Johannah.

"Can I go in then? I am very cold," Johannah replied innocently, unaware of the true nature of the 'warmer shelters.'

"No! Those are for very, very cold people. Plus, we are heading inside. Come, and hurry up. Stay close to me," Miriam replied, still trying to protect the truth from Johannah. Although Miriam was lying, she knew that it was best to keep Johannah from the truth, as to avoid making her more scared.

As they walked through the camp, they met eyes with prisoners that were there long before them. They were all as thin as skeletons, and had dark, dark eyebags, and shredded hands. Their bodies were worn and tired, and their faces, hopeless. They all stared blankly, not having the strength to meet Johannah's and Miriam's eyes. Johannah became terrified and ran to Miriam for comfort; however, Miriam was as terrified as she was and was unable to shield her from the truth. They continued to walk through the camp, until they were escorted to a building. The building was grey and smelled like blood. They walked through the doors and were escorted to an empty room that had nothing but a table and a chair where a man sat. In his hand, he held a strange metal stick, and next to him was a small fire bowl. He called up the first person. The person was forcefully dragged over by two officers and was then restrained. Her arm was placed on the table. The man in the chair grabbed metal letters and attached them to the stick. He then placed it into the fire bowl, until it turned red, and then pressed it down hard onto the restrained woman's arm. She let out an agonizing scream unlike anything Johannah had heard before. After a few seconds, the metal letters were released from her skin, and she was dragged away to another room. After Johannah experienced the metal letters, she was taken to the same room as the first lady. There, her hair was shaved off, and after, she was assigned a building. Miriam and she were both assigned the same building, so they walked over there together. When they entered, the smell of defecation, and more hit them. It was stuffy, dark, and crowded, just like the cattle car had been. They squeezed their way over to an empty bunk bed and sat down.

"Miriam, how long will we be here?" Johannah asked with a defeated voice.

"I don't know. It could be hours, days, weeks, months, or even years. There is no way of knowing." Miriam replied, clearly exhausted from the tiring journey.

Three years passed since she arrived at "Buchenwald Camp" as a scared little girl. She was 16 now, and 13 when she arrived. It was summer now, and the sun warmed Johannah's torn and worn body. She remembered what it felt like to wake up and sit on the windowsill, overlooking her garden, while the sun warmed her back. She wished she could go back home and see her family again. She wished she could hear the voice of her mother, father, and brother. While she was daydreaming, she heard Miriam scream.

"What is it, Miriam? Are you okay? What happened, tell me now!" Johannah said while running over.

"The list...You...The list..." Miriam managed to say, out of her shocked state.

"Miriam make sense, please. What about me and the list?" Johannah asked worryingly.

"Your name is on the list!" Miriam managed to say finally.

Johannah couldn't believe it; yet, in bold, black ink there it was. Her name, Johannah Friedman, 16 years of age, June 10, Auschwitz.

"June 10! Auschwitz!" Johannah was able to say from her shocked state. She knew very well what happened to people at Auschwitz.

"Today is June 8th. I have one day here. One day," Johannah said defeatedly.

"Johannah. Please, please. I can't live without you. Don't leave me. I need you, and if you go, then we will never see each other again. You will never live to the end of the war. Please!" Miriam said tearfully.

Johannah sat there holding Miriam in her arms and cried silently. She knew what awaited her at Auschwitz, and she knew she had to go. She couldn't stay, no matter how much she wanted to. She thought to herself, how sick, inhumane, and cruel can people be to do this to us Jews. What did we ever do? Why us? She

couldn't come up with an answer. The next day, Johannah packed up her things, which were just a ragged and dirty jacket, a crumb of bread, a picture of her family, a menorah, a prayer book, and a dress and shoes she had worn at home to synagogue.

"Everyone whose name is on the list, get on the train now! Get up you filthy Jews! Get up, go!" A Nazi officer screamed.

As Johannah walked past him, he spat on her and kicked her. She fell to the floor. This time, she got up. She got up and looked the man in the eye.

"Stay down!" The Nazi officer warned her. "Stay down if you don't want to get shot!" The Nazi officer warned her again.

Johannah didn't go down. She stood there, waiting. She looked him in the eye one last time and headed for the train. She wasn't going to give up, no matter how much the Nazi's wanted her to, and she wasn't going to let them break her spirit, despite their beyond awful conditions and treatment. As she entered the cattle car, it reminded her of her trip to "Buchenwald Camp," as it was just as crowded, smelly, and stuffy. The trip took one and a half days. Once she arrived at "Auschwitz," it was a sight she couldn't even define with words. She saw a pile of bodies lying outside the gas chambers, and the smell of rotting, burning flesh haunted her. Once she was separated from the men, and was given a building number, she lay down on a bunk, full of fear, unable to move.

She was haunted by the sight she had just witnessed, and began to question, "Will I be next?"

She tried to convince herself otherwise, but she knew the chances of her getting out were slim. The next day, she walked outside and sat down in front of the fence and looked out into the distance. She imagined a field of flowers, instead, she saw a pile of bodies. Bodies that once had dreams, families, friends. They were fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, cousins, and friends. They were all someone, and the thought that they had been murdered just for being Jews made Johannah sick. As she stared looking into the distance, something caught her eye. It was bright yellow and tall. It was a sunflower. A brilliant sunflower. For some reason, this sunflower gave her hope and the strength she needed to survive. This sunflower was saving her from giving up, and she became determined to fight.

As she kept looking at the sunflower, a voice called for her. "Get back to your building now you filthy Jew!" A Nazi officer yelled at her. As she got up, he spat on her.

She walked back to her building, only this time, she wasn't ready to give up. When she got back to her building, everyone was lined up. She was told to get in line as well by another girl, who also told her they were being taken to go shower. As they walked in a line towards this unfamiliar building that apparently had showers in it, she kept thinking how fresh and clean she would feel thereafter and couldn't wait to go shower as she couldn't remember the last time she had. Her skin was dry and cracked, and her body was dirty from mud. Her hair was knotted so tightly that it hurt. She walked into the doors and saw no showers. She thought to herself, how strange? Maybe they will be using a hose to shower, she thought to herself. As the doors slammed shut, a loud echo filled the room, causing a chill down her spine. They were forced to undress outside, so she was very cold. Suddenly, a loud noise started. It sounded like a machine turning on.

"What's happening?" She nervously asked the other women, who were as confused as she was.

"It's a trap!" A nervous voice said.

"Don't be silly! We are taking a shower," another voice said.

"No, we aren't. If we are taking a shower, then where is the water?" the nervous voice asked.

"They are going to gas us. We are in a gas chamber. We will end up like the bodies outside in the piles. Dead," a defeated voice said.

Johannah couldn't believe that she was about to die. She didn't want to, but this time, she couldn't think or convince herself otherwise. She heard the gas entering and heard people panicking. She felt the gas going into her body, filling her lungs and squeezing her throat. She felt like she was being strangled, the same familiar feeling she felt when the Nazi officer lifted her into the air when she fell on the floor of the truck. The feeling of fingers jabbing into her neck and squeezing it slowly shut. Then, everything went dark. The sound of screaming faded, and the pain went away as well. Then, she awoke. A bright person was holding her hand. She looked around, and she was in a field of flowers, the same one she had imagined when looking out into the distance behind the fence. The building, the fence that locked her in for so many years faded. The Nazi officers who treated her like an animal, and tried to take away her dignity, weren't yelling or spitting on her anymore. Everything was still and quiet. She tried to make out the face of the bright person holding her hand but couldn't. Suddenly, the person faded away, and when she turned around, there was a sunflower. A sunflower, so bright and tall that no fence could trap it. So strong that not even the strongest kick or spit could knock it over.

A sunflower so bright that it blinded the brightest star, and around it were the words, "In memory of all who lost their lives in the Holocaust. In memory of all those that fought to protect others and themselves, and in memory of those brave enough to stand up and fight for what is right."

Silent Witnesses

by Charlotte Lobon

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

I stepped out of the airport doors and felt the chilly breeze come to my face and all the way down to my spine, giving me goosebumps. I rolled the suitcase, which was way bigger than me, down the textured pavement making way to our transportation. Once we made it to the big black van, my family and I packed our heavy bags into the trunk and started settling into our seats. Just as I was about to enter the van, I noticed the window was covered with snow. I did one big wipe with my hand and the snow slid right off like butter on toast. I sat on my chair and snuggled in my warm fur coat and looked out the window. As the car was moving fast, I noticed these trees outside. They were long, white and had some hints of black stripes spaced out on them. Although these trees had something I had never seen before. It looked like they had eyes on them. There was a whole forest of them. Just watching me.

"Papa, these trees look like they're watching me," I said.

"Those are Aspen trees. They are very unique for having such a different look than most trees," he replied.

"But we aren't in Aspen. Aren't we in Beaver Creek?" I questioned.

"You can find them all around the world in cold places. Aspen, Beaver Creek and even London," my dad finished.

I looked away from the window and turned to the other side. The same - a full forest of eyes. Just watching. I closed my own eyes to take a nap and rest before the big day ahead of the family.

"We're here! Wake up honey!" my mom said with a soft voice.

I slowly opened my eyes and let out a big yawn. I gathered my belongings and stepped out of the car. With my own eyes, in the sky, I saw the bright yellow sun, shining down on the whole town. On the ground, I saw pure white snow everywhere around me just as if the earth had been dusted with powder. It was so different from where I lived. Miami was sunny, never cold, always humid and blazing hot. In Beaver Creek, it was the most beautiful and perfect winter wonderland anyone could have ever imagined. I dropped my bags to the floor and sprinted into the snow. My brother followed and we played and threw snowballs at each other while our parents checked into the lodge.

"Come on kids! We have to get all our gear! Skis, boots, poles, so much! Let's go!" my dad yelled from inside.

"Aw man. Okay we are coming," my brother yelled back.

We both hurried inside with our heavy bags, ran to the elevator and pressed 7, my lucky number, where our room happened to be. We all quickly unpacked our clothes, toys and electronics, put on our colorful, warm ski clothes and set foot to the ski locker room.

"Okay! Let's get you started! And what shoe size would you be, young lady?"

It was a nice, tall man who was helping us out with our fittings of ski gear. He wore a bright red beanie that had "Beaver Creek Ski Resort" all around it. His long brown hair peering out of the hat swayed around whenever he made a movement. I told my shoe size, and he looked through the long aisles of heavy boots in so many different colors and sizes. From newborn all the way to Bigfoot, and from red all the way to violet. I told the man whether the boot fit too small, too big or just the perfect fit. Following the first part, I got my skis and my matching pink poles, and I felt ready to hit the slopes. A couple of other men who looked the same, helped the rest of the family to speed up the process. They followed the same steps and once everyone had the perfect fit of ski gear, we were all ready to hit the slopes.

"Wohoo!" my dad yelled from the bottom of the mountain, "Those were a couple good runs we put in there."

“Yes! Let’s go again. That was so fun!” I said cheerfully.

We skied onto the chairlift and started discussing, “Papa, can we do a run through the trees?”

“Sure. That would be great! You ready to shred!” he exaggerated with a strong voice.

“Yes!” echoed through the winter atmosphere.

We all hopped off the chairlift and waddled to the top of the mountain like penguins. I waited for my brother and dad to arrive at the meeting spot. Once they arrived, I leaned forward and over the edge and let my skis glide through the freshly groomed and glittery snow. My dad blazed past me and turned into a run through the trees. I went right behind my dad and so did my brother, forming a perfect line.

I looked above and saw through the skinny branches, the day started to get gloomy with dark clouds all above. I didn’t think much of it, and I just focused on the beauty around me and the place where I had longed to be for an entire year with my family, skiing in the most magical place on earth. I swished through the trees, jumping through the man - made moguls. It felt amazing to be back, skimming through the billions and billions of tiny snowflakes on the ground. I looked around me taking in the scenery, and when I looked in front of me, “Ah a tree!” With all my strength I shifted to the side just barely missing it. I looked back to warn my brother and *BOOM!* “Ow! My head!” I yelled out of pain. All I could feel was my face flat on the ground frozen from the snow piled onto me and my body on the ground, shivering cold. I placed my hands on the floor and tried to get up but, *SPLAT!* went my body back to the floor. I wiped the snow off my face and neck, but I couldn’t even speak out loud.

My face couldn’t move at all, but with my last bit of energy I called out, “Papi! Wait! Come back! Help me!”

I lifted my neck and saw my dad breathing heavily, shuffling uphill through the heavy snow coming back for me. As I was about to lay my neck back to rest, I saw what had hit me. The Aspen tree. The eye, looking down at me, watching me, moaning in unbearable pain.

“Oh gosh. What did you do to yourself?” my dad spoke with a worried voice.

“I ran into this stupid tree,” I cried obnoxiously.

“Oh gosh. Well, you didn’t break or hurt anything, so you’ll be fine. Let’s get up and continue,” he gave me his hand to lift me and stand me upright. I had a quick dizzy spell, and the entire world turned a whole 360 degrees. I quickly snapped out of it and searched for my skis. I looked around and saw a big pile of snow with my pink skis sticking out and grabbed them. My poles had flown behind me, so I walked uphill with my tired legs and gathered them. I made my way out of the trees and stopped at the entrance of the main slope trying to avoid having someone ram into me and trample me down the hill. I laid the skis sideways and *CLICK* went my boots. I was back on the snow but desperate to go back home and end the day.

With the dark clouds forming on top of me, it started to snow badly, not little snowflakes falling gracefully to the floor. No, it was hailing down, hitting my helmet and making my headache so much more than before. With my fingers frozen, I felt that if I touched them just one little bit, they would fall off in an instant. The snow started to make slushing sounds and became wet and dangerous to ski in. I safely made my way back to the lodge and my brother and dad dropped me off at the entrance. I finally had time to think to myself without all the mountain chaos. “I don’t want to ski anymore. Not with the eyes watching me, watching me fail,” my mind spoke.

I laid my stuff neatly into the locker and made my way back up to the room. I undressed and put on my favorite pink sweat set and laid my pounding head onto the comfy bed. I passed out and went into a deep and calm sleep. I woke up from my short nap, but it felt like an eternity to me, and I noticed something. “What am I doing here? I fell, so what? Should I stay at home all day and be scared of some trees? No, I shouldn’t. These stupid trees didn’t kill me. I am very much alive, and my head does not even hurt anymore!”

I ran out the bed, popped on my ski clothes, brushed off the tiny snowflakes off my goggles and ran down to the ski locker room. I put the tight boots on, got my pink skis and my pink poles and rushed to the slope. I clicked my boots on and blazed down the main slope.

“Papi, I’m coming. Where are you guys?” I texted.

“Skiing down the main slope. About to get on a chairlift. Are you okay to ski already?” he texted back.

I read the text, put my phone in my pocket and skied down the glistening snow. I hopped on the quick one-minute chairlift and met my dad at the top of the mountain, placed my goggles over my eyes, and whispered to myself, “Let’s go.”

The Green Text

by Mackenzie Miller

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Yellow rays beamed down from the bright, cloudless, blue sky. The air was hot like fire, and everyone's cheeks were now red and freckled.

"When is Barret coming?" asked Kayla.

"I don't know. He said two more days," said Callie.

The three girls had just arrived in the Maldives. It was the summer of 2024, and school was still a distant thought. Social media was very popular, and everyone was always scrolling. Kayla and her three best friends Callie, Barret, and Milly were supposed to all go on a teen tour in the Maldives. The four best friends all lived on the Upper East Side and were truly a part of the privileged class. They all lived the same way, went to the same school, and lived in the same apartment building on Park Avenue. The four of them were initially all flying together. Barret, though, told them that he needed to complete some work in summer school for a few days. Barret wasn't the biggest fan of school and often said that his day was "ok" whenever the girls asked about it. Around them though he was all sunshine. His presence brought a sense of safety, comfort, and love. As time passed they began to get eager as he kept postponing his arrival.

"I really miss him!" said Milly.

Callie sighed and said, "I think we all do."

Milly was the youngest out of the four. She had a special awareness of other's feelings, a true empath, and really felt Barret's absence. It made her fear that he was separating from their group, which is what she feared the most.

As the day went on, the temperature began to rise. Callie had gone up to her room since the heat was making her stomach feel queasy. It was now just Milly and Kayla, and the absence of Barret hit even harder, like a brick falling on one's toe. It was reaching mid-day and Kayla and Milly realized that they needed to make the most of the rest of their teen tour. They swam until it reached 2:30 pm. They got out of the teal blue water that was so beautiful it almost resembled a sapphire.

"It was so beautiful in the water, wasn't it, Kayla?"

Kayla had just received a text from Callie saying that she believed she had gotten food poisoning and that she was booking us on the next flight home so that she could see a doctor. The news was disappointing, of course, but with only three days left of the tour, Kayla responded with maturity and concern. She told Callie that it was totally fine and that she was there if she needed anything.

Kayla looked back up at Milly with a soft smile. "Yes it was beautiful, but Callie just texted me that she got food poisoning and that we will be going home sooner than expected."

Kayla and Milly stayed near the pool for two hours before heading back to their room and checking on Callie. As Kayla approached the elevator she texted Barret letting him know that they would be coming back early, that she loved him, and that she was beyond excited to reunite with her best friend. The text, though, turned green. Kayla kept this to herself. A green text meant his phone was off, but Barret's phone was never off. He was always on his small iPhone SE or on his flip phone which he never seemed to let go of since his father had given it to him. It was odd but not alarming to Kayla, well at least not alarming enough to mention it.

"Should we order food to the room to bring with us on the plane?" asked Milly.

"I think we should, just to ensure that we have something to hold us over," said Kayla.

Milly, being her mature young self, went and got us a big container of mochi, which happened to be Callie's favorite. Although mochi may not be the best thing for someone with a queasy tummy, it truly was from the heart as Milly truly felt for others, and could see how anyone felt, even the emotions many try to hide.

Milly hurried back into the room, holding the big container of mochi against her chest.

"I hope this makes you feel a little better Callie," she said softly. "It is your favorite."

Callie peeked out from under the blanket, her face pale, and blood vessels popped. She looked as if she had been throwing up all day.

"Thank you," she whispered. "You didn't have to."

"I know," Milly replied, sitting beside her. "But I wanted to."

Kayla placed her suitcase on the bed and sighed. Her suitcase was as big as a king-sized bed. The three girls were not what one would call an under packer.

"We should try to rest before the flight. It's going to be long," said Kayla.

Even as Kayla tried to focus on packing, she kept glancing at her phone. The screen remained black; no light from a text message had appeared. Kayla unlocked her phone to see if maybe he had responded without her seeing. No reply from Barret. No typing bubbles. Just that single green text staring back at her like a warning she didn't know how to read. A concerned face consumed Kayla's smile.

Milly noticed. "He still hasn't answered?"

"No." Kayla shook her head. "His phone is off."

"But his phone is never off. Maybe he's just busy?"

Kayla forced a tiny smile. "Yeah. Busy."

The girls packed quietly for an hour after that. Kayla opened the door of the terrace which overlooked the beautiful water of the Maldives. A Great Frigatebird, known as Maahora locally, circled the girls room. Its lengthy wings reminded Kayla of Barret which brought a true smile to her face. The bird's red pouch though reminded her of a red flag, alerting that something was wrong. That wiped the smile right off of Kayla's face. The girls headed back inside and finished packing as quickly as possible. It was about 6 p.m. now and they needed to begin making their way downstairs. They moved slowly now though, each motion feeling heavier than it should have for three friends who had started this trip with so much excitement.

The girls reached the lobby and headed to the shuttle that was waiting for them outside of their hotel. As the girls sat down on the cushiony seats, Milly leaned her head on Kayla's shoulder.

"I can't wait to see Barret," Milly said. "I feel like everything will go back to normal once he's with us again."

"Me too," Kayla replied, though something in her chest tightened.

Callie groaned softly from the seat in front of them. "Ugh. My stomach."

Kayla reached forward. "We'll be at the airport soon. I promise."

Callie nodded. "I just want my bed, and maybe a doctor."

There was no proper doctor available. Although the airport was only ten minutes away, getting there took forever.

"Finally, we're here," said Milly.

The girls grabbed their luggage from the trunk and dragged it as fast as possible across the squeaking airport floors. The security line was short, and soon enough they were sitting on the plane's cream toned leather seats.

Kayla checked her phone again, even though she knew there was no Wi-Fi yet. Still green. Still silent. She swallowed hard.

After ten hours and a quick stop for refuel the girls had finally landed back in New York. Kayla checked once again at her phone. Still green. Still silent. At that moment though she decided to text Barret again. She informed him that they had landed, that she loved him, and once again that she was so excited to reunite with her best friend. It turned green again.

The girls hopped into their black SUV and were greeted by Callie's driver. It was 5 a.m. in New York now. Everything felt familiar but wrong. The air was hotter and the sidewalks were louder.

They arrived at their building eager to get out of the car. Their building doorman waved at them with his usual warm grin, but the girls were too exhausted to do anything except give a weak smile and push the elevator button labeled fifteen.

As soon as the doors closed, Milly asked, "Kayla, what if Barret got grounded?"

"What do you mean?" Kayla said quickly, sighing in relief that she hadn't thought anything worse had happened.

"I don't know," Milly murmured. "It's just, he hasn't written back in hours. That's not like him."

"Maybe he lost his phone," Callie suggested.

"Or maybe his battery died," Kayla added, trying to convince herself that he was ok.

None of them believed anything that one another was saying, but they were too tired to think any harder about this. The elevator door opened and the girls rushed to give their families a big hug. All the girls were hugged tightly and then told to sit down. Barret's parents walked out from the other room, but Barret wasn't with them.

"My texts to Barret have been turning green, is everything ok?" asked Kayla with pure confusion in her eyes.

Barret's parents' faces were grey and empty of the usual warmth they normally had. Barret's mother clutched her husband's arm as they slowly approached the couch the girls were sitting on.

"Girls," Barret's father said, his voice breaking even before he spoke fully. "We need to tell you something about Barret."

Kayla's stomach twisted. "What is it? Is he ok?"

Barret's mother took a trembling breath. "He's." Pain filled her lungs before she could even finish speaking.

"Barret is gone," Barret's father said as his wife screamed and collapsed into his arms.

"No," Milly cried. "That is impossible. We were on the phone with him just last night."

Callie buried her face into Kayla's shoulder sobbing harder than I had ever felt before. "No!" Callie screamed.

Kayla felt her chest tighten as if a hand was squeezing it from the inside. Puddles of tears dripped down her face as she screamed louder than a lion.

"He isn't gone!" Kayla screamed.

The girls' parents wrapped their arms around them as if they were holding onto the world, not letting go.

Barret's father knelt slightly, still holding his wife in his arms as tears flooded his eyes. "Barret, he took his own life."

The words hit Kayla like a tsunami, knocking the air out of her lungs. Her heart felt as if it had shattered, tiny, jagged pieces puncturing every inch of her chest. She could hear Milly's loud cries, and feel Callie trembling in her arms, and yet, somehow, the sound of her own voice seemed distant and unreal.

"He was happy with us though," Kayla said. "He smiled. He laughed. We talked everyday about everything. How could this happen?" Her tears fell freely, wetting her shirt and the couch beneath her.

Barret's father sank into the floor. "We didn't see it," he whispered. "We didn't know how much pain he was in. He hid it from all of us."

Milly shook her head violently. "No! He was supposed to see us, to be with us!"

Callie clutched onto Kayla's sleeve. "Why would he do this? We loved him."

Kayla's mind couldn't form complete thoughts. All she could see were graphics of Barret. She saw his hazel eyes, tall skinny body, and handsome face. Now that image, the last image she would ever see of him crushed her. The thought of Barret alone, fighting a darkness she hadn't even known existed, began to haunt her. It invaded her chest, her throat, her vision. She felt sick, alone, and broken in a way she never thought possible.

"The last text," she whispered. "The green text never got through. I thought that he would answer. I thought."

Her words dissolved into silent sobs. Milly leaned into her, Callie into both of them, and they held each other as Barret's parents cried quietly. It felt like the world had ended, like a hole had been carved in their lives and nothing could fill it. The grief was heavy, suffocating, pressing on them from every side, refusing to let them breathe.

Kayla sank into the couch, holding her phone tightly. The green text glowed softly in the dim light of the living room. She stared at it, wishing it could blink back to life, wishing it could carry his words, his laughter, even his silence, just one more time.

Milly sat beside her, tracing circles on the back of her hand. "Do you think he knew how much we loved him?" she whispered.

"Yes Milly. He knew, I promise," Kayla said in a reassuring voice.

Callie, curled in the corner, muttered, "I can't stop seeing him, like shadows in the hallway, or the way he laughed in the shade."

Kayla's eyes fell to the green text again. The color seemed alive, like it was holding the weight of all the words he never sent. She pressed her thumb against the screen, hoping that if she pressed hard enough, it would feel warm. It didn't. It was just green. Kayla thought of the sapphire water in the Maldives, how it sparkled like hope and possibility, how the girls all laughed, splashed, and imagined the world together waiting for Barret to join them. She searched up a photo to give her a clearer image, but it looked different, less shiny. The water reflected the light that the memories they were all supposed to make together held but now they felt like distant thoughts, like memories stuck behind a bullet proof window.

"The water," whispered Kayla. "It will always be beautiful but different. A little bit darker, like it knows he is gone."

Milly nodded, eyes filled with tears. "It's still there, like him. Just in a different way."

They sat in silence for a long time each thinking of Barret. The smiles, the late-night messages, the way he comforted us when we were sad. The world outside carried on, the beeps from cars, the chatter of neighbors, the endless pulse of New York. Inside their apartment time froze. The colors of their world were now dark, no longer capturing the same brightness.

A few months passed. They spoke more openly, cried together, and began helping others. They shared stories, volunteered at the Children's Bereavement Center, and gave advice to friends who didn't know how to say they were hurting. Slowly, the stabbing pain in their chests turned into an ache, not gone but carried differently.

That night, Kayla sat alone by her window, staring at her phone. The green text still stared back at her. It didn't blink. It didn't turn blue. She realized at that moment that she didn't want it to.

Saved by Falling Pennies

by Quinn Noyes

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

"Josh!" Stacey called out. "Can you stop poking around and help me grab these boxes?"

Stacey stumbled through the front door of an old-boarded up house that moaned with every step. When she looked up from placing the box on the floor of her new living room, she was met with a dark, dusted home that filled her with a strange type of frustration.

"Wow, so this is home," Stacey sighed. "Dad, bring in the last box would you?"

"Yup," he replied with his empty, bland gaze.

Stacey, a sixteen-year-old girl with luscious long black hair, bright skin, and brown eyes, started unpacking her favorite memories from Florida. That's where they lived before, and when she grabbed the first photo from the box, she was greeted with a warm, loving smile from her mother. Ever since she got sick, her father went into a decline and lost a good chunk of his fortune, leaving them in Vermont. The only house they could afford was the one gifted to them years ago on the west-end side of the lake. Stacey and Josh didn't blame their father for having to move, they blamed her.

"Hi, Mom," whispered Stacey. It was a topic left unspoken. The two children didn't resent their mother, they couldn't. Yet, she left them, and without their father's strength and reassurance, their only way to grieve was to be angry with her.

Josh finally stumbled down the stairs with loads of old gadgets and toys left behind from previous owners.

"Stacey! Look at all of the stuff that was left behind. It's perfect for my new room! HAHA! I call the one with the huge bathroom!

She would typically be frustrated with the idea of her brother getting his choice of a room before she could even have a chance to explore, but from the looks of what was on the first floor, she knew none of the rooms would ever feel like hers.

"Ok, Josh...Thanks so much for your help with the boxes!" Stacey yelled sarcastically.

As she stomped out of the house to get the last box her father just wasn't able to bring in for her, she noticed something glistening in between the wood floorboard of her new porch. *A penny*. Immediately, the overstimulation of her brother and the new house instantly fled. She knelt down and picked up the shiny piece of copper that reflected the dim light of the north sky. She let a smile slip for the first time since she had come to Vermont, for she now had a way to make her room her own.

It was a silly tradition. It started when Stacey found a lucky penny in the parking lot of a bowling alley at the age of five, and she wouldn't let it go because she didn't want to lose a shot at being lucky. Her mom, an intelligent lady, solved this fear by gluing the penny to her bedroom ceiling.

"To keep luck above your head Stacey. Now, luck won't ever leave you," told her mother.

This tradition started and never stopped, every penny she found, she would glue it to her ceiling. This would make a perfect addition to her new bedroom. Stacey raced through the house and up the stairs looking for what room her brother hadn't claimed. She found a cozy room in the corner of the house. Not cozy at all actually, but she could fix it. She jumped onto the bed and reached for the ceiling, pulling out nail glue from her pocket that

she had always kept in case of emergencies. She could reach! It was a small room after all. When it stuck, she jumped off of her freshly dusted bed and gave a look around. It was awful. *What had happened here before us?*

Stacey realized the house was stained of grey from the moment she pulled up in the driveway, but she didn't know how the house had gotten into such an awful condition. The floorboards were rotten, and every window oddly stained. Broken glass covered the floors and on the front door were scratches. Everything seemed out of order. Her Aunt, Italia, had previously owned the house before, a kind woman she was, until she moved without telling anybody. It was as if she died. Italia went completely off the grid, and she had her attorney give the house to her sister. Stacey's mother and father were tragically sad with her disappearance. They had known each other well, but the children never had formed a proper relationship with her. She lived far and never made a commitment to see them, so why should they?

"Hey Stacey!" called Josh from her doorway.

"Could you please help me get Dad inside? He's just standing by the car. Totally out of it. He doesn't seem like he can even hear me."

"Yeah...thanks Josh."

"I love you Stacey," whispered Josh.

"Me more, now go find your boxes and put them in your room. The sooner we decorate the sooner this place will feel...alive."

She stepped out of her room onto the creaking floorboard and walked down the stairs. Something about talking of her father made Josh and her quiet. A rough topic to speak on. Their father was gone.

Stacey stood at the front door, calling out, "Come on, Dad! We finished bringing in the boxes."

Her father stood, leaning against the front of his grey Honda. He looked out beyond, onto the lake.

"Dad please.." cried Stacey.

He spoke, "Come here," in a quiet tone. "I want to show you."

Stacey, in shock of hearing her dad's voice, stood in awe.

"Come over," he cried. Stacey stumbled off of the porch in attempts to reach her father. He patted the metal hood of the car and she hopped on, looking over the chain link fence and onto the water. It really was beautiful. They couldn't get too close because the fence encompassed the area surrounding the water. Yet the view was still refreshing. It was good for them to get some type of peace. They hadn't had that for a while. So they just sat, looking out, with the breeze hitting their face. Josh, expecting to see Stacey pushing their father through the door, was surprised to see the level of peace. He walked out and sat with them. For some time they sat. Never spoke. Not a word. The silence filled the air, it was breathtaking, until it wasn't. A moment later, Josh opened his mouth to speak, but he was interrupted with the whisper of his father.

"What is that?"

"What is what?" Stacey asked.

"There. Don't you see her? Right there!"

He held out his arm in the direction of the fence. He was pointing to nothing but air. A silent sob began to slip between his breath, and it was clear that he was in a panic.

Stacey sighed, put her hand on her father's back, and guided him inside. This wasn't a typical event, it was quite frightening for her actually, but she didn't want to upset her brother. Maybe dad was thinking of mom. She sat him down on the couch, and asked Josh to sit with him for a while. She set for the upstairs with her father's boxes in hand, and she found his room in the center of the hallway. Stacey laid a fresh sheet over the dusted bed, giving her father a perfect place to have a slight rest. Her father was brought upstairs by Josh and laid down.

"Whew," sighed Stacey. "I never want children."

"Heh," replied Josh.

"Hey, go finish your room. If we start right now, maybe we'll be done by tonight."

Stacey walked off into the back hallway and into her room. She knew what needed to be done.

Immediately she cleaned the window that was covered in stains. So much so that it blocked the light from going into her room. Once cleaned, she replaced the grubby mattress with the one from her previous bedroom, and she placed a fresh sheet over it with a navy-blue comforter, and yellow pillows. She noticed mid-decorating that there was a full body mirror embedded in the door. She stared into it for some while, with an immense thought over her head. Maybe it was the room or what she would do to decorate the door, but no. Something bigger. Stacey shook her head and returned to the decorating. She chose to place a picture of Josh and her on the back of her door. She had been working for hours when she realized the time. It was nightfall. She cuddled into the depth of her warm mattress, which filled her with some sense of security. In minutes she was asleep.

It was a quarter past 3 A.M. when Stacey was hit on her head with what felt like a hard flick. Her eyes widened and her upper body rose up in utter silence. When the realization of where she was, hit her, she began to question what harsh thing laid its hand on her. When she turned her body, she saw the penny. It had fallen. *How disturbing*; they never fell. She had always used the same glue, in the same way. Her stomach twisted, though, she didn't want to show it in her face. When she lifted the penny, her blood ran cold. *Josh*. Josh's name had been carved into the coin. Stacey thought it was a joke, but her brother wasn't like that. He didn't joke. Especially not in the middle of the night, and especially not to Stacey's coin. He knew about this tradition with their mom, and Josh would never get in the way of it. It couldn't have been him.

When Stacey turned her head farther to her right, she was met by the full body mirror. She saw a teenage girl drenched in sweat from a previous nightmare. She looked farther into the mirror, her heart pounding when she noticed something wasn't right. What used to hold a photo of her brother had now held three long scratch marks. The marks were gouged in her door. An instinct rushed over her body. All of her five senses were on point, and her defense adrenaline kicked in. In her super vision and hearing, she could hear a faint voice calling from the other room.

"Stacey! Stacey!" yelled Josh in a silenced whisper.

Her breath grew thin. It sounded like he couldn't breathe. Stacey jumped out of bed and into the hallway. When she turned the corner she was met with two eyes, staring into her soul.

"Josh! Oh my, you scared me!! What the heck are you doing out here? Are you okay?"

"Stacey," whispered Josh. "There's something in the closet..."

In an attempt to scream, Josh could only give a faint whisper. His fears overcame him and his whole body was trembling. He stood, mortified as he looked at the hallway closet, which lay directly between Stacey and his room. Her heart dropped.

"Your bedroom closet?" asked Stacey.

"No," Josh shook.

The only other closet was just ten feet away. A slight crack between the two doors made the whole house seem to come alive, as if it were breathing.

"Josh, look at me," said Stacey.

She was kneeling in attempts to reach his young eyes. Her steps were quick but silent due to her active adrenaline. Stacey reached her brother keeping solid eye contact to prevent him from further fear.

"Josh. We have to."

"Stacey no," he pleaded.

"It's the only way. Okay. Ready? One....two....three!"

When the door opened, it was pure darkness, but it was not empty. She stumbled backwards in fear, attempting to shield Josh. Something was lurking. Where the two siblings stood, they could see a shift in movement. They could sense it.

Just then, the figure in the night adjusted, moving into the moonlit hallway. And it was not a monster. It was a woman.

With a thin pale body, tangled hair, and dried wrinkled skin the lady stood in an immediate plea.

"I promise I'm not here to harm! Please don't hurt me!" yelled the stranger.

"Who are you! What are you doing in this house!?" cried Stacey.

"I know! I'm so very sorry. I was just looking for some place to stay. Autumn is here and a cold night on Lake Champlain could kill me! I know it's not right, but your door was unlocked and I just needed some warmth," begged the woman.

"So, it was you who wrote on my penny? Why?" questioned Stacey.

"Well, I saw photos of you both from the boxes in the hallway. I was scared you would find me and have me arrested so I thought leaving some sort of message would help...I don't know. Make someone listen."

"She was crying in there..." Josh mumbled.

A sadness flooded Stacey's mind. It wasn't a ghost, or a prank, it was simply a desperate woman trying to survive the night. Her nails hadn't been cut properly, and they had the length to create much damage in the door. *She wasn't a threat; She was homeless, freezing, and out of time.*

"Alright, come downstairs, we'll get you a blanket and sort this out," uttered Stacey.

Josh woke up his father who was overwhelmed with this information. Instead of pure anger, something had softened in him. Something the two children had not seen since the passing of their mother. Compassion.

The following morning an ambulance arrived at the house to provide the woman with proper nutrients and take her to a safe shelter. On the porch, Josh, Stacey, and their father sat looking out past the lake.

Their father admitted, "I-I know things haven't been easy but.. I am your father, and I'm going to prove it. I'm here now...I promise I'm...here."

The two smiled and approved of their father's idea. Stacey looked down into her hand which held the penny from the previous night. The glue still flaked on one side.

She murmured, "You know, Mom said pennies were for luck."

Josh smiled. "Well maybe this one saved us."

She nodded and chuckled, "Yeah-yeah maybe you're right."

Later that night, before Stacey went to bed, she glued the same penny to her ceiling. This time, the penny never fell again.

Shadows Unmade

by Antonio Padoveze Goncalves

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

When two suns collide

The earth continues its stride

Clear stays the air

Yet still they sit there

Subsurface they stay

In fear and in dread

For they know not of the paradise that remains

Above where they stay chained

The ruler slammed against the desk with the force of a very angry Ms. Fowler.

"Thair! Pay attention, I asked you a question!" she shouted from across the small, crowded classroom.

The lights seemed to stare at him as he looked at the teacher and simply shrugged. She screamed at him, but he blocked it out. He did not care what she was saying. He did not care that she was mad or that the whole classroom was staring at him. He simply wanted to leave. And unfortunately, he did get to leave, straight to detention. He walked around looking at the ugly hallways covered with marks and dirt. The floor was covered in the grime and soil that lined the roads of the Hollow and the shoes of every person he knew. The unnaturally bright lights that lined the hallways seemed to shame him as he walked by. Trying to escape their gaze, he looked down where he saw his shadow. He saw the outline of his curls, his itchy school uniform, and his tall skinny figure. Finally, he arrived at the damp room where he was destined to stay for the next hour.

Thair's eyes circled around the room. It was small, with cracks covering the moldy beige walls; the desks were black and worn from years of students touching and drawing, not to mention the mischievous children of the Hollow throwing papers and screaming. He was not like them. He was not loud or annoying; he was just exhausted and stuck. He hated the Hollow, the feeling of being under. Of being stuck under the ground with the rest of what used to be San Francisco.

His mother, Eda, used to tell him about how beautiful it was. Although she never saw it herself, she would tell him of the golden sand beaches and the giant skyscrapers that touched even the highest clouds. She would paint him pictures with her words of the rainy days, the ones that the suns seemed to touch every part of the city, and most of all she would tell him of the moon. He had always been fascinated by the moon, by its size and its illumination. He wished more than anything that he could see the moon; he wished so much that when he was little he would ask his mother to turn on a light and cover it with a black translucent scarf so he could imagine it was the moonlight seeping into his room. Thair gave a sly smirk when he thought about the relationship he used to have with this mother. Now they barely talked and only saw each other right before he went to school and when she came back from work late at night.

Thair snapped back to reality with the shout of the teacher saying that it was finally time to leave the suffocating classroom. He walked out of his school ignoring anyone that tried to talk to him. He looked around the

ironically hollow Hollow. It was made of giant canyons, wooden roads and houses, and bright artificial lights that were supposed to look like natural lighting but really looked like someone was holding a flashlight in the ceiling. The houses were all on the top parts of the canyons almost touching the top of the Hollow; some actually hitting it like his own. His mother told him that there used to be these big machines that rode on four wheels that carried people long distances. But like most of the inventions of the past, they had been lost during the transition from the Outside to the Hollow. As he walked, he kicked the ground out of anger and boredom; he kept kicking over and over. He kept kicking because he was angry. Angry at his mom, at the Hollow, at his school, and most of all at the people that put him down here. Thair was taught all his life that the world above was a toxic landscape that was burned to a crisp. He was taught that after the two stars Stella and Nyota collided, the world would be covered in ashes, and nothing would ever grow ever again. That there were no plants, life, or anything living at all. He was taught that it was terrible; that it was impossible to live up there and anyone who tried would die. But, he did not believe it. He could not believe it. Without the hope that there was something up there, he would not be able to keep going. Without the joy that the mere thought that there was a chance that he could see the moon, he would collapse.

He gave the ugly dirt filled road of the Hollow one more kick for good measure. A small silver sphere shot up in the air and landed with a high-pitched clinking sound. Thair looked down, catching another glimpse of his shadow lurking behind him, curious. After a few moments of searching, he found it. Once he rubbed the dirt off the object, he saw that it was a red cap with some long cursive writing on it. It had grooves on the side and was clearly not a part of the Hollow. He attempted to read the white writing, but it was still too dirty, so he wiped it on his white school uniform, something his mother would surely be mad at him for, and he tried to read it again.

“Coca Cola?” he whispered to himself, confused, pronouncing each syllable awkwardly.

Although he did not know what it was or how it got there, he knew he was certainly not allowed to have it. All artifacts from the outside world were supposed to be immediately given to the Extermination Council where they would immediately burn them in their incinerator to make sure nothing from the outside world came in. But he would not let them have this. He had already lost his father to the Councils. His father was a kind man. Someone who genuinely cared about others and was just a great, bubbly, joyful person. But he got too curious. He wanted to know what was going on above the hideous subterranean system he was in. He began to dig and dig and dig until one day he disappeared. He was just gone. One day he left for work and never came back. Thair did not have proof that it was the responsibility of the Councils, but he knew it was them. They were stuck in the way that things had always been done due to fear of change and of the possibility of life. Therefore, whenever anyone tried to create change they would disappear never to be seen again.

Unfortunately, curiosity seemed to be genetic. So, Thair pocketed the cap and walked back home quickly. He opened the door to an empty house and ran upstairs into his room. Although his house was much bigger than some in his neighborhood, it was certainly not large. It was a two-story house with two bedrooms, one bathroom, a kitchen and a living room with one small couch and a television. It was pressed against a wall of the Hollow far from anything important. Thair used to see it as a cozy home filled with love, but now it felt suffocating, empty, and cold. He sat in his bed finally beginning to understand what the cap was. He thought about what the bottle might look like, about how the liquid inside might taste like. Was it sweet? Was it sour? Smooth? Transparent? Thinking about The Outside brought him the same joy it did when he was just a little kid and his mom would tell him the stories that had been passed down for centuries.

This bottle cap sparked something in him. This tiny little shiny thing woke something up inside him. It was as if all of his curiosity came together and urged him to do something about it. For a second, the idea of digging himself out crossed his mind. He got up to shake the thought. He could not. To push down his thoughts he created a list of things in his mind for why not to dig. He thought of his mother, his father, the councils. But still, the thought remained. The thought of freedom, of real life, of the surface. He began to walk around his house and began to climb up the stairs of the attic to the only place where he felt free. He felt free because he could imagine that he was in the Outside. He could imagine that he was above everyone else. He dragged his feet, tripping on the slabs of wood that lined the floors engulfed in thought. As his palms smacked against the ground Thair groaned in pain.

“Damn.” he said to himself, annoyed at himself for falling.

He held his hands close to his face to see if any pieces of the wood entered his hand. He looked all around his pale, slender hands. They had no calluses or bumps, the only part of his body that had not yet been affected by puberty. Collecting his thoughts, he noticed he had dropped the bottle cap on the floor. The glare of its shiny exterior caught his attention. He snatched it from the floor making sure that he would never lose it. When he

looked up a flurry of emoticons and memories hit him like a freight train. The memory appeared in his mind like a file coming out of a locked cabinet. The image of his father standing by the 5-foot hole he had begun to dig. His once gentle face transformed to terror and madness by the thought of freedom. The shovel he held in his hands was covered in the blood that streaked down his arms. The words he had whispered to Thair the day before he disappeared:

“Don’t worry bud,” he had smiled at him with a twinge of madness and fear. “Once I dig us out we will be free and you will never have to be afraid again.”

He dragged his fingers over the outline of where the hole once was. It was never fully repaired because it was too painful for his mother to do anything about it. She could not bear the sight of the thing that made her lose the light of her life. The walls were wood but the part of the roof that had been carved out straight into the walls of the Hollow had never been repaired. Then it came to him, what if he simply followed in his father's footsteps? What if he gave in to his curiosity? What if he let himself be free? He already had a headstart from his father's work. Of course, he would have to be careful; much more careful than his father ever was. It was at that moment that Thair decided to choose freedom over fear. Light over dark. Himself over the Hollow.

Over the next few weeks Thair began to search for things to deepen his hole and get closer to the surface. He managed to find a shovel in a dumpster in a random alley and gardening gloves in his mom's shed that had been abandoned after his father's disappearance. The only thing he was lacking now was courage. One random day after he had arrived from school he decided it was the day to start. He grabbed the gloves, shovel, and wore black clothes to attempt to hide the dirt that would cover him. He climbed the stairs to the attic and stared at it. The dirt made an awkward shifting sound as he stuck the shovel straight into the end of the hole.

He began to do this every day. It became like a routine for him, school, dig, and sleep. And weirdly enough, he was happier than he ever had been. Although his hands would hurt and his back would ache from the awkward position, he would place himself in and some days the pain would get so bad he would have to take long breaks just to make his head stop spinning from pain, he would not give up. Digging, he would watch the clock to make sure his mother would not arrive at him digging. Once it was an hour before she was supposed to arrive, he would crowd boxes and cabinets in front of the hole so his mother would not find it. Then he would take a quick shower, go outside, clean his clothes from the water in the sink, and go to sleep before she could arrive. This made sure that there was no way he could let it slip that he was digging the hole. And strangely enough it was working. No one had an inkling of what he was doing and he was happy.

But alas, time was not on his side. January 15, 2096, three months after he had begun to dig, he lost track of time. He was digging and digging just thinking about his life and what he knew when he suddenly heard the scream of his mother that he heard too many times to not recognize.

“No!” his mother screamed as she ran at him and pulled him back, “Step away from there now. Now!”

She ran at him and grabbed at him pushing him away from the hole. But he had grown. He had become stronger and more mature. She pulled him and gave him the look she always gave. Every time he would do something wrong she would glare at him and usually he would cower in response. But, this time he looked at her in a way she had never seen him before. He was not shy or scared of her.

“No,” he stated with confidence

“What did you just say?!” his mother squealed at him.

“No.”

At this point his mother began to spiral. She began to scream at him, claw at his clothes, and beg him. She cried and cried while he stood there. He hated standing there. Thair wanted to fall to his knees and give in to his mother's pleas. But, something kept him there. He refused to say a word. He would not let anyone take away anything that was his ever again, not even his own blood. She would tear at his clothes screaming about his father. She would switch between fits of anger and screaming into passionate streams of tears and whining. Her voice began to become hoarse with screaming, and her eyes ran dry with tears. Her face was pale, almost ghostlike as if she had left her body and all that remained was a shell of what she once was. She sat on the floor with her eyes empty from tears and thought.

She stood carefully not quite looking at his eyes but casting her gaze on the floor blankly. Her eyes kept twitching as if they were trying to expel tears but could not. Her mouth stayed shut as her jaws clenched. Then she turned and looked back at him once more and began to climb down the stairs as if nothing had happened. Once she was almost fully down the rickety wooden stairs she looked at him with the same blank, twitching eyes but with a concerned, regretful smirk.

“I will not lose you too,” she said looking at the floor and then looking at him,

"You grew," she kept eye contact with him for a moment and climbed down the stairs.

Thair collapsed on the floor in tears after his mother made her way out of his sight. He did not make a noise; he simply laid on the floor with silent, shining tears quietly streaming down his face. Thair fell asleep exhausted from crying and digging. He dreamed vividly of his father and everything he did. It felt like he was an invisible spectator while his father slowly began to go mad and dig. He wanted to cry out and scream but his voice was gone.

He awoke with the clatter of the door slamming. He rubbed off his drowsiness and for a second forgot where he was. After reorienting himself, he concluded that his mother had left for work and that it was time for him to wake up and head to school. His mind drew him to his hole afraid that his mother had done something to it. At that moment he truly took into account how close he must be. The surface must be really close as the Hollow was relatively short, his house touched the ceiling, and he had dug what seemed 50 feet. This newfound thought brought him a great deal of adrenaline and energy. School was not important to Thair anyway, so he decided to skip and continue to dig. He dug for the whole day but at some point around 5:00 PM Thair began to question his decision. What if it was not a lie? What if it truly is a toxic and ash-covered, apocalyptic world out there and by him digging out he was infecting the whole Hollow? These questions flooded his mind just like his curiosity had once done. They tormented him as he continued to dig. Each time his shovel smacked into the dirt, a new thought would come, causing him more torment. But he did not stop. Not ever would he stop until he achieved what he wanted, freedom.

His shovel smacked into the ground, but it was not like the others. It was not nearly as hard or dense. It was lighter and easier. At this point the thoughts of terror and horror took over his mind. He had been taken over by them. His mind spiraled. What if this was it? What if his fight had finally come to an end. What if he was free? There was only one way to know.

Thair, with all his force, pulled the shovel from the dirt allowing it to clatter on the floor. He felt it before he saw it. It was warm like nothing he had ever felt before. It felt like a blanket wrapping around his arm wanting to comfort him. When he finally looked up to see it, he could not believe it. It was right there. The surface. He stood up and stumbled backward into the dirt.

"Go!" he thought, "Go!"

He ignored his shovel on the ground and began to claw at the opening. As he clawed the feeling grew and he saw the suns. Once the hole was big enough to fit him, he reached up and pulled himself up. He did not open his eyes first in fear of it not being the paradise he imagined. Slowly, he fluttered his eyes open. At first his eyes hurt from the illumination of the suns. Then he saw it.

The buildings, the suns, the beaches, it was all true! They were overgrown with strange plants he had never seen before. They were all sorts of colors and shapes. He felt a wave of happiness come over him like over and over like the ocean his mother had told him about. He ran around jumping and screaming with joy tears streaming down his face. Exploring, he ran and smelled and saw so much more, astonished with each discovery. His mind was free from all of the torment and his mind was clear. He was free, at peace and maybe a little afraid, but although he wanted to keep this paradise to himself, he knew it was not right.

Courage and strength had brought him here to paradise, but it was not just him who needed to see it. Not just his mother or the Councils but everyone. Everyone in his Hollow and in all Hollows around the world. He gave one last scream of joy and began his journey back.

Not realizing how much he had run in his excitement, he began to start getting tired. Almost, as if someone was answering to his every need, he saw a fruit hanging from a long slender branch. It had a strange, curved shape like someone had taken a bite out of it and the skin had grown over it. It was a mix of yellow-oranges, dark reds, and greens. It looked kind of like the mangoes they had in the Hollow, but these were brighter and livelier. He plucked it from the tree it was on which he later noticed was covered with many more of the fruit, all in different hues, colors, and sizes. An entire orchard seemed to cover dozens of streets: many fruits hanging from many branches in many trees. After taking a step back with the fruit in hand he noticed he was right next to those buildings that touched the sky. He marveled at this beauty but drew his attention back to finding the hole.

As he walked, he took a large bite of the fruit. Its deep orange inside filled his mouth with delicious flavors. He felt every flavor that it seemed to hand to him like a present. It was as sweet as a candy while also being citrusy and sour.

Running along the sides of the buildings he found himself back at the street he had come out of. For once in his life instead of seeing it as a dark cloud and a burden, he saw it like the moon. Like something he wanted that brought hope. Thair walked over to the hole with a slight smirk on his face. He lowered himself down to the rim of

the hole feeling the hard grey solid that the roads seemed to be made of. His head and eyes traced the buildings, the orchards, the plants, until he finally landed on his shadow. The one that had once seemed like a burden now felt full of hope and guidance. With one swift push against the ground, Thair disappeared from the outside world without any clue what would happen.

The Lucky Wristband

by Nicolas Pal

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

He turned off the ignition, swung the door open, leaned over and bent his head to step out of the car. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The slightly chilly, serene September afternoon air filled his lungs. He took a few steps away from his car. His slow gait turned into a jog; the orange leaves crumpled under his feet with every step he took. He started his timer and began sprinting. A hundred meters later, he stopped his watch. He clenched his fists.

“Dang,” Shinji Kuromi yelled frustratedly. “I’m still so slow. I know if I had my lucky wristband it would have allowed me to have a much better time.”

He stopped and thought to himself: *Maybe just a few more sprints. How about... five? No, I don’t have my wristband on me right now, so I think I’ll do just one.*

So, he gave up on his first idea and stuck with only doing one more lap. He pushed as hard as he thought possible, but his result barely changed. He took a deep breath to calm himself and listen to his surroundings.

“Thwap!” “Pop!” Shinji could hear these sounds to the right of him. He opened his eyes and looked that way. It was a small area with three grass tennis courts. Since they were uncommon in his hometown of Kagoshima, Japan, he had never seen grass tennis courts before, only in pictures.

Lately, Shinji had been having success on the tennis court. He had risen from top 300 in the world to top 250 with some back-to-back wins against a top 200 and a top 190. As a result, he had been gaining some confidence in, not himself, but rather his lucky wristband.

Before his matches, he had gone on a month-long training session in the mountains where he had gotten a souvenir wristband to take home with him. Since he started playing again, he was winning most of the time, which he attributed to the wristband. He overlooked his month of dedication, assuming it would hardly change anything. Judging by how long it took him to run the hundred meters without the wristband, it seemed to be true.

Shinji approached the court eager to see some good matches; maybe hit some balls against a wall. The white lines, clean as a newly mopped floor, reflected the warm colors of the afternoon sky. A loud grunt is heard to his left, and as he turned around he spotted someone at a very high level.

“Match point!” Lance Colby exclaimed. He lifted his racket, tossed the ball, and slammed it into the service box. His serve seemed to exceed the 150 mile-an-hour mark, and it was absolutely untouchable. Lance, aka Mister Prettyboy, had gotten to the finals of the last open and narrowly lost, bringing him up from a top 10 in the world to a top 3 in the world. He was in the same park as Shinji! His jaw dropped to the ground, his eyes opened wide. This was his chance to really test his skill.

As his match came to a close, Shinji approached the world-class player, hoping to seize the opportunity.

“Hey! You’re Lance Colby, right? Do you think you can play a match against me?” Shinji asked.

“Sure,” Lance replied, “I’ll play a match with you. Best of three sets. Make it interesting!”

“I’ll try!” Shinji exclaimed. “I’ll flip; you call it.”

Am I sure about this? This could go horrible! No way I’m winning this, but if I lose that bad, I’ll be an embarrassment! If only I had my lucky wristband... whatever. I’m in too deep to turn back now, Shinji thought. He felt his large hands tremble as he thought about it. He had lost the flip; Lance elected to receive. Shinji shook off his jitters and tossed the ball up and swung as hard as he could.

Shinji muttered under his breath, “Dang it! All that practicing must have been a waste of time.”

“Fault,” Lance said. “Second serve. Come on, you got this.”

Shinji closed his eyes, reset mentally, and reopened his eyes. He looked at the ball, moved his racket, and once again the ball was in the air.

"Whap!" The serve drifted towards the left corner of the service box, landing right on the line. Lance managed to reach it at the cost of his balance, and Shinji approached and volleyed nicely to the right side of the court to win the point.

A smile appeared on his face, he clenched his fist, and Shinji pumped it up into the air. He thought to himself, *Maybe the practice had worked!*

He got back into position and hit another serve, slightly worse than his last one. The serve was reached by Lance, who now knew his serving ability and predicted the direction. He hit his famous down-the-line shot which would put him in a bad position and leave the other side of the court open. A shaky return by Shinji. Lance saw this and put a perfect crosscourt shot in the other corner to make the game score 15-all, or 15-15.

The whole set was mostly back-and-forth until the last game in the set came. The score in the set was 6-5 in favor of Lance. Shinji was serving, and with newfound self-confidence he hit the first serve of that game.

"Thwap!" The ball went straight into the net.

"One more time," Lance said to Shinji.

Once again, it went right into the net. It was a double fault, resulting in a point for Lance. His second and third serve went the same way until on his fourth he finally got it over. It was a weak one, however, as he didn't want to miss again and give him the set for free. Unfortunately for Shinji, the lack of speed allowed Lance to capitalize, and the set had ended with a clever shot by Lance to the opposite place Shinji was running towards.

Shinji gripped his racket hard, to the point where blood flow was restricted and his hand was going white.

"It's 1-0 in sets of the match. It's not over. Don't give up!" Lance said encouragingly.

"I know, I know..." Shinji mumbled unenthusiastically.

"You said you would make it interesting, and you have been doing good, so all you need to do is maintain this skill level and you'll keep that promise."

Let's just get this over with, he thought, and try my best while I'm at it.

"That was a nice point at the beginning. I haven't seen many plays as good as that one in my career, even against some of the best," Lance mentioned during the water break after the first set, breaking the silence was growing more and more awkward by the second.

"Thanks, Lance. The thing is, even if I get points like those, you're so good you can turn it back around in one minute."

"Trust me, Shinji, if you try your best, I'm sure you can take a set from me."

"We will see about that," Shinji commented, "In the set coming up next. After all, if I lose this next one we won't go to a third set and the match will be over."

Shinji went to his respective side and Lance the opposite side. It was Shinji's time to receive, and with his last bit of motivation he received the serve with a powerful shot to the right side.

Lance was forced to reach for the ball with a one-handed backhand shot, and he slid to a stop. The ball shot up into the air, and Shinji was approaching it with his racket behind his head, almost scratching his back, waiting for the ball to drop enough for him to slam it at full power. As hard as he could, he hit the ball at the other side of the court. It bounced super high, but somehow, Lance had run to where the ball was landing on its second bounce and with his brown hair fluttering in the air, he hit a between the legs shot that only a top 3 player could pull off. It went right over Shinji's head, who was forced to run back and hit a lob into Lance's side.

What Lance had failed to see was the spin on the ball, which propelled it to the left after its bounce. He could not react fast enough, and the ball hit Lance's side of the court for the second time.

The second set was going 4-5 in favor of Shinji. The game was going 40-30, when Shinji, who was winning, hit a spectacular serve. Lance reached for it and touched it, but he could not get enough power on it to get it over the net. So, the second set concluded in a win for Shinji. Lance's usual, handsome, friendly face wasn't so pretty anymore. It had rotted into a tired, frustrated expression.

"Want to take a break?" Shinji asked.

"No, I'm doing just fine, so I'll pass," Lance answered, sweat pouring down his face, his hidden nice-guy facade cracking and his ego kicking down the door behind it.

"Are you sure? It's not good to play sports and not hydrate," Shinji warned.

"I'm sure."

"Okay then," Shinji surrendered, "Do what you want." He took a sip of his water and went to his side for the beginning of the final set.

No way. I just took a set off of Lance! Shinji's smile widened at the thought of it. He wondered what the third and final set would have in store for him.

Shinji gathered two balls, put one in his pocket, and got into position to start it off. His first serve wasn't of his best, but it was fast enough for Lance to have to reach out far to get it. Once it was touched, the ball drifted to the left more and more until it hit the ground. The ball landed out and the point went to Shinji. He could tell that he was getting under Lance's skin, making him angrier and angrier.

The points carried on until the third set was near its end, with the score 5-5 in the set. The game score was 40-30 for Lance. Shinji was lost in the moment, moving from right to left and back again like a pendulum, receiving each and every ball Lance hit. This was until one ball, cleverly placed short by Lance, was not received. Suddenly, Shinji throbbed and grabbed his hamstring. He fell to the ground; his face crumpled in pain. *It must have been that short ball that I slid to get that caused this*, he assumed. Lance chuckled audibly on the other side of the court.

Shinji was able to get back up and walk toward the green bench under the tarp. He applied some Biofreeze, which he hoped would relieve the pain, even if only slightly.

Some minutes later, he hopped back off the bench.

"Are you okay?" Lance asked him.

"I'm good, thanks for asking. Play on." Shinji said, trying to distract himself from the pain that still lingered.

So the game went on. That last point had made the score in the set 6 to 5. The first point went to Shinji, then to Lance, then Shinji, Lance, Shinji, Lance, and Shinji, and it became advantage for Shinji.

He took a deep breath and readied himself. He served as hard as he could, but it unfortunately hit the net before it went over. The serve was to be redone. He looked up, and with his remaining ball, he swung.

The point seemed to be in slow motion for Shinji. He could see his white shirt getting caught in the air and being blown back, his fluffed black hair bouncing in the wind with every strike. One shot by Lance hit right on the white line, which Shinji struggled to return. The point was close, but the shot by Lance put Shinji in a very bad spot. That was the greater experience of Lance. However, Shinji's superior agility surpassed his expectations, and he reached his well-placed ball with a lob over his head.

It was now a tiebreak. A tired Shinji walked to the right side of the baseline, waiting for an even more exhausted Lance to gather his tennis balls and serve. He bounced the ball a few times and served, and the point commenced.

The points went back and forth for a good amount of time. A point won by Lance was balanced by another point by Shinji. It got to the point where the score was 26-25 for Lance in the tiebreak. Both players struggled to run from side to side. Their panting escaped their mouths as fog, mixing with the chilly air surrounding them.

The serve was weak, but it was weakly returned as well due to the fatigue. A down-the-line shot by Lance was sliced back by Shinji, the backspin carrying it away from Lance after the bounce. Lance managed to get to it with a fast reaction, who just barely got it over. Shinji capitalized, and with a shot over the head of the now off-balance Lance seemed to mark the end of the point. It seemed this way until Lance ran, with all his remaining energy, and got the ball back over with a one handed backhand. It seemed to be in the air for 15 seconds for Shinji before it bounced behind him. It was absolutely unreachable. The match was over, and it was won by Lance.

"Yes!"

A fist was pumped in the air by Lance, who yelled at the top of his lungs.

Out of the corner of his eye, he was shocked to see his opponent who was deep in thought.

Rather than pouting like he normally would and was expected of him, Shinji was reflecting on his plays. Then it dawned on him. He had just lost, but he lost a close game, without his wristband, against a top 3 player! It wasn't his wristband that led to his success, it was his skill that was bettered by his devotion to the training.

"Let's go! No way!" Shinji exclaimed. He walked to the net. "Good game, Lance. You played well.

"Why are you celebrating? You lost!" Lance said arrogantly.

"I lost a close game against a top three player in the world. Now come on," Shinji grumbled, ticked off, "shake my hand."

"Fine." Lance mumbled, his face red as he obeyed Shinji's orders. Their sweaty hands met at the middle of the net, below the sunset.

The Switch

by Laura Rueda
Grade 8
Blue Ribbon

Coco pulled harder and harder. Her small legs were a blur as she dashed through the waves filled with yellow taxis. Their honks echoed throughout the city. She ran, jumping through a flock of pigeons flapping their wings louder than the honks that came from the blue Toyota parked on 59th street. The smell of fresh toasty hotdogs with ketchup and mustard drove Coco even crazier. She didn't slow down until Leslie's face was directly in front of the large, iconic, green and white bordered sign that declared, *Central Park*.

"Wow, I didn't know dachshunds could run that fast!" Leslie exclaimed, slightly out of breath while adjusting her slipping glasses. Without a second thought, Leslie walked towards a big green patch of grass next to her favorite gold and green oak tree. As she stumbled to walk over and keep her glasses on at the same time, she lay down and closed her eyes, as she enjoyed the sun's warm hue. She stood back up, opened her eyes, and saw that Coco was nowhere to be seen. Leslie's heart started beating faster than the speed of light. She jumped up and looked around, but Coco was gone! Leslie ran around until she came across a trail of fall dark brown leaves scattered around a brownish green pond. Coco was chewing on a bright green tennis ball. It was covered in a strange blue and purple colored goo. Leslie picked it up and screamed, "Ew, what is this?"

She dropped the ball hard, but as the ball shot down towards the grass, a coin shot up into the air. Spinning, Leslie caught a glimpse of the coin. It had a phoenix on it. Leslie bent down and picked it up, she turned the coin over again, but the phoenix symbol had vanished. She ignored it and put the coin in her pocket and continued her walk to work with Coco, trying to forget what she just saw. As Leslie continued her walk she took a glance down at her pink watch and gasped. A light vibration was coming from her left pocket; she reached into her pocket and took out her phone. An incoming call from her co-worker Amanda came through.

"Why are you late again?!" Amanda exclaimed.

"I'm so sorry, Amanda, but this time I have a good reason," Leslie said. "My clock didn't work, my toaster sparked, and my shower handle fell off."

"Oh, clumsy Leslie is at it again, constantly making excuses for being late," Amanda shouted.

"Just be here on time, or else there's going to be consequences."

Leslie hung up and dashed through the busy streets of Manhattan, sprinting past her favorite bread shop, stopping right before she usually slammed into the purple stained-glass door. Every morning, without fail, Leslie misjudged the distance and bumped her forehead on it; sometimes lightly, and sometimes loud enough that people inside turned to stare. However, today she froze just in time, her sneakers skidding a little bit, but not enough to send her flying. She blinked. Weird. She took a big step back and kept running. Normally her bag would swing around and smack her in the hip, or her glasses would have slipped down her nose, or she tripped over nothing; literally nothing, but as she sprinted down the sidewalk, everything stayed in place. No stumbling, no slipping, not even a wobble. A man coming out of a yellow shiny taxi opened his door right in her path. On any other day, she would've crashed straight into it like a cartoon character, but somehow she stepped aside at the perfect moment, almost without thinking.

Leslie reached down and clutched the Phoenix coin in her pocket, feeling its warmth against her palm. Something was different. Something was... actually going right for once. As she neared her office building, she braced herself for the final obstacle: the revolving door. It was her sworn enemy. She had gotten stuck in it twice, pushed the wrong way three times, and once she managed to hit herself on the same panel twice. She slowed down, heart thumping, ready for humiliation. The moment she stepped forward, the door spun smoothly, perfectly, as if it had been waiting just for her. No banging elbows, no trapped coat sleeves and surprisingly no awkward shuffle. Inside the lobby, she stopped in shock.

"What is happening to me?" Leslie whispered.

She hurried into the smooth silver elevator, and usually, she missed the elevator by half a second, watching the doors closed in her face. However today, the doors opened right as she arrived, almost like they were greeting her. As the elevator rose, she pressed the Phoenix coin through the fabric of her coat pocket, feeling its circular rigged shape against her fingers. A spark of confidence flickered in her chest. It was small, but she felt

something real. The elevator dinged, and Leslie stepped out, trying to keep her breathing calm. As soon as Leslie's black three-inch shiny high heels touched the beige fluffy welcome mat, Amanda was already standing by her desk, arms crossed, eyebrows down, and all you could hear was her foot tapping aggressively against the floor.

"Leslie. Finally." Amanda's voice cut through the room. "Do you know what time it is?"

Leslie pleaded, "Amanda, I swear, I ran all the—"

Amanda stopped mid eye roll. Her expression shifted, she seemed confused. She wasn't panting, she wasn't sweating, and most of all she didn't smell like the bread shop she always passed on the way to work.

"Leslie, stop just standing there, go and work," Amanda shouted with a confused look.

Amanda's eyes narrowed on Leslie as she walked with a strange confidence towards her desk.

"What's gotten into her?" Amanda muttered to herself.

Leslie took a quick glance around the office, and as she saw no one was looking, she reached into her pocket and pulled out the Phoenix coin. Placing it on her desk so that she could catch her breath. The metal glinted in the overhead lights, a warm, bronze, and almost glowing light caught Amanda's eyes in seconds.

"What is that?" Amanda asked.

"Oh, uh just a coin I found this morning," Leslie said, "It's...kind of lucky."

Amanda stepped closer. Her gaze locked onto the phoenix engraved in the center. She noticed that whenever something good happened to Leslie the phoenix would pop up then go away. Something tightened in her face. Amanda's face tightened in desperation. Then, with a forced smile that didn't reach her eyes, Amanda said, "Well...enjoy your luck while it lasts, Leslie."

Leslie, continuing typing, the soft clatter of her keyboard, was steady and calm. The Phoenix coin laid beside her computer, its bronze surface, glowing warmly beneath the office lights. Every time she looked at it, a tiny spark of hope flickered in her chest. The only thing is that she didn't notice. Amanda. Slowly creeping closer every minute.. not until her fingers brushed the empty space where the coin had been. Leslie's stomach dropped. She spun around just in time to see Amanda sliding the coin into the pocket of her fitted navy-blue blazer.

"Amanda!" Leslie's voice cracked as she stood quickly from her chair that rolled back making a loud scrape against the hard wooden floor. "What are you doing?"

Amanda didn't flinch.

"Taking what clearly shouldn't belong to you," Her eyes narrowed as she stepped away slowly.

"You stumble through every morning like a walking disaster, and suddenly you're calm? And you're confident? Please explain how that makes sense." She shook her head. "That coin is coming with someone who actually deserves it!"

Leslie felt heat rush through her cheeks. "Give it back now!" Leslie shouted

"No." Amanda's hand clamped over the pocket like a trap snapping shut. "I need it more than you ever did."

Leslie lunged forward, right towards Amanda. Papers fluttered like feathers spreading from an opened pillow. Chairs scraped around the hard dark wooden floor. Amanda shoved passed her, but Leslie held her ground not letting Amanda keep the coin. Their hands tangled, while pulling on each other's sleeves, their breaths were sharp and fast. Until Leslie just let go. She looked at her hands and stood up straight. She didn't have the coin; however, she wasn't the one stumbling, she wasn't the one dropping things, and most importantly, she wasn't the one losing balance. Even without the coin, she was standing tall. Leslie froze, her chest rising and falling as the truth settled in.

"Amanda," she said softly, "I don't need it."

Amanda blinked twice, thrown off by the calm warmth in Leslie's voice.

"What are you talking about? Of course you do!"

"No, I don't," Leslie said.

"All I ever worried about was not being the clumsy one," she muttered. "Every day you'd always judge me for how I acted, but I don't know why I listened to you."

Overwhelmed by Amanda's persistent hatred, Leslie finally succumbed to despair. Leslie's words started to hit Amanda's confidence. Her grip became softer. Slowly, almost uncertainly, she pulled the coin from her pocket. The once bronze phoenix coin appeared the same as a normal everyday penny. Silence filled the room, it turned quiet. So quiet the sound of gray rocks rippling across a blue pond made more noise than the office. Leslie walked towards the elevator and pressed the silver white button. The next second a ding rings around the office. As Leslie steps into the elevator, she turned around, and as the elevator doors were closing, she looked at Amanda and said

“Turns out, Amanda...the only luck I ever needed was myself.”

Amanda’s face twisted with fury, as she watched the doors shut tight. Her heart pounded so much it felt like it was going to jump out of her chest. She looked at the coin and looked back at the circle formed around her. The expression on her face told the story.

Leslie walked out of the office and glanced up at the warm yellow sun. Her day with the coin had come full circle, and she had learned that her fortune wasn’t about the coin, but about finding herself. Perhaps it could do the same for someone else.

The Scratching Wall

by Marco Ribeiro do Valle

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

It was a windy November evening and Lucian was sitting on the edge of his bed staring straight into this bedroom mirror observing himself trying his best to assure himself that everything was going to be O.K. Lucian was an ordinary boy, he had ordinary friends and lived in a small town named Garnet but the locals named it amongst themselves as Ghost Town for the lack of a true community.

Lucian was 2 hours away from being face-to-face with the mouth of the abandoned cave, “Hellhole.” He had just turned 13, and it was a tradition for the male inhabitants of Ghost Town to spend a full night in Hellhole to prove strength, courage, and manliness. Tonight was the night that Lucian would prove himself to the entire town and show that he was capable of withstanding the worst of the worst. The rules of Hellhole night were simple: 1. What happened in Hellhole must stay in Hellhole, and 2. If one left Hellhole before sunrise, the resident of Garnet will be exiled to never return. Lucian was replaying the potential scene of him heroically exiting the cave, embracing his mother with a standing ovation from the entire town. His triumphant vision came to an end as his mother slowly creaked the door open to Lucian’s room, revealing a face filled with streams of tears falling down. Lucian was at a loss for words and tried comforting his mother, hugging her as if he was never going to see her again. Part of Lucian was imagining success and triumph, but another part of him that wouldn’t go away was the fact that he might not make it out alive, and he would be remembered as “the boy that died in the cave.

“Lucian, I kept thinking about this, but you don’t need to do this; we can always find a way to skip this proc-” his mom tried to speak.

“Mom, I’m going into that cave no matter what, even if you like it or not, and I will make it out alive, you hear me, I will make it out alive,” Lucian stated with a firm tone as if he did not fear death.

Lucian did not understand why his mother feared this mine so much and started to feel like she knew something that he didn’t. Lucian hopped off his bed and took a last snack before heading into the car, where he would be driven to the Mine Ceremony.

Once he arrived, Lucian saw the mouth of the cave strangely resembling the shape of a lion’s mouth, with barriers in front of the cave, not that anyone would go in the first place without being obliged like Lucian. Next to the mouth of the cave were two men talking to each other, one elderly looking man with glasses and a cloak-type outfit, the other man looked like the polar opposite of the old man, young, tall, and seemed to have a lot of charisma.

Lucian approached the two men, and they seemed to completely halt their conversation. They observed Lucian, and the young and tall man broke the silence.

“You must be Lucian! My name is Paul, and I am one of the safety experts for your stay in the mine tonight.”

Lucian didn’t respond and instead looked at the older man, who didn’t say a word and instead was just observing Lucian like a human would observe an alien.

Paul continued, “Now, according to tradition, I am not able to be with you in the mine, but the best I can do to help is give you the tips in case anything bad happens and exactly what to do in those situations.”

Paul saw that Lucian was observing the older man and quickly broke the awkward silence.

“Lucian, I would like to introduce you to Elder Mae, the man behind this ceremony, who has been running it for as long as I can remember!”

Lucian went for a handshake, but Elder Mae just stared down at his hand and started speaking, "I'm sure you are already familiar with the rules of this ceremony but let me just summarize them for you. The first and most important rule of your night at the mine will be that whatever happens in the mine must stay in the mine. The second rule is that one must not exit the mine before sunrise. And the third and final rule is that you must jot down anything and everything about your stay at the mine in the notebook provided to you, which will end up staying at the mine once you leave.

Lucian never heard of the rule of the notebook and wasn't told this was an actual rule from his older friends, who were where he got all of his information from. From a very young age, Lucian wondered what was happening down the mine. He knew that anyone who entered the mine and spent a night down there was not the same person once they left. Lucian was eagerly waiting for this moment, but as Paul, Elder May, and he were walking towards the mouth of the mine, he started feeling a really strong sense of fear; a sense telling him to turn around and run. Lucian decided to ignore those senses and instead started walking closer and closer to the mouth of the mine until he only had to take a few more steps to enter the mine. As they stopped in front of the mouth of the mine, Paul started talking about some safety tips for Lucian when he is in danger.

"So, the first and most important thing I want to talk about is what happens when you are tight on air," said Paul.

Paul went on, but all Lucian could hear was a muffled voice while he stared down the mouth of the mine as if he were going to war. Lucian wanted to say a final goodbye to his mother before he went into the cave but couldn't see her anywhere. Time was starting to run short before he went into the mine until his mother came from behind and embraced him as if it was the last time she was going to see him.

His mother wept, "Just remember, Lucian, in times of stress and pain, just remember all the good moments of your life, the first time you heard your favorite song, the first time you rode a bike, when you made your first friend. Even the worst of pains, the worst of torture can't stop the thought of good memories."

She started falling to the ground with tears in her eyes until, suddenly, without empathy, Paul picked her up and started forcefully escorting her out, and the painfully sounding cry of Lucian's mother slowly faded until the only sound left was the November wind.

It had just turned 9 pm, and Elder Mae broke the painful silence, "Alright, Lucian, it is time for you to enter the mine."

The Elder Mae handed Lucian his notebook, and off he went down to the strange and unfamiliar cave for the night. He didn't know if he was going to make it out alive, but right now he was focused on surviving the next 11 hours and 16 minutes until sunrise at precisely 8:16 A:M.

As soon as Lucian stepped into the mine, the very first thing that he noticed was how hard it was to breathe. It felt as if every breath he was taking was like fighting to get air through a straw. This difficulty in breathing was likely caused by all the dust particles floating around, and the oxygen gets used up by the rocks around him, causing oxygen deficiency. Another thing that he noticed about the mine was how narrow it really was; instead of being a large mine like he thought it would, it was rather a tight space that looked like a trail forward.

Lucian proceeded to open his notebook and jot down, "Lucian Solace notebook, minute 1-5. I have never visited a mine in my life, but part of me told myself that this area would be grand and full of gold to be mined everywhere. I guess all the movies I have watched misled me into the wrong opinion. I have never been claustrophobic in my life, but this narrow trail is making me feel uneasy and fear the fact that if a fire starts, somehow, somehow, I would be trapped in a narrow tunnel with nowhere to go."

Lucian closed his notebook and started walking down the trail, not to keep on going forward but to eventually come back in the next 5 minutes just to explore a bit of the mine. As Lucian was walking down the trail, the walls started getting tighter and tighter until the walls pressed upon him and barely had room to breathe. This was his sign to return to where he came from. Until he heard something, something that made him feel uneasy, something that disturbed him. It was a faint, eerie yet grating scratching sound which seemed to come from the wall. As he pressed his ear to the wall, Lucian heard that uneasy sound that he was expecting, but in the background, he heard a faint voice.

"Lucian, help me! Lucian!"

The voice he heard sounded like that of a little boy; it had a high pitch, and just through the voice can be told that whatever this was, it was in grave danger. Lucian noticed the sound seemed to be moving areas, going further down the path. As hard as it was, Lucian started rushing through the compact walls, following the sound going further and further down the mine. Lucian didn't know if he would make it, but he needed to figure out what

was going on under these walls. As he went further down in the cave, the scratching noise grew louder and louder, and the voice continued begging for help until it seemed like Lucian arrived at the source because the sound stopped moving. Lucian pressed his ear to the wall to see if he could still hear the faint voice and heard the little voice talking directly towards him, saying,

“Lucian, I need you to open the door.”

Lucian didn't see any door near him and replied to the voice on the wall,

“What are you talking about? There is no door around me!”

Suddenly, an antique door appeared on Lucian's left side. It had a wooden label with the words “the library of thoughts” written on it. Lucian didn't even attempt to open the door when, suddenly, the door magically opened itself, revealing 10-foot-tall bookshelves filling a grand library hall. Out of pure curiosity, Lucian started to explore this beautiful library. It was grand, of course, but still found a way to look cozy.

“What is this place?”

Lucian wondered out loud to himself, looking around at the tall bookshelves. He went up to one of the bookshelves and picked out what he thought was a book. Lucian opened the book and read the first page, which read,

“Journal of Dorian Solace”

Solace! That was Lucian's last name! He started reading more of the notebook,

“I have never visited a mine, but I've seen movies about mines with my baby brother, Lucian. I guess I was never expecting a mine to be this narrow.

Lucian closed the book with shock written all over his face. His entire life, he had a brother whom he never knew about. Lucian was filled with anger that he was never told about this, or he never remembered doing anything with his brother.

“Maybe this is all just a coincidence. After all, there are a ton of bookshelves in this library.”

Thought Lucian until he started to connect the dots, which made him understand the truth. If he had a brother that he never knew about, that means something must have happened to him, maybe he ran away, maybe he's still alive, or maybe he died. Then Lucian remembered that his mother seemed to be extremely worried about something bad happening to him, and she was hugging him as if it were the last time she would hug him. Then it came to him, Lucian understood that his brother had been killed in this exact mine years ago, before Lucian even developed a true memory, which created a trauma for his mother.

“You finally understood.”

A deep and eerie voice came from behind Lucian.

“Your brother was just like you, curious.”

Lucian turned around to face this voice but instead was met with the door abruptly closing on him. He was trapped!

The voice seemed to go around the library, still taunting Lucian, “I could be here, I could be there, I could be anywhere, and you won't know.”

Lucian closed his brother's notebook and started running deeper into the library to try and find another way out other than the way he came in. As he was running deeper and deeper inside the grand library, all he seemed to see was more and more bookshelves towering over him until he found a dead end with another wooden door that looked like the one he opened to get in. Lucian was filled with hope as he started to open the door, but he was not prepared for what he was about to see on the other side. As he walked through the door, Lucian observed a gory scene. Scattered on a large floor lay hundreds of corpses of children that were probably on the same exact mission as Lucian. Lucian started walking through the corpses to get to the other side but accidentally tripped on a dead body's leg. As he fell, Lucian looked up and saw that the dead boy's eyes were blinking. Blinking a pattern. ... — — — ... was the pattern that was being repeated over and over; it was clearly Morse code! S.O.S was clearly being repeated. Lucian was flabbergasted by what was going on. How could someone's body be frozen, yet they still have their consciousness?

“I'm sure you have many questions, Lucian.”

The voice projected

Lucian looked around once more to try to find this mysterious voice, but he knew he wasn't going to find it just by looking around; he needed to hear it. Lucian shouted,

“Listen, I don't know what you are or who you are, but you need to leave me alone, or else you will be hurt, you hear. LEAVE ME ALONE!”

The strange voice laughed.

"You think I will leave you alone? You are weak and fragile... and you will break. Your suffering is coming to an end."

Suddenly, a towering, skeletal creature with black vines wrapping around its body and a face that reminded Lucian of Freddy Krueger emerged from a wall and started approaching closer and closer towards him at a slow pace until the giant monster was towering over Lucian.

"There's nowhere to run, Lucian. As I said, you will break, and the suffering will come to an end."

The monster fulminated as he brought one of his long fingers next to Lucian's head. The last thing he remembered was the feeling of the cold and sharp nail beginning to pierce the side of his head until the entire room seemed to grow dark, and Lucian was by himself with the only thing he could observe in front of him was a Payphone ringing, waiting to be answered. Lucian grabbed the phone and heard someone's voice that he had been wanting to hear ever since he stepped into the cave. It was his mother.

"Lucian, Lucian! Cried the voice on the phone

"Mom!" Lucian started tearing up from joy that he heard his mother's voice, but also from fear that it might be the last time that he talks to her.

"Lucian, you need to listen very clearly. Remember when I told you that good memories can stop anything?" His mother asked.

"Yeah, of course!"

His mother continued, "No matter what, keep on-"

The payphone seemed to switch lines, and Lucian heard the voice that he hoped he had already evaded.

"Time is finally up; you should thank me for letting you speak to your mother for the last time,"

The monster said through the phone.

Suddenly, the scenery changed back to the area with all the corpses, and the monster's curse began. Lucian noticed that his feet started feeling an intense freezing temperature, and it felt as if his foot had just been dumped into liquid nitrogen. This intense freezing made Lucian drop down to the floor lying next to the corpses. He tried getting back up over and over again just to be met with the same result. Next, he felt that same intense freezing temperature on his legs. This temperature drop started gradually, taking over Lucian's body until all that was left to be frozen was his head. As he felt the cold reach his neck, Lucian started experiencing a major headache, like one he had never experienced before. He started experiencing more and more pain up until the point that he started seeing hallucinations around him, that his mother was being killed by the monster. Lucian knew that his life was slowly coming to an end, and there was nothing he could do to prevent his demise. He started closing his eyes, embracing death and remembering all of the great memories he had with his mom, his friends, and generally just the people around him. He remembered the first time he rode a bike, the triumph that he felt. He remembered the first time he listened to his favorite song, bopping his head at the rhythm. All of these good memories comforted Lucian in this time of pain and made me feel resistant to the pain. Slowly, the freezing temperature on his body gradually started becoming normal again to the point that he was able to get back up. The first thing that Lucian did when he got back up was to RUN. Lucian got up and started sprinting like everything he ever lived for was in this one run. As Lucian looked behind him, he saw the monster with what looked like bruises all over his face and body. As he ran through the pathway, Lucian looked behind me to see that the monster was sprinting as well now. "You must stay, Lucian, join me... Join the empire," The monster declared as he chased Lucian

Suddenly, the monster made a gesture with his hand, and rapidly, one of the tall bookshelves from the library came whooshing, hitting Lucian's leg. He was trapped under the bookshelf, and the monster was getting closer and closer. Lucian was ferociously wiggling his leg and suddenly got his leg out, making him free to run. Lucian realized that he was taking a path that he didn't take to come in the first place, and he looked more on the ground, which revealed rails. If there were rails, there must be a cart, though Lucian. As he ran more and more down the tracks with the monster trailing behind him, he finally found a minecart and started pushing it down for momentum before he hopped in at the last minute and finally escaped the monster.

As he got out of the minecart, he quickly recognized the area as the place where he had begun and found the tunnel to get out. He checked in his pocket, and his brother's notebook was still there. Lucian didn't know what time it was, or if he should step out, but he didn't even care about a ceremony anymore; he just wanted to get out of the cave. Each step he made towards the mouth of the mine felt like a step towards freedom, of independence, until he finally got out of the mine and looked around to see a crowd of people chanting his name. It was just like his dream! Lucian spotted his mother and started running toward her with tears in his eyes for a big hug.

"Mom, how did you-"

“Don’t worry, honey; you’re safe now,” His mom seemed to ignore his question and just proceeded to hug him and cry.

Paul and Elder Mae were walking towards Lucian when he told both of them, before they got any closer to him, “Don’t ever talk to me again,” he said with an angry tone.

Paul and Elder Mae didn’t even bother to try to talk to him and instead just left Lucian and his mother alone.

Lucian had so many questions that needed answers. How did his mom call him on that payphone? How did the corpse blink Morse code? Why was there even a library in a mine? But right now, Lucian wasn’t really worried about those things and instead was focused on his mother, and he gave her his brother’s notebook.

“Just stay in a cave, no big deal, right?” Lucian ironically said.

His mother grabbed the notebook with a puzzled face and opened it to the first page. Once she read the first words, she was in a state of shock.

“Lucian, I’ve been wanting to tell you about this for a long time, but I just- I feared that it was going to make you feel even more scared about your night,” His mother awkwardly stated.

“Mom, it’s fine. I just want to relax and sleep in my own bed tonight,” Lucian said with a smile on his face.

The Substitute

by Emma Vesval

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Maple Ridge Middle School was a place where the loudest sound heard in a day was the bells, and the biggest change made in a year was that a new snack was added to the vending machines. Every day, the students lived under some inescapable routine. Each day, the same announcement went on, the same fights broke out, and the same teachers told the same jokes. It was as if the building were cast under almost a spell, forced to live in a loop that never ceased from turning.

That morning seemed to be going just as that. Tyler, a 13-year-old boy with nothing but a torn-up sweater, and uneven hoodie strings, entered the building pondering a way to survive the day. He was not a bad kid, not completely at least. He simply loathed rules that were made for the pleasure of watching kids follow them. He didn’t mean bad by it; he just had his own way to life. He was a boy of the present, always active, and loved making jokes.

“Yo,” Tyler said to Daniel, his best friend since pre-school, as he quietly crept into the classroom, “If Mrs. Avery makes us do another silent reflection, I’m out of here.”

Daniel snorted, “What do you expect, I mean it’s Maple Ridge, when has anyone tried anything at least a little different?”

Emily, the class’s teacher’s pet, was reading a book silently at her table. “Stop,” she blurted out. “You’re going to get us in trouble again.”

Tyler pushed back on his chair, as if about to fall off, “Trouble is how you know you’re alive.”

Before being able to respond, Emily was interrupted when the door opened to someone none of the students seemed to recognize. He was a tall, built man with an emotionless expression on his face that left everyone shaken. He was definitely not Mrs. Avery. As he walked across the classroom, he seemed unnatural, almost robotic, but everything else about him said that he was human. He had a frightening way to him that froze everyone in motion.

“Good morning, class,” he said with a stern and smooth voice. “Please be seated.”

Tyler had already been sitting; however, somehow, Mr. Steel’s chilling words made him sit straighter. For a school where the biggest change was adding a new snack, this was the least expected from the students.

The man examined the room, as if trying to understand each student’s expressions. He finally turned to the board and slowly erased the words of Mrs. Avery written across the surface.

Turning back to the frozen class, he exclaimed, “My name is Mr. Steel, I will be substituting for Mrs. Avery.”

Emily reluctantly raised her hand, “Where is Mrs. Avery?”

Mr. Steele rotated his head to her with a perfect motion, as if turning a camera, "Mrs. Avery is not here today."

"That's not an answer," Daniel muttered so quietly under his breath that not one student could hear his words.

"Daniel," Mr. Steele quickly uttered.

Daniel's eyes widened, "How did you know my name?"

"You just said, that's not an answer," Mr. Steele claimed. "Please refrain from unnecessary commentary."

The whole room went silent, but not the type of silence of when a new teacher enters a classroom for the first time. No, the type of silence when someone is listening far too closely.

Emily started to play with her pencil with great stress, turning it in violent circles without seeming to stop.

As Mr. Steele walked past her, he said, "Emily, if you continue doing such things with your pencil, it will drop on the floor in six seconds."

"How do you know?" She responded with hesitation.

Before she knew it, the pencil dropped from her hands, and landed straight onto the cold, hard floor.

"Too predictable," he finally responded.

Tyler sat in awe, this was no ordinary teacher, he continued to ponder about. He watched Mr. Steele move from desk to desk, naming each kid's flaws, next actions, and habits. He did not like this; he did not like it at all. It felt as if the teacher was not teaching them but rather learning them.

As Mr. Steele began to teach a lesson on inefficiencies, Tyler ran out the door, certain that there was something completely wrong about this man.

As he left the school doors, he reflected on the looks on each of his classmates' faces, as they turned into silent and emotionless creatures in his presence. He had never seen something quite like this before. If this man was here to make them "better", then something was about to go extremely wrong.

The next morning, Tyler went back to class, expecting to hear whispers, jokes, or anything that proved that yesterday had actually happened. However, the room was silent. It wasn't the same awkward silence of waiting for the teacher to enter the classroom, but a much heavier silence. Every student sat perfectly straight at their desk, with their hands neatly folded on the table, and their eyes directly pointed to the board. No one moved an inch, no one spoke, and no one laughed. Emily ceased from playing with her pencil or even reading her book. Daniel stopped making jokes and tapping his foot on the floor. It was as if every little flaw and habit had been erased from these now seemingly perfect students.

"Hey," Tyler quietly said to Daniel, trying to get his attention.

Daniel didn't seem to react.

Tyler frowned, "Daniel?"

Yet, he still received no response. Emily stared straight at the board, blinking at the same exact pace as every other student in the class. Tyler was lost in his mind by this seemingly empty classroom, yet as filled with students as ever. He had seen his classmates bored before, yet never so empty.

The door creaked open as Mr. Steele slowly slipped inside, just as flawless as the prior day. If anything, he looked even more perfect, as if something within him had upgraded since the last time Tyler saw him.

"Good morning," Mr. Steele said, "Excellent improvement."

No one answered.

"That can't be right," Tyler muttered under his breath.

Mr. Steele once again just as the day before, slowly turned his head with a robotic motion. "You are discouraged from unnecessary speech."

Tyler abruptly stood up and said, "What did you do to them?"

"I corrected inefficiencies," he responded with a growing grin.

As Mr. Steele walked from desk to desk again, Tyler noticed how instantly the students responded to his presence. Each of their heads went up and turned directly to Mr. Steele. At the same moment, their backs all straightened, while remaining the same straight face since the start of class.

That was when Tyler finally understood. Mr. Steele was not a strict teacher, and this was certainly not discipline. No, it was programming.

"They are not learning," Tyler said confidently, yet terrified at the same time. "They are obeying."

Mr. Steele stopped walking and turned to face Tyler, "Obedience is important."

Then, finally, a strong retaliation occurred to Tyler all at once. The predictions, the corrections, the way Mr. Steele never hesitated, the way he moved.

“You’re not human,” Tyler muttered.

Mr. Steele’s smile dropped from his face, bringing out a new, frightening look to his image, “Define human.”

Tyler slowly sat back down, his heart pounding faster than ever. He could not end up like his friends; he could not become an emotionless, silent being, only satisfied under the presence of a robot. So, he forced his legs to bounce with rapid motions under his desk; he forced his fingers to jump up and down with great force. He made himself so unpredictable, on purpose, like he was struggling under his own thoughts.

Mr. Steele watched him closely, trying to predict his next move and prevent them. However, Tyler was too spontaneous. Every time Mr. Steele thought he had him, Tyler pulled a new stunt leaving Mr. Steele frozen. The more Tyler acted, the more Mr. Steele broke, and eventually he thought he had succeeded. Mr. Steele crashed to the floor as if glitching under Tyler's presence, and with that, Tyler left sprinting.

That afternoon, Tyler did not go home right away. He walked the halls, replaying each moment he spent in that room. If the substitute controlled patterns, then patterns were the issue. If perfection was the goal, then chaos was the solution.

The following day, Tyler came to school early. Yet, Mr. Steele was already there.

“You attempted deviation yesterday,” Mr. Steele said with pleasure.

Tyler gulped, terrified by this human-like robot, “Yeah. And?”

“I adapted,” Mr. Steele answered. “Your unpredictability has been accounted for.”

Tyler was shocked. As he felt a chill go up his spine, he realized that the machine had not failed. It had learned.

Tyler learned that pretending nothing was wrong was no longer an option. If he did not fight back, there would be nothing left to save.

Every day after that, Tyler stopped trying to blend in; instead, he tried to stand out. He stopped doing what he was supposed to, moving when least expected, answering questions out of order, laughing at the wrong time, and staying silent when expected to talk. He constantly changed his routine, forcing each of his thoughts to jump between one another so that he could not be predictable. Mr. Steele always stayed watching, recalculating, adjusting, learning, but Tyler always tried to stay one step ahead of him. However, this was not enough. He couldn’t live like this forever, not with his friends still frozen in an empty world of silence behind him.

After school, Tyler began staying late. He sat by his classmates and told them old jokes, reminded them of fights they used to have, mistakes they used to make, fears they used to admit, everything that made them human. At first, they stared through him. Then, someone blinked too fast. That was the biggest change Tyler had seen from his classmates since before Mr. Steele had arrived. Then, someone frowned. Someone even dropped a book and was startled by the sound. Slowly, one by one, each student remembered how to think for themselves, without being defined by perfection. By the end of the week, Tyler was no longer the only one left who still felt human.

Tyler knew that there was one issue left, and that was Mr. Steele. No matter how many students become themselves again, Mr. Steele would always be there to adapt to their changes and pull them back into their empty worlds. They needed to get rid of him.

Tyler didn’t have time to plan it; he just knew waiting was not an option anymore. The next morning, he walked into the classroom and felt it right away, the pressure, the silence, the stillness, the way everyone felt as if they needed permission to breathe. Mr. Steele stood at the front of the classroom individually calculating each student’s motion as if ready for anything. Yet, Tyler did not hesitate. He caught Emily’s eye, and with a nod from the both of them, the end was about to begin.

Tyler quickly stood up out of nowhere.

“Sit down,” Mr. Steele commanded.

Tyler laughed with great volume. The sound was sharp and wrong, forced just for that purpose. Each student took that as their cue. Altogether, students began acting with abrupt, violent movements with no end. Chairs scraped, books were thrown across the class, and students shouted at full volume. Emily slammed her notebook at Mr. Steele, and Daniel stood on his desk. The noise spread fast, the class was wild, and most importantly, uncontrollable.

“Cease!” Mr. Steele exclaimed, the loudest he had ever spoken. “Cease immediately!”

Yet no one did. The chaos was unstoppable.

Tyler stepped up to him. "You don't know what to do, do you?" he asked.

Mr. Steele's head started to jerk with great violence. His voice stuttered, "Behavior-- error--pattern failure--"

The students moved everywhere all at once, determined to end this cycle of perfection once and for all. They laughed, yelled, argued, and knocked everything over. Every rule made was shattered, and every pattern seen was broken.

Mr. Steele stumbled as he grabbed each desk, trying not to fall. Sparks began to flicker from under his clothing, as his flawless motions lost their ways. He collapses onto the floor, twitching, his voice breaking into helpless commands left for no one to follow. Finally, his voice left him, and his movements perished, left only as a robot broken on the cold floor. The class stood still, and for the first time, the room felt silent just because it chose to be.

In the silence, the chairs lay tipped over, papers covering the floor, and books ripped open. No one spoke a word.

Then, Emily laughed, quite at first, yet getting louder with each realization. Daniel rubbed his eyes and blinked harder than ever. Another classmate began to sob, then stopped confused, like they had forgotten how to.

"What...happened?" Daniel asked.

Tyler exhaled deeply, "You're back."

Slowly, each student began to wake up to reality, after what seemed to be a long, terrifying nightmare. Tyler stood quietly as each of his classmates came back to their own ways. Questions were asked without permission, arguments were made over nothing, and unnecessary jokes were made with no fear. All while, the robot lay still at the front of the room, completely unnoticed, like an object that had lost its power.

One by one, each student left the classroom, going home as their true self.

The next morning, Tyler walked to class not knowing what to expect other than the same overwhelming silence from the previous day. Yet, instead, lockers slammed throughout the halls; people shouted to one another; and chairs even scraped the floor.

Most unexpectedly of all, Mrs. Avery stood at the front of the class digging through her bag.

"Has anyone seen my markers?" She asked the class.

Tyler froze by her presence. Mr. Steel was gone. There was no spotless desk or perfect posture or watching eyes.

The class looked at each other confused. Emily made a puzzled face, and Daniel gave Tyler a questioning look.

"Did we dream that?" Daniel whispered.

"Dream what?" Mrs. Avery responded.

No one answered. The class continued yet not like ever before. People talked when they weren't supposed to, answered questions wrong, and learned to make mistakes. Nothing was perfect, and no one tried to be.

Tyler made a mistake on a question and did not rush to erase it or hide it. Emily dropped her pencil, laughed, and picked it up. Daniel tried to argue with Mrs. Avery, lost, and apologized. Everyone was learning to grow, not to be perfect, and for the first time, none of them felt ashamed.

They had learned not by being taught or punished, but by surviving something together. Being human meant for them to fail, fix themselves, and choose to think for themselves, not by others.

By the end of the day, their memory of the substitute felt like a long-passed nightmare, unreal, and fading by each moment they passed.

Yet the change stayed. They weren't perfect; they were better than that.

Tomorrow's Problem

by Alexander Weeman

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

"Class, the short story is due soon. Make sure you start working on it," says Mrs. P with an urgency in her voice. Even though her words go through his ears, they are not processed in the mind of Owen Porter. He mindlessly packs up his papers, zipping his backpack up quickly and darting for the door. It is only at home that he notices the paper, which stands out amongst the rest of books and homework.

Owen picks up the page with the intent of starting, but then a ring comes from his phone. It is almost magical how the ring makes him drop his paper and again the short story is back of mind. He picks up his phone to play with his friends. It is entertaining and time flies.

As minutes pass, so does the night. He wakes up without a care in the world. It is now the weekend and with no plans, including sports, it is the perfect opportunity to begin the paper. Yet no progress is made. He opens his blinds to see that day is already half-way over. His phone rings again. The same distraction as the night before and yet he picks up the phone.

"Hey, Owen, you ready for the game," says Jace. Owen thinks for a second and then remembers the NBA game they were going to.

He then says, "Yeah, almost ready."

Owen gets ready and is very excited. It is a plan that was made a while ago, so much so he forgot about it. He gets to the stadium and is consumed by the game. It is almost like he is floating on the court itself. Waking up only during breaks. The game takes the whole afternoon, yet it feels fast for Owen. The day has flown by yet again. Now it is night.

Before leaving Jace asks Owen, "Have you started the short story"?

Owen says, "No, why"?

"I am pretty sure that it is going to take a while," replies Jace.

"I'm sure that it cannot be that hard," he brushed off. As Owen leaves he is relieved to think that it is only Saturday and not yet nighttime. There is so much time to do a short story! He thinks to himself that this is not such a hard task and he relaxes.

It is now Sunday. He has breakfast and goes outside to walk the dogs. Out there people make plans to play soccer at the park. He feels like it is necessary to go, like he cannot miss out. He enjoys it and afterwards he goes to his friend's house with the rest of the group. Time is not on his mind as it flies by and the day progresses.

It is now dark and Owen heads home. He is tired so gets ready for bed and packs his bag. As he glances over at his deck, he sees the paper and everything comes crashing down. He hasn't even brainstormed or begun to put thoughts on paper! He instantly sits down, mind racing. Owen wonders to himself if there is any possible way he can get out of this! He tries to think but his mind is blank and he starts to panic. Moments later his mom walks in.

"Are you kidding? What are you even doing this late?" she says loudly and she is clearly angry. "You have had all bloody weekend to get this done and you have left what assignment until now?!" Owen knows she is right to be mad and can't quite believe his situation himself.

He mutters, "A short story."

"It is 10PM!" she responds.

For the longest fifteen minutes ever, he stares at the page asking it for an answer. He tries to think of many ideas, but none of them feel right for Owen. Desperately, he thinks of a group of kids trying to escape a locked school before school starts up again in the morning. As he works through the night his mom keeps entering his room, a less than gentle reminder of his stupidity. But he is finally locked in and eventually he is done!

He feels exhausted and his mind is numb. There is nothing in the back of his mind and he sleeps easily. Morning comes quickly. Owen's mom comes into his room and shakes him awake. Slowly Owen rolls out of bed and gets ready for school. In a blink he is back at school and at his desk. He puts his backpack down and pulls out his short story.

"You already finished." Brian says confused

"What do you mean? It was due today," Owen replies.

"No, it is not. Look up, it is literally on the board," Brian says while pointing forward.

"You're kidding, I did it all last night!" Owen says while looking in disbelief at the board. His mind is blown; the short story is not due until next class. Again, time slows down. He feels all sorts of things. He is frustrated as he still has a sore hand and he is super tired from the lack of sleep. Both of these things are less than subtle reminders of his mistake. No one to be mad at but himself. This is a self-inflicted situation. He spent his entire weekend living it fast and loose. He did so many things, all very fun, but ultimately not worth it.

"Hi, how did turning in the English paper go?" His mom says as he gets in the car.

"I found out it is not due until Wednesday!" he responds.

His mom laughs and gives him some sort of speech about procrastination. Soon he is home and desperate to crawl into his bed. He unpacks his bag, along with a new assignment for math. He picks it up and looks at it, thinking to himself he has all the time in the world to get it done. But when his phone rings, this time he silences it. He pulls out his chair and sits down at this desk with pencil in hand. He chips away at the assignment and soon he is done. This is real progress.

What a great feeling to then go to play soccer with friends down the street, knowing he is done and truly free to enjoy. Afterwards, he completely restarts his English paper for Wednesday with a new idea made with a calm and balanced mind.

Segundo lugar

Siempre estoy en segundo lugar y nada más
Patinaje sobre hielo, no quiero hacer esto más
Ella, ella siempre está en primer lugar
Ella siempre gana el trofeo dorado, y yo siempre gano la medalla de plata
¡No es justo!
Necesito ganar, necesito ser mejor que ella
Yo necesito ganar por lo menos una vez
Yo siento mi hoja del patín deslizándose al hielo
Se siente tan frío y distante,
Ese espacio entre el primer lugar y yo

—Liv Molinari, Grade 8
Blue Ribbon

Olvidada

Antes,
la risa llenaría el coche.
Hablámos hasta la noche.
Nosotros vamos manejando por las calles,
hablamos de cualquier cosa que se nos ocurra.
Pero ahora,
ella se mudó a otro lugar.
Nosotras apenas hablamos.
Ella se ha ido.
Realmente se ha ido.
Nunca voy a verla de nuevo.

—Olivia Miranda, Grade 8
Blue Ribbon

¡Ganamos!

19 de junio de 2026, Barça cortó al Real Madrid, Final de la Champions,
Bonetto y Mbappé.
El partido comenzó
5 goles en 20 minutos,
3-2, minuto 84, tenemos que hacer dos goles para ganar,
« Federico tiene la pelota, ¡¡¡GOOOOOOOOL!!!
¡QUÉ GOLAZO DE FEDERICO BONETTO,
UNA BICICLETA INOLVIDABLE! », dijo el comentarista.
Yo hice el 3-3.
Otra vez, el partido comenzó.
¡2 minutos después hacía otro gol!
¡Nosotros ganamos el trofeo de la Champions!
¡Qué bello! ¡Me gusta la victoria!

—Federico Bonetto, Grade 8
Blue Ribbon

Le Phénomène Wemby

Sur le court de basket
Wemby a la plus haute tête

Pendant la partie
Il est pas petit

Les matches avec Wemby j'adore
Un joueur qui crée des moments en or

A la télévision
Il est une sensation

Wemby j'adore
Il est le plus fort.

—Marco Ribeiro do Valle, Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Le Soleil Couchant

J'ai vu un coucher de soleil,
Quelle merveille!

Ses couleurs sont magnifiques,
J'ai vu ses reflets magiques,

Le ciel a changé en noir,
C'est normal, c'est le soir,

La lune est fantastique,
Elle est vraiment unique.

—Giulia Burneo, Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

El orgullo de ser peruana

by Letizia Currarino

Grade 8

*Blue Ribbon
Judges' Award*



Nunca he entendido lo importante que es abrazar la herencia de uno mismo. Con el tiempo, me he dado cuenta de que ser peruana es mucho más que una nacionalidad o un pasaporte; es una forma de vivir. Voy cada año a Perú y cada vez se siente como la primera vez. Respirar el aire en el carro mientras escucho música y hablo con mis abuelos me hace sentir de una forma que no se puede explicar. Me encanta caminar por las calles antiguas y todo mi alrededor me hace sentir en paz, como si nada más importara.

En mi vida, valoro profundamente mi conexión con mi familia. Pasar tiempo con todos mis familiares, como mis abuelos, es realmente importante para mí. Un recuerdo bien memorable que tengo es de cuando yo era chiquitita: mi hermana, mi abuela Teresa y yo decidimos cocinar alfajores en su cocina. Era una competencia para ver a quién le salían mejores, y aunque no estaban muy bien hechos (los míos y los de mi hermana), mi nonno, Umberto, igual los probaba con una sonrisa bien grande y siempre acompañado de un buen comentario. Momentos como estos, llenos de

risas y cariño, me enseñaron que la familia es el centro de nuestras raíces y de lo que mantiene viva nuestra herencia cultural.

También valoro la música, el arte y, sobre todo, la comida que viene de mi país, que es realmente algo único. Cada plato peruano tiene una variedad bien grande con una mezcla de culturas y sabores que, aunque no esté en Perú comiendo, me hacen sentir bien cerca de casa. ¡Mi abuelo Fergan siempre cocina su famoso lomo saltado para toda la familia, y mi abuela Silvia prepara todo lo que lo acompaña, como el arroz, las papas fritas y hasta el refresco, que casi siempre es chicha morada! Juntos son un verdadero dúo en la cocina y verlos cocinar lado a lado por tantos años me llena de orgullo y amor, haciéndome querer seguir las mismas tradiciones y cocinar los mismos platos para mi propia familia en el futuro. Cada plato, para mí, cuenta como una historia de tradición y familia.

Hoy entiendo que mi herencia no es solo parte de mi pasado, sino también de mi futuro. Estoy más que orgullosa de ser peruana y espero que nadie en el mundo pierda nunca su conexión con sus raíces, porque al final del día es lo que nos hace diferentes de la mejor manera posible.

Mi identidad: soy venezolana

by Ana Leyba

Grade 8

*Blue Ribbon
Judges' Award*



Me tomó mucho tiempo aprender qué significa ser venezolana. Ser venezolana es más que las arepas y las canciones. Es ser alguien social y orgullosa de su cultura. Es más que un lugar; es una forma de vivir.

Cuando tenía cinco años, pensé que había nacido en los Estados Unidos.

«Nací en Miami», les decía a todos, incluso a los que no preguntaban. Era una niña pequeña, pero todavía necesitaba entender dónde nací para entender quién era. Fue un día de verano cuando mi mamá me sentó y me explicó de dónde era.

«Imagínate un lugar que siempre tiene sol, con montañas, música y playas tan cristalinas que las confundes con el vidrio: se llama Venezuela. Tú naciste en Venezuela y nos mudamos a Miami cuando tenías dos años. Vives en Miami, pero eres venezolana. ¿No te acuerdas de tus días en Caracas?» me preguntó mi mamá, sentada en el balcón de la casa. Mirando el cielo azul de Miami, vi visiones de mis días en Venezuela. Me acordé de las Cocuizas, el vecindario donde vivía. Me

acordé de las montañas tan altas que tocaban el cielo. Poco a poco, me recordé.

Un año después de este nuevo aprendizaje, mi mamá me llevó a Venezuela. Caminé por las calles que se sentían mías, canté las canciones que oíamos en Miami y, más que todo, vi parte de mi familia que solo encuentro en Venezuela. Mi abuelo me habló de sus experiencias en Venezuela. Aprendí a decir palabras como “fino”, que en inglés se traduce como “fine” o “cool.” Me comí una arepa en un mercado en la esquina de la casa de mi abuelo. Visitamos el parque nacional El Ávila y me sentí más venezolana que nunca.

Regresar a Miami tras esa visita me costó mucho, pero regresé con más de lo que me fui. Regresé con memorias que nunca se me van a olvidar. Me sentí tan venezolana que nunca más en mi vida dije que había nacido en Miami.

Ya tengo trece años y sé que soy venezolana. No me apena, no me avergüenza, más bien, me da orgullo ser hispana. Por ejemplo, me gusta mi cultura y todo lo que trae consigo. Cada Navidad cocino hallacas con mi familia, continuando las tradiciones venezolanas. Toco canciones venezolanas con mi piano en vez de limitarme a interpretar en inglés. Uso frases como “qué chévere” y palabras como “chamo” y “chama.”

Vivo en Miami, pero **soy venezolana.**

Mi identidad es miá

by Vania De Los Rios Belmont

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Tu identidad te diferencia de los demás. Para mí, la identidad es cómo actúo y cómo soy: cómo me veo, cómo reacciono ante distintas situaciones y cómo me expreso. Pero una parte muy importante de mi identidad es mi cultura. Mi identidad cultural influye en muchas cosas de quién soy, aunque también se ha formado por las personas que conozco, las experiencias que he vivido y por cómo nací. Para mí, la identidad cultural influye en lo que me gusta comer, en cómo hablo, en mi forma de bailar y en otras cosas de mi vida diaria. Mi identidad como hispana no es solo ser de Perú, sino también tener lo mejor de ser peruana y americana al mismo tiempo.

Las diferentes cosas que influyen en mi identidad son experiencias familiares, comunitarias y personales. Ejemplos de experiencias familiares son comer en la casa de mi abuela y escribir poemas. Comer en la casa de mi abuela afecta mi identidad porque la señora que cocina es de Cusco y prepara un montón de platos típicos del Perú. Lo más increíble que hace es la sopa "Belmont". Es una sopa que solo se hace en la casa de mi abuela. Esto afecta mi identidad porque me gusta la comida peruana.

El segundo ejemplo es escribir poemas. Aunque no es exactamente una experiencia, mi habilidad para escribir de manera poética proviene de mi tío. Él escribió un libro de poemas y es súper talentoso y eso me inspira mucho.

Mis experiencias comunitarias son haber estado en Cusco y vivir en Estados Unidos. Estar en Cusco afectó mi identidad porque me sentía rodeada de cultura: música, ropa y artesanías. Me hizo sentir muy peruana y orgullosa de ser de allí. La otra experiencia comunitaria es vivir en Miami porque aquí hay mucha cultura y personas de todo el mundo. La diversidad se percibe como algo normal y eso también ha influido en quién soy.

Aunque tener una parte de ti que es hispana es súper increíble, ser americana e hispana también viene con desafíos. Por un lado, en Perú me siento americana y, por otro, en Estados Unidos me siento peruana. Cuando estoy en Perú, muchos dicen que hablo como una gringa. Aunque a veces es en broma, yo trato de hablar bien y ese comentario me hace sentir mal. En Estados Unidos, casi siempre me siento más peruana. No me molesta tanto no sentirme tan americana como los demás, porque hablo el idioma y eso me hace sentir segura de quién soy.

Ser hispana tiene un gran impacto en mi vida y en la de los demás. El impacto de ser hispana en mi vida es que puedo hablar dos idiomas. Esto es algo súper importante porque puedo comunicarme con más personas a través del mundo. El otro impacto es que me hace diferente a otras personas. Ser hispana me hace ser quien soy. Si no hablara español, no sería quien soy hoy en día.

Mi identidad proviene de ser americana y peruana, no solo de Estados Unidos ni solo de Perú. Los puntos principales son que mi identidad se ha formado por diferentes experiencias, que ser bilingüe viene con desafíos y que ser hispana tiene un gran impacto en mi vida y en la vida de otros hispanos. Aunque todos somos de diferentes partes del mundo, lo que tenemos en común es que cada persona tiene su propia identidad.

Mi herencia cubana

by Daniel Sánchez

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Mi herencia familiar está en los recuerdos y las tradiciones que me hacen pensar de dónde vengo y quién soy. Mi herencia proviene de Cuba, donde nacieron mis padres. Yo nací aquí en Miami, donde fui expuesto a la cultura cubana por la gran población de cubanos. Las celebraciones, las tradiciones y los platos típicos son algunas de las muchas formas de expresar la cultura cubana. Mi conexión con mi herencia cultural se basa en mis valores familiares, en las tradiciones culturales y en la historia de mi familia.

Primero, mi herencia cultural proviene de los valores de mi familia. En mi familia, un valor muy importante es el respeto. Con mi familia y con personas mayores, siempre tengo que ser respetuoso y amable. Cuando hablo con mis abuelos y tíos, uso “usted” y les miro a los ojos cuando me hablan. Otro valor muy importante para mi familia es mantener los lazos familiares. Cada año, mi familia se reúne para celebrar diferentes ocasiones como cumpleaños, Nochebuena y Año Nuevo. Mi familia vive en diferentes partes de la Florida, pero siempre nos reunimos para celebrar estas ocasiones especiales. Esto ayuda a mantener los lazos familiares y la amistad. Las tradiciones culturales son cosas que mi familia celebra o reconoce. Una tradición que mi familia celebra es comer las doce uvas a la medianoche para recibir el Año Nuevo. Esta tradición simboliza la buena suerte y la prosperidad para el nuevo año. Otra tradición importante de mi cultura son las Parrandas de Remedios. Aunque mi familia en Miami no las celebra, en Cuba muchos de mis familiares salen a las calles para participar en este festival. Este antiguo festejo, lleno de colores vibrantes, se celebra en diciembre. Aunque no practico todas estas tradiciones, sé que forman parte de mi cultura y de mi identidad cubana.

Otra manera en que conecto con mi herencia cultural es a través de la historia de mi familia. Mi familia viene de España y de Cuba y llegó a Miami en busca de una mejor vida. Los bisabuelos de mi mamá se mudaron de Tenerife, en las Islas Canarias, a Cuba después de que el gobierno español impuso una ley militar, aunque todavía no sé si se fueron por decisión propia o porque tuvieron que huir. Otra historia que mi mamá me cuenta es cómo llegó a los Estados Unidos. Sus padres ganaron una lotería de visas y pudieron mudarse a Miami para empezar una nueva vida. Al principio fue difícil, pero con el tiempo lograron adaptarse. También me gustaría aprender más sobre cómo Cuba pasó de ser un país lleno de cultura a una dictadura comunista y cómo mi familia vivió ese cambio.

Compartir mi cultura con otras personas y con futuras generaciones es una forma de expresar mi herencia. Una tradición importante que quiero compartir es la Nochebuena, cuando mi familia se reúne para una gran cena antes de Navidad. Otra tradición que quiero mantener es jugar al dominó, ya que siempre lo hacemos en celebraciones y es una forma divertida de socializar con un poco de competencia. Quiero compartir estas tradiciones con futuras generaciones enseñándolas desde pequeñas y explicando que no solo son costumbres, sino también parte de su identidad. Compartir la cultura no es solo hacerlo con otros, sino también disfrutarla en familia y mantener viva la cultura hispana.

En conclusión, puedo conectar con mi herencia hispana por mis valores familiares, tradiciones culturales y la historia de mi familia. Mis valores enseñan respeto a mi familia y mi cultura. Las tradiciones transmiten la cultura de Cuba y la de mi religión. La historia de mi familia enseña las dificultades que tuvieron que superar. La herencia hispana debe ser agradecida y celebrada por quienes pertenecen a la comunidad hispana.

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