

The Muse



SOPHIA HOPPE | Grade 8

GulliverPrep

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SOPHIA HOPPE | Grade 8

A crushed Coke can. A sun-bleached hat. The scattered remains of laughter, salt, and fleeting time. These are the echoes of a moment—a brief, passing instant that lingers long after the waves have erased footprints from the sand.

In this issue, we invite you into the minds of our students as they capture moments that shape their lives. These pages hold fragments of joy, sorrow, wonder, and reflection—poetry, stories, and sketches that freeze time, if only for a little while.

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Selections are marked to indicate students who received special recognition in the Miami-Dade County Fair and Exposition Creative Writing Competition, the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, the American Association of Teachers of Japanese, and the 74th Annual Beaux Arts Student Artist Showcase.

**Gulliver Preparatory School • Marian C. Krutulis PK-8 Campus
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The Waiting Room

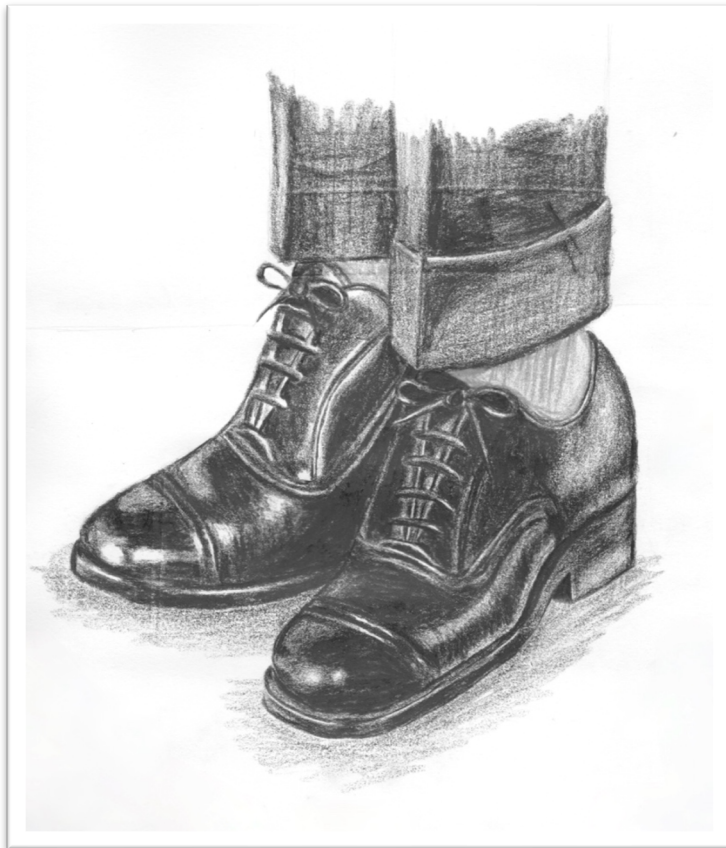
You're sitting down on the crisp white chair,
Taking deep breaths.
You hear the sirens wailing,
And the screams coming from the inside.

You try to tell yourself that everything will be ok
That she will be okay,
But you can't.
Because, as you sit in this waiting room,
You know there's nothing you can do,
Except sit and stare at the clock,
As time passes by.

You stare at your shoes,
As they dangle above the floor,
You see the doctors,
Staring,
Pointing.

You can't hear them,
But you know what they're saying.
You know that she won't be ok.
And all you can do is sit, waiting,
In the Waiting Room.

-Annabelle Tirado, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



AVA PLANTENGA | Grade 8

Feather

Flowing down from the heavens,
its edges slightly ruffled,
swaying in the brisk wind,
looking like a goddess in white.
Flying freely,
blissfully,
calmly.
Gentle and graceful,
it lands on trees of evergreen,
majestic mountains,
and many other invigorating
destinations.
Yes,
the feather is free,
the goddess in white.

-Joanna Harris, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



Writing

You grasp the pencil tightly
With great intent
Thoughts flood your brain
What should you write first?

You inhale deeply...

Overwhelmed with thoughts and ideas
Wonderful ones
Wicked ones
Some that spiral out of control
Like a whirlwind

Some that just empty your brain
Intriguing ones
Boring ones
And then...

BOOM!

The perfect one arrives
Bubbles to the surface
Makes its presence known

One that fits right in
The one that tells you
you did it!

-Kiara Pavan, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

My Incredible Miracle

To where I could remember
Stood a young lady whose name was Milenka.
She entered a different world
Of an English culture.
She was a sweet un-native flower who
Sprouted in new soil.

She finished her education in a successful way
Showing that she had grown to a beautiful
And mature peony.
She became interested in music like a wolf
captivated by the moonlight
And with open ears like a dolphin.
She let her soul enjoy the simplicity of life
Cherishing each moment with grace.
She sang and danced like a palm tree
Swaying without wind.

She has been a beautiful butterfly fluttering in my heart,
Taking all the space in it.
She has been a passive and assertive human being
As I have never seen before.
To fight the bad things that try to tear my soul

Her solutions always light my path
Well, I know I have helped her as well,
As she always thanks my life
In my eyes, all she did in my life couldn't be done
By anybody in the universe.

In my heart, she holds a place no other can claim
Looking at her makes me so happy
And speaking with her warms my heart completely

All the moments we had for the last seven years
Have been a lovely, happy, and exciting adventure
That still lasts today.
To where it all started,
My incredible miracle
I will love her forevermore.

-Hudson DeMeo, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

The Tropical Paradise

On a calm shore where the sand is gold
Palm trees rustle their leaves
Shells whisper the sound of the ocean
While boats drift lazily on the crystal-clear sea.

There is only peace and tranquility.
Hammocks gently in the smooth air,
Hypnotizing dreamers without a care.

The ocean sings an alluring melody
While the waves dance and glide on their land.
Sunlight sparkles on the sand as if they were shiny jewels
In this tropical paradise,
Mind finds rest,
Where your worries all dissolve.
Nature wraps around you like a gentle hug
And the symphony of sand, sea, and sky
Welcomes you abroad.

-Francisco Herrmann Matos, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



AISHA AHLUWALIA | Grade 8

The Book

The Cambridge blue cover
The gold lettering
The flowers
So white
Their own beauty

But inside
The true treasure
Not gold
Nor silver

But the letters
The letters
That unfold
That unravel
Into a story
One of hardship
One of pride
One that shows
The struggles
You hide

But one may say
The value is none
How wrong they may be
Oh, all the things they'd realize
If only they'd take a peek

A book
Not a need for a picture
All needed is the mind
A mind that sees
The beauty
The beauty that hides inside

-Serafina Hill, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

The Night Sky

Insecurity

Insecurity
It's always biting at your ego
Whispering in your ear
That you will never be good enough
Why can't I be like him
Or look like her
But no
I am stuck in this body forever
I'm not pretty enough for this
But she is
Not smart enough for that
But he is
I don't have the stamina for that
But they do

No matter what I say or do
I will never be good enough for anyone or anything
I am just me and nothing else
My insecurity eats away at my happiness
Real smiles are not common anymore
When you walk down the street
Everyone is smiling
And so are you
But yours is artificial
Because you can't let anyone see what you really feel
Don't be a burden
Just thinking about what I could have done better
I could have said this
Done that
But no
I was thinking about what was wrong with me
The way I looked
Acted
Said
Everyone else seems perfect
Everyone other than me

-Bianca Schwartz, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

It is nighttime where you are
Lying down on a chair and looking up at the ebony sky
It is stunningly beautiful
Twinkling stars steal the spotlight and you watch them shine
They seem so far yet so very close
You close your eyes and can see the faint light shining
through your eyelids
You are there in the moment
Appreciating the darkness
Feeling the time pass but enjoying every second of
being there
It feels surreal
Like a different world
But it's the beautiful sky
In all its glory
The blinding white stars sticking out against the
dark navy background
And there you are...

-Valentina Rodriguez, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



HANA SMITH | Grade 8

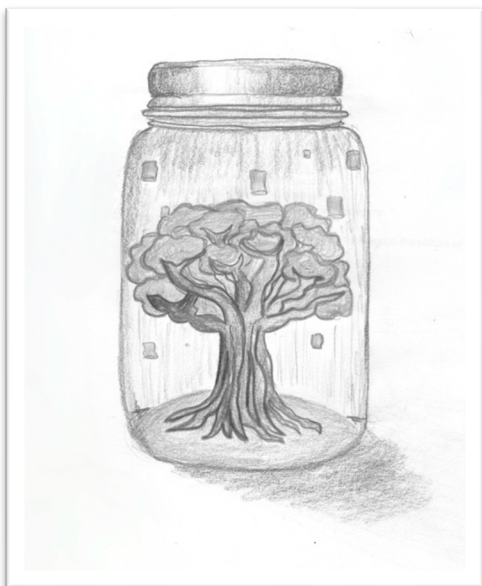
Rainforest

Trees fighting for the land
Their roots intertwined
They will always be together
No matter how much they try,
Toucans squawk above
Looking for food
Their child attempting to play
Normal people see only calm
But there is an unseen
War

Termites fighting for king
Jaguars prowling for a weak soul
Frogs jump from lily to lily
Looking to poison their most feared enemy,
Oh, the list may go on
But I fear it will grow smaller and smaller

Farmers take over
Destroying many
Habitats lost to longing for money
Littering too,
Humans, the most feared
Known with names
Know that animals stay away
From you

-Olivier Monderen, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



CAMILA MAK | Grade 8

The Forgotten

Do you want to know me?
Since no one ever does
On every wonderful morning
When the noble children walk
There is a straggler
A gloomy look in their eyes.

These are the forgotten
They walk the same hallways as the others
But they are not as vibrant or as vivid.

All their life they watch the cherished.

Knowing it will never be them
So, as you are walking
Laughing almost glowing
Look behind and see
In the dim light

The forgotten ones.

-Olivia Treiser, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

Mes vacances préférées!

Chaque année
Je vais aux Trois Vallées
Je suis passion

Il y a la neige
Quel privilege.
Du matin au soir je fais du ski
Val Thorens c'est pas petit.

Le soir je vais au dîner.
J'adore manger français
Le délicieux fromage gratiné.

Puis je vais me reposer.
Voilà mes vacances préférées!

-Roniel Fishman, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

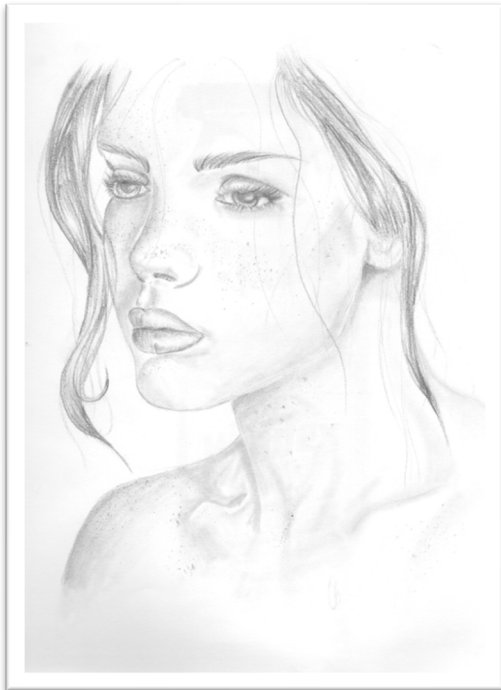
Voyage à Paris

Je voudrais
Visiter
La Tour Eiffel
Car elle est belle.
Là-bas! c'est magnifique
Et exotique.

Je voudrais
Faire du ski
à Chamonix
Car c'est vraiment joli.

Je voudrais
Voir Mona Lisa
Allez, on y va!

-Avi Cardum, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



KYLIE LANDSOM | Grade 8

Disappearing

The art of disappearing.
People disappear to move away from problems,
pressure or not wanting to take responsibility for their actions.
I have wanted to disappear,
Not just fading into the background or wandering life like a ghost.
But instead of being forgotten I wanted to disappear.
Disappear so far no one would even remember me,
So far that I wouldn't remember myself.
Just the freedom of being in a blank void
With nothing but my thoughts.
Except I don't understand why.
I want to leave the world,
sit alone.
Without a single soul including mine.
Disappearing and death are the same,
Both left in holes in people
Some deeper than others.
Holes in your heart to holes in your life.
There are people who leave.
Not just physically but emotionally,
they leave you stranded by yourself,
No one to comfort you.
Those people have mastered the art of disappearing,
Most times they were never really there.
Even if they were with you, they wish they weren't,
Probably in an empty field of flowers or snow
Floating in space.
So, if those holes were already created
What would make the difference if I did it too,
and mastered the act of Disappearing.

-Mia Bermudez, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



KYLIE LANDSOM | Grade 8

The Rose and Her Thorns

A rose so lovely and bright,
Her petals gleam in the light.
She stands with grace, and elegance
A soft beauty she carries.

But if you reach to touch her bloom,
Beware the thorns that pierce.
Though her rubicund colours steal your gaze,
Hidden dangers she acquires though she can't control.

The thorns are sharp,
A warning that is quietly wept.
Showing beauty, pure and true.

But her cunning ways,
Thinking you are going to caress smooth velvet,
But if you try to take her from her roots,
She will draw blood.

The rose reminds us, clear and strong,
That beauty isn't just what is wrong.
It's both the bliss and pain we share,
A balance found in love.
So when you see her standing tall,

Know that beauty is a call.
Her thorns remind us, sharply,
That beauty's depth is worth the fear.

-Annick Tabatchnik, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

La merveilleuse Ville Lumière!

Je voudrais visiter la Tour Eiffel
Parce qu'elle est belle.

J'adore la mode française.
C'est magnifique.
A Paris les boutiques
Sont magiques!

Oh la la!
Je voudrais voir Mona Lisa
Allez, on y va!

J'ai vraiment envie
D'aller visiter Paris
Oh la la! Oui! Oui!

-Nathan Liu, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

His Whole Life Long

La Tour Eiffel est magnifique

Je voudrais faire un pique nique
Sous la Tour Eiffel, c'est magique
Un sandwich c'est romantique
Avec ma chérie, c'est magnifique!

-Steven Font, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

La Tour Eiffel

J'adore la Tour Eiffel
La Tour Eiffel est super connue
Je vois le monument dans la rue
la Tour Eiffel est en fer
Elle n'est pas en verre
La Tour Eiffel a 137 ans
A Paris, c' est le plus grand monument

-Rodrigo Vergara, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

Notre-Dame de Paris

Notre-Dame de Paris
La construction est finie
Après l'incendie
Tu es merveilleuse aujourd'hui
Mais ce antique
Oui! Oui!

Tu es magnifique
Oh la la! Vraiment unique
Allez, on y va! C'est fantastique
J'ai vraiment envie car tu es magique!

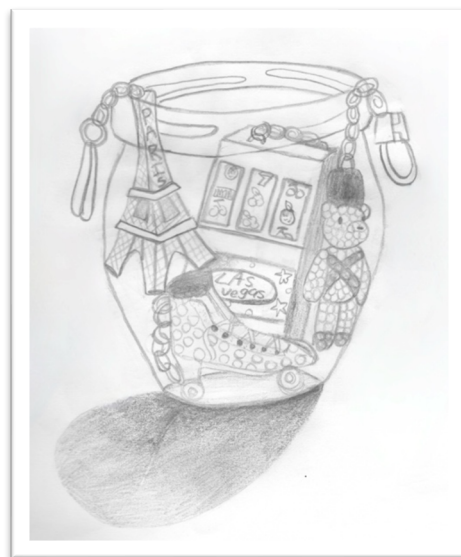
-Manolo Zubiria, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

There are many birds
Who can freely fly
Through summer skies
And through vast landfills
Of dandelions and alluring snow
But some birds unlike the rest
Aren't as free
They can't fly
Nor can they soar
This bird is trapped in a cage
His whole life long

His sleek chipper and song can't be heard
His enticing voice and wings can't fly
With impious chains retaining his voice
This bird is trapped in a cage
His whole life long

Inside of me a little bird burrows
Who has ideas
Opinions
Beliefs like a voice
But insecurities and judgment
Don't let him live alone
My bird is trapped in my heart
His whole life long

-Sofia Villagomez, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



KATARINA BURGIO | Grade 7

Musique

La musique est magnifique
mais, la musique française est magique
C'est un beau son
qui traverse mes oreilles
ça me fait sourire
Paris,
Ta musique est magique
C'est exotique
La musique est la vie

J'adore la musique
Mais la musique de Paris,
Elle est unique
C'est romantique,
emblématique

et,
magnifique!

-Sofia Villagomez, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



OLIVIA GABAY | Grade 7

Final Wave

The wave of the next time,
The wave of the last time,
A goodbye.

Leaves of rust and amber falling from the willows,
As the season fades,
Others do the same,
With waves of tears,
As winter nears,
Waves of goodbye,
Like leaves falling from the sky.

The clock slowly ticks away,
With your heart begging for them to stay,
The train engine sighs near,
With your mind just wanting to disappear,
Will this goodbye be the end,
Or will we still remain friends?

Grief falling to realization,
Your hands are at hesitation,
With your love ceasing to appear,
As the train slowly draws near,
Waving your hand farewell,
Wishing you could cast a spell,
So they could stay another day,
With no farewell for you to say.

-Iker Tuch Bussey, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



Nostalgia

Searching for the perfect fragrance
The journey it puts you through
One scent
One memory
Rewinding the forgotten moments
All nostalgia takes is one perfume

One spritz of vanilla cashmere
And the sweet cozy aroma filled the room
Suddenly nostalgia took me back
A dark rainy afternoon
Not a glint of sunlight peeping through my window
In my squishy big bed
Hugged by a white weighted blanket
Just watching my favorite show
For hours

One spray of rose petal
Nostalgia hits
My grandmother's garden
Smelling of flowers and fruits
The smell of the roses relaxed any tension
Planting seeds
Grandma smiling at me
Pure happiness

One spritz of cotton candy
The sweet scent piercing my nose
But the nostalgia took over
Walking through the carnival
Buying super sweet pink cotton
One bite of a fluffy cloud
Immediately sugary liquid
Amazed

One perfume
One moment in time
The power a scent can hold
Rewinding a whole life's worth of memories
Nostalgia

-Juliana Alonso, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Abandoned Life

Once, there were dreams,
big and full of ambition,
chasing the sun,
all across the sky.

But somewhere,
they grew quiet,
like old songs,
the melody and rhythm blurred.

The silence grew restless,
taking over the mind,
and now all that is left,
is nothing but a cold, darkened soul.

A life that once felt full,
now it feels dull,
gathering dust,
like something forgotten,
on a shelf too high to reach.

The hands that used to reach out,
are now gone,
not in rest but in giving up,
and the heart,
once strong,
beats slower.

Time has passed,
years that came and went,
without leaving a trace.

But even in all of the quietness,
there's a whisper,
a tiny shine of hope,
hidden deep inside,
of what could have been,
of what might still happen,
if the courage to try again,
could be found...

-Leo Castro Alves, Grade 7
*Blue Ribbon
Judges' Award*



A Fading Memory

They come with their machines,
Iron beasts that devour the land,
Leaving wounds where life once thrived,
All part of a lost ecosystem.
The screaming saws slice through the silence,
Shattering the peace.
Their machines are a cancer
That keeps spreading across the land.

“Boom,” the thud of the falling trees,
A sound that drowns out the singing birds.
The forest cries,
Its green tears falling like rain.
A landscape, once full of memories,
barren and grey.
Where will the deer graze now,
Its grazing grounds bone dry?
Where will the fox den,
Its home now just a pile of wood?
Where will the owl hunt,
Its lookout spot now on the ground?

We watch from the shadows,
The humans, with their hunger to be the best,
Consume all that lies before them,
leaving only when emptiness is left.
Will they continue their march of destruction,
Or will there be mercy?

The wind howls through a dry wasteland,
Where the air once cleaner than filtered water,
Now hangs a heavy cover over the land.
Where the river once an endless gift,
Now flows are filled with different toxins.
Where the animals once thrived,
struggle to survive in this landscape.

The humans, trapped in their concrete palaces,
Not aware of the beauty they have destroyed,
A fading memory.

-Riyaan Datta, Grade 7
*Blue Ribbon
Judges' Award*



The Silent Mirror

A mirror-
A seemingly endless glass panel
With a narrow golden frame
But it is much more

A mirror holds time
From our first breaths to now
It has seen us grow up
Watching us change day by day

A mirror is a silent observer
Holding time and unspoken truths
Not only seeing what you wear
But seeing you-during good times and bad

A mirror is that one friend
That many don't know they need
It listens but never talks
However, it still replies

The truth it gives us is cold and clear
It is real and honest
It knows the hidden secrets
Never told before

It holds you-
Not just your face,
 but your fears and dreams too
It knows our every thought-
Even the words we haven't spoken

A mirror sits in a corner
Waiting silently and patiently
It remains a quiet witness
And knows all we have ever been

-Daniel Sanchez, Grade 7
*Blue Ribbon
Judges' Award*



Oh la la!...

Oh la la c'est beau la France
J'adore l'ambiance

Oh la la c'est chouette les pique - niques
C'est romantique dans le quartier République

Oh la la c'est génial chez Odette
Je vais là bas en bicyclette

Oh la la la France c'est merveilleux
La nourriture c'est délicieux

Oh la la c'est un champion Léon Marchand
Il voit la vie en grand

Oh la la la beauté du Palais Garnier
J'adore les antiquités

-Philippine Ritter, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Les Jardin des Plantes

Les fleurs, magnifiques
Les couleurs, vibrantes
La beauté naturelle et fantastique,
Organisée et importante

Le maison verte aime la vie des plantes
Les déserts et les forêts fusionnent
Les laurier-roses et les arbres, ambiance différente
C'est une atmosphère pour moi qui est accueillante
Une maison pour les gens qui aiment les plantes

C'est ma ville
Le jardins des Plantes à Paris

-Katherine Bardet, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



AISHA AHLUWALIA | Grade 8

Great Vehicle

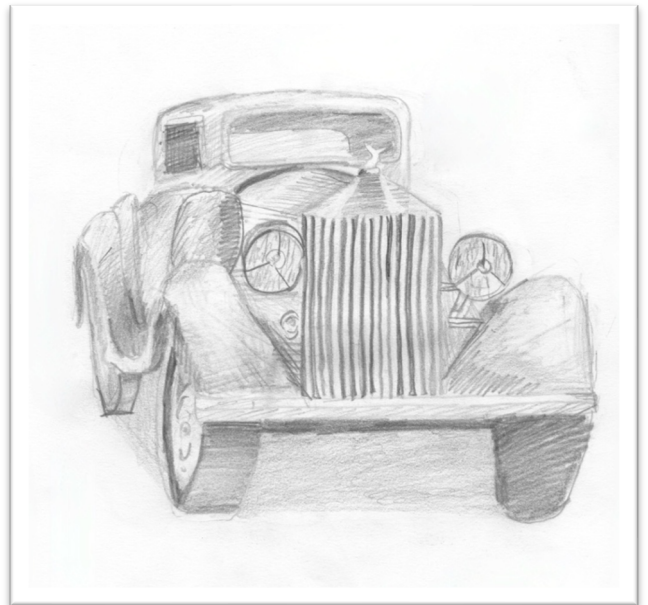
I was once a great vehicle.
Like a strong muscled Mustang
I once had a strong engine
I attracted great crowds
I did great work, but I received no pension
Zoom! My tires hit the road like a race car
I used to fly through roads like airplanes in the sky
My color was matte black
My highlights glistened in the night like the moon on a lake
My color was beautiful
Nothing could compare
Now it's chipped off, and my color is beautiful no more
My eyes had the power to light up a city
Now they just sit and catch dust
I was once a great vehicle

My rubber was impeccable.
No nail or needle could stand a chance
I don't even have tires now, and I'm surrounded by plants
My roof could carry mountains holding the sun
It sits rusting away now not bearing the strength it used to have
I used to run for miles
I could bring you to the world and back
Now I can't even run on a track
My rump is old it only carries memories now
I remember the days when it could carry a plow
I was once a great vehicle

As my driver pushed the gas
I lost control,
My engine could take no more
His love for me left
As he left me to rust my heart was broken
And then, my driver was gone in a flash

My driver wasn't great.
My love for him wasn't mutual.
He left me to rot away like an old banana
I devoted my life to him, but he didn't care
I sit here waiting for a new driver to take me away to better days
I remember better days
Where I was once a great vehicle
Where I would dance on highways like a tango
I used to be great, but not anymore
My days are over
And I am a great vehicle no more

-Wystan Allen, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



MATTHEW MALHERBE | Grade 6

Je t'aime, Paris!

A la boulangerie
Les croissants sont délicieux
Et vraiment prestigieux

A la pâtisserie
Les macarons sont succulents
Ah oui! Parfaitement!

A la boutique Chanel
J'achète un parfum Mademoiselle
Je me sens comme un oiseau avec des ailes.

Je t'aime, Paris!

-Giulia Burneo, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

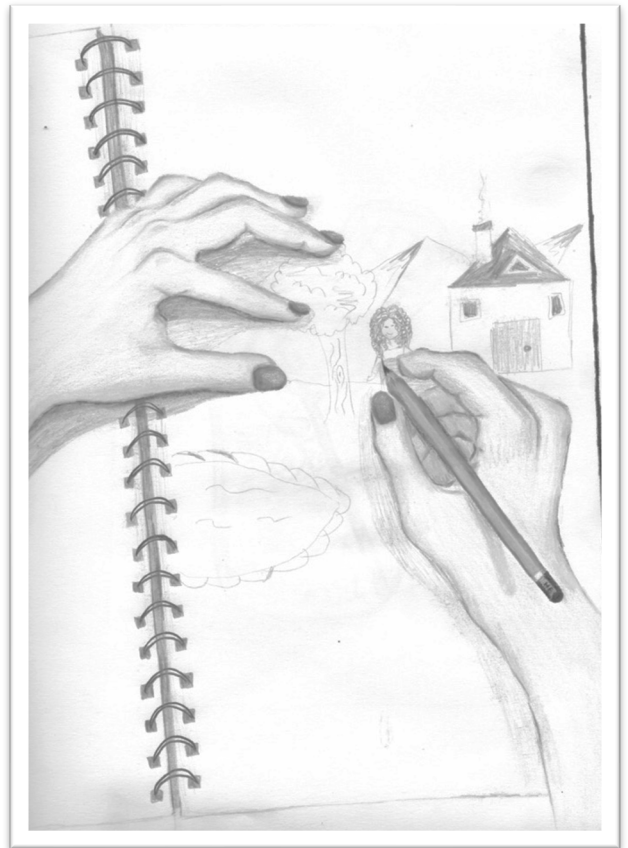
The Forgotten Pen

Darkness surrounds me.
A coating of what I can only assume is dust
hides my glossy black exterior from the world
I am unused. Unwanted.
Cast to the side and shoved in a drawer
Set aside by the person who once used me daily
Now forgotten and drying up
I let memories envelop me
enfolding around me as I look back
on the beauty that was me

I am a ballerina
I glide on the paper; I twirl around
I am deft and precise in my movements
I arc and curve with every fluid stroke of my body
Applying the perfect amount of pressure
To create a masterpiece that is the shiny black ink
When wielded, I can accomplish anything
I write the words left unspoken
The truths left untold
I can create everything from nothing
I am a master in my craft
Every scribble is a work of art
When it comes to me

But now? I am nothing
I am a part of the shadow that is this cabinet
My memories fading with my time trapped
Like a bird in a cage, I long to spread my wings
To relive and relish just once more in my reverence
Now, I am leached of my life; A shell of what I used to be.

-Pia Arango, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



AVA PLANTENGA | Grade 8

Earth and Its Varying Features

On Earth,
Our ecosystem
Provides us with protection
Beyond view

Ailments retreat when they see
The earth's potential
In full bloom
For when our trees don't waver
And stand as one
We are united with the earth,
Everyone is content
But when selfishness and cowardice
Stains our streets,
We are changed for the worst.
In this shift
Our earth is thrown off balance
All the elements punish us
For our egotistical actions

All the components work as one,
Turning against those once trusted
The waves no longer give thrill
But instead fear

The trees no longer give joy and oxygen
But instead shed their leaves
They become dormant and lifeless
And finally, we are left broken,
Gasping and leading to tears of depression
However, after a snowball of effects
We are turned towards one another

Forcing selflessness to overrule selfishness
And like a snake shedding its skin
We are reawoken
Not gloomy and lackadaisical as we once were
But instead, industriously working for a future
Unassociated with the past

A hopeful future
Now our tools and materials toil energetically
The world begins
To clean up its own mess
And just like that we're back together
Let's just hope global warming
Doesn't take control of the weather

-Hunter Bailey, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



OLIVIER MONDEREN | Grade 6

The Beauty of Nature

Sapphire skies come to an end
As the horizon blends into hues of ginger,
Dotting the skies clouds begin to liberate themselves,
And the bolts of Zeus smite the earth.
Rain trickles down onto the land; the lush forests being fed,
As the beasts of the wild rest,
And as darkness drapes the earth below,
Stars in the dead of night shine with glory and valor,
And the full moon reveals herself in all her glory,
The vast expanse of beauty in the jungle is intoxicating.

A song is sung,
As the tundra becomes an orchestra with its soft blowing wind.
The wolves sleep soundly with their young in dens underground,
And the seals hide away in their homes of ice.
Frost covers the land of wonders,
And the beauties of the deep-sea wander aimlessly,
Looking for prey.
The sproutlings crawl out,
In the snowy groves,
The circle of life happens once more.

Wonders are drawn all over nature,
Sometimes you notice them,
And sometimes you don't.
A caterpillar accepts change and stays weeks in a cocoon
To finally emerge as a gorgeous butterfly.
Life has many ups and downs—twists and turns,
Change might be hard or long,
But keeping patience,
And biding your time,
Will always be worth the while.

-Diego Caesar-Iglesias, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

School Frozen in Time

The wooden doors of the lifeless school creaked open-
the faint breeze carried the sound of past giggles.
Books lay on the floor,
the breath of wind rustling the pages.
The cold, decaying classes stood alone-
the past footsteps of the students were heard.

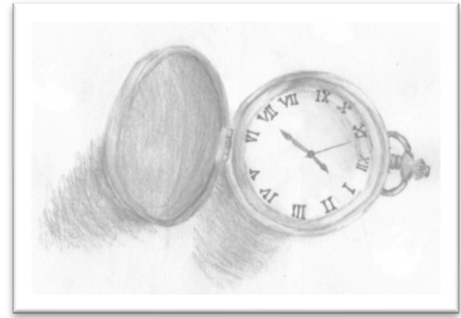
A young girl was wailing from stress
marked by the dark wet splotches imprinted
on the bathroom counter.
A young boy was upset
imprints the ripped open books festering on the hallway floor,
scattered and rotting.
A teacher was enraged
shows the chaotic scribbles decaying on the old chalkboard.

The school stood still
as if frozen in time for thousands of years.
But still each class contained a special power
to teach the future.
The building brimming with secrets
of past students, secrets they pray are kept.

A boy was not following the rules
said the candy wrappers crumbled and rotted in the desk drawer.
A girl unable to follow the guidelines
said the rusted scissors lying next to the tiny skirt.
The students loathed going to school
said the revealed notes lying on papers passed in class.

Notes that were passed from class to class
now exposed for the world to see.
The teacher did not approve of these notes;
they were pinned on the board for all to see,
frozen in time.
But, notes contained friendships,
the books contained wisdom;
the classes contained the power of knowledge.

-Olivia Binello, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



SONIA MURUGESAN | Grade 7

Abandoned Treehouse

As I walk down the street,
something big and brown I see up in a tree
with a worn-out rope hanging down,
strings ripped apart.

Vines creeping up the walls,
weeds sprouting through the creaking floor,
moonlight shining through the cracked window,
the small treehouse slowly falling apart

like an ancient woman on her deathbed
trying hard to stay alive.
A star in the sky
losing its brightness.

Pictures with friends,
memories that have been lost,
never to be experienced again
stay within these cracked wooden walls.

Dolls lying towards the corners
with their faces slowly melting away,
desperate looks in their eyes
to be played with again.

Dust-covered paintings hanging on the walls
dreams,
to create magnificent stories,
forgotten.

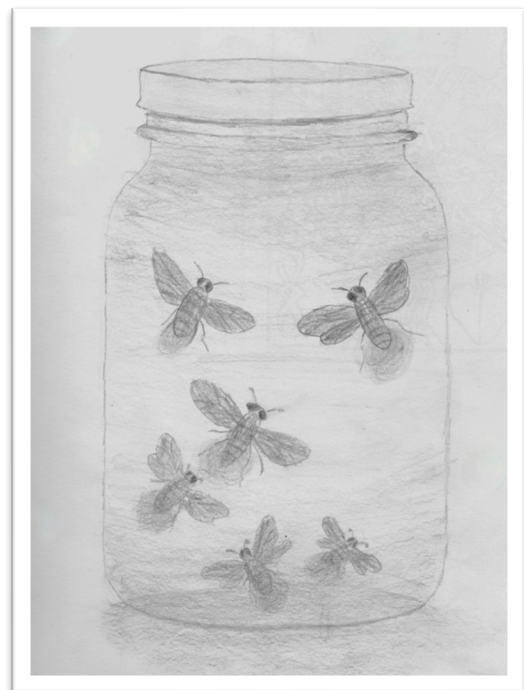
Memories
Dreams
Left behind
To rot.

-Vania De Los Rios Belmont, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

The Magic of Theater

The feeling of the lights warm you like a fire
The costume hugging you like a blanket
You come alive
The audience looking at you
With anticipation and encouragement
You take a deep breath
Look at your partner
And sing the best you can
Hours go by in a blink of an eye
As you dance and say your lines with
Love, Passion,
And confidence
Right there, right then
Nothing else matters
Just you and the stage
The people around you enjoying themselves
The sense of connection flowing through the stage
The theater is a family
A family you can't quite explain
You just learn to take care of each other
You laugh and learn and cry together
An actor longs for the stage
And the stage yearns for the actor
That's the magic of theater

-Isabella Dosal, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



ETHAN ROSENWALD | Grade 8

The Pressure is on

"Break a leg!"
My mom exclaims
I enter the court excited for the day
Racket in hand

The crisp fresh wind hits my face,
But only for a minute
The blazing hot sun glares at me as if it were jealous
I felt as proud and brave as a lion
The pressure is on

I throw the ball in the air and my eyes glaze the sun
for a millisecond
I hit the ball, and it zooms away like a bee
I run side to side chasing and hitting the ball
The opponent hits it out and I smile
The pressure is on
Sweat trickles down my face stinging my eyes

When it finally comes down to the last point I think,
Will I win or fail
My heart was like a firefly, fluttering
I hit the ball as hard as I can
It flies in the air like a bird careless and free
The pressure is on

The opponent misses and throws their racket on the floor
There was a deafening silence for a moment
Then a feeling of victory rushes through my body
A smile spreads across my face
I won

-Natalia Botty, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Expectations versus Reality

Throughout the years
Women have been mistreated,
Misunderstood,
And disregarded.

It is always, what was she wearing?
Never, why did he do it?
Society expects women to be these
perfect housewives,
Cooking, cleaning, taking care of the children.

A woman having power,
A voice, scares men.
The man always makes the decision
When it comes to women

Our voice,
Our bodies,
Our life,
Us.

We are expected to be compliant,
But stand up for ourselves.
We are expected to have the perfect body,
But we cannot flaunt it.

Women work like dogs,
But do not get paid the same as men.
The same job, same effort,
But a different reward.

The question man or bear is asked,
Even the bear is scared of hunters.
Women are scared.
Women are fearing for their lives.

Yet, we get called overdramatic,
Ridiculous,
Over the top,
Too much for any man to love.

Women and girls come together,
Deliberating the issues,
The issues should not be there in the first place,
The problems that men made.

It is almost impossible to be a woman.
Men do not understand the 'no' or 'back off!'
It sounds like: 'Yes please do whatever you like,
I am an object.'

Women are not objects.
Women are human.
Women have voices.
Women have rights.

Society is regressing.
Only one hundred years ago,
Women got the right to vote.
Now women will not even have the right to choose
what to do with their bodies.

-Lilian Garcia, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

AISHA AHLUWALIA | Grade 8



A Summer's Dip

A bright, warm, summer day
With a feeling of light in the air,
And a peaceful ambiance
Pupils around the area enjoy a day
Lying down on the gentle, summer sand.

A refreshing, cold, nice splash of water glazes
over my feet.
A welcome change of pace from the original heat.
I take my drink from its resting spot,
and feel the icy water trickle down my dry throat.

As I feel freshened, I decide to venture
into the bright baby blue water.
I dip my toes in.
I sense a familiar feeling; it gives me flashbacks
from when I soaked my toes earlier.

As my ankle starts to descend further and further,
The water grasps my shin, knee,
and eventually my lower hip.
An uncomfortable feeling rushes through my legs,
as my body adjusts to the new environment.
I start to feel the original feeling of warmth
that I once felt earlier in the sun

As I start feeling the nice water against my skin
I start to walk around the deep ocean.
Feeling a new type of squishy, wet, sand,
that was no longer grainy and hot like the dry sand.
I dodge the slimy seaweed,
and the sharp rocks along the ocean floor.
Trying to keep my pace like a man
struggling through a sandstorm.
The waves thrusting me in different directions
like a roller coaster.

I dip my head into the deep abyss.
Lifting my head straight out of the water.
My soaked hair dripped down my back.
A unique feeling, unlike any other.
I decide to emerge from the water
And I lay in my original spot, putting on my sunglasses
that gave the world an orange tint.
Feeling that same feeling from earlier
My wet skin quickly drying up,
I'll remember this memory fondly, for the rest of my days.

As a nice summer's dip.

-Luke Gelber, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

SOPHIA HOPPE | Grade 8
Scholastic Art and Writing Awards - Silver Key



The Diary

I have been left on a cold park bench for months,
but has felt like years
I have kept secrets but that did not matter
The tears from the years
Have been marked on me forever
The pages in me are filled to the brim
No pages left

My bind is broken
Maybe because of harsh ways I was treated
Never got appreciation I was like a stick in the mud
Considering the things I kept to myself
Never said my opinion
I always just listened

I remember the first day
where my owner took me everywhere
We were more like friends at the time
As the months and years passed I got treated worse
It was like she was doing me a favor
The day I ran out of space she didn't even say goodbye
After I had been through the good and the bad with her

Her name will always be engraved on my cover page
Sally Abrams
Brown hair with blue eyes
Nice on the outside and mean under the mask
Got me when she was ten years old
Left me at fifteen years old

The secrets Sally had were things
she couldn't even tell her best friend
Sally was not a nice person
If anyone could see from the stuff she wrote, I wish
I wish I could speak to get my revenge
All the bad she did to others including me
But now I am nothing but an old broken diary
lying here forever

-Leah Gonzalez, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

A Friendship Renewed

Deep in the dark brown soil,
Of a garden with no green,
On a day so dark and cold,
There is something that was once shiny

An object that used to have fashion
Tied with what looked like a strand of hair.
Chains with stunning charms from an old friend
And a heart with a missing piece.

These beautiful details that paint a portrait,
But what is hidden on the inside is forgotten.
The bracelet holds many memories
Yet, it must have grown up, grown old, and lost
memory.

A bracelet that is left behind,
Without an owner.
This bracelet was once loved,
But now it is almost forgotten.

The charms represent a life that was as cheerful as
Christmas day
Of someone who cared for someone very special.
This person must have had a friend
Who was always there.

It is slowly rusting away like an old scrap of metal
Those charms are now dull
The chains are breaking, yet glue is not an option
Only love and the remembrance of the old times can
fix this broken heart.

Although the bracelet may seem alone right now,
What is shown does not have to be always true
For a friend has only left for just some time.
Maybe some determination and a bit of trust,
May be the key to bring this friendship back out of
the dirt.

-Samantha Gonzalez, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Five Minutes of Fame

I shine my light through the darkness
make stars twinkle
through the night sky

Behind me, floats the Sun
The biggest star of the show
He grows plants and flowers for beautiful plains
Provides light
Fights the cold

When the Sun looks down
he sees kids having fun
as if they are fireworks on July fourth
dogs being walked
Nature thriving
everyone enjoying

When I look down
I see the lights turning off
as if the fireworks were fizzling out
eyelids getting heavy

Like there is nothing to see

the Sun provides my light
without him I am only a Rock

on the day of the Eclipse
All eyes are on me

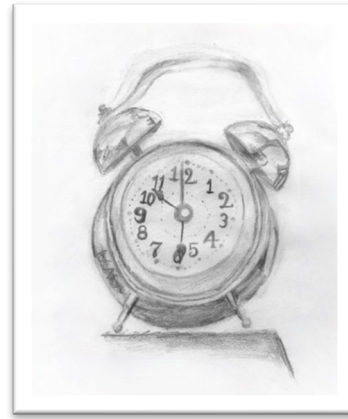
My face covers the sun
the sun is my shadow
I am the Star

When I look down
I see a crowd
Everyone is here to see Me

All at once
dark it becomes

the Sun provides my light
without him, I am only a Rock

-Sonia Murugesan, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



MATTHEW MALHERBE | Grade 6

Like Quicksand

Life is too important to take for granted
It is like a sunrise you forgot to watch
Like a moment you had all day to cherish
You can never get these moments back
The ones that you get over with
You focus on everything but what matters

It is a shame to think that time will wait
To think that tomorrow will always be there
But it does not always show up
It's impossible to rewind a clock
The world doesn't pause for you to catch your breath

People who never got a chance
Or were too lazy to make one
The things they missed
The things they wanted
The things they yearned to do
that they thought would always be there
And when you are gone
the only things left are the moments you lived

We are all on a clock
We think we have forever
But friends slip away
Moments slip away
Life slips away
Almost like sand through our fingers

Time goes faster than it seems
Life is too short to not pay attention
It is almost as if it were a dream
and Death wakes you up

-Carolina Guerrero, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

A Heart Nowhere to be Found

A diary sitting in the middle of the school courtyard
he opens it up
her memories written in this abandoned,
 yet beautiful piece of memoir
it smells like old paper
like memories left behind

She writes in couplets
almost like Romeo and Juliet
love life splattered around inside
he is careful not to smudge the ink
a coarse spine holding the story together

The sad schoolyard, with rusty tables
and the trees with wilting leaves
the mossy, aged bricks show sorrow

Bang! stabbed in the back by a sword, he was
he felt sadness in his heart
it had gone dim
like a cloud overtaking the sunshine
for he had loved her
but she did not show any love back
emptiness...
a recollection of past memories

He was the thunder, shouting for help
and she was the sunshine, winning the power back
he was the crying rainfall
and she was the wind, blowing him away,
 so he could never come back.

Reading the diary, hurting his heart
he understood that it was just the start
it teased him, and hurt him, as he felt a lack
of the space in his ribcage,
 where his heart was supposed to lay back

Many weeks had gone by, he realized
Many weeks had gone by, he realized
His heart lost

-Aleksander Calloway, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

The House

I stand lonely and dusty for what has lingered for years
At the end of a street with no significance
My windows cracked
My roof incomplete
My paint peeled and uneven
Weeds never endlessly grow and travel up my sides
As my shutters dangle dangerously from their hinges

Daunting front doors are anything but welcoming
Scratching over the threshold to enter
Wretched cobwebs stretch from door to door
Patchy and unsmooth flooring spreads throughout
And the shadows prance and dance as the wind blows,
 causing the trees to shake

This house has a tale to tell
A thick smell
A broken table sitting by the door
Ready for someone to sit and listen

The windows cracked and murky
The leftover dishes sitting unpleasantly in the corners
Cracked and shattered

There were people here before...

The treehouse in the back is a storybook
All dented, but at one time sweetened with innocence
Did they cry or did they laugh?
Makes one wonder...

The memories it holds
The seasons that must have passed before it

How lovely this home probably was
But never again...

The door has a letter on it
Marking it
But what could it stand for?
It hangs on for dear life by a rusty nail
Not ready to give up
Yet fading away
Like no one had ever been here before.

-Arya Luthra, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Greatest Loss

I felt safe with my floaties in the pool
You promised you would keep me safe
And nothing would ever happen
You helped me let go of the safety I held on to so tight
But now you can't protect me

Your laugh was deep and rumbling
Now the earth is still
Your hands held it all together
Now it's all falling apart

You used to hold me in your arms
But now you're not around
You used to keep me close
Now I feel so far

What I would do to hear your laugh
And see your smile
Feel your hands
And smell your cologne

You used to make me feel light
And toss me in the air
Now I weigh a million pounds
Bolted to the ground

The big hands that used to hold it
The shoulders that used to carry it
The world is now so empty
It has lost its greatest protector

-Isabella Posada, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

A Metal Box

A metal box
Green with seaweed, red with rust
Resting on the bottom of the ocean
The handle half broken off
Impossible for one to open,
 like a safe or time capsule
The contents possibly untouched for decades
Whatever was inside
Perhaps some bait or maybe a shoe
Or maybe some valuables stashed away
Nobody could know
 what the mysterious box contained
Perhaps a man was fleeing from police
Tossing his belongings into the sea
Expecting to come back to collect them
But perhaps he was killed before he could return
Leaving trillions of dollars behind him
Or it could simply be a lunch box
 that a child had left behind
With a soggy, moldy sandwich inside
Maybe an old fisherman
Decided to give up his passion to fish,
 throwing his tackle box into the sea
Leaving all the bait and hooks just out of reach
The story of the metal box
Remains unknown
Just like us
Having so much potential
Capable of sharing a backstory or information
But with nobody bothering to figure out,
Nobody will know
Some willing to speak up, only waiting to be asked
Some people remain closed off forever,
 not wanting to open up
Sunken, untouched in a watery grave

-Kai Tai, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Echoes in Silence

They sit in my mind like books on a dusty shelf.
Once heartfelt stories, now hiding themselves.
I can hear them... but their voices are dull.
Once soothed me to sleep in a lull.
Bright they were, like stars that one shone,
Now they fade to shadows, they are quiet and alone.

Dreams I planted as a child, like seeds in soil
Left untouched as I grew up, they became dry and coiled
The stem barely surviving, hanging by a thread
Soon enough, it will wither, fade away, and be dead.
Their roots reach out and reach out, wanting rain, thirsty and weak,
But no rain comes, no answers they seek

Childhood dreams from my past
Gone forever, like a blast
Everyday thoughts in my mind,
Disappear, never coming back to realign

"Where did they go?" I ask myself
At the bottom of the bookshelf...where the forgotten lie
"Will they come back?" I ask myself
Keep your eyes open, before they go bye-bye

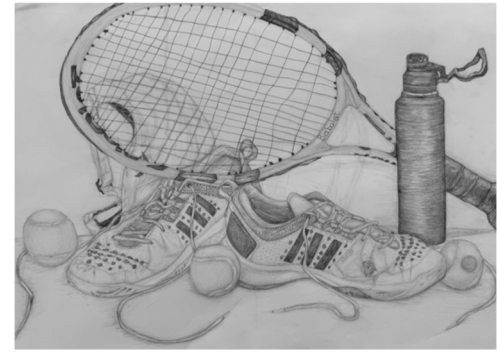
They whisper like wind through an empty school hall,
Soft and faint, whispers hardly heard at all.
Their voices slowly fade with the passing years,
Lost in the echo of forgotten fears.

Yet, life moves forward, the seasons do not wait,
New dreams will grow, it's never too late.
A tiny flame still flickers, not gone,
A reminder that life, like a river, flows on.

-Olivia Trejos, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



JULIETTE LE BONA | Grade 8



The Abandoned Theatre

Old pointe shoes
 Pointing through halls
 Making loud clacks
 Damaged and gray
 So narrow you could see the pain
 Dry blood dripping on the creases

Who had put these here?
 Why were there so many?
 Old chandeliers about to fall
 Hanging down from a beautiful orange ceiling
 Creaking and cracking so silently
 It was like a pin dropped

Rows and Rows of seats
 From left to right
 People's bags left on the ground
 Scattered inside with brochures
 From past talented shows
 Dressed-up dancers on the covers

Costumes were old
 Says the dust running off
 Like a running club of men
 Tutus stick straight
 With gems sewn delicately on the tips
 And black and white tights on old chairs

But something so special about the abandoned space
 The pointe prints on stage
 The paintings streaking the walls
 Like a fish fluttering in the water
 The big old dusty props surrounding the wings
 And the feeling that artistry struck this place

-Ava Scheiner, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Abandoned Tennis Racket

Reminiscing the times I was used
 Full of enchanting power and life,
 but now I lie on the ground, lifeless,
 Covered in dirt and residue

Once filled with talent and promise,
 But now forgotten like a dead leaf
 I was once a champion,
 Now only an ordinary piece of debris

Stuck in wet, marshy grass,
 The trees towering over me,
 Previously a legend on vibrant courts
 But now forgotten, my glory consumed

Grommets are missing, and the head chipped
 Oh, how heart-wrenching this is,
 I was once a swift, striking weapon
 Now I lie in defeated agony

A hollow echo resonating through my frame,
 A mournful scar from the lost rallies
 I look at my strings as severed tendons,
 That can no longer bear the weight of a swing

My strings destroyed and grips torn
 Echoes of laughter dim into silence,
 The sounds of grunting from other players.
 I dream of the thrill of matches won.

My memories fading
 And dreams decaying,
 But here I am, alone
 A faded memory waiting to be restored

-Patrick Shie, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

The Abandoned Camp

It was a popular place
With fifteen cabins set in a circle
All around the rough and rocky dirt yard
A place for camping
With a cold campfire surrounded by rocks
And dirty marshmallows left on the floor
A place that many liked
With a broken wall full of recurring names
And the hidden money left in a building

It was a busy day for all who attended,
With a long moss-colored chalkboard
With faded words and times
A fun day
Says the crafts scattered around the yard
Getting scratched by the grass
A day to create friendships
Says the braided bracelet left on the ground
And the necklace full of names

It was a camp in the middle of the woods
With a few uncut trees surrounding it
Like a coat protecting a child from the cold
It was a camp with a past
With a broken, wooden tiki pole
That used to be as strong as a bull
It was a camp that lived with nature
With the scent of a salt lake nearby
It was a playhouse for all who lived near

But nothing good lasts
Says the ground with faded footsteps
All leading out
Nothing good can last
Says the twenty-three broken toys and tools
Hiding under the dirt and grass
Nothing good will last
Says the broken and abandoned camp
Out in the middle of the woods

-Alina Skillrud, Grade
Blue Ribbon



CHARLIE SALUP | Grade 7

The Broken Diary

I hold secrets that no one else knows
Except for my owner
She tells me them in confidence
Because she knows I won't spill her secrets

Red, blue, purple, pink,
Sharp or dull
She uses colorful pen and pencils
To jot down her deepest thoughts

She abuses my pages and spine
I want to scream for help
But her words are engraved in me
It's fine, I'll never whisper her secrets

If her friends knew what she wrote about
They wouldn't want to see her again
Nobody will know though
Because her secrets are safe with me

I wish that she could love me
Just as much as a mother loves her only child
Or how Romeo loves Juliet
But that's not real for somebody like me

Once she uses out all of my pages
I'll just be another thing in the trash
She holds so much trust in me
Only to throw it all away

Or a couple years later
When she is cleaning her room
She will stumble upon me
And all the memories will start rushing back

I'm just a diary
Nobody will ever know how I feel
The only thing that I have left to grab onto
Are the secrets once kept in here

-Ariana Sosa, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Whispers of the Children Waiting

Darkness engulfs it.
Shrouded in a cloud of mystery,
contrasting the vivid paint flaking off the build.
Echoes of laughter that once infested the area
now replaced by the squeaking noise escaping the swings-
Rust painting the chain a dirty brown.

What was once a safe place for children,
now consumed by the memories from forgotten times.
Abandoned, unused,
left to be tarnished by the ghosts of the past.
Secrets left untold,
haunting the deserted ground beneath.

The seesaws sway slightly,
possessed by the phantoms of the children who used it.
The merry-go-round quietly spins,
flashing back to joyful moments now lost.
The layers of dust covering the slide
rest as its only company as it begins to decay.

The sun starts to rise,
shining a spotlight on the structure,
its former glory unfolding in the daylight.
The build stands tall,
its face almost smiling,
Beckoning for you to come closer,
to remind you of its prior happiness.

As the sun sets,
a promise shines through the air,
of whispers coming from the children.
For a new generation to build a new future,
to give life to the place.
Once full of it, now patiently waiting.

-Emma Vesval, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Is There More Out There?

Looking up at a sea of stars
Wondering why we are isolated
in what we know
An insignificant tiny blip
In the constantly moving stream of time

Could anything else be out there?
From big to small?
Or is it just us
Screaming a call unanswered?

It's only human
To be curious
Of what lies beyond
Our imagination

Anything could be out there
Normal has no meaning
When we branch out to the stars
Hopefully, we find life.

We might not be peaceful
We never were
But hopefully we find it in ourselves
To find a way to coexist.

We are a drop in a ocean of voids and emptiness
A meaning with no purpose
But the universe tried so hard to make us
To look at the stars and just keep dreaming

But while we wait
Before we have to face our end
We should live out our life
For we'll have to leave the binding chains of time.

-Zachary Yantiss, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

The Grave of Grief

Visiting the grave of a former loved one
Knowing that their company
 could no longer be beside you
Through your lows,
Through your highs,
And when you need them most
A friend, a loved one, and a partner in life
Now gone, forever

Remembering all the memories you held
Now all in the ground below
Wondering if they can hear you talk,
About all the great times before
Hoping you were their last thought,
Still in their sole that they would now hold
Not knowing the things that happen 365 days ago

Bringing cake and candles
To the loved one no longer able to celebrate
Times before we would be laughing,
Out at dinner, and in arguments
Unaware that in years' time
 this would be how birthdays would be spent
All in grief, sadness and regret
One missing the others presence
The feeling of Hades taking me down with her
But I must stay

My best friend would have always been here
Giving me a hug, telling me not to be sad
 about the one that I'm missing
Though this time it is her
My best friend would have always put a smile on my face
Cracking an unfunny joke, hoping that it would make me laugh
Though this time that wouldn't be possible
The grave holding many regrets,
 and memories now a place of peace

-Sasha Zaragoza, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



ETHAN KALE | Grade 7

Cloud Doll

I once owned a doll as a child,
So pretty, so lifeful.
I had no complaints, it was true, she was perfect.

She was a convenient size, not grand or small,
And she was more perfect than anyone I had seen.
Hair as raven as night, and skin more clear than porcelain.
Her skin merged well
with the vibrant reds and golds of her silk kimono,
As the sleeves and ends danced with the wind.
Her hair, half up, half down,
A beautiful pin held part up, just like mine.
Her feet were well hidden, and she came with an addition.
A paper parasol, pristine,
But I chose never to use it, for it may get lost just gazing at it.

For years of childhood, I kept her with me,
Kept her safe like a mother hen,
But when the day came to wrap her in tissue, I tried to repel.
To abide would be heartbreaking,
But thirteen was deemed too old to love a doll, I had to listen.
I agreed to the dreaded words,
And let them take her away.
Only 3 years would pass,
And my body would finally fly away.

As I woke up, I was finally there.
Only three years, sixteen, who would have guessed?
I could, I said it myself,
And I could finally see the beauty,
The beauty of palaces gold,
Spiral, striving pillars and diamonds galore.
Everyone was happy as they left the gated door.
There was one rule, however,
 leave a treasured item behind from past,
And you can pass, feel happiness once more.
I thought of only one thing, and this time I was sure.
It would be my last goodbye, but she would stay
 dear to me in my heart.

I tapped the winged guardian of the shelf,
“I know what item I will display,” I say blissed.
He comprehended, just said a few words, and flew off,
Dropping in front, the carton box.
Oh, how I loved it now and grieved it then.
I picked it up and inspected it.
No cracks, just how I left it.

I lifted the lid and there it was,
The wrinkled tissue that surrounded.
I froze for a slight moment.
“What if she reflected who I became?” I doubted.
Ripping it off, I tried not to care,
 I only wanted to see her happy again.
As I held her in my lap,
 I fell into shock and deep despondency.
I had presumed correct once more.
The perfect doll I knew was fractured and forgotten.
Her hair in deep knots, some ripped out.
Her skin mimicked of smallpox, puss in some blemish.
Her clothes disheveled, and her eyes, oh her eyes,
As if an empty shell was left and filled with tears.
Only a change to clothing was present
 that was never there.
A bib, a red one, under her dress, it blended too well.
“Maybe I never noticed as a child,” I guessed.
Once an item from a treasure trove,
 turned into garbage in the common view.
I held her to the light, hoping, dreaming,
Praying she would return
 to the shining sun she was once,
And as I mused, my wish came true.
Her beauty was always there, but all the pain
and guilt I had of parting from her, sealed it away
in my heart.
I smiled to see her back in her normal state,
And as the bells chimed, I was ready to leave her,
To see how much she will then grow.

I stood her on the glass row of cases,
Tightening her onto the stand.
I placed the paper parasol into her hand,
The same one I was afraid to touch.
Maybe one day, my family would see
and smile, smile alongside me.

As I left the palace of gold, and watched her drift away,
Finally building the courage to accept my fate,
I could finally learn to walk on the clouds in peace.

-Katherine Bardet, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

The Lifeless Pond

Trees glowing in the sunlight
Flowers shine as bright as the sun
Their petals resemble a rainbow filled with color
Petals and leaves glide through the wind
A lifeless pond fills the land
A crystal-clear reflection the water provides
Petals glide through the sky
Wind blows throughout the land
The colorful petals land in the cold, lifeless water
Water consumes the petals until none remain
and their color fades.

Petals continue to flow through the sky
Their journey continues to end in the lifeless pond
The petals persist until they crowd the pond
A once lifeless pond now covered with life
Trees began to encircle the pond
Fauna flock to the pond looking for shelter
The once lifeless pond turned into a home

The pond's life and color fades away
The once haven for animals became
a lifeless pond once more
Abandoned and forgotten by all
It becomes a desolate and quiet place
All life has forgotten the pond
Wind flows through the air
A flower petal once again lands in the lifeless pond
The sun shines bright as it illuminates the pond
Petals continue to crowd the pond once more
Animals return and life flourishes once more
The pond will continue to be a haven of colors and life
The cycle will continue for centuries to come

-Enrique Ubarri, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



VICTOR KRISLAV | Grade 8
Beaux Arts - Honorable Mention

A Frosty Winter Wonderland

by Patrick Ercuta

Grade 7

Blue Ribbon

A new state has been crossed off the family go-to list! The snowy state of Wyoming. I couldn't wait to begin snowboarding. Whenever I watched television, I would be fascinated by the stunts and tricks snowboarders did. The snow pummeled my face as I stepped outside the huge airplane.

"Taxi! Taxi!" yelled the taxi driver.

My father and I made our way to the taxi, which would take my family to our destination, Snow King Ski Resort. As the Ercuta family arrived at the ski resort, I had the urge to jump into the snow. and I did after I hopped out of the cab and thanked my parents for bringing us here.

I had made a list before we arrived here with my family and I planned beforehand so that once we got here, the list shall begin. The first thing on this list was to learn how to snowboard. I put on my clothes and headed out for a pair of ski boots.

Afterward, my sister and I got a teacher for snowboarding. His name was Andrew. He is a tall, curly and orange haired man with a cowboy-like moustache. As we left the hotel, Andrew assured me that we will head to the slopes later.

"After we get the basics over with," Andrew said, "we will head over to the gondola."

The gondola is a little cubed box that has seating available for people to sit. It goes up the mountain on wires. We trained hard for hours over and over again. I fell over many times, but with each fall, came a lesson from Andrew. My face was numb from falling over so many times! Andrew would urge us to keep our eyes on the prize. As the lesson moved on, the falls lessened and eventually came to an end.

"Good work!" Andrew exclaimed with joy splattered all over his face.

We then headed up the mountain where the most important thing for us was a snack shack! We sat down, took off our gear, and enjoyed some goldfish as we chatted a bit before hitting the slopes. Before we knew it, we were now at our first real slope! This was exciting for me, and it was a moment to rehearse everything we have learned. With a full stomach and lots of determination, I was ready.

It sucked! I had fallen so many times that I felt numb; however, I still got up and advanced to the following stage.

"We're getting there!" Andrew enthusiastically told us.

We were now exhausted and couldn't wait to have a seat and take a break from the slopes. The ski lift was our idea at first, but then we thought the gondola was faster and cozier, so we took the gondola instead. The ride only lasted five minutes and we had some time to discuss upon arrival.

The moment we got there, we sat down, and I said, "What else is there to learn?"

Andrew then explained that there is more to snowboarding than just sliding down a mountain. There are many fun tricks that professional snowboarders use daily, so I wanted to know more. Without any further discussion, we went on to learn the whirly-bird. The whirly-bird is a trick where the snowboarder jumps and turns mid-air and does a spin.

Since my father is an amazing snowboarder, he decided to join us to see how we were doing. He recommended that we go back down since there is harsh winter weather up here. We went back to the gondola and headed down the mountain for a recap session. As we finished the recap session, I remembered, I still had one more thing to do to cross this off the list, and that was going down a black slope. The black slope is the hardest slope to learn before the double black slope. NOBODY was going to stop me, and I've been thinking of it since we stepped out of that airplane yesterday. That was one of the hardest challenges for most snowboarders, but I was going down it one way or another.

"Are you sure about this?" my father asked me.

"Yeah, I'm sure," I added.

It was freezing cold out, and I felt the weather getting worse by the second. I even felt it through my what was supposed to be a warm and fluffy jacket. The gondola was closed for the day, and the ski lift too. The only way down was by getting down ourselves. It was 4:00 p.m.

"I'm late for dinner!" I thought to myself.

With one large breath, I lifted my board, and I began to slide down the mountain. I slid through the harsh winter weather for a whole five minutes without pause. I haven't felt this happy in such a long time! It was at that moment that I lost all focus, and I went crashing down. The crowd of people went silent as they watched me. I lay there for about five minutes thinking of what just happened.

"Are you ok?" Andrew asked as he slid in front of me and came to a stop.

The weather rubbed against the bruise on my face.

"I lasted five minutes!" I exclaimed with a small jump.

"That's what you get for eating that many fries before boarding the plane!" Dad remarked.

It was then when I realized that it wasn't about making it down, but about the memories we made along the way. The burst of determination hit me one last time as I got up, and I went on to finish the slope. Mom was waiting down at the bottom with a bag of French fries.

"Fries anyone" she stared at me.

"I think I'll pass," I said as I backed away.

Learning to snowboard was one thing on the list, but snow-tubing was next! Snow-tubing is an event where you get in a tube and slide down a steep slope. It was also the second most popular attraction in Jackson Hole. We had a lot of fun while waiting in that long, long snow tubing line. We played video games on our phones and made snowballs to throw at people going down the slope. When I arrived at the top of the slope, my father, my sister, and I got in the triple tube, a tube for three people. The moment we went down, I realized we forgot to put on the tube slower. We sped down the slope at 40 miles per hour. Then, we hit the ramp, which sent us flying in the air. All of us fell off.

"How was the ride?" Mother questioned.

"It was a blast!" I included.

Just like that, there was only one thing left on the list. And that was dirt biking with my uncle. We caught up for a bit on the way there and then we raced. For hours, we raced each other without end. We lost track of time because we are having so much fun.

"How does it feel to lose?" my uncle yelled.

I stared back, and I wasn't going to let him win one more race.

"Oh, what is this?" I found something.

It turned out that I was using the kid's bike, which also had weights on it to slow it down.

"How does it feel to lose?" I yelled at my uncle.

"Karma!" I thought to myself.

Without a doubt, this trip can be described in a few words, the best trip of my life. And it wasn't because of the fun we had; it was about all these beautiful memories made here in Wyoming.

"Let's head back home now." Dad said.

"Not yet." I smiled, "I think I'll stay here."

Thrill of Universal

by Charlotte Lobon

Grade 7

Blue Ribbon

"Thank you so much," I said to the lady who gave me the food.

I grabbed my cotton candy and large icy Dr. Pepper. After taking a big gulp and big bite, I was in heaven. As I looked around, I saw the famous Rip Ride Rockit, which was a big, long, bright red roller coaster. I had waited years for the opportunity to ride it and today was that day.

My mom questioned my decision, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

I looked up at her and exclaimed, "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

Afterwards, my cousin, Angelito, and I annihilated our food. We quickly ran away from our moms to get into the line.

My Aunt, Tia Lesli, scolded us, “Hey! Don’t run off just yet!” Staring at both of us she said dramatically, “Check your seatbelts, stay together, ask for help if you need.”

We both groaned and let out a big sigh, “Yes, fine, love you both, bye!”

My mom gave me a quick hug and afterwards, my cousin and I sprinted away. We stopped abruptly because the long line brought us to a surprising halt.

Catching my breath, I turned to my cousin and announced, “This is going to take forever!”

“Come on, we’ve waited forever to do this, don’t back out now.”

I glanced up at the sign above me that said, “Wait time: 65 minutes.”

My jaw dropped to the floor. I was about to leave the line when my cousin grabbed my arm aggressively and forced me to stay. I stayed for another 35 minutes, and I was drenched in sweat.

I was fidgeting with our tickets when I gasped and yelled out, “Angelito, we have fast pass!”

He looked at me in utter and complete shock. We quickly cut the line to go in the fast pass lane and the wait was only three minutes! We started laughing together and couldn’t believe what just happened.

“We are so silly, why didn’t we check before?”

He responded still laughing, “I don’t know, but I’m glad we aren’t in the other line where they have to wait,” he looked up at the sign that said, “Another 35 minutes!”

It had been time for us to make way to our cart. We stepped into our seats and saw a screen saying, “Choose your music.”

As a tall, skinny man walked toward our direction, he used all his strength to push the bar down to make sure we were intact.

The ride started gearing up and the music started playing, I sat back on the chair and took a deep breath. The ride propelled up a huge ramp that looked never-ending. I heard creaking on the tracks of the roller coaster and immediately got scared. I started shaking in fear, my hands sweating from grasping onto the bar so tightly. The ride dropped as it picked up speed. I yelled from the top of my lungs as the ride kept swiveling through tight loops and building on more speed. My heart pumped out of my chest because I was scared to death.

Gasping for air, I felt my seat belt loosen. I was crying for help, holding on harder for my life. I heard people cheering and laughing on the ride, in the distance, kids crying, the big speakers on each side of my ears booming obnoxious music. My cousin, beside me, looking happier than ever, I was the complete opposite. My hair was flying around my face, the wind whooshing past my ears, my seatbelt kept feeling loose. As the ride finally came to a quick halt, I jumped out of the cart, holding my hands to my heart, completely out of breath.

I tasted the air of sugary churros and cotton candy, I felt queasy, and I was about to barf. I rushed out of the exit, running through the crowd of people, and I spotted my mom in the near distance. I sprinted towards her and gave her a big hug.

“Mom, my seat belt was loose, and I felt like I was going to die. Mom...” my throat became dry, “I was so scared.”

She hugged me tightly and her face looked disappointed and worried. She reassured me I was now fine and said she would talk to the man operating the ride. My mom grabbed my hand, pushing away the crowd, and death started the man operating. The same man, tall and skinny, with a red shirt across saying, “Universal Studios. Rip Ride Rockit,” looking surprised.

My mom yelled, “My daughter had a loose seat belt! Did you even check her seat belt?” My daughter came running to me scared to death.

“Ma’am, that’s the way the ride was designed. I checked her seat belt. I assure you we double check every time and we are very safe here,” The man finished.

I looked at my mom in embarrassment, “Mom, I’m so sorry. I got you so worried and you yelled at this man who was just doing his job. It was my first time on a really big ride, and I was really scared.”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it. You just got me very scared,” my mom replied. She turned to the man, “Thank you for letting me know.”

She turned back to me, “Do you want to eat something? Maybe another cotton candy?”

My stomach groaned in pain, “Definitely not,” I replied.

A Good Old-Fashioned Showdown

by Felipe Marques

Grade 7

Blue Ribbon

The family buggy, a Volkswagen Beetle, is fitted with a new body and has a slightly modified engine. At the farm, the buggy is what my family and I use to drive throughout the town. My uncle and I love going on long journeys with the buggy. Every time we go on a road trip we always try to beat our previous time on how long it took us to get there. My uncle and I always argue about how fast the buggy can get us to our destination. When we went to Jericoacoara, we had a little run in with a train.

We cut the engine and walked into a restaurant in Jericoacoara which was around 1,787 km from our farm in Matão. At the bar, my uncle looked at me and said, “Do you reckon the buggy could beat a train from here back to the farm?”

“I don’t know, but I think we have a fair shot, I mean we drove here after all,” I said confidently.

“Good point, but don’t you see that man in uniform? Looks like he’s a train operator on break. Go talk to him!”

“Ok, I’ll go ask him.”

I walked over to the train operator cautiously to inquire if he was indeed a train driver. I waited until he put his drink down to interrupt his lunch. My uncle was correct, he was a train driver. I then proceeded to ask if the buggy would be able to beat the train to Matão.

He responded nonchalantly, “I don’t think so, after all the trains are made for voyages like this.”

After some brainstorming and disagreeing on who would be able to get to Matão the fastest, I saw my uncle start to get curious as to what we were talking about. Trying to come up with an idea on how we could prove the buggy is faster than the train, I pitched the idea to set up a race. The train director looked intrigued, and I explained to him that it would be my uncle and I against him. The train director agreed so we decided to meet at 8:30 the next morning at a cargo train station not far from the restaurant. He was pretty confident in the train’s ability to beat the buggy, and he even bet 40 Reais he would win. We finished eating and drove back to the hotel. I didn’t sleep that night due to the excitement to finally prove that the buggy is faster than a train.

The next morning, we got up, refueled the buggy, and went to the starting point. We were waiting for what felt like an eternity. Soon we heard someone exclaim “Bom dia!”

“Good morning to you as well,” I answered. I turned around and the train driver from the bar was standing behind me. He was standing there confidently with his hands on his hips and seemed like he was ready to win.

“Oi senhor,” he said in Portuguese.

“Hi Sir,” I responded.

We lined up and put GPS trackers on each other’s vehicles and he beeped his horn one time... two times. then three... and we were off. I must admit the launch was pretty difficult on the sandy terrain, as there was no grip to the road. I drove fast but carefully to avoid trees and hanging branches. It was the ultimate test for the buggy - 1,787 miles and 41 hours of driving not counting time to stop for gas.

The roads were narrow and never ending, I shifted up to fourth gear and settled in for the 40 hours remaining. Only three hours in, I had neck cramps, my left foot was hurting, and my back was stiffer than a solid metal bar. We had a constant speed of about 120 km/h which means we only covered about 360 km. I pulled over and woke my sleeping uncle to switch as I was exhausted. My uncle continued the drive, and I checked the GPS on the train, it was behind us but not by much. I showed him how to watch the train on the GPS and used that as my time to get some sleep.

He woke me four hours later and we switched back. I was the one driving when we encountered our first problem. We were almost out of gas. Now that we had almost driven 750 km, we only had a little bit of gas left. We had no idea where a gas station was, so I scanned the GPS and found a little village called “Cantão do Buriti” about a mile away. We arrived at the village with drops of gas left and eventually, the buggy rolled to a stop. Now stranded in this tiny village with no service and few people, we were helpless. My uncle and I sat in silence wondering to ourselves what to do, as time was ticking, and the train was now in the lead. My uncle got out to walk down the road to see if there was anyone or anything that could help us. Luckily, I stayed behind and a local

noticed us and called his friends who were nice enough to help us. I called my uncle back and they helped push the buggy to a nearby hidden gas station. They told us they built it off the road to avoid traffic stops. Once the buggy was full again, I got back into the driver's seat and off we went. I drove for another grueling five hours when we finally stopped for a quick lunch at a Graal gas station.

"Felipe," my uncle said as he looked in my direction. "How long have we been driving for and how much is left?"

"We've been driving for 12 hours."

"Holy crap, how much is left?" My uncle said as if he was regretting every decision he had made.

"Twenty-nine hours" I said dreadfully. I am now wondering why I agreed to this race in the first place.

We got back in the buggy, this time learning from our mistakes, started it up, and my uncle was now the one driving. We continued our journey. We refueled and swapped drivers every five hours so none of us fell asleep at the wheel. Fifteen uneventful hours later, we reached the final stretch of road. When I last checked the GPS we were behind the train but now with our strategy in place, we resumed a small lead. The road was a smooth new highway and my uncle was sleeping, so I floored it.

It was always my dream to see how fast the buggy could go, and I wasn't about to let this opportunity slip. I saw the needle on the speedometer rising 120, 130, 140, 150, 155 and finally the fastest it could go 160 km/h. We now had a larger lead on the train than before. Still driving at about 155 km/h, my uncle woke up, and yelled at me to slow down to about 120 km/h.

As we were driving, the unthinkable happened. The buggy made a sharp twist, and the steering wheel trembled uncontrollably. I peered out the side of the buggy and realized a tire burst! I looked at my watch and with some quick math I realized that we were only two hours away from the finish line. With that, I checked the train's location and with the gas incident and stopping for lunch, there was no way we would win this race. I had to drive on three wheels into Uberaba City to reach the closest tire shop. It took an hour and a half to get new tires, and I lost all hope of winning this race, but I did not want to burst my uncle's bubble. My uncle jumped behind the wheel, I threw myself into the passenger seat, we thanked them, paid up, and left.

We had to maintain an average speed of at least 150 km/h to catch up. Two hours later we were finally at the entrance to the farm, now we had to make it to "Pontilhão", the finish line. My uncle and I switched one last time so I could be the one to drive us in. Never in my life did I drive that well. With both hands on the wheel, dodging trees left and right, my gear shifts being extra smooth, I didn't lose a single second. It was a relatively wide dirt road surrounded by bamboo, we followed the road, and I shifted up into fourth gear once again. I made a hard right turn then a left and onto the final stretch. I slammed the gas down so hard that I felt the floor of the buggy. Then, I heard the train's horn.

"Oh, great—a good old-fashioned showdown," I looked at my uncle laughing.

"Come on man, go!" my uncle yelled.

I stepped on it and shifted the gear up. I saw the speedometer needle rising, but I had to focus. I drove, and I saw the Pontilhão slowly approaching. I got ready to brake, and I counted down from three. Looking behind me watching the train get closer and closer. Two, the Pontilhão got closer, and I needed to time it just right. One, I hit the brakes, and we reached the Pontilhão just in time. I saw the train trying to slow down, and it came to a halting stop and hearing the metal on the tracks squeak, I covered my ears, and I knew that we had won.

"Wow, you guys just beat a train at its own game," The driver said defeated.

"I find it hard to believe too," As I had a lot of faith in my buggy, there was a part of me that doubted it for a little bit.

"Well, a deal's a deal, so here's your 40 bucks."

I laughed as I took the money from the train driver. He shook my hand and walked away.

"No problem." I said to myself as the train driver has now walked away with his head down, disappointed.

He returned to the train and slowly left honking his horn three times, indicating "good game".

"Well, we just beat a train, where do we go from now?" My uncle looked at me proud.

A plane passed over us.

"I think I may have an idea...."

The Weight of Rumors

They spread quickly,
Like a fire that can't be controlled,
Whispers are shared in secret,
Get louder as they travel.
A tale that gets twisted, stretched, and shattered,
Until it becomes something barely recognizable.

They don't realize the pain, the sting of every word,
How it lingers in my thoughts
long after they've stopped talking.
I want to shout the truth,
To clear things up,
But it feels like yelling into a strong wind,
Which returns to slap you in the face.

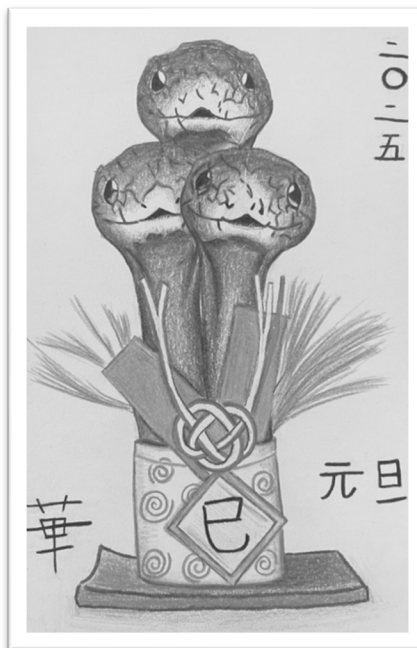
Rumors don't wait for permission; they just take over.
They steal your peace, your trust, and your voice.
But I've learned something through all the chaos.
The truth doesn't have to be loud
To stand significant.

So, I'll keep my head up and let the lies fade away,
Like slithering snakes back into the depths of black waters,
Because the only person who really knows me
Is me.



-Antonella Ciocca, Grade 8
*Blue Ribbon
Judges' Award*

HANA SMITH | Grade 8
American Association of Teachers of Japanese
1st Place Nengajo Contest



Unwritten Disdain

I've perched here for persistently dragging hours,
Only in view of a blank page teeming with words I can't write,
In doubt that I ever will.
And yet I have nothing better to do
Then criticize nonexistent words which remain
 still invisible on the page
My wording is inadequate
Change it.
Now the wording too flamboyant
Change it.
Nobody understands the wording
Too deadly sick of writing to change it now.
STOP.

Look at it, and see how awful and trite it sounds,
Delete the scraped phantasm that remains cloaked
 in the white light of the page,
I'll never love what I write.
It'll always sound better in my head
 rather than spoken from my mouth
Or flowing from the pen's tip.
Everyone else knows what to write, and will write it,
Yet, I'm stuck chasing the faint scent of a mediocre idea
 only to hate it when I have it seized
It's patternless and shallow, punctuation
 abhorrent and detestable, grammar more loathsome.

I hate it once again.

I hate chasing the distortion of a dream
That I'll ever comprehend the love for what I do and make
To wake to finding my real thoughts.
I hate the words I can't write.
And hate it more so when it is written.

-Abigail Costales, Grade 8
*Blue Ribbon
Judges' Award*



Mother Nature

Making our word vibrant
A colossal effect on us
Magnificent scenery among us
Unfolding behind the curtains of the world,
Yet there's more.

Let me explain
Gruesome storms leaving unforgettable imprints
Unpleasant sights in their aftermath
Ruining lives.

DESTRUCTION

On the other hand
Four seasons delivering different things
Frigid, invigorating, blossoming, sweltering weather
Pleasant in necessary ways

Dismantled by the human hand
We can't contain it
Treating it obnoxiously
Mother Nature
Slowly drifting away.

-Andrej Bakrac, Grade 8
Blue Ribbon



MATTHEW MALHERBE | Grade 8

Lost in an Ocean of People

Every day he walked along the crowd
humming the same tune
loudly but silently...

Every day he wished somebody would stop him in his path
And ask him, "*what are you humming?*"
They would have a genuine conversation
And he would finally socialize...

Every day his tune was ignored
Despite his desperation...

Every day he was ignored
Washed away in the deep swathes of men and women...

He prayed he wished he hoped
But he knew no other soul...

Still today he walks
Humming with false hope
Washed away in an ocean of people...

At home, at school, in public, at work, at the retirement
home,
Still, he hummed his last tune
On his deathbed...

Too late to realize
He could have just said:
"*hello*"

-Nicolas Burneo, Grade 8
Blue Ribbon

A New Union

After numerous days of slow-moving time
She finally found her love of fate
As she readied for the moment of her life
Refilled her heart that was taken
As fast as a shooting star...

Colossal amounts of people present
The love of these two was never scared
Groomsmen and bridesmaids filled the room
With an enchanting piece of art revealed as their love

As idolized as she was, she was enraptured
While he took her heart in a new direction
With tears filled with joyous life
Hearts beating out of proud chests
The now husband and wife esteemed the room
As a united pair
Moving towards new horizons.

-Corbyn Dauphin, Grade 8
Blue Ribbon



WILLA DUNAGAN | Grade 6

You

Glistening words purr like music
The sunlight of your words extracts the best in me
Cherishing the time I have with you
Scared it will suddenly end
Now, your words darkening
Your wicked words strike me
Big loud and venomous verbiage spewing out of your mouth
Your snakelike words wrap around me
Holding me
Stopping me
Your instigations like knives in my back
Like a dark shadow following me
The feeling of me being held hostage
I believe captivated you
Feeling that you could control me like a puppet
Manipulated my every move
Second guessing myself worth
The darkness surrounded me, overwhelming me
Thoughts of our friendship is long gone into the shadows
Now, the daunting thought about you makes me feel sick to my stomach

-Carolina O'Brien, Grade 8
Blue Ribbon

Skiing

With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility

Living in a gruesome world,
Where sorrow clouds the light of God,
Criminals out of control, mayhem in the streets,
Where this one policeman stood,
Bringing his gun out to ensure balance,
With great power and yet... duty.

Walking on the streets of Washington,
Stood the magnificent White House,
Inside, a president signing laws,
Vetoing and accepting,
knowing the fate of this country relies on him.

Inside the vaults of the bank,
Bankers receiving money,
With great trust from the people,
Knowing a stack of gold is behind them,
Resisting temptation and doing what is right.

Leaning on the stack of books,
Looking and teaching a new generation,
Filling them with knowledge and imagination,
Stood a teacher in the mist,
Having the power to change the mindset.

Standing next to the medical seat,
a doctor doing surgery,
operating carefully,
Knowing the life of the patient is on him.

People using their powers for good,
Keeping the world a balanced place,
Growing and helping the new generation thrive,
Knowing there's hope for total peace,
With great power comes great responsibility.

-Miguel Trujillo Flushing, Grade 8
Blue Ribbon

My journey starts when roars pick me up,
carrying groups and gear
My friends lead me to unexpected slopes.

Vast forest impatiently waiting to be conquered.
Beautiful nature covered in glittering cream,
Brilliant sun, shining sea,
Covered snowy trees, hiding fun and joy,
Luscious snow, twinkling, breathtaking, perfect.

I see big and small families together,
eating perfect chicken nuggets,
Boring ice skater losers,
People falling off metal chairlifts,
The average wannabe Red-Bull rampage skier
speeds down with his doomed victims,
Helicopter moms taking terrible pictures,
Blocking the snow-capped mountain for all skiers,
Ski school zig-zagging across the dangerous slope
taking out any living skiers still standing.

Challenging adventure,
I glide through the steep slopes,
Between the pine trees,
Weightlessness and free,
I'm cold,
My freezing feet itch,
And I can smell warm hot chocolate and special Swiss cheese.

However, death plagues my brain.
I scramble on unforgiving rocks
Then I graciously fall
Tumbling down the slippery mountain
My pointy poles fly into the green pine trees
My shiny skis in the bright sky

The world seems to end,
Breathless and aching,
But death doesn't come.

In the end, I just landed on fluffy pillows.
I'm buried in snow
Waking up from my self-imposed slumber,
I look and feel like an overstuffed, snowy snowman.

Climb back up to the top,
And try it again...

-Arturo Zizold, Grade 8
Blue Ribbon

La magie des Champs Elysées

Les Champs Elysées
L'atmosphère
La beauté
C'est magique

Marchant à travers les lumières de tes bras
Allez, on y va!

Courez main dans la main avec vos amis
Partez à l'aventure à Paris

Les Champs Elysées
L'atmosphère
La beauté
C'est magique

Des rues éclairées par des milliers de lumières
Les cafés sont légendaires

La magnifique architecture
C'est une belle aventure

Dans la boutique, je vois un béret
Tout est tellement glamour, je suis enchantée

Les Champs Elysées
L'atmosphère
La beauté
C'est magique

-Juliana Sanchez-Tobar, Grade 8
Blue Ribbon

Les boutiques

Ladurée
Tu me fais rêver
Chocolat chaud chez Angéline
Pourquoi pas
Le Bon Marché
C'est parfait!
Les galeries Lafayette
Pour faire la fête

C'est très chic!
Mais oui, magnifique
Quand je suis à Paris
C'est tellement joli!

-Raphaella Tuch Bussey, Grade 8
Blue Ribbon



INES VAN GASTEL | Grade 7

Les spécialités françaises

Je suis allée chez Ladurée
Et j'ai demandé,
Un macaron s'il vous plaît
À la vanille, au chocolat?
Je ne sais pas

Je suis partie,
A la boulangerie
Et j'ai dit
Comment ça va?
S'il vous plaît, Un pain au chocolat

-Siena Lunt, Grade 8
Blue Ribbon

La mode, mon amour

En France, la mode est magnifique
Les marques de luxe sont magiques
Ma marque préférée est Vêtement
Tout est parfait! Vraiment!
La mode en France est unique
Tellement fantastique!

-Stefano Ferrero, Grade 8
Blue Ribbon

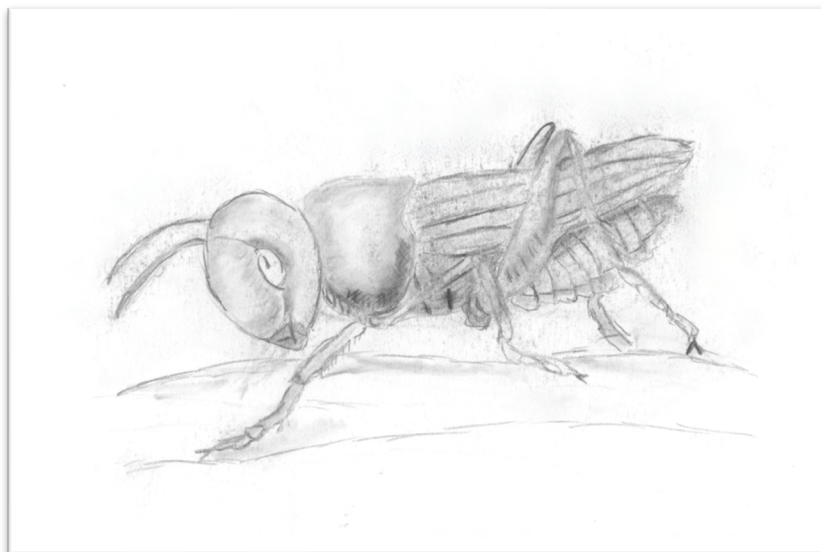
La nature est malade

Les plantes sont mortes
Quand nous regardons le téléphone
Quand nous voyageons dans la voiture

La nature est belle
La nature est forte
Mais elle travaille,
et travaille,
et travaille,
Et est faible

Je m'appelle Sophie
Et mes yeux adorent la nature,
elle est malade
Et je n'entends pas la musique de la nature
C'est le silence
C'est grave
C'est mal.

-Sophie Nogueira, Grade 8
Blue Ribbon



LEO RAMPOLDT | Grade 7

Calliope

by Clarissa Perez
Grade 8
*Blue Ribbon
Judges' Award*

Larry Thompson Creative Writing Award

Larry Thompson was a popular humorist and columnist with *The Miami Herald* for over twenty-five years. In honor of Mr. Thompson's lasting contributions to our community and his inspiration to young authors, the Larry Thompson Creative Writing Award is presented to the "Best of Show" entry for teen writers in grades 8-12 at Miami-Dade County Fair and Exposition.

Editor's Note:

"Calliope" was selected for this special award for its vivid storytelling and emotional impact. To ensure it is suitable for all of our readers, we have edited the ending. While this version reflects the heart of the original work, it does not include the full conclusion as written by the author.

Sweet appendages of flight have beauty and grace of a maiden and so vital to the aves that are blessed with such beautiful things, though unfortunately it seems they are only regarded in a fleeting whisper. Their poetic existence constantly begs a singular question from me: if we lack wings, how may we fly and if it is beauty that we lack how may we be seen? Fragile humans regard beauty as a beacon, illuminating their pores when there is a darkness in them, and even I must admit I am not so sublime that I would not be a victim to such a belief. To me, such beauty be a religion that would bring me to my knees. This being such, I could not begin to understand the strong negative emotions so ephemeral a thing happens to be invoking in me. I feel such an indescribable hunger, a shallow empty pit barely shrouded by the skin hanging weakly off my bones. I am unaware what I may want but I feel I am an addict searching for such a thing, something I'm sure I had once had, for you don't crave a thing so greatly when the tip of your tongue has not been planted on it. What I search for seems a dim flickering light appearing when there is a darkness deep within me that when found would spark an eternal light: so, when I would awaken and see my reflection, I wouldn't look upon an ugly, despicable thing with skin having jagged teeth gnawing at its own flesh desperately for some semblance of being satiated. Though what is it that I hunger for? It had been my primary concern all my writing life and how I had constantly bled the blood that concerns such prophecies onto paper. I had believed it was the hunger for life and its meaning, which is not something that I could ever search for with my philosophical striving, but something I would have to wait to find me in a predestined fate. I hoped to experience something that could make me feel as if I didn't need to bear the weight of three strong men on my back in the simple struggle to continue living.



At the grand age of thirty-six it seems I have finally discovered my final hypothesis; a hypothesis that I am sure is correct. It was as if a mischievous, malicious red faced devil had been plotting his sinful schemes within me scorching my organs till there was nothing left inside me except for the heart that haunts me with the emotions it bears. It is envy that haunts me for I am only a weak thing to be ravaged and torn apart excruciatingly by the parasite that lives within me from inside out:

What I create is a direct manifestation of beauty I could never quite achieve.

I no longer wish to write, for all love it and gaze upon it affectionately, but if all love my poetry then who will be left to care for me. Yet, I cannot control my truth, and writing is what it is, unfortunately. I could look upon a dead fly and describe how lovely it was before its squashing: as the impending occurrence of death constantly hanging over our heads makes us all the more lovely. But then, it was never truly me who wanted to write such a thing. It was the dead fly on the wilted old wood of the desk in my study that spoke its last whispers. Yes, that's it! All poets have an irresistible little figure in their mind whispering soft nothings in their ear acting as puppeteers to their writings. A muse. She is what must die.

In all poets lies a sleeping beast that would claw itself out of the host that hides it when awakened by the lesser matters of the world. It is a frank beast that lies inside them that would be the one to understand that the sorrowful aspect of our art will overpower the joyful. It proclaims that paper is our only friend: it haunts us all with the joy that to our harsh blows will yield no useless cries; yet, to our emotions there is no comfort, there only be a deafening silence that leaves us to wallow in oblivion.

And what of my Calliope? It seems my love's calming, symphonic voice be akin to the shrills that awaken the dormant beast in me. And how I despise the feeling, for she is something that has been joined with my soul; hers painstakingly sewn to my own throughout the struggle to allow her to fill such a useless existence of continuous destructive tendencies of writing, and sleeping, and wallowing in the pit of lonesomeness and hunger I had dug. It is unfortunate that the frantic, clamoring beast clawing through my ribs has urged a movement forward into the blurring lines between endearment and detest, sanity and insanity.

Years prior, in our past, when there was no explanation to what occurred around us and when natural human curiosity was strengthened, the Greeks created their mythology. In it, it was said that humans had originally been created with a head bearing two faces, four arms, four legs. However, the greedy gods, fearing the potential power they were destined to hold, had split the being into two parts, condemning the now fragile humans to spend their lives in constant search of the half that they had lost. The majority of humans would remain at only half of their full potential, as in a world of millions the chances of finding your alternate face, arms, and legs were slim to none. I must have been blessed by a kiss from Zeus himself then if I have been granted enough luck to find the rest of myself; my wife, my muse, the embodiment of beauty itself.

Truthfully, when we had originally been acquainted with each other I had feared even gazing into her eyes as in them I would find her soul, one fresh, antithetical to my own that had been rotten and decaying. And how I was frightened by the possibility of intimacy with her, as she had been so seraphically pulchritudinous that I feared when we would kiss her lips would feel fake and porcelain and her mouth would taste of iron like machinery. I feared that when we would deepen, I would feel her heart against my chest like a lump of cold unfeeling brass while mine would blindly burn like fire. This is why I find it so very unfortunate I must do what I must do and rid of her, but I'm sure with her blessed soul she has experienced a life much finer than I.

I currently write upon an old, dusted sheet collected from my typewriter, attempting to write a plan for my murder, for if my wife's death were to be discovered, me being the only one she lives with, I would be the obvious culprit. Then for what would I have killed her? Capture would provide me little time to enjoy a life that only a privileged few had been born with. A life free from beauty's grip. Each time I begin to write, however, I seem to become too aware of it all in the silence of my study. When my thoughts rest, I hear the skin over my hands silently cry a soft weep, straining against the idle movements that oppose my looming malice. I am jolted from my thoughts at the sound of a muffled knock then the creaking of a door following.

"Darling, you poor thing! Have you been cramped in here all day? You were here when I had left for the market this morning." she asks through a soft velvety voice that I had previously felt cradle me like the crease of a mother's arm, but now seemed to have lost its warmth. Poor thing? Is that pity I hear, pity for the fact that I be so monstrous while she be the kind that a stranger would lust for?

I cough, sparing her a glance accompanied by a dull countenance before looking down at the blank page with a simple stripe of black ink. My hands trembling, having stopped, their weeps no longer tremoring throughout my body. "I suppose, I've had quite a lot to concern myself with the past days, I must work diligently if I were to receive knighthood as I hoped."

"Hm," she begins as she saunters over to behind my chair positioning herself behind me to gently caress at my tired shoulders, "it doesn't look like too much you're doing there. On my way back I'd seen the quaintest little coffee house and was exhausted from the day. I had tasted a bit of their porridge. I've brought some home, it'd make a wonderful evening meal."

At her words I could not help but involuntarily grit my teeth. I'm certain most blind men would love the soft shackles of domestication. They'd feel in heaven with their darling lover requesting their presence for a dinner, but I see through the wretched entity that consumes her. She must think herself so virtuous to bring me home dinner, though it is all only a part of her plan to improve how the world regards her. She only does this so she can remain a lovely, ripe woman while I be the unruly monster. I am feared, but my blood fills the well of pride she feeds through my domestication! How I despise her! Ah, yes... I have despised her. My memories must have fooled me, for how I've been so blind! I glance up at her seeing her eyebrows deeply furrowed most likely due to the growing silence. "Are you not hungry, dear?" she inquires. I stop the seduction of the muse before it can occur by planting a soft kiss on her lips. Yes, then I am sure her lips taste of iron, she be a emotionless robotic shell of a woman who's only reason for existence is to haunt me, watching me slowly fall into a pit of madness in an attempt to discover why my flesh seems to be deteriorating and why my muscles tear at their ends. But alas, the she-devil had underestimated me!

As the days pass me like the migration of the aves to the South, it seems my heart has lost its soreness at the thought of my sweet Calliope leaving me. Truthfully, I'm sure it'd bring me joy to see her go, as it seems every time she comes around I cannot shroud the tick of my jaw and the sensation of my nails digging into my palm so desperately that I'd feel my body was trying to burrow into itself. How she loves to comfort me when, I assume, the housework weighs too heavy a burden; she comes to my study as I work and massages the aching shoulders that I have used for little but writing my useless musings of pretty meadows. Though now, as she massages my tense shoulders so, it seems her nails carve the skin of my shoulders to draw fresh blood and she shakes me, helping the devil inside mingle its sinister brew.

"Sweetheart," she coos softly, seemingly to disarm me from the wretched torture she had been putting me through ever since our marriage was consummated, "what would you like for dinner? We haven't spoken in quite a while. We should share a meal, just us."

"Meal," I begin. As a question, in any other situation, I would be quick to decline her due to the unwanted amalgamation of emotions I have been feeling deep within me. Then I begin to think, a meal with only us: a perfect opportunity to rid of a blood sucking leech that has been gnawing on my back. "A meal tonight sounds delightful, I have been so, so hungry."

It was a fine environment she had set, I could give the woman, or whatever she may be, that. Such a setting would normally make my heart swell with abstract dictations of the love or infatuation I previously harbored for her. Though I am no longer so weak that I would fall for her schemes. It is dark and dim. She has completely shut every drape so no light from streetlamp could filter in from the night's soft blanket. She lit candles as well, and it makes the house fill with warmth; yet somehow I remain shivering, still. I carefully examine her cutting me a strip of meat and placing it on my plate before she stands hovering over me like a pestering fiend, her hands clasped tightly in front of her in anticipation.

"Take a bite. I hope it is to your liking," she encourages softly with a nod. I cut at the tender meat taking a small bite. I let out a slight huff at the flavor seeping into the muscle of my tongue

"It is delicious, but a little dry I'm afraid," I respond with a dull countenance working at the flesh between my teeth.

"Oh, dear, of course," she utters as she rises, the small scraping sound of her chair against the gemstone floors and her shuffling to take my plate forcing me out of my thoughts...

Merci Maman

by Marisa Beverley

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

The captivating aroma of fresh gougères in the oven fills my nostrils; my mom, Eleanor Bernard, is making my favorite snack. Not even the gougères in Burgundy taste as good as hers. She has a talent, my mom, and her food is truly a pleasure to eat. I watch as she places them on my grandmother's special china; I love these plates because they remind me of her. Margot was her name, and she was a marvelous cook. My mother said she learned it all from Margot, but I believe that the love my mom puts into her cooking cannot be taught; it comes from the heart. Luckily, she promised to teach me her gougères recipe once I become a famous chef. My one true desire is to be a chef; my mom wants it just as much for me. However, I just fear the hardship and pressures that may come with cooking school. Yet, cooking is engraved in my blood, and food is a part of who I am. There is a recipe to suit the good times and the bad, food can bring people together and bring one joy.

"Bon appétit Antoine," she says as she places the dish down, "and be careful; they are hot."

"Merci Maman!" I reply as I take my first bite.

Immediately after serving me, my mom glances over to the vintage toile clock sitting atop the cabinet above the stovetop. She gasps and throws off her floury apron and runs upstairs to her room; I can tell my mother is late for work. She works for a wealthy elderly woman who lives in the Auteuil Villas in the center of Paris, far from our tiny apartment on Rue Saint-Denis on the outskirts of town. It is a forty-five-minute journey by train, followed by an additional half an hour walking to the house. I feel bad for my mom for having to travel so far every day, especially because she has arthritis in her kneecap. She would like a car but can't afford one because Raphael, our landlord, has doubled our rent. Equally, after my father left my mom for another woman, we are now even shorter on funds.

I have been keeping a secret from my mom for a while now, two actually. The first is a car that I have been building for over a year now. It has been a gradual process because I have to source all of the parts, which cost a pretty penny. The restaurant that I have been waiting tables for, La Coupole, is my source of income at the moment, and every penny I earn goes to purchasing car parts for my little project. My mom thinks I am saving the money for college, so I can't tell her about the car until it is finished. The second secret I am keeping from her is that I applied to a cooking school early last September, a very prestigious one, Le Cordon Bleu, which is the best cooking school in existence, or at least currently in 1997. Their acceptance rate is 36%, which is daunting. This is a complex situation for me because if I am lucky enough to be accepted, there is no way I can tell my mom. We can't afford it and telling her about my acceptance in Le Cordon Bleu will make her feel guilty; she already has too much on her plate. I love her so much, and I wish for her eternal happiness; I won't do anything that will cause adverse emotions for her. That is why I can't tell her about my application.

I finish my plate of gougères and then I wash my plate. My shift at La Coupole starts at 5:00 p.m. sharp, but I have to take the subway to get there, so I always leave early. Before I go I take out the cutting board and some root vegetables as preparation for tonight's dinner. Then I flick off the lights to head out. I slip into my leather coat and brown loafers, which I have been meaning to take to my neighbor who is a shoemaker. The heel is receding and clacks when I walk. As I walk out of my apartment, I lock the door, and travel down the stairway three floors to the ground floor. I quickly stop by the mailbox behind the front desk out of curiosity to find out if my application has arrived. It is mid-March, roughly around the time applications are returned. Every day since the first of this month I have checked the mailbox on my way to work; nervously awaiting a response from Le Cordon Bleu. Interestingly, I have a feeling today will be the day that I receive notice. To get in would put me one step closer to my dream of being a chef if I am to get in, but I cannot attend because of financial obstacles.

I open the rusting mailbox door and pull out the mail. Bills, newspapers, letters from Margot, and an envelope from Le Cordon Bleu. It had a detailed gold stamp and my address written in elegant cursive writing. To open it is a risk. Whether I am accepted or not I will be disappointed either way. However, I must do it. I tear open the envelope while squinting my eyes to hide the words.

"Un, deux, trois!" I whisper to make the exposure of my application more dramatic.

I begin unfolding the letter. I skim through the visible part of the paper, and it starts by thanking me for applying and my interest in cooking. I unfold twice more to reveal the verdict: "We invite you, Monsieur Antoine

Bernard, to join us at Le Cordon Bleu this fall in Paris, France.” An immediate chill runs through my body. I can’t believe it; my dream has just been unfolded, and I am so close to reaching it. Opening this letter is like opening the door to my future. Now I am sure, I must go to Le Cordon Bleu, no matter what it takes. I will take extra shifts at La Coupole or take on a second job. But I must, I must go to this school. I refold the letter and nicely place it back into the envelope. I hide it in my coat pocket and head out to work.



It is a Friday night, so the restaurant is busy as usual. I am on my way home, and it is roughly 9 p.m. My mother should be on the train home now from work. Fortunately, we finish work around the same time, so we share our evening meal together. On my way home I peer across the street at the television outside the repair store that I pass every day on my way home. The usual news reporter is delivering today’s breaking news. He has a slim face, bushy eyebrows, and small nerdy-looking glasses. People start gathering around the screen, so I cross over to see what the fuss is about.

“Breaking news tonight in Paris,” the reporter begins, “a devastating train crash on the Rue Saint-Denis subway line. Luckily, only one death occurred during this horrific accident. The unfortunate death of a middle-aged woman, identified as Eleanor Bernard, is confirmed live.”

My heart begins palpitating and sinks into my stomach. I feel my fingers tingle and then go numb. I fall to my knees and feel my loafers crease. My head collapses into my hands and tears begin streaming uncontrollably down my cheeks. I can’t feel anything; no emotion in my heart, or anywhere inside of me. How could this happen to my mother? The person I love most in this world. What will I do now? She is everything to me; how can I love anyone again?

I walk home, hardly conscious enough to put one foot in front of the other. My devastation has overcome my brain and my body. I become dizzy, start seeing stars, and the next thing I know my eyes shut.

“Réveillez-vous! Wake up monsieur!” I hear as I am shaken by someone, and my eyes daze up to the bright sunlight.

I must’ve passed out and spent the night on the street. As I regain my vision, I distinguish the sight of a young, beautiful woman. Her hair is blonde with fair skin, but since my vision is still returning I can’t recognize her eye color. The woman continues shaking me until I stand up and she trusts I am fully awake. I hear her introduce herself to me, but I am not even listening. My mother has died. I fainted on the streets of Paris. I have been accepted to a school that could change my life, but how can I attend now?

I fulfill my delayed journey back home to my building. I go up the stairway to the third floor where my apartment is at. I attempt to open my front door, but my hands are still tingling out of shock. I drop the keys on the floor as I enter the doorway, and I make my way to the kitchen. I put away the cutting board and the vegetables I set for last night’s dinner. As I do this, I think about what must happen next. Must I become miserable and depressed about my mother’s death; or should I take it as a sign? Her dream for me was to become a famous chef. I must honor her wish, and I can do that by attending Le Cordon Bleu. I must. I must get there. The money will be sorted; somehow. I can sell the house, or work double shifts, triple even, but I must go to this school.

One month has passed since that horrid night of my mother’s passing; I have coped with it. I have chosen to take it as a message from God to take the initiative and achieve something bigger than myself and my emotions. I have grown up, and without my mom, I am forced to face the world on my own; like I should. I have not forgotten

her, and have not moved on, but I have stood strong on my two feet. I've already responded to Le Cordon Bleu with a letter confirming my interest in attending this fall. The funds have been sorted; I have sold the apartment. I will move into a dorm room in the school once it begins. Until then, I will manage; it is what I must do. Merci Maman, for building me to be the man I am today. What is life without hardship anyway?

The Kingdom of Fantasy

by Connor Blakely

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

It was a dark, stormy Friday night when Freddie was suddenly woken up by a loud crash outside his house. He blinked at the clock on his nightstand. It was 12:07 AM. Thunder rumbled again, and Freddie felt his heart race. What was that sound? A tree? A car? He grabbed a flashlight from his desk and cautiously made his way downstairs. The house was quiet, the only noise coming from the storm outside. He peered out the window but saw nothing unusual.

"Maybe it was just the wind," he thought.

He was about to head back upstairs when a flash of lightning lit up the night sky—revealing a massive shape outside. Freddie froze. His eyes widened as the figure came into focus; a giant dragon, its glowing green eyes staring right at him through the window. Freddie stumbled backward; his breath caught in his throat.

"What... what are you?" he whispered to himself, half in disbelief.

The dragon chuckled—a deep, rumbling sound that seemed to shake the walls.

"My name is Jack, and I need your help."

"Wait... what?" Freddie blinked. *"A talking dragon?"*

Jack puffed out a cloud of smoke, clearly amused.

"Yes, I'm real, and I'm here because you're the only one who can help me. There's a princess we need to save."

Freddie's brain was struggling to keep up. He is a little slow in the head sometimes.

"Princess? What do you mean? And why me?"

Jack's green eyes softened, almost pleading.

"The Fairy Princess, Lily. She's been captured by Agatha, the Queen of the Witches. She's in danger, and I can't save her alone. I need someone who isn't afraid to fight."

Freddie stared at the dragon, still unsure if he was dreaming. But as he looked around at the quiet, lonely house—his lonely life—he realized he didn't have anything better to do. Maybe this was his chance to actually do something important.

"Okay," Freddie said, taking a deep breath. *"I'll help. But what exactly am I supposed to do?"*

Jack's wings spread out, each one the size of a house.

"Climb on. I'll explain as we go."

Without thinking twice, Freddie grabbed onto Jack's scaly back and climbed up. The dragon's scales were surprisingly tough, but smooth to the touch. Freddie felt his stomach lurch as Jack's powerful wings beat against the wind, lifting them higher and higher into the sky.

As they soared above the clouds, Freddie couldn't believe what he was seeing. He could see his entire town below, the tiny houses, streets, and trees looking like little toys. The feeling was so surreal, Freddie almost forgot to be scared.

Jack started humming softly, and the sound was soothing. Freddie's eyelids grew heavy, and before he knew it, he was asleep.

During his slumber, he had a dream. In this dream, he was flying over a huge island, full of strange creatures. There were dragons, trolls, giants, and fairies, all living in different parts. But across the island, there was a dark, gloomy place where volcanoes smoked and trees were nothing but twisted, dead branches. Freddie could see witches walking through the streets, their long, black cloaks dragging behind them.

Suddenly, Freddie woke up with a start. He realized they were almost at their destination, and the island from his dream was the Kingdom of Fantasy. He was dreaming of real life.

Freddie sat up, still feeling a little disoriented.

"What is this place?" he asked.

Jack flew lower, pointing down at the shimmering Crystal Palace in the Fairy territory.

"That's the home of the Fairy Princess, Lily. We need to get there before it's too late."

They landed smoothly, and Freddie followed Jack inside the palace. There were fairies everywhere, all whispering anxiously. They stopped when they saw Freddie, as if they were relieved to see him. They seemed to know who he was.

"Freddie!" one of them said. "You're here! Thank goodness!"

Jack led him into a large room where the leaders of the different territories were gathered: a giant, a troll, and even a creature who looked oddly familiar. Freddie did a double take.

"Wait... you're the King of the Dragons?" he asked, staring at Jack in surprise.

Jack smiled. "I am. But that's a story for later."

The troll spoke up, his voice deep and gruff.

"What's the plan, then?"

Freddie took a deep breath.

"We're going to fly to the Witch's territory, sneak into their dungeon, find Lily, and bring her back here using Jack as transportation."

The room fell silent as the others processed the plan. After a moment, they all nodded in agreement.

Jack looked at Freddie. "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

Freddie shrugged. "Oh, sure. I've always wanted to break into a witch's dungeon. Sounds like a perfect Friday night."

Jack chuckled. "Good," he said with a grin. "Let's go."

They geared up in armor and ate a meal that consisted of weird but tasty foods. Then they started heading out. Freddie mounted Jack, and they took off into the night sky. But things didn't go as smoothly as planned. Within minutes, rain started to pour down an extreme amount, making it harder for Jack to keep flying.

"This is bad," Jack muttered. "Rain ruins my wings. We're going to have to land somewhere."

Before Freddie could say anything, Jack suddenly banked hard to the left, and they hit the ground with a thud. They both groaned but were thankfully unharmed.

"Well, that wasn't fun," Freddie said, sitting up.

Jack grumbled and shook his wings. "We'll have to walk from here."

"Nice. Walking. Because flying was obviously too easy," Freddie muttered under his breath, but followed Jack as they began their journey on foot.

"We don't have a choice," Jack replied. "The Witches' territory is ahead. We have to be careful."

The land around them was gray and dead-looking, the air heavy with dark magic. There were no trees, no animals—just a lifeless, eerie landscape. It didn't take long before they spotted the Witches' main city in the distance, a dark, twisted place full of crooked buildings and empty streets.

"We need to be stealthy," Jack said. "If they catch us, we'll be in trouble."

They made their way quietly toward the dungeon, but when they got closer, they saw that the entrance was guarded by several witches.

"We need a distraction," Jack said. "You've got any ideas?"

Freddie thought for a second. "I could throw a rock, maybe. From every story I've read, witches are kind of... gullible, right?"

Jack grinned. "That will probably work. Let's try it."

Freddie picked up a rock and tossed it a few yards away, making it clatter loudly against the stone wall. The guards immediately turned to investigate, leaving the dungeon door wide open.

"Let's move," Jack whispered, and they rushed inside.

It didn't take long to find Lily, sitting in a cold, dark cell. When she saw them, her eyes lit up.

"You're here!" she exclaimed. "I knew you'd come!"

Jack used his claws to quickly pick the lock on the cell, and they all rushed out. But as they stepped into the courtyard, they were met by none other than Agatha, the Queen of the Witches.

She sneered at them.

"You think you can escape so easily?"

Freddie looked at Jack, then at Lily. "Well, I've always wanted to face off with an evil witch. This is going just how I imagined it."

Agatha cackled. "You're all fools!"

And just like that, the battle began. Jack breathed fire, lighting up the night sky, while Lily summoned a blast of pure fairy magic. Freddie tried to help but couldn't do much instead of distracting her. Agatha fought back with dark spells, but before she could get another word out, Jack's fireball hit her square in the chest, knocking her back.

The rain stopped.

"We did it," Freddie said, breathing a sigh of relief.

Lily smiled at him. "We couldn't have done it without you."

Jack nodded. "Now, let's get out of here before the other witches show up."

With Lily and Freddie on Jack's back, they flew off into the night sky. As they soared through the clouds, Freddie couldn't help but feel a little different.

"You know, this whole 'saving the kingdom' thing is a lot more tiring than it sounds."

"Well," Freddie said, looking at Lily, "this has been a pretty crazy night."

She smiled back at him. "You have no idea."

"Let's head back to the palace" Jack says.

After another small flight, the palace started to emerge in the distance. As they landed on the palace grounds, Freddie felt a wave of exhaustion mixed with relief. The Kingdom was safe, and it was hard to believe that he's actually there, standing beside Jack and Lily. Jack folded his wings and turned to Freddie, his deep voice full of warmth.

"We did it, Freddie. And like Lily said, we couldn't have done it without you."

Freddie smiled weakly, still processing everything.

"I'm just glad I didn't mess things up."

He glanced around at the sparkling palace, the fairies flying through the air, and felt something he hadn't in a long time—a sense of belonging. He looked up at his new companions.

"I never thought I'd be here, with both of you. Before this, I didn't have anyone—no real friends. But you guys... you made me feel like I actually matter."

Jack's golden eyes softened. "Sometimes, you just need the right friends."

Lily nodded as her wings fluttered. "Exactly. And you've got us now."

Freddie smiled, his heart lighter. "I'll come back, I promise. I don't know when, but I'll visit. This place... you both... you're the only friends I've had in a very long time."

Jack grinned. "We'll be here whenever you need us."

Lily added, "This will always be a welcoming place for you, Freddie."

Freddie took a deep breath, feeling more at peace than he had in years.

As he walked toward the palace, Freddie stopped and looked up at the stars. His mind was racing.

"I can't stay here forever," he thought, *"I have to go back."*

For the first time, he realized he's capable of more than he ever thought. He wasn't just the quiet, invisible guy anymore. He had learned what it meant to fight for something important.

He glances back at Jack and Lily. *"They're right,"* he thinks, *"sometimes you just need the right friends."*

But he couldn't forget the people back home, the ones who felt alone, like he once did.

"I need to help them," he muttered to himself.

He smiled softly. That adventure was just the beginning. Now it was time for him to go home and use what he learned for the greater good; that he could be the hero in someone else's story.

The Whispering Woods

by Marina Bravo Tancredi

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

I clutched the paper in my hand as I glanced back at my home, torn between staying or continuing forward. The thought of my mother sleeping peacefully in her bed tugged at me like carrying a weight tied on my ankle. I longed so badly to go into the forest, but my love for her held me back. The silence of the night pulled me deep into my thoughts, and time slipped by whilst I contemplated my next steps.

Lusty barks sharply, confused by my indecision. His voice broke the silence and took me out of my trance. "You're right, Lusty," I muttered, "we've got to go." As I crouch down to ruffle his fur, the look in his eyes seems to challenge me. *What are you waiting for?*

I know exactly what's holding me back. Thomas's voice creeps into my mind like a thorn. "Bridget, I heard YOU wanted to make it to the Truth Tree. You're joking, right? You'd never make it there, not by yourself at least." His words sting like a needle even days later, and he seems to always get the best of me, even if I know deep down I shouldn't care. What bothered me the most is that he had once attempted the journey and failed, yet I still let his comments get to me. I pushed the thought of him out of my head, his hateful words being like coal to my adventurous train. They fueled me to persist and prove him to be mistaken. "Come on Lusty, we're doing this."

The sky seemed to be as dark as ink, but it shined with stars which filled me with hope. "Be the light in someone else's darkness," was my mom's iconic motto. She was my favorite person, and I have a special spot for her in my heart. Although I knew she didn't approve of my journey, something inside of me told me it was imperative that I went. I'd heard of the Whispering Woods all my life; well, everyone in my village had. Many had attempted the journey and failed, or simply did not have the courage and strength to go on. However, there were few who had made it to the Truth Tree, (as you can probably tell, my town loves alliteration), but they refused to give up its secret. While continuing my way through the forest, I kept note of the path I was taking with my map, so I could easily make my way back home once my journey was over. Growing up I was always so amazed by the tremendous courage those who reached the Truth Tree had, and their loyalty and clandestine ways of keeping the secret were always something I admired. Being my mother's only child after years of failed pregnancies, she would always tell me it was too dangerous. I've always felt so protected by her, and knew I had to do this for myself. Being her miracle child could be so exhausting, since I felt like I owed it to her to never fail her.

My thoughts were interrupted by a startling whisper. Lusty began to whine and I giggled at him, "Hey, it's okay!" I told him reassuringly. The whispers were nothing to be scared of. Although my town had no real explanation for them, they were always seen as a friend and would guide you through your journey. The legend had always been to walk forward for ten, and let the whispers guide you then. The earlier sound seemed to have come from the east, so I changed my direction and continued walking. "Come on Lusty, we're going this way," my tone was cheery as ever as the excitement overcame me.

After a bit more walking, I came across two separate paths. One was mossy and quite overgrown, with weeds and flowers plaguing the trail. The other was clean and seemed to have some sort of venom that kept any life from growing on it. I looked upon my choices anxiously, knowing this could decide my fate. *I can't do this myself*, I thought. I turned to Lusty and nodded my head towards the paths, he made his way to them, carefully inspecting them through sniffing and digging holes. When I decided I'd embark on this journey, I was sure Lusty had to come along with me. He was my favorite companion, and the most loyal spaniel there ever was.

After a bit more inspection, he headed down the overgrown path. I followed him down and as we made our way down the path, I couldn't help but admire the flowers. They were a vast array of colors, and even during the night they made the otherwise terrifying forest seem much friendlier.

After more walking, I noticed myself getting tired by my constant yawns, but I decided to persist for a few more minutes before giving in and sitting down. I'd had to stay up hours waiting for my mom to fall asleep so I could sneak out, which now resulted in a fatigue I simply couldn't withstand. I decided I'd take a nap just for an hour or two and then go find the Truth Tree.

I laid down on the grass and shut my eyes, and the peaceful yet suspenseful silence of the forest seemed to empty my mind. One annoying little voice, however, just would not go away. "Don't you find it a bit ridiculous that you believe you'll make it to the Truth Tree while even I couldn't? I mean, look at yourself! You're a GIRL,

you'd probably get tired before even hearing the whispers." I clenched my fists at just the thought of him and tried my hardest to push his comments out of my head. I shut my eyes as tightly as possible and focused on the sound of leaves rustling to distract me.

I jumped awake as the whispers got louder, as if they were my own personal alarm clock. My eyes burned at the sight of the sun. "Oh my gosh, it's morning already!" I noticed. *'My mom is going to kill me!'* I thought. I woke up Lusty and headed towards the whispers.

Finally, the whispers went quiet, and I looked up stunned by the large and absolutely astonishing tree. It was over 30 feet tall, and incredibly thick as well. The leaves were an array of colors and were reminiscent of a rainbow. They vividly reminded me of the flowers on the path from last night. Except now that it was daytime, the colors shone so brightly in the sunlight it was even more beautiful. I breathed out a sigh of relief as I realized I'd made it. I had proven Thomas wrong and was so excited to rub it in his face once I returned. I looked down at my map and excitedly drew a big star where the Truth Tree was.

I walked towards the tree, lightly touching a part of its trunk. Inspecting it and curious to know how I'll discover its truth. Suddenly, a piece of bark seemed to shift in my hand. I pulled it away to reveal a hollow part of the tree. Inside was an inscription "The truth lies within those who seek it."

My fingers brushed over each individual letter, as if touching them would make their meaning clearer. *Was the truth something I'd already found?* The thought lingered, and I realized the whispers had fallen silent, as if waiting for me to decide what this meant. "Maybe it's not the truth of the tree that matters," I murmured, "but the truth I found in myself."

I glanced to the ground and picked a sharp stick, the bark rough against my hand. I pondered carving my name on the trunk to prove that I had made it and done what Thomas couldn't. I raised the stick to the tree, but for some reason I hesitated. If I wrote my name down now, it wouldn't make me stronger or more courageous, it would only show this to others. I put the stick back where I'd found it, now understanding this had been the final test. "Come on Lusty, we're going home," I said my voice steady as I opened my map and began my journey home.

The sun was high up in the sky now, marking the afternoon approaching. Whilst returning home, I decided to take the mossy path once more, now admiring the flowers more than ever. Walking through the forest I felt serene, and the tall trees that had seemed ever so frightening last night now just added to the beauty of the forest.

After hours of walking, I got a glimpse of my village, and I felt a smile creep onto my face. Although I had adored my journey I did terribly miss home. I ran in the direction of my house, and Lusty raced me all the way there. I opened the door and saw my mom's beautiful brown hair. "Mom," I cried, "I missed you so much." She turned at the sound of my voice and tears welled in her bright green eyes as she embraced me. "I'm so sorry I went to the woods, but I needed to do it for myself," I whispered.

"Hey, it's okay. We'll talk later, but for now I'm just so glad you are home," she said as she sniffled and pulled me closer.

Beyond the Singularity

by Bryan Brown

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Theo's fingers hovered over his keyboard, the dim glow of his bedside lamp casting long shadows over the scattered papers flooding his desk. They were filled with complex equations that were too intricate for the standard person. The room was deafeningly silent, with the exception of the occasional hum of the old computer which processed data too vast for ordinary minds. His eyes, bloodshot from hours of staring at numbers and astronomical charts, burned with the kind of fatigue only a person working on something revolutionary could understand.

He had come very far in his research. His discovery of the gravitational anomalies around distant black holes was not just a story, but a breakthrough. He had traced the unusual patterns that seemed to suggest

something no one had proposed before: The existence of a hidden dimension woven into the fabric of space and time itself! A dimension that could change everything humans thought they knew about the universe.

He clicked through the final set of data.

"The numbers aligned perfectly," he said to himself. It was there—the Proof.

Before he could breathe, a soft ping echoed from his desk. Theo blinked, he was confused, before he realized it was a message in his inbox, one he rarely ever checks. With a mixture of caution and curiosity, he opened it. The message was short and cryptic:

"Mission confirmed. Prepare for departure."

His heart skipped a beat, and his mind began to race. This was next to impossible. He was not expecting a mission, He was simply a researcher, a lone scientist, working in a small office. Yet, there it was the Confirmation.

He quickly checked the email for details. There were none, no location, no instruction, just the words "Mission confirmed."

A chill ran through him. Theo sat back in his chair, with his eyes glued to the screen. He had worked his entire life for this breakthrough in astrophysics, but now it seemed that there was something more, something greater, that had chosen him. Whatever it was, it was happening now. There was no turning back.

Theo quickly got out of his seat, knocking over a large stack of papers. He could not just ignore the message when it was connected to his life's work. The temptation was too strong, and the timing was just too perfect. Surely, it was all connected, the hidden dimension, and the weird gravitational anomalies. He grabbed his coat from the back of his chair and began pacing around his small office.

"Was this a test?" he said to himself, "Maybe a sign from an unknown force?"

The thought was crazy, but the idea of passing up this opportunity was even more absurd. He could not allow himself to let this discovery slip through his fingers.

Theo had been alone for most of his life, wrapped up in his work, but he could not deny the strange pull toward the mission. It was as if this moment had been waiting for him, drawing him in, ready to push him outside of his comfort zone and get him out of the small office in which he had held himself.

He clicked the reply button, still not very certain about his decision. His mind was going wild, preparing for what would lay ahead. His world was about to change, and for the first time in years, Theo Hayes was ready.

"I'll go," he typed. "I'll be ready for departure."

He hit send.

Theo stood there for a long moment, staring at his empty inbox, with the weight of his decision finally sinking in. He had no idea what to expect, but for the first time, his obsession with the unknown had a purpose.

Theo felt uneasy as the shuttle doors closed behind him. The Stellar Vanguard was cold, sleek, and extremely advanced. He had never been on a ship like this before. Before he could adjust himself, a figure appeared up ahead. Captain Elena Verglas. Tall with sharp eyes, that seemed to be scanning him before he even had the chance to speak.

"Dr. Hayes," she said. "Welcome aboard, I trust your journey was delightful?"

Theo cleared his throat, "Delightful," he muttered, his heart still racing. This was real. Elena gave a brief nod.

"Good, we are preparing for take-off. Have you reviewed the mission details?"

Theo hesitated, "I-there were no details. I only got an email 'Mission confirmed. Prepare for departure.'"

Elena did not flinch. "The mission is classified. You will receive a brief explanation when the time comes. For now, know that your expertise is critical."

As the two walked into the command center, Theo felt uneasy. What exactly had he gotten himself into? Why had they chosen him? The command center was alive with activity.

Orion, the ship's AI, greeted him with a neutral voice. "Welcome, Dr. Hayes."

Theo nodded his head stiffly, he did not know how to respond to something that was not human but carried its weight. Elena gave him a nod. "Orion will be assisting you, but I will be giving orders, understood?"

"Understood."

The ship's engines hummed to life, and the vast expanse of space flickered on the view screen. The Stellar Vanguard was ready. They were about to make the journey to the coordinates Theo had provided, the location where his discovery lay.

A few hours later, Theo stood beside a window, staring at the swirling anomaly that now filled the screen. It was breathtaking, a massive distortion in space and time, a swirling cloud of cosmic energy. This was it, the proof of his theory.

"It's beautiful," he whispered, barely aware of Elena standing beside him.

"Don't get too close," Elena's voice was curt. "We don't know the full extent of its effect on the ship or crew."

Theo barely heard her. His mind began racing as the data began to stream in. This was more than he could hope for. The anomaly was more than just a theory, it was real. His breakthrough was right in front of him. It was everything he had worked for. Before he could say anything the ship's engineer Maya Chen appeared beside him.

"You're staring at a black hole Theo, Get too close, and we might not make it back."

Theo snapped out of his trance. "I know what it is."

Orion's voice suddenly filled the room. "Warning. Gravitational fluctuations were detected. Immediate action is required."

The calm was shattered, and Theo's heart began to race again. This was no longer just a discovery; it was real and dangerous.

The ship rocked violently, throwing Theo against the wall. Gravitational fluctuations. The words echoed throughout his mind as alarms sounded throughout the ship. Theo barely even recognized the chaos throughout the ship, crew members scrambling, the Deep hum of the engines struggling to keep up with the instability.

"Captain, the anomaly's gravitational pull is increasing!" Maya's voice was filled with panic. "If we do not stabilize it soon, the ship won't hold!"

Elena remained calm, "Orion, give me an analysis of the fluctuations. We need a solution now."

Orion's voice filled the room, "Analyzing... Gravitational field is fluctuating on levels never seen before. It's unlike anything in our data banks."

Theo's pulse quickened. This wasn't just a theoretical anomaly; it was alive, dynamic. His calculations had not predicted this level of instability. He couldn't hesitate now, the only way out was to understand it, get closer. He knew how absurd, and dangerous the idea was, yet he knew he had to try. It was Theo's lifelong work, right there before his eyes, how could he not want to study it closer?

"Elena," Theo said, his voice steady despite the chaos, "we need to approach it, I believe it's a doorway."

Elena's eyes locked onto his, "Are you suggesting we get closer to that thing?"

Theo nodded, his mind still racing, "It's a rift, not just an ordinary black hole. I think it may be trying to relay a message. But we need to get closer to understand how."

Elena's gaze shifted over to Xander Kowalski, who was already adjusting the ship's trajectory. The Stellar Vanguard groaned under the pull of the anomaly, the black void swirling with an impossible amount of energy. Theo's heart pounded.

"We're entering it," Elena said, with a concerned voice.

Theo's calculations had always been based off of observations and diagrams, but now he was experiencing it first-hand. The gravity of the anomaly intensified, his mind felt as if it was about to be torn into pieces.

Orion's voice echoed across the ship, "Warning: we have breached the Event Horizon."

The ship began to rock violently, then everything went black. Theo woke, weightless, surrounded by an everlasting void. The stars that vacated the empty space radiated an insane amount of light. They were distant, and unfathomable. A voice, not spoken but felt, echoed through the singularity.

"Welcome, you have gone beyond what you consider unknown."

Visions of strange events exploded in his head, galaxies, civilizations, the birth and death of planets. It was almost as if the universe was unraveling itself right before him. His body felt distant, as if his mind was not in the same realm as his physical body.

Then came the voice again, "You are beyond time. You are everything."

A deep peace settled over him. Theo achieved his goal; he knew things now, too many things. He had the answer to questions that never even formed in his mind. Eventually, it became too much to handle. He felt his presence pulling itself away, as if he was fading into the vastness of space. Suddenly, a jolt struck him, a sharp return to his body.

Theo stumbled back onto the Vanguard's deck, breathing heavily. The lights flickered, and the engine's hum was returning to normal. He was back. Elena faced him, with her eyes wide open.

"Theo? What happened?"

Theo could not put it into words, not yet. But he felt, deep inside his heart, the weight of a truth that could not be spoken of. The universe had opened to him. Theo sat back down, the ship continued to hum around him, and the stars outside twinkled, as indifferent as ever. Theo sat quietly, staring beyond the singularity.

The Floors Above

by Sofia Caprio

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Danielle could have never thought that a family Thanksgiving tradition would turn into such a strange occurrence. It all started November 28th. It was Thanksgiving Day, and Danielle was overworking herself as usual.

“Come on, Danielle,” called out Danielle’s dad. “We are going to see the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade.”

“Be there in a second. I’m finishing this body paragraph,” called out Danielle.

Danielle had been working earnestly on an extra credit assignment for English. She believed that every opportunity for extra credit should be taken. Although the assignment was aimed more for the students with lower grades and Danielle certainly did not need it, she still wanted to do it.

“Please, you have been working on that essay for the past three days. You have to embrace the New York surroundings. If you’re stuck writing about the vacation you’re not going to be able to experience it firsthand,” her father responded.

Soon enough, Danielle gave in and closed her laptop lid. She did, however, grab a notepad and pen to take notes on the trip. She believed this was the best way to write a competent essay. She then headed down with her brother, Martin, and her father. They walked down the steps of the Park Lane Hotel and walked towards the mob of people. Families and lovers admiring the parade together. They joined the crowd and cheered along in awe of all the floats and displays.

“That was so cool,” exclaimed Martin. “The inflatables were almost larger than the buildings!”

“I particularly enjoyed the Christmas float. Did you see the size of those presents?” added Danielle.

Their father chuckled. Afterward, they walked over to a cafe nearby and waited in line. As they moved forward in line Danielle pondered what she wanted. When the time came she ordered herself a hot chocolate and a lemon loaf. This should hold her over until dinner, she thought. The family would soon head over to a restaurant for an early dinner with their family and close friends. After enjoying a late breakfast at the cafe, they walked back to the hotel to get ready. Danielle curled her hair and put on her outfit. She was dressed in a white sweater and a fancy flannel patterned skirt, as well as black tights and dark, yet glimmering boots with a buckle. She wore a closely detailed necklace with engraved hearts and diamonds, a gift from her late mother. There was a small abrasion on the necklace; the gold plating was slowly wearing off and turning silver. The necklace always reminded her of her mother’s encouragement towards a strong work ethic. It was Danielle’s motivation to strive and excel in her schoolwork and any other assignments. Once everyone was ready, they walked down together to a car that was waiting to take them to the restaurant. Every year, Danielle’s father rented out the second floor of this huge restaurant. The restaurant was at the bottom of a huge office building, which had been empty for a while. The company, BuildCo, used to occupy the higher floors was shut down for embezzlement and burnout of their employees. After around twenty minutes, the car came to a stop, and they arrived at the restaurant. Danielle got out and looked up at the large, towering building. She thought of all the floors that used to be occupied by workers. As she walked in she felt the warm air set and an aroma of cranberry sauce lingered throughout the room. She began to grow hungry. Danielle and her brother took off their coat and waited in the entrance for the rest of her family and friends that would be attending. Over time, familiar faces walked through the doors and Danielle got up to greet them. One could hear the clacking noise of heels and platforms as they walked up the wooden steps to the second floor. Everyone gathered around the bar and conversed.

“How is school going? How are sports going? Do you still enjoy writing?” an adult flooded Danielle with questions.

Yet, Danielle was a bit timid around them and answered in small words. Seeking relief, Danielle and her brother extricated themselves from the interminable conversation involving school and their life. Danielle walked into the dimly lit bathroom and felt at peace. She realized that reunions were quite exhausting. Finally, she decided to go back out and socialize although she felt as though she wanted to take off her makeup, put her hair in a bun, change into pajamas, and continue writing her essay. Though, she knew she had to be mindful and respectful. After all, it was Thanksgiving, a time for family and friends. With a new burst of energy she walked out of the bathroom renewed and excited to see her relatives.

After many long greetings, everyone sat down, and the courses began. First, a variety of appetizers were sent to the table, including an assortment of bread, meatballs, mozzarella, tomatoes, and other food. Danielle picked at some of the foods and her cousin and brother served themselves a plate. After eating their share, Martin and their cousin, Jack, whispered under their breath, and then left the table. Danielle knew exactly where they were going. Above on the fourth floor there was a lounge room with a pool table, sofas, and a TV. On the same floor was a dining room, yet usually nobody occupied that room and Danielle, Martin, and Jack would use it as an escape to play games and talk together about something other than school. She got up a couple minutes later and walked to the elevator. It was a split elevator, used both by staff and guests. As she got into the elevator the other side of the elevator opened up to a steaming, overpacked kitchen. There were workers dashing around with plates and carts of food while others prepared dishes, it seemed like rush hour on the highway. Suddenly, a worker with a cart with a large amount of food caught sight of her waiting in the elevator and let the door close to catch the next empty one. She continued up to the fourth floor. The elevator dinged twice until the doors opened. She could overhear the chatter and laughter of Martin and Jack and the pool balls clinking together after a sharp shot.

"Hey guys, it was getting boring downstairs, so I came up," said Danielle. "Do you mind if I just take notes about this in the corner?"

"You're so weird, Danielle," commented Martin. "Why would you work on a holiday?"

"Hey, you know what would be fun? What if we went up the thirteenth floor?" chimed in Jack.

Martin replied in a mischievous manner, "Good idea Jack, let's go."

"Um, okay, but aren't all the floors above abandoned?" Danielle said, feeling a bit tense.

Martin and Jack ignored her, so they called the elevator. Danielle followed quietly. They stepped in and Martin clicked the button for the thirteenth floor. Danielle began to grow nervous; the number thirteen did not seem to be very lucky. She had read about ancient Norse mythology, a banquet that thirteen gods attended ended in chaos and the god Balder died. This aided the unluckiness of the number thirteen. The elevator dinged eight times, on the ninth, Danielle knew they had arrived. The doors of the elevator opened. In sight was a dead and dull hall, it obtained a lack of presence.

"I'm going back, this was a foolish idea," remarked Danielle.

Before she heard a response she was impelled into the darkness. Startled, she looked back and saw the elevator door close. Martin and Jack's laughter followed them down. The elevator would probably go down thirteen floors and then be occupied by other guests and workers, it would take forever to come back up. The only illumination Danielle received was the dim red light of the elevator. Danielle decided to look for a staircase which she could easily access and walk down. Besides, she didn't mind the cardio.

As Danielle distanced herself from the elevator in search of a staircase, she was enveloped by an eerie feeling as the dark swallowed her. After countless minutes, she realized the elevator would have been faster and then tried to find her way back. Although she seemed to have lost her way, Danielle began to walk down a hallway hoping it would lead her back. All of a sudden, she stopped in her tracks. She heard an odd clicking noise, it seemed familiar. She decided to follow it, perhaps it could be another person that could guide her back. As she crept towards the noise, she observed small white walls. As she got closer she realized they were cubicles. Danielle thought back to the company that used to work here, it must be an old office. The noise increased and she found herself inching towards a cubicle in the left corner of the gloomy room. Then, a light shined out of the cubicle, finally somewhat clear vision. She walked into the cubicle and acknowledged an unusual figure crouched over a tarnished computer. Struggling to keep her composure, she knew that no matter how strange this seemed, she had to get out of there. She tapped the figure's shoulder.

"Excuse me, by any chance would you know," Danielle's voice trailed off.

A ghostly figure turned its head. There sat a man in a wheeled office chair, a bleached pale mask overtook his face. His hair rested on his shoulders, dirty and grown out. He looked up at Danielle with bloodshot eyes and then slowly turned back to the blinding light of the screen. He stayed mute and typing what seemed to be a document.

“BuildCo...” muffled Danielle as she read it on the screen.

Then, something caught Danielle’s eye. It was a broken wooden black frame that barely held together a delicate photo of what seemed to be a family. She picked it up off the table and a splinter from the frame cut her finger. She observed the photo, a woman, two children, and what looked like a reformed version of this man. She placed it down next to a piece of paper. Out of curiosity she picked up the faded page and read...

Dear Carlos,

I'm leaving you. You're never home and when you are it feels like you're not even there. You sit with us and look right through us, your mind always occupied by something else. I will never understand the thoughts behind those dull eyes. I'm taking the children and moving to Minnesota, I don't think they should grow up with a father who is never present. There is no difference in cutting ties or where we are now, so I made the decision to let you go. Now we are no longer a burden to your work. It seems to be more important than your family. I've packed the kids and I's bags and I'm probably already on the train by the time you receive this. I'm done chasing a ghost.

No longer yours,

Maria

She placed the letter back and slowly walked away. This man couldn’t save himself. How would he save her? As she walked away she tripped over a cord. All of a sudden it was dark again. The computer screen no longer illuminated the cubicle. She heard a chair scrape against the floor and then light footsteps. The footsteps began to grow faint and in panic she followed them. Danielle saw a light appear and a slim figure walked through it. She ran towards it and grabbed the door before it closed. A brightly lit hallway with floral wallpaper and a brown wall trim appeared before her. The man was no longer in sight, but an elevator was. Filled with glee, she dashed towards it and clicked the gray button. The elevator doors opened, and she stepped in. The doors closed. Nine dings and she was back on the second floor where her family was dining. She walked towards the table filled with chatter and dishes of food.

“Hey Dad, you won’t believe what just happened. I accidentally ended up on the thirteenth floor, but first I want some turkey,” said Danielle, exhausted.

“Excuse me ma'am,” a server said, tapping her on the shoulder. “We don’t have a thirteenth floor.”

The Village Filled with Glee

by Julia Cardoso

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Microscopic to the human eye, my village was home to many young fairies, a place where joy and laughter were as natural as the breeze. I'm Sarah, and every day in our village felt like a dream. The air of spring felt fresh with a hint of flowers that bloomed, and the sky gleamed with sunshine. We danced and sang, day and night with nothing to worry about. The beautiful garden next to our home provided all the fruits and vegetables we could ever need and life was effortless. Everything was handed right to us, so our lives consisted of nothing but joy and laughter. Our houses were made of buttons and flowers and every single day we would wake up and gather at the main



house to eat breakfast, grateful to have one another.

One morning, I woke up late with the sound of my stomach growling loudly and realized I had missed breakfast. Determined to find some berries or ripe fruits to eat, I flew to the nearby garden located past the woods. As I passed through the dense forest, I heard heavy, echoing footsteps coming from under a nearby bridge. My heart skipped a beat. *What could that be?* I thought with my mind racing. I quickly zapped into a flower to hide, trembling as I peeked out, praying that I had not been seen. It was in fact not a *what*, but a *who* that was coming my way.

Through the flowers I saw them and gasped. Two monstrous ogres coming over the dark bridge. Just the thought of one of them spotting me made my stomach twist with fear. These giant creatures are known as the predators of fairies and deeply we fear them. The fairies insisted that ogres were myths, nothing more than bedtime stories to put young fairies to sleep. No villages had been attacked in a very long time, but still the fear remained in us.

"I heard there is a fairy village nearby," one ogre said to the other.

"Let's go check it out and see if it's true," the second ogre replied.

My heart raced. "I have to go warn the fairies!" I whispered to myself.

I flew back as fast as I could. When I returned to the village, I found everyone in the middle of a celebration, singing and dancing holding hands with music filling the air. I did not want to interrupt the party but had no choice.

"Everyone! Ogres are coming! We have to prepare ourselves!" I shouted with panic rooted in my voice.

The music came to an abrupt stop and the crowd went silent. Then, laughter spread.

"There is no such thing as ogres!" one fairy yelled from the crowd. And with that the music went back on and everyone resumed dancing as if nothing had happened.

Frustration and hopelessness came through me. *What should I do? They didn't believe me, and we are in serious danger*, I thought. A brilliant idea then came up in my head. *I'll warn all of my closest friends, together we can find a hiding place and strategize a plan, so we are all safe*, I thought.

I quickly asked a nearby bee to deliver a message to my friends, for them to meet at my friend Sunny's house. I flew to her house and arrived out of breath where all of them were, with a concerned look on my face and shut the door behind me.

"What's going on, Sarah?" asked Belly.

"Is everything okay?" Tati added.

"I have to tell you something," I said with a trembling voice as I caught my breath. "I saw two ogres today planning to invade our village! I attempted to warn the others, but they all laughed at me," I explained.

The room went quiet.

"Oh, no. What are we going to do?" asked Sam, her eyes wide with fear.

We all thought for a second until Tati spoke up with an idea.

"We should all hide in the nearby cave if we hear them coming," said Tati.

We all agreed that if we heard loud noises or anything suspicious and out of normal we would instantly rush to the cave and meet there so we could be safe.

"I think I'm going to try to tell everyone again, maybe they'll believe me and understand that it's not a joke," I said with determination in my voice.

As I flew back to the village, I gazed at huge trees that swayed from side to side. *How have I never really noticed them before?* The world outside our village seemed so vast, and suddenly I realized. I had never been aware of how small we actually were. Zoned out, I looked down and realized that I had already arrived. I then went down to talk to the fairies that were dancing around.

"Please you guys have to believe me!" I exclaimed. But they kept dancing even when I was calling to them. *It's no use*, I thought to myself. I decided to just return in defeat.

The sun began to set, and the streets slowly emptied as I made my way towards my home. It was a colorful cottage with many pink flowers and stones. The chimney had smoke coming out of it and you could smell it from far. I opened the button door and walked into the coziness and sat next to the warmth of the fireplace which comforted me hoping everything would be okay. I couldn't shake the fear. *I already planned my escape so I will be fine in case the ogres come*, I thought reassuring myself. I then went to my soft cotton bed and dozed off into a dream.

I woke up to the sound of the bookshelves shaking and the floor rumbling beneath me. My heart pounded rapidly in my chest, and I jumped out of the bed startled.

"What's happening?" I said to myself.

I rushed and put my head outside the window and saw fairies flying in every direction screaming in fear. Chaos had fallen over our village. *The ogres are here.*

As I stood there in shock thinking about what I was going to do next, I remembered what my friends and I had talked about the day before. We had all planned to meet at the cave, so I quickly packed a bag with things I might need the most just in case. I threw food, clothes and a flashlight inside. After grabbing what I needed, I zipped the bag and put it around my shoulder. I slipped through the back door of my cottage and flew toward the direction of the forest glancing around to see if anyone had seen me escape. I paused for a minute and looked back at the village where I could see the same two ogres from the other day approaching the city with menacing grins on their faces. Every time they took a step the ground shook and screams coming from the village grew louder and louder. *I have to get to the cave.*

I flew through the forest as fast as I could with my wings flapping frantically against the air. Screams, the heavy stomps of the ogres and the crack of buildings collapsing, all the chaos from the village reverberated through my ear. I pushed myself harder, determined to make it to the cave and my friends before it was too late.

I finally arrived and found that my friends were already there, huddled in the dark with their bodies trembling in fear.

"You made it!" Tati exclaimed with relief.

"I came as soon as I could—" I was interrupted by the distant sounds of destruction coming from our village. We could still hear the fairies in despair and the terrifying yell of the ogre's laughter.

"We can't hide here forever," Belly said. "What if they come here next?"

"We have to wait for now; it's the only place we are safe," I replied with my voice steady as if I had no fear inside me.

The night went on and the sounds of destruction slowly went away. Hours passed and finally the world outside went quiet. We decided to wait in the cave for the entire night just in case there was still danger in the village. When the sun started to rise, we gingerly left the cave without making a sound, our hearts full of despair.

When we went to the village, it was almost unrecognizable. The streets that were once covered in smiles and laughter were now destroyed and dirty. Houses made of leaves and flowers had been trampled and their walls crushed by the ogres. The village square, where parties and dancing would take place, was now empty. Our beautiful garden full of delicious fruits and vegetables were now squashed. Hopelessness swept through our bodies, and we realized that all the happiness we all once had was now gone.

The remaining fairies gathered in small groups, some sobbing, some standing in shock. I recognized a few faces, but they were scared and pale. I walked towards the center of the village and stood beneath the tree that was once covered in beautiful flowers but now all the branches were broken and twisted. I felt deep sadness for all we had lost.

I raised my voice and said, "We let ourselves believe that nothing bad would happen or harm us. We ignored all the signs and warnings coming from the outside world and let our lives become too easy, which is not right."

The fairies slowly gathered around me realizing it was their fault they were too ignorant to see the signs..

"We can't exclude ourselves from the rest of the world and pretend like nothing can hurt us." I paused.

"We have to prepare ourselves for whatever encounters us even when we least expect it. The world is bigger than we thought and if we want to survive, we need to think ahead."

The fairies listened and nodded, and for the first time, I saw the determination in their eyes. We had been given a second chance now that we knew the truth, and we must not make the same mistake again.

Over the next few weeks, we worked long and hard to rebuild our homes. But this time, we did not just focus on restoring our decorations and gardens, but we built strong defenses and learned how to stay prepared. The village slowly went back to a place where joy and laughter was spread, but it was also a place where fairies were always ready for challenges and that made us feel safe. As I stood in front of our freshly rebuilt village, I felt the flowery breeze we once had. Watching the fairies go back to singing and dancing once more, I knew we had learned our lesson. Even in a world filled with peace and glee, there is always the possibility of danger.

The Bottomless Pit

by Lexi de Godoy

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon



The orange-gold crispy leaves of autumn crunch beneath their feet as the chilled wind passes through the trees of the empty neighborhood. It's the last day of school before Thanksgiving break and the two boys are walking home from school together. Asher, the shorter of the two, glances at his best friend, the blonde, who's mindlessly typing away on his phone, the unbearable silence driving him insane.

"So," Asher breaks the silence, his fluffy brown hair slightly blocking his field of vision due to the wind, "how'd you enjoy Bella's party last Saturday? I barely saw you."

He looks over at Hudson, who has his AirPods in. With an annoyed groan, Asher whips out his phone and dials the latter's number to get his attention.

Hudson looks up from his phone with a confused expression, taking out one of his AirPods. "What?" the blonde says, raising an eyebrow.

"You're acting weird. What's got you so obsessed with your phone?" Asher stops in his tracks, placing a hand on his hip like a mother waiting for her child to give an apology.

"Well, you know Bella's party we went to last Saturday?" Hudson asks, oblivious that Asher had asked *him* a similar question not even two minutes ago.

"No, I don't, enlighten me," Asher retorts sarcastically, rolling his eyes as he resumes down the sidewalk that leads to their neighborhood.

"Anyway, I'm texting this girl. I've liked her for a while and that night we..." the boy clears his throat shyly, "we kissed."

Asher raises an eyebrow smirking at his flustered friend. He decides to pry, knowing Hudson is weak and it never takes long for him to give in, "Really? Who?"

"None of your business," Hudson responds with a flushed pink face.

"That's so unfair. I always tell you everything!" Asher whines, looking over at his friend with puppy-dog eyes. "Remember the time when I-"

"Fine!" Hudson exclaims with irritation, his face as red as a tomato.

Asher triumphantly smiles at the boy as they approach the crosswalk separating their neighborhood from the previous. While they wait for the cross-light to turn green, their conversation resumes.

"It was Charlotte. You know? From our math class?" Hudson says meekly.

As the light to the crosswalk turns green, Asher stands in the same spot as if in a trance.

Hudson looks over at his dazed friend with confusion, "Ash. The light's green? Let's cross?"

"You kissed Charlotte? After you knew I've liked her since the seventh grade?" Asher says with a growing frustration in his voice.

When the sudden realization hits Hudson's face, his demeanor changes, almost like an impending guilt has washed over him.

"I..." Asher continues, "I kissed her that night too..."

All the guilt immediately drains from Hudson's face and is replaced with a bubbling anger. "What!?" he exclaims, his eyes glaring daggers at the boy.

Asher takes a deep breath in and out to relax his simmering displeasure with the turn of events. "It doesn't even matter; she said she likes me more than any of the other guys she's been with," he says with a forced nonchalance.

Asher decides it's time to cross the street and does so, not waiting to check if Hudson is even ready. The latter, startled by the boy's sudden disinterest, follows a couple of feet behind.

"Dude you can't just say something like that and run off," Hudson remarks, bubbling with annoyance.

Trying to sound innocent, Asher responds, "I'm just walking home."

"I'm just walking home..." Hudson mutters to himself in a mocking tone.

"Dude, are you trying to pick a fight with me?" Asher remarks, his patience visibly growing thin.

"Shut up!"

"No, *you* shut up!"

As the two boys pettily argue, they don't realize they make a wrong turn that takes them further away from their destination, and closer to the nearby forest. After a couple of minutes of petty bickering, they finally realize they've lost themselves in the woods.

"Shoot. Which way did we enter again?" Hudson says, scratching his head nervously.

"We wouldn't be here if it weren't for *your* poor sense of direction." Asher retorts.

"Oh, am I to blame?" Hudson raises an eyebrow, crossing his arms in the direction of his best friend.

"You're the one who overreacted, like always, distracting us from getting home!"

"I don't always--"

Before he could finish his sentence Asher trips on a tree root, causing him to crash into Hudson, making both of the boys fall down a black hole in the ground they hadn't noticed until then.

"Ahhhhh!!" Both of the boys scream in tandem.

Asher looks up to see a sign right next to the opening, still slightly in his field of vision, reading 'Bottomless Pit' with an arrow pointing to the hole in the ground.

The boys find themselves in a space with no walls, just endless black for as far as the eye can see. A couple of moments later, after the initial shock, the two boys fall endlessly in silence, their backs facing each other. The fall has left both boys speechless, creating a deafening silence between them. After what feels like hours, Hudson finally decides to speak up.

"Look, you don't have to say anything..." he says, his back still facing Asher, "but it's stupid to ignore each other if we're gonna be stuck here forever."

Asher stays silent, his back still turned away facing the darkness.

"I..." Hudson sighs defeatedly, his sensitivity makes him prone to feeling guilty, even for things he has no control over, "I'm sorry for kissing Charlotte," he exhales. "I was so caught up in the idea of having my first kiss I disregarded all logic. I was impulsive." Hudson admits, his cheeks flushing an embarrassed pink. He hates apologizing, but he'd do anything to fix his friendship.

"I'm sorry too," Asher finally admits, turning around to face his friend, only to find Hudson still facing the other way. Asher brings a hand to the back of his neck anxiously. He's always found it hard to express how he feels without blowing things out of proportion. "I...I was just so *hurt* by the possibility that you willingly betrayed me, I reacted on impulse," the boy confesses, feeling guilty for the situation they are in.

"Bros?" Hudson asks, turning to face Asher, offering out his hand to do their handshake.

"Bros," Asher replies with a genuine smile.

The two boys complete their minute-long handshake, feeling closer to each other now than ever because they can finally understand each other's true feelings and struggles. They both realize how petty it is to lose a true friendship over miscommunication and have both benefited from this experience.

"So, what do we do now?" Asher asks, the boredom present in his voice.

"I don't--"

"Shhh! Look!" Asher exclaims, putting a hand over his friend's mouth and pointing beneath them.

Hudson bites the hand over his mouth making the latter hiss in pain and quickly retract it.

"Ow!" Asher yelps with a new throbbing sensation in his palm.

"Well maybe if *you*--"

"Just look below you!" Asher cuts him off again, this time grabbing Hudson's blonde curly hair and forcing him to look beneath them.

Beneath the two boys is a white light, getting bigger and bigger as they fall deeper into the pit.

Hudson begins to hyperventilate, “A-Are we gonna die? I-Is this the white light they’re always talking about?”

“I don’t know!!” Asher cries with panic laced in his voice.

As the light gets frighteningly close, the boys grab each other’s hands anxiously. When the impending unknown reaches them, they shut their eyes, passing through the light.

“Oof!” Asher grunts as he lands roughly on a soft patch of ground.

The two open their eyes, exposing themselves to the sunlight. They’ve landed right next to the entrance of the hole they fell through.

“We’re back?” Hudson questions curiously.

It appears that no time has passed since they fell through the hole hours ago; it is as if time had stopped completely.

“So much for a bottomless pit, huh?” Asher asks with a look of disbelief etched onto his face.

“That just happened...” Hudson responds, still not believing what had just occurred.

The two stand there for a moment, dazed and confused about all that has just transpired. The chilled autumn breeze whispers through the oak trees, creating a song composed by nature itself.

After a moment of silence, Hudson speaks up.

“Can we keep this all behind us?” Hudson timidly requests.

“Sure,” Asher responds with an idea, “wanna go play Fortnite?”

“Yeah,” Hudson agrees with a grin.

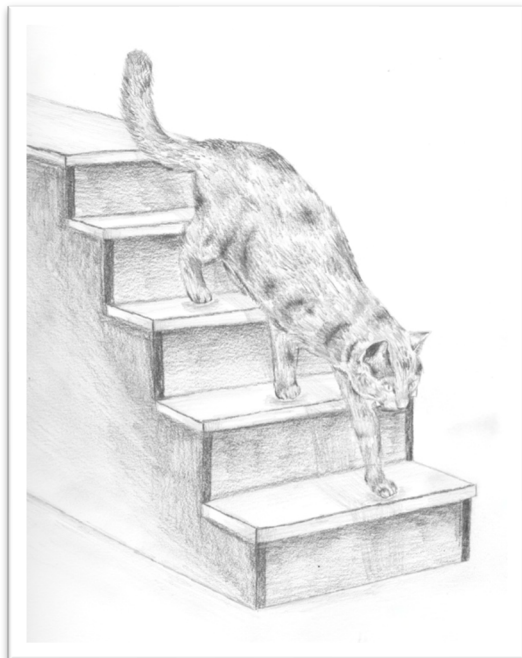
They begin their walk home, side by side, the weight of this bizarre experience slowly fades away as both boys realize that sometimes the deepest pits aren’t the ones you fall into, but the ones you dig with your own hands. But, for now, all that matters is the road ahead and the laughter of old friends echoing in the crisp autumn air.

The Blood Moon

by Evelyne Ercuta

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon



“There’s a secret the zoo has... it’s something that makes the zoo unordinary. If I tell you this, secret, you’ll have to promise that you’ll never speak of it to anyone that doesn’t work here nor take that secret outside of the zoo. Do we have a deal?”

That’s what my boss, Mr. Brook said to me before I got my job as a zookeeper at Wisteria Zoo.

I stuttered a little bit, but I replied, “Yes, we have a deal. I won’t ever speak of this secret.”

“Good...You’re hired!” he exclaims.

Though I was still confused.

“Mr. Brook?”

“Yes?” he responds.

“What even is the secret?”

Mr. Brook smirked at me before answering me.

“That’s for you to find out. It’s your first task as the new zookeeper.”

“Ok. I’ll do my best to complete this task.”

“Oh ya. The others will like you Lancelot, they really will. Speaking of the others, why don’t you go meet them.”

"That's a great idea. I'll do that right now. Thank you Mr. Brook!"

I walked out of his office, happy I got a job, *I wonder how the others are?* I thought. As I tried to go to the staff room so I can meet the others, I got carried away from wandering around and observing every little detail of the zoo. An hour later, I finally noticed that I got carried away. I started running to the staff room, like I should've an hour ago, and as I was running I accidentally bumped into someone. I fell to the ground and saw that in front of me was another zookeeper. *What a great first impression*, I thought to myself. This guy was pretty tall and muscular but still looked my age. He also had pretty tall yellow hair, not blond but dark blond close to literal yellow.

"Watch where you're going Trixie you almost ruined...Oh! You're not Trixie, but you have a uniform. Are you new?"

"I'm so sorry for bumping into you! But yes, I'm new."

"Wow, well, apology accepted only because you're new. Follow me to meet the others."

Before I can say anything this guy grasps my hand and starts dashing at full speed, I'm basically flying from the speed. Once we got to the staff room, he finally let go of my arm. I was so dizzy I could barely walk straight. We both go in and a bunch of zookeepers stared at me. They all looked my age, like nobody looked older than eighteen.

"Guys I brought a new guy!"

A girl with ginger hair took off the headphones and replied, "Well he's very unfortunate to have met you first, Rex."

"Hey that's not true Lizzie!" he exclaims.

A boy with wavy white hair got up from a bean bag. This guy looked very elegant. He started to speak.

"Guys, we should give the new guy a proper welcoming."

"Ya, we should," the girl said. "I'll start. My name is Lizzie and just to let you know, everybody in this room right now is a zookeeper."

"No really, well my name is Rex," said the guy I bumped into.

The guy who got up started to speak as well.

"My real name is Troy, but please just call me Trixie. I think you probably already heard my name from Rex."

"Yes I heard him say it when I bumped into him. He thought it was you."

"Of course he did," said Trixie under his breath.

Lizzie walked up to me and grabbed my shoulders.

"That girl with light blond hair on the couch is Honey. She is pretty shy, so don't worry about her. The other small girl jumping around the room is Millie. She's always hyper so she kind of goes crazy. Also, there is another guy here, but he went to grab a snack or something."

"It's very nice to meet you all! My name is Lancelot, but you guys can just call me Lance. "

"Well, looks like break is over." says a guy kicking the door open. But his voice sounded very familiar. I turned around and actually saw the guy. He had grey hair and looked very careless. I knew it.

"Jester! Is that you?"

"Who said that, wait, Lance?"

I knew I heard the right person. That was my childhood best friend, Jester.

His look didn't change at all, only that he got a bit taller.

"Oh, Lance I never thought I'd see you again after you left school."

"About that," I said, "I need to catch you up on what happened that day, I mean, it's been four years since I've seen you."

"You know him?" Lizzie asked.

"Yes actually, he's my best friend who I haven't seen in a long time. I never expected him to work in a zoo without me making him."

Jester looked over at Lizzie and I talking and comes over to bud in. He grins at me before he started to speak.

"Actually Lance, I got a job here about two years ago because I realized that you really did get me into zoology. I enjoy working with animals now thanks to you!"

I smiled at Jester and thought, I never expected I'd ever influence anyone in my life, because I'm used to ruining lives not helping them as my parents always told me. Just before I thought of anything else Lizzie shouts.

"Like Jester said guys, break is over, and we need to get back to work. Jester, I'm guessing you'll help Lance with his first ta..."

"Actually," I interrupted, "Mr. Brook told me my first task as the new zookeeper is to figure out what the secret of the zoo is."

Everyone paused what they were doing and stared directly at me and nothing else. Then they all gave me a crooked grin. The tension in the room was awkward. Honey got the courage to speak.

"Oh um, the secret, um, you'll find out what it is tonight."

"Wow Honey! Happy to see you build up your courage to speak! Well anyway Lance, the "secret" only happens on nights of the blood moon. Luckily for you, tonight's a night of the blood moon."

"Can we finally go do our jobs?" sighed Rex angrily.

"YES! YES! Let's go!" exclaims Millie

A few hours passed by like a sailfish swimming in the ocean. We finished our tasks for the day and closed up the zoo. As we walked over to the dorms that were offered to us with the job, we passed by a building with a very secure looking lock on its big doors. I tried to ignore it but couldn't. I wonder what's in there, I mean, I feel like I heard a noise in there, like a roar? I also noticed that Rex looked pretty despondent once we passed by that building. I wonder why I thought. We bump into Mr. Brook at the exit.

"Lance I see you met the others. Seems like you guys are getting along."

"We are actually. They're all awesome and Jester was actually my childhood best friend, so we reunited."

"That's wonderful Lance. Also, I heard Honey gave you a hint on the zoo's secret. In that case, see you guys at the big wisteria tree in the center on of the zoo tonight."

He left smiling which made me feel suspicious of him. But that doesn't matter right now. The others were kind of annoyed by him, probably because he seems to know everything that happens around the zoo.

We got the dorms, and I unlocked mine; it was perfect for me—not too big nor small, just right. It already came with some furniture such as a twin sized bed, a mini kitchen, and a television. Now, I just got to decorate it to suit me, which I'll do later on. The others showed me their dorms too. They were all so unique to suit them. Rex's room looked like a gym, Trixie's room looked Victorian and elegant, Honey's was cottage core, soft and full of plushies. Mille's was actually kind of calm; it had a few plushies and was painted in a bunch of pastel colors. That's kind of ironic towards her hyper personality. Jester's room was of course rock star themed and lastly, Lizzie room. Her room looked as if a music bomb exploded in there, it was full of music related things. There was an album shelf, a guitar, sheet music scattered everywhere and, with no surprise, a bunch of headphones. My room would probably be zoology and animal themed since I love animals.

An hour later, I unpacked all my stuff and now my room looked livelier. Since I finished, I decided to go across the street and back to the zoo where Mr. Brook told us to go. The others noticed that I was leaving so they came too.

We make it to the zoo, and I noticed that every wisteria flower hanging around the zoo was glowing purple. We walk towards the big wisteria tree Mr. Brook wanted us to meet him at. We got to the tree, and I saw a glowing, purple sky, in fact, it wasn't the sky, it was the wisteria flowers hanging from the tree. The tree was so big that it covered the sky if you looked up under it. The moon was turning redder by the minute.

"Ah! Welcome guys! Today is a night of the blood moon which means that the wisterias will glow, and your spirits will show. Lancelot, in a few minutes you'll figure out what the secret was."

"I can't wait," I said.

The others didn't seem excited but at the same time, all their eyes were on me. I think it's cause something going to happen, but I don't know. The clock strikes midnight, and the moon is fully red. I feel something strange happening to my body. I look around and everyone seemed to be transforming into something. So was I. Now, I realized what really happened, we all turned into animals, except for Mr. Brook.

"What happened!" I said freaking out.

Mr. Brook smiles and says, "This is the secret Lance. If you work here, your automatically cursed with something. On the nights of blood moons, when the clock strikes midnight, all of the zookeepers' curses are unleashed. The curse is that all zookeepers turn into their spirit animals. After an hour, you'll turn back into your original human form. You'll get used Lance, just like the others did."

"Ok fine. That kind of makes sense. I mean, we're in a zoo during the moon's rare phase and we're in Japan. I get why I'm a beagle dog, but why am I a red one?"

"Because you're a literal red hair, like, you literally have dark red hair."

"Who said that?" I asked.

An albino peacock responds, "It was me, Lizzie. If you're wondering why my feathers aren't ginger like I am, it's because my spirit animal is a mutation, I'm albino."

"That makes sense actually."

A wolf comes up to me and starts to speak, "So I'll let you know who's who. So, to start, I'm Jester..."

"I know that Jester," I said.

"Shut up and let we help you. Ok so as I was saying, I'm Jester, the albino peacock is Lizzie, the bearded dragon is Rex, the fluffy white rabbit is Trixie, the Siamese cat jumping around is Millie, obviously, and believe it or not, the grizzly bear is Honey."

"It's great that I got to know your guys' spirit animals, but I can't wait to turn back!" I shouted.

Honey says in a gentle voice, "It's going to be all right Lance. You'll get used to it."

"So, I'm not going insane?"

"No," said Trixie, "you're not."

"Ok, I trust you guys. But for now, I'm still kind of freaking out."

"Understandable," they all said.

I heard a loud roaring noise again and it came from the same direction as the locked-up building. I'm so eager to know what's in there. Whatever it is, it sounds like it's in pain. I thought. I start to run towards the building with my now four legs. But a feeling stopped me halfway. I turn back around to where the others are.

"You're curious about that building Lance? None of us know what's in there," said Trixie.

"Actually Trixie," said Rex, "I do, and I wish I can get her out of there."

"Oh..." said the other zookeepers.

It's like they suddenly knew what was there, but wait, did he say her? I thought. I'm curious to ask him.

"Is someone in there?"

"Yes. Yes there is Lance, and I have a feeling you want to help me save her."

"Of course I do! Those noises have been bugging me since I first heard them. But, if I help, may you tell me who's in there?"

Rex spoke, "Yes! In fact, I'll tell you right now. So..."

"Ok, I understand," I said.

We all run towards the building together and once we got there, we looked at the lock. It looked like a super difficult puzzle. She knew we were outside the building; I could sense it.

"How are we going to get this lock open? It looks impossible," Rex said.

"I might have an idea," replied Lizzie. "I can try to pick the lock with me beak."

Rex looks at Lizzie as if she's joking. "Come on Lizzie, I pretty sure it has to be harder than that to get this lock open."

"Just watch Rex, Mr. Brook thinks we're gullible and would never dare to trying to unlock this building."

Rex sighed, "You're probably right. Just make sure Mr. Brook doesn't actually catch us."

"Got it," Lizzie says.

Lizzie turns her peacock head upside down and put her beak in the keyhole. She starts to pick the lock for a while and almost gets it unlocked. She tries again and, this time, succeeds. Rex looks at Lizzie in shock as she slowly opens the buildings big doors. Inside was just as Rex had told me, a dragon! Rex runs up to her and hugs her with his lizard arms. The dragon seems happy to see him, then her big eyes moved towards me. She paused and decided to speak.

"You're a new face to me and I know you were the one to convince my dear Rex to save me, thank you."

Rex looks at me and says, "Lance, this is my best friend, Aurora. She was locked up and kept away from us by Mr. Brook because there had been a malfunction with her human transformation."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"I'll tell you more later. For now, we just want to run."

We sneak away and back to the dorms. Nobody saw that Aurora was missing, yet. Aurora was pretty big in size, so it was harder to hide her, but we still succeeded in doing so. Rex, still a bearded dragon, crawls up on one of Aurora's wings and rests on it.

"When I first started working here, I didn't know about the zoo's 'secret' either. My spirit animal is a dragon so on the night of the blood moon I became one for the first time. That wasn't the problem though."

"What was?" I asked.

"Like Rex told you, I had a malfunction with my human transformation. Basically, instead of going back to being a normal human, I went to permanently being half dragon on the lower half of my body. You'll see that in 5

minutes when we turn back. What got me locked up for like, 2 years, was that Mr. Brook thought I was dangerous and that I would reveal the zoo's "secret" to the guests."

"How would you have done that?"

"The guests would have seen my lower half and question it."

"Ya, that's probably tough to hide," I said.

An hour has officially passed, and we were all turning back into humans. I going to have to get used to being a dog sometimes. I looked at Aurora, she had nice and fluffy white hair and eyes that might remind one of emeralds. Cool beige horns were sticking out of her hair. She also had a long tail and big, white dragon legs. She wasn't kidding when she said she had a malfunction. We all went to sleep for the day.

One day has officially passed and now it's morning. Everyone was awake and we met up in Jester's room.

"I have an idea on how we can hide your dragon half," said Millie.

Everyone in the room stopped what they were doing.

"What's your idea?" asked Aurora

"We could pretend like you're always wearing a dragon onesie to work."

"I don't get it," said Aurora.

"Hear me out. We could tie a white, fluffy cloth around your waist to make it look as if you're wear a onesie. And for the upper half, just wear your uniform top."

"That might actually work," said Rex.

"That's great! Now we have nothing to worry about, except the new guy settling down from yesterday." Aurora said.

"No, it's fine," I said, "thanks to you guys, I'm starting to get used to it for the next blood moon."

"That's good," said Lizzie.

Everyone was now ready to go. Millie's idea for Aurora's outfit was perfect. It looked exactly as if she got hot in a onesie and tied it around her waist. We head down to the zoo for another day. Mr. Brook comes up to us while we were preparing to open.

"This idea for Aurora is excellent. Keep it this way from now on."

"Ok, Mr. Brook," Aurora said.

"And Lance," said Mr. Brook, "it's great to have you on our team. Good luck on your second day here."

"Thank you Mr. Brook," I said.

The zoo now opened for another fun day. I got used to working here from yesterday and I became friends with the others. I reunited with Jester and saved a fellow zookeeper. I knew that my life was going to change for the better from now on. And thanks to my new friends, I stopped freaking out over the curse. I couldn't feel more grateful for the people in this zoo for helping me find my new path. I turned around and looked at them all before doing anything else. I smiled at them.

"Thank you guys!"

Willow Tree

by Clara Friedman

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

There is one day that I will always remember. I will always remember it better than I remember my own birthday, December 13th, 2003. That was the day my older sister took her life. That was the day that my world fell apart.

It was a Friday, and I was saying goodbye to my friends after my last period when it started to drizzle. I rode home on my bike every day, so I knew I was in for a bumpy ride. My house was not far, usually ten minutes. So, quickly, I hopped onto my bike to try and get to my house before it really started to pour. As I was nearing my house, I slammed into a willow tree. There were many on our property, so many that you couldn't even walk three

feet without coming face to face with a new one. I didn't notice it earlier because I was so focused on my English essay that was due the next Monday. When I slammed into it, I fell off my bike and cut my knee and elbow.

Just as I was picking myself back up, it started to pour, harder than I've ever seen it before. "Just great. I love rain!" I said sarcastically to myself. I didn't even have time to think about my cuts because I jumped back onto my bike while trying to stay dry by the safety of the willow tree. Eventually, I decided that the rain was not going to stop so I made a break for it.

I brought my bike up onto the porch and locked it so that no one could take it. My house was on a huge piece of land that stretched all the way to the boggy swamp of Louisiana. When I opened the front door I expected to see Maggie, my dog. However, she did not greet me. Instead, I was met with the deafening sound of silence. This was strange because usually one could hear my dad and older sister, Josie, cooking something in the kitchen or listening to something on the TV, but this time it was different. Everything seemed to feel off, in a sense that something was wrong.

I started to call out for Josie, Dad, or Maggie but no one answered. I decided to look around to see if maybe they were in a different room. I walked from the kitchen to the TV room, to Josie's room, to Dad's room and back down to the kitchen again. I was starting to get worried, so I decided to call my dad on the landline. Usually, I was not allowed to do this, using the landline was only in case of an emergency, but I felt like there was something telling me to do it. I dialed the numbers to my dad's phone, and it started to ring. I waited for a little bit and just as I was about to set the phone down my dad picked up.

"Dad? Where are you?" I asked with a slight hint of worry in my voice

"I am just driving home from work. I had to stay overtime today," he said in a reassuring tone.

"Alright, well do you know where Josie is?" I asked.

"No, she should be at the house. Is she not there?" My dad asked curiously.

"No, I can't find h-" I stopped, looking out the window. I saw something. Something so horrific I thought that it could have just been a hallucination.

"Ari? What's wrong?" my dad asked with curiosity. I did not answer. I just stood there paralyzed with fear. "Ariana what's wrong?" he asked again now with a hint of worry.

Before he could ask again I dropped the phone and ran out the back door. I weaved through the willow trees in the pouring rain praying and hoping what I saw was not real. But as I ran around a tree, I saw her, Josie, hanging there on the willow tree. Her lifeless body limp and frail. My worst nightmare had become a reality. And right below her sat Maggie, soaking wet staring at Josie with her worrying eyes.

Before I could even process what I was seeing, I felt an overwhelming sense of sorrow, fear, and dread come over me. It felt as if my world was crumbling and everything was dark. I fell to my knees and started to cry. I cried harder and harder every passing second. It felt as if time seemed to stop and all I could do was cry. I cried until I felt sick; I cried until I couldn't breathe; I cried until my dad came home and found me. When he saw the horrific sight all he could do was cry as well. We both couldn't stop; we couldn't understand why she would do this. Why would she leave us?

The rain never stopped. It rained all the way until her funeral. Josie was buried underneath one of the willow trees in our yard. Willows were her favorite; that's what made her death even more painful. After her funeral I fell into depression. I stopped talking to people; I couldn't look out the window to the back yard without bawling my eyes out; I couldn't even talk to my dad. I had frequent nightmares and hallucinations of that dreadful day. It was something that I could not escape no matter how hard I tried to forget the image of her. It was engraved into my mind.

My dad never healed from Josie's death either. No matter what he did, what he said, or he would do he always had a blank face. And no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't smile.

I graduated from high school a couple months later. After my graduation I decided to move to Vermont to get away from those willow trees and from painful memories that haunted them. I couldn't stand to look at them any longer. I needed time to heal. Time to change. It was hard, moving away from my dad. Especially right after Josie's death. The death of his first-born child, the death he would never get over.

After moving to Vermont I felt like the best thing to do was to get a job and be alone for a while. That way I would be able to fight all of the pain and suffering I was going through alone. I needed to find something that I liked to get my mind off of everything. It would be good to try and find some peace in my new home.

Coincidentally that same month I met James. James was tall and tan. He had dark brown hair and a soft smile that could make anyone feel better in a heartbeat. He had this sort of personality that could brighten anyone's day. He was my neighbor and my first friend in Vermont. He listened to my story and showed a kind of

compassion that really made me feel safe and secure. He helped me through all of my feelings and helped me to accept my sister's death. James encouraged me to sign up for college to make a better life for myself, but I wasn't ready. I didn't feel like it was the right time. After a year and a half of dating he proposed. It was the happiest I had ever been since Josie passed. For our wedding, we decided to move back to Louisiana. The wedding was a beautiful ceremony with just a few close relatives under one of the willow trees that was so dear to my sister's heart. That day was the first time I saw my dad smile since Josie's death.

After the wedding, James and I decided to stay at my old house for a while until we were ready to move into our own home. On one rainy day, when the willows were swaying in the wind and looking as ominous as ever, I decided to clean up the house. I started in the kitchen and made my way to the TV room, and to the bedrooms. When I was walking out of dad's room, I noticed that Josie's bedroom door was open. "That's strange," I thought to myself. "I haven't seen her room open since she died. Dad doesn't like to go in there and neither James nor I have opened it," I said again walking closer to the door. When I got to the door I got this overwhelming feeling that I needed to go in; I needed to see it. So, I did. I opened the door to see her room just as she had left it.

Her bed was made with all of her pillows lined up just as she liked them, her makeup all put away on her vanity, her clothes tucked away neatly into her closet, and her books put away from her favorite to her least favorite. Seeing it for the first time since her death made me feel an overwhelming sense of sadness and loss, but I didn't cry. My wound was starting to heal, and I didn't want to slash it open again. Just then, I saw something. A piece of paper sticking out of one of her nightstand drawers. I walked over to take a look at it and see what it was, but I was not expecting what I found. On the note it read:

To whoever is reading this,

I do not feel like this life is worth living anymore. I cannot stop comparing myself to the girls I see around me. They have everything I want, that I need. Their hair is perfect; they don't care for their weight; they don't need to wear makeup. They have everything. Everything that I wish for, everything that I dream for. The bullies are ruthless. The names they call me makes me wish I could hide and never come out. "Freak, idiot, rat, fat, ugly," and so much more. I can't keep going on like this. I know I will never be enough.

Josie A.

I read it over and over again. The words written in a familiar handwriting that stung like hot knives in my back. The wound that I had tried so desperately to heal had opened right back up like I had never even tried. And just like that horrific day, I collapsed. Sobbing and trying to keep myself from suffocating under my own tears. I screamed and cried until I couldn't cry anymore. All I could do was sit there, broken inside once again. James, who was in the other room, heard me from downstairs and ran up to see what the problem was. As soon as he came through the door he knew what was wrong. He knew that I found something that was a part of Josie's unfortunate death, and he knew that all I needed was comfort.

Weeks went by and I was slowly starting to become myself again. My nightmares slowly went away, and I didn't cry as much as I used to. Then one day, while we were folding clothes, James brought up the topic of college again. "Do you think it's time for you to go back to college?" James asked while we were folding laundry.

"You know, I've been thinking about it, and I think I should," I said, not looking up from my folding.

"Good, what do you think you would study?" James asked now, curious and excited.

"I want to become a psychologist," I said, setting down the shirt I had in my hand.

"Oh really? Is that so?" James said, putting down the sheet he was trying to fold.

"Yea, I think that I can really help people," I said with a slight smile on my face.

"Well, I think your sister would be very proud," James said with a big smile plastered on him.

"I think so too," I said, picking back up my shirt to fold it again.

It took some time to actually send my application for college but at the end I got accepted. It took many many years, but I got my master's degree in psychology and therapy. I opened my own non-profit to help people dealing suicidal thoughts, and I helped lots of children, teens and adults.

It took a lot of heartache to get to where I am, but I am now happy helping people who are going through the same thing that my sister was going through. It makes me feel like I am helping my sister in a way. And at the end of every session or talk, I always make sure to tell people that they will always be enough.

Echoes of You

by Gaby Gant

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Elliot checked his watch for the third time, feeling the weight of time pressing down on him. It was almost midnight, and the bar was nearly empty. Just the usual late-night crowd, an old man who looked like he'd been here longer than the place had been open, and two college students who sat in the back and probably had to leave before 11:00 p.m. to make it back before their curfew.

Elliot ran his fingers over the rim of his glass, his thoughts elsewhere. He hadn't planned on being here tonight, at this corner bar that barely had any customers or excitement, but a message earlier that evening had pulled him out of his routine.

I'll be at the bar at midnight. Don't be late.

The sender was anonymous, the message was brief. But Elliot knew exactly who it was from.

It was her.

Anna.

He hadn't heard from her in two years, not since the night they'd... Well, not since the night it all fell apart. Screaming, glass shattering, suitcases, tears, and finally absence. It had gone on for a while, but that night was different and something just clicked. He'd spent months after that night convincing himself that he didn't need answers. That whatever happened, he'd be fine without her. But now, sitting in this dimly lit bar, he couldn't help but feel the familiarity of something unresolved.

The old man got up with a grunt and left. Elliot was the only one left in the bar except for the single bartender. As Elliot watched the old man leave, the door swung and made a jingle. As the old man went out of view, a figure replaced him. Elliot's heart skipped a beat.

It was Anna.

She was exactly how he remembered her. She even smelled the same. But something was off. He couldn't figure it out. She walked closer slowly, like she was unsure of how to approach.

He stood up, "Anna?" His voice cracked a little.

She stepped a few feet away, a small, polite smile on her lips. "Elliot," she said, her voice low, "you came."

"Of course," he said, forcing a smile, but his stomach was in knots.

He shrugged, trying to act casual, and she raised an eyebrow. She always knew when he was nervous or stressed out.

He awkwardly asked, "Two years, right?"

"Two years," she agreed, her eyes dark but unreadable. "It feels longer though."

Elliot didn't know what to say to that. The years without her had been an odd blur.

There were moments when he missed her terribly, and there were times when he convinced himself that he was better off without her.

"Why now?" he finally asked, leaning against the bar. "Why contact me now?"

Anna hesitated for a moment, fidgeting with her hands and twisting all of the silver rings that went on her finger, including the blinding engagement ring that still sat on her left ring finger. Elliot noticed, but she never brought up why she still wore it. Did she still have feelings for him? Maybe she's here to ask for a second chance?

She took a deep breath, as if she was preparing for something heavy. "I needed to tell you something...I've been...living with a lot of guilt, Elliot. You have to understand."

But before she could finish, the bartender approached. His eyebrows tilted in, creating deep wrinkles on his forehead, and a smile that looked painful by how many teeth he was showing. Was he curious or concerned?

"Can I get you something, sir?"



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Elliot gave a small nod, "A whiskey, neat," He gave his order quickly, basically shooing him away because all he wanted was answers.

Once the bartender left, Anna continued, her voice barely above a whisper, "You remember the night I left you, don't you?"

Elliot stiffened, "I remember," he said, his voice tight.

Anna looked away, out of the window to the dark street with cold dim spotlights from the weak streetlights, "I never really told you why I left," she paused, like she was weighing her words. "I had to leave. For your own good."

Elliot frowned, "What are you talking about? You didn't give me a chance to—"

"I wasn't the one you thought I was!" she interrupted, like she was holding in the words her whole life and finally threw them up. Her voice now trembling, "I was...someone else. Someone you didn't know. And if I had stayed..."

His chest tightened. "What do you mean? What are you talking about?" he asked, not wanting to stop until she replied.

Anna's eyes were dark but steady. "You didn't deserve any of it. I wasn't just running away from you. I was running away from myself." Nothing she said made sense. He felt like a sick joke! Like he was being tricked or pranked.

Her eyes met his, and for the first time in two years, Elliot saw something that stopped him cold— regret. Yes, but also something darker, something he couldn't quite place. He had seen it when she entered the bar, but he dismissed it because he was more focused on why she wanted him to meet her here.

"I wasn't the person you thought I was," she repeated, her voice shaking- "I couldn't, I couldn't stay."

Elliot opened his mouth to ask her what she meant, but then it hit him— something about the way she spoke, the way she wouldn't meet his gaze. And then he remembered the whispers. The rumors. The way everyone looked at him in disgust and would back away like he was some kind of monster when they came close. The ones he had dismissed at the time nothing more than town gossip.

Anna's face went pale. She knew by his eyes and expression that he put the pieces together.

"You never came back," he whispered, getting louder and louder with each word, "not because you had to leave...but because you were never coming back."

She took a deep breath and stood up, "I'm sorry, Elliot," she said, her voice steady now, though it lacked warmth, almost robotic. "You should've never met me."

Elliot stood up thinking if he should pull her back or something. The memories from that night were coming back, and he didn't want to feel the same anger and rage that he did back then. But before he could attempt to say anything, Anna turned and walked out of the bar, leaving Elliot standing there, the weight of her absence suddenly unbearable.

A beat later, the bartender set down his whiskey, sliding it toward Elliot with the same troubled look on his face, "Enjoy."

Elliot looked at it, then back at the door she had just walked out of.

The door jangled softly as it closed behind her.

And then, for the first time, Elliot felt the terrible certainty in his chest.

She was *never* real.

But how, how could he fall in love with his imagination? He couldn't lose the love of his life, his soulmate even if she wasn't real. It was real love! Two years of his life! He got up, tripping slightly then clutching to the table to stop his fall, then quickly walked over to the door. He whispered, "*Anna .. Anna!*" His thoughts scrambled. The bar was left empty, except for the bartender who was wiping a glass clean. He glanced up with just his eyes keeping his head and body still. His tense body relaxed, his forehead smoothed, and his teeth were locked away by his mouth.

"Thank God that psycho is finally gone. I was about to call the dang cops on this drunk."

The House in the Woods

by Gabriel Gelber

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

It was a cold October morning. The leaves outside were changing to dark amber. As Cooper woke up, he yawned at the alarm clock beeping on his nightstand.

"It's too early," Cooper said groggily.

His alarm clock refused to cooperate and continued beeping loudly. Cooper slammed his palm onto it, silencing it. *Oops*, he thought to himself.

He walked down the dimly lit hall and down the stairs, the tip of the sun peeking through the windows as a source of illumination; he heard groaning coming from Louis' room.

"Well, looks like everyone is getting up," he said to no one in particular.

Cooper leaned his head through the door frame of Louis' room.

"Good morning Louis," Cooper said. "How do you feel this morning? Any older?"

This morning happened to be Louis' 13th birthday. He was the first of them to become a teen.

In return for this comment, all Cooper could hear was Louis grumble under his breath about one thing or another.

Meanwhile, in the other spare bedroom, Liam and Oliver, the two twins, woke up and started preparing for the adventurous day ahead of them. After a good 30 minutes of getting ready, everyone met in the kitchen for breakfast. As they sat and ate, Louis started throwing out ideas for what to do for his special day.

"We could go to a trampoline park, or a waterpark, or we could go watch a movie, or even go explore that creepy abandoned house in the valley," he said with enthusiasm.

Liam immediately wanted to go to the abandoned house, but Oliver wanted to see the newest movie, and Louis really did not care and wanted to let them pick. As a result, the option was left up to Cooper, as he did not want to go to a trampoline park or a waterpark.

"I think...", Cooper said slowly, "we should go explore the abandoned house."

So, it was decided that the group would explore the abandoned house. At this time, Cooper thought that it would be a cool experience, Louis thought that they would find a ghost, Liam thought that they would find a dead body, and Oliver refused to believe that there would be anything out of the ordinary in the house.

They then concluded that they would need supplies such as flashlights and snacks. After a brief trip to CVS, they had everything ready to go. Now, all they needed was to convince one of their parents to drive them to the drop-off spot to get to the house.

After convincing Tanya, Louis' mom, to take them to the trailhead that led to the house, they all got in the car and discussed what might happen once they arrived.

"Do you think the doors are going to be locked," asked Liam.

"I think that the owner of the house is long gone, so probably not," replied Oliver. "Do you think that there are actually ghosts?"

"I don't think so," Cooper said in reply.

The conversation died down, they arrived at the trailhead, and their hesitation began to show, thanks in part to the menacing look of the trail. It was about three miles long and went out into a group of woods known as the pine barrens. This area of the forest was known for its eerie environment. As they continued walking, the trees became more and more dense until there was nothing but the faded path keeping them from being swallowed by the trees. As they walked, Cooper brought up an old story that scared everyone.

"When I was six, my mom used to tell me stories about these three-foot tall creatures that were always hunched over, and that they would spring out of the trees, feeding on lone children," Cooper said in a strange tone.

"Nice try, Cooper, but that story is so obviously fake. Plus, that's not even scary," Oliver retorted.

"Think whatever you want," Cooper growled, "but when they come, don't say I didn't warn you."

"Cut it out guys; we're almost there," Louis said.

"Finally," Liam retorted.

Right before they came to the house, the trees opened up to reveal a clearing. In this clearing, they could clearly see the driveway to the house, with an abandoned, rusted Ford Thunderbird. Even though the house was in a valley, there were still ominous-looking stairs leading up to the old, wooden door.

"Let's chill here for a second," Liam suggested.

"I want to go straight in and get it over with," Oliver replied.

"I agree. We should chill here and set up for a second," Louis said.

"Yeah, setting up is a good idea," Cooper added.

So, as the group sat on the slightly dewed grass, they began to plan.

"I think going in the front door would be best, just straight in," Oliver said.

"But we should check the perimeter first," Liam responded.

"What if we go in the side door," Cooper said.

"I think we should walk around the house first to check it out," Louis said. And so, it was settled; the group would walk around the house first, checking the perimeter.

As they walked, Cooper lagged behind for a second, as he was calling his mom.

"We should prank Cooper by scaring him in the house," Liam suggested. "We could hide in closets and jump out and just imagine seeing the look on his face."

"Brilliant idea," Louis said.

"I'll join too," Liam said.

"What are you guys talking about," Cooper asked.

"Just the NFL," Liam responded almost too quickly.

"Ok then," Cooper said while jogging towards them to catch up.

Halfway around the house, the group ran into an abandoned pool, full of still water, which had algae and brain-eating amoeba mixed in with it. As the group stood at the edge, Louis pushed Cooper forward. He would have fallen into the pool if Oliver had not been in on the stunt and caught Cooper and pulled him back right before he fell into the water.

"Why did you try to push me in?" Cooper screamed at Louis.

"Chill man, it was just a joke," Louis said.

Cooper then picked up the nearest rock from the ground and chucked it at Louis, hitting him in the leg and drawing blood.

"What was that for?" Louis remarked. "I didn't hurt you; I just gave you a little scare, no harm no foul, right?"

"I guess, but, whatever," Cooper said.

"No *thank you*?" Oliver asked.

"*Thank you*, Oliver," Cooper said with heavy sarcasm, "You really did save my life."

After this, the group then finished their walk around the house without any more incidents. The only thing they encountered was an unlocked side door, and this started the debate on whether or not they should enter through the front door or side door.

"It would be better to go through the front," Liam suggested. "That way we can start from the beginning of the house."

"We should enter the side door," Oliver said, mainly just to disagree with Liam, with no reason behind why.

"Let's go through the front," Louis said.

"I think we should go in the side," Cooper said smugly, making the vote a tie.

"Rock paper scissors for it," Louis said.

"Bet that," Cooper responded.

"Rock, Paper, Scissors, Shoot," they said in unison.

"Rock beats scissors, I win," Louis said.

The group walked up the steps of the porch, approaching the front door. As Cooper reached out to grab the door handle, Louis grabbed him by the shoulders, scaring Cooper badly. Cooper, mad at this point, spun around and punched Louis in the gut, making him drop to the floor.

"Stop Cooper," Liam yelled as he grabbed Cooper's arms to stop him from beating up Louis.

As this was happening, Oliver grabbed Louis and dragged him to the wall of the house, propping him up weakly. Louis let out a weak moan of someone in distress.

"I'll kill you I swear," Cooper yelled to the other side of the porch.

"Cooper why?" Liam asked. "Why did you hit him?"

"I'll kill you all I swear," Cooper yelled, still clearly enraged.

This then went on for another fifteen minutes until Cooper finally cooled down, and Louis apologized for scaring him. Louis ended up being fine and was just going to have a little bruise under his rib cage for a while. Then, after this entire fiasco, the group finally entered the house, with Louis taking the front this time.

The house was nice on the inside, with dusty, stained wood floors and fiber and plasterboard walls representing a style from the 1960s. As Louis walked into the master bedroom, he saw a closet right next to the door and could not resist. He entered the closet, ready to scare Cooper as soon as he walked in.

"Where did Louis go?" Cooper asked as he entered the room.

"Right here," Louis yelled as he jumped out of the closet into Cooper.

Cooper screamed and fell backward and hit his head on the wall behind him hard enough to leave a dent.

"Why do you keep on doing this?" Cooper said weakly.

"I'm telling you, it's just a joke, chill out," Louis said in return.

Certainly doesn't feel like a joke, Cooper thought to himself. Feels like you just hate me. Why is it that every time we hang out, I feel like I just get targeted like there is an invisible sign on my back saying "Easy target to bully"? Whatever, at least Liam and Oliver aren't joining in.

"Let's just keep on going," Cooper said after thinking it over.

The rest of the first floor was pretty uneventful, with the group finding long expired food in the kitchen, and some washing machines and clothes in another closet. After a full first-floor sweep, the group reconvened in the kitchen to sit down and eat a little bit of food.

"I call dibs on the Oreos," Liam said.

"At least give one to all of us," Oliver said.

"I get the Goldfish then," Cooper said.

"And that leaves me with the pretzels," Louis said solemnly.

The group ate, and as they ate, they noticed that the house creaked from time to time, like someone or something was upstairs moving around.

Cooper exclaimed, "What was that creaking!?"

"Probably just because of how old this house is," Louis replied calmly.

"What if it's the tree trolls?" Cooper said.

"Don't be stupid," Louis said. "Tree trolls don't exist; we told you that earlier."

"Okay then, but just another warning, when you are face to face with one we will see who's laughing."

The rest of their lunch was uneventful, with them discussing football and their newest school project. After lunch, the group decided to explore upstairs, as they found nothing else downstairs but an eerie door that led to what they assumed to be the basement.

Upstairs, the group split up into two separate groups, Oliver and Cooper, and Liam and Louis.

Cooper, glad not to be with Louis, but also curious as to why Oliver put up with him, asked Oliver a couple of questions.

"Why do you hang out with him?"

"I'm not sure. Liam just started hanging out with him, so I had to as well."

"I think he's a jerk."

"I guess, but he's nice to me at least. I feel bad for you, though. Just be prepared for him to pull more of his 'pranks' on you."

"Thanks for the warning."

As Cooper and Oliver walked through the bedroom hallway, they noticed a small, green door about four feet high with a golden doorknob.

"What do you think that's for?" Oliver asked.

"I'm not quite sure," Cooper replied.

"We should probably meet back up with the other group before heading into the master bedroom, like we agreed upon," Oliver said.

"I guess so," Cooper said reluctantly.

On the other side of the house, Louis and Liam were planning their final prank.

"What should we do for the finale?" Louis asked.

"What if you act like you fainted and I run over to them yelling?" Liam suggested.

"Perfect," Louis said as he gave Liam a fist bump.

Louis then continued lying on the ground with his eyes closed perfectly still.

"Oliver, Cooper, come quick!" Liam shouted at the top of his lungs.

"What happened? We're coming," Cooper shouted back.

"Louis fainted," Liam shouted back.

"How did that happen?" Oliver asked now that they were all together.

"I don't know. He was walking ahead, and he opened that green door in front of us, screamed, and fell," Liam said.

"Are you talking about that small red door, the one that's four feet tall with the gold handle?" Cooper asked.

As the group gathered around the small green door, curiosity mixed with apprehension.

"What do you think is behind it?" Oliver asked, glancing nervously at Cooper.

"Maybe it's a secret room," Cooper suggested, his voice barely above a whisper. The air felt charged with an unspoken tension, and the old house creaked ominously as if it were alive.

Louis, still feeling the sting of Cooper's earlier retaliation, smirked and stood up.

"Let's just open it and see. I bet it's just a storage closet or something lame," Louis said.

He reached for the golden doorknob, his fingers trembling slightly as he turned it. The door swung open with a groan, revealing a dark space that seemed to swallow the light from the hallway.

"Wait!" Cooper exclaimed, "I don't care if you lied about being knocked out, but what if there's something dangerous in there?"

But Louis, emboldened by his friends' laughter at his previous pranks, stepped inside without hesitation.

As he crossed the threshold, a sudden chill swept through the room. The door slammed shut behind him with a loud bang that echoed through the house. Panic surged in Cooper's chest as he rushed to the door, pulling at the handle.

"Louis! Open up!" he shouted.

Inside the dark room, Louis felt an unsettling presence. Shadows flickered around him, and he could hear whispers that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere all at once.

"What is this place?" He muttered under his breath, trying to convince himself it was just his imagination.

Meanwhile, Cooper and Oliver banged on the door desperately while Liam stood frozen in shock.

"We need to get him out!" Oliver yelled, "What if something happens?"

From within the room came a low growl and then silence fell like a heavy blanket. Suddenly, the door creaked open again, but not by Louis' hand; it swung wide to reveal not Louis, but three small figures hunched over in the shadows. The tree trolls Cooper had warned about suddenly appeared in front of them.

"Who dares enter our domain?" one of them hissed, its voice raspy and dripping with malice.

Cooper stepped back in horror as he recognized them from his childhood tales. The very creatures that fed on fear and mischief.

"We didn't mean to intrude," he stammered, heart pounding in his chest.

The trolls exchanged glances before one spoke again.

"You have disturbed our slumber," it said slowly. "And for that, we demand a price."

"What do you want?" Liam asked bravely, though his voice shook.

The troll leader grinned wickedly, revealing sharp teeth. "We can help you deal with your bully," it said, nodding towards Louis, still trapped inside. "In exchange for your friendship."

Cooper felt a surge of anger and betrayal at Louis' earlier actions but hesitated.

"What do you mean?" he asked cautiously.

"Join us," the troll said with a sinister smile. "Help us rid this world of those who torment you, your friends who laugh at your expense."

The offer hung in the air like a thick fog. Cooper glanced at Oliver and Liam; their faces mirrored his internal struggle. Would they really consider such a dark pact? But deep down, Cooper felt an enticing power rise within him at the thought of revenge against those who had bullied him for so long.

"Alright," Cooper said finally, determination hardening his resolve. "We'll do it."

With that agreement sealed in darkness, the trolls cackled gleefully as they led Cooper deeper into their lair, a twisted alliance forged in anger and desperation.

Outside, Louis remained oblivious to the fate that awaited him as he stood alone in the shadows of fear he had created.

And so began a new chapter for Cooper, one where darkness whispered promises of retribution against those who had wronged him, while binding him to an ancient evil lurking within the trees.

The Truck

by Bianca Harley
Grade 8
Blue Ribbon

Eleanor heard footsteps from across the hall of the school library. It was all she could focus on, rather than on her blank computer screen that read “final essay” at the top. The noise faded as the student left the building. It was so quiet she could almost hear her heartbeat. She turned back to face her computer and began to type. A few minutes later she checked the time. Her phone’s lock screen read “12:08” in large bold letters. It was midnight, and she had barely started writing her medical paper. Eleanor knew what to write. She had been studying medicine for two years. It was her junior year at a small college in the suburbs of Connecticut. She just didn’t want to write it; this wasn’t her passion, literature was. Thinking, she picked up her phone and dialed her father’s number on the bright white screen. Her hands became slippery with sweat as she pressed the red call button at the bottom. There was a long pause and her heart beat faster and faster.

“Eleanor?” a muffled voice was heard from the other line.

“Hi-,” she said, “Hi Dad.”

“What are you doing calling me so late?” her father asked, agitated.

“Yeah, I know, I’m sorry,” she answered. “I was just studying for my medical paper-” she explained as her father cut her off.

“How is that class going? By the way, I’m so glad you’re following in your family’s footsteps by studying medicine and not throwing your life away by pursuing your ‘dreams’ of becoming a writer,” he said, chuckling. “You know,” he continued, “aspiring writers are the most likely to fail in the future.”

“Dad, listen to me,” she uttered, attempting to sound assertive. “I don’t want to continue studying medicine, I want to switch my major to English language and literature.”

“You won’t do it Eleanor, I will never speak to you again if you don’t fulfill your family’s legacy of becoming a doctor,” he said, his voice escalating with anger.

“But neuroscience isn’t what makes me happy; it’s only what makes you happy. Writing is my true passion, and you can’t change that. All you think about is yourself,” she answered.

“You will not speak to me that way! I’ve heard enough. You will continue studying medicine until you graduate and become a successful doctor like everyone else in your family or else I will not support the financial costs of your education. Not another word from you!” He shouted enraged and furious.

“I understa-” Eleanor began. Her father hung up the phone before she could get another word in. A tear streamed down the side of her cheek as she looked around and saw the empty library around her. Soon, she yawned, and her eyes became droopy when she shut her laptop, packed it into her backpack, and headed towards the exit of the building, leaving her phone on the table. A gust of wind slammed into her face as she swung the door open. A cold fall breeze passed by and staggered her off her feet. A weary and loud silence filled the empty parking lot as the wind settled. There was a large forest surrounding the school library, she could only know how far it reached. It was dark, only making out the tree’s shadows contrasting the moonshine and hearing the leaves rustle in the gale. The parking lot was vast, and standing out like a sore thumb her bright red car sat in the middle of the empty and dusky area. She looked around, nervous, as she walked to her car. Angered and shaken by her call with her father, she got in, noticing it was unexpectedly unlocked, and turned on the engine as it roared onto the street. As she drove through the empty street surrounded by nothing but trees, she contemplated how everything was unusually empty and quiet. Sure, it was past midnight, but a few more people were bound to be driving thi....BLARE! Eleanor jolted and quickly looked into her rearview mirror. She saw an enormous truck driving behind her. It had almost appeared out of nowhere and continued to honk at her.

"I could have sworn that truck was never there before," she whispered to herself, perplexed and shaken. She drove faster as the truck followed closely behind her. "It was probably just a mistake," she thought and continued to drive home. Her drive from the library back to her house was longer than usual since the library was further than the actual campus and there weren't any main or direct roads to her home from this location. As she continued driving the forest around her grew denser and darker, and the street became narrower. She could hear the gusts of wind shifting the tree branches from side to side. A couple of minutes later, she noticed the truck was still behind her which was weird since she doesn't live in a large neighborhood, and this isn't a road most people take; it was isolated and remote. Further, on her right, there was a right-hand turn she could make. She got ready to turn onto the road, without using her blinkers, to see if the truck would continue to follow her. As her tires screeched and rotated right, she looked up at her rearview mirror and saw that the truck turned onto the road as well, right behind her, keeping little space between them. Her heart almost skipped a beat. Her hands grew sweaty, and she struggled to grip the steering wheel. The hairs on the back of her neck stood straight. She went to reach for her phone to call the police or let someone know of the dangerous vehicle following her. As soon as she extended her arm, she realized she had left her phone on the library table. She must have been so agitated that she forgot to pick it up. A new overwhelming horrific terror filled her eyes. Her heart was racing so fast it felt like it was going to beat out of her chest. Her thoughts raced through her brain when they were suddenly interrupted.

BLARE, BLARE, BALRE! Sounded the truck's horn as its high beam lights flashed on and off repeatedly. BLARE! Again, the truck honked. The vehicle seemed out of control as it continued honking and flashing its lights over and over. Suddenly, the flashing lights and the honking came to a sudden halt. Eleanor felt like she was dreaming. Like this was all a nightmare she could wake up from. But it wasn't. As her foot trembled to step harder on the gas pedal, her breath escaping out of her lungs, and her head feeling like it was spinning, she tried her best to stay focused and get home as fast as possible. She took a couple more turns to get back onto the road she had previously been taking but every turn she made, the truck stayed steadily behind her. Her car sped through the narrow road swooshing the tree branches along her sides. Her heart was exhilarating as the arrow on the speed monitor of her car kept increasing. Soon, the truck's lights began to blink again. BLARE! Sounded the truck's horn as it continued to honk at her.

"Oh no," she said fearfully, stepping on the gas harder. She was desperate to get home and would do anything to make it go faster. The truck honked again, and the lights flickered on and off until the truck stopped once again. Taking a deep breath she turned onto her street.

"I'm so close," she said in relief as she quickly pulled into her driveway, the truck again, right behind her. As her car came to a full stop on the bumpy gravel in front of her house, she grabbed her keys and flung the car door open, she jumped out of the car and closed the door, locking itself as she did so. As she raced to her front door, the truck's thick tires screeched as it slowed down and turned onto the gravel, parking right next to her small, red car.

Eleanor felt nauseous as she shut her front door and locked it. Her heartbeat slowed down and she exhaled a large sigh of relief. Immediately, she ran to the kitchen and slammed the number 911 into the phone. She grew anxious as the phone waited for the caller to pick up on the other line.

"911 what's your emergency?" said a voice from the other end. Eleanor's racing breath prevented her from even saying a word.

"Hi," she said hurriedly, still panting. "Could you please send someone, there's a strange truck parked outside my house," she said as she looked through the curtain of the window above the kitchen sink while raising the phone to her ear. She saw the large truck, still and with no movement towering over her car beside it. "They followed me all the way home, flashing their lights and honking their horns at me. I think they might be dangerous," she explained, as her eyebrows raised, and her eyes grew larger in suspense and worry.

"OK," said the calm voice of the 911 dispatcher. "Hang tight, we will send the police right away." Eleanor sat in her empty kitchen, trying to calm herself down as the clock kept ticking.

Soon, she heard sirens getting louder and louder, flashing lights of blue and red beamed brighter as two police cars pulled into her driveway next to the truck. Eleanor was stiff, looking out her window as she saw 8 cops in full uniform holding pistols get out of their cars. They ran to the truck and began to yell at the driver inside.

"You're under arrest, step out of the vehicle immediately!" shouted one of the demanding and assertive police officers. Eleanor's still eyes watched the scene; she didn't even blink and felt as if she wasn't breathing. The door cracked open. A tall middle-aged man struggled to step out of the large vehicle. He had a dark beard and mustache with some white hairs seen in between. His white t-shirt was stained with a splotch of coffee in the center, his grey cargo pants were covered in dirt, and his old worn-down brown boots had a hole at the sole. His

hair was rugged and messy, blowing in the wind of the cold fall night. This man's face looked even more frightened and shaken than Eleanor's did. His eyes were wide as if he had just seen a ghost and his hands trembled. As soon as his feet touched the gravel, two policemen forcefully grabbed his arms and pushed him against the hood of one of the police cars while handcuffing his wrists behind his back. The man's face looked panicked and frightened as he tried to look over his shoulder and tell them something but wasn't heard over the ongoing sirens of the police cars. Soon, as the policemen opened the car door the truck driver frantically shouted in a panicked voice,

"It's not me, it's him! It's him!" His shaky hand pointed directly at Eleanor's red car. The policemen looked distraught. As four policemen remained with the man in handcuffs, two others strode slowly over to Eleanor's small Volvo. Curious and intrigued, one turned on their flashlight and brought their face close so they could see through the tinted window, his cold breath fogging onto the glass. As his eyeballs moved side to side, inspecting the back seat of the car, he saw something, and the blood on his face was immediately sucked out in fright. His jaw slightly opened as he signaled the other officer to see this. There, curled in a ball, was an old, grey-haired man, holding a sharp kitchen knife. The flashlight's beam reflected off the old man's bright blue eyes and yellow teeth. He smiled insanely, looking right into the police officer's soul. Then, one officer came into Eleanor's house.

"What the matter?" Eleanor asked, "What's in my car?"

"An insane man is holding a knife in the back seat of your car. Were you aware of this Ms. Bennet?" he seriously asks her. Eleanor's face fills with confusion and more terror.

"No, I had no idea," she said as her mind began to trail off in complete perplexity.

"Well, we need your keys to unlock your car and detain this man. He could be seriously dangerous. You stay right here until we tell you to, okay?" The officer added.

"Yes, of course," she stuttered, handing her keys to the policemen. Emily was shaken and now even more afraid.

"Could this night get any worse?" she thought in complete horror and bafflement. Wanting more answers, she immediately walked right back to her kitchen window, where she saw two more police cars arrive in front of her house. A group of them circled her car and pointed their pistols at the vehicle. They yelled at the man in the car to get out and to drop his weapon. The man came out of the car and willingly dropped his knife onto the gravel. He was asked to get on the floor and put his hands behind his back. The police immediately grabbed him by the arms and legs and handcuffed him. A few officers picked the man up and walked him over to one of the police cars. As they were about to tilt his head down and seat him in the back of the car, with bloodshot eyes, he looked right through the kitchen window and straight at Eleanor with a devious smile stretching across his face. Chills ran down Eleanor's spine, as she quickly closed the blinds. The man's powerful and frightening stare was somehow burned into her brain. The police car with the old man inside pulled out of her driveway and left while the truck driver was being questioned off to the side.

Ten minutes later, the group of police officers who had questioned the truck driver came to her door.

"We need to speak with you, Ms. Bennet," one police officer said.

"Yes of course," she said rushingly, wanting answers. They first asked Eleanor some questions and then began to explain the full story to her. That night, as she was studying in the library, the old man broke into the backseat of her car, with a knife. Later, when Eleanor was done studying and began to drive home, she didn't notice the man at all. Soon, the truck driver began to drive behind her when he noticed something strange in her back seat. He had seen the old man sit up holding the knife up behind his ear, ready to stab her from behind. As soon as the truck driver saw this, he instantly slammed his horn to warn Eleanor about the man right behind her. As he did this, the old man looked back at the truck and immediately ducked. Later, when the man tried to stab her again, the truck driver stayed right behind her and immediately blared his horn as loud as possible, this time he began to flash his high beam lights at her as another warning. He continued to do this and followed Eleanor home to make sure she was safe. As he was parked in her driveway, he never left his truck to keep a close eye on the old man and to make sure he wouldn't escape. Eleanor was full of shock. She was shaken by the fact that she was so close to being killed but also by how she had survived, thanks to the truck driving behind her.

As the police left, she was still stiff trying to process what had happened. She was completely dismayed and still frightened. She crept into her sheets and jolted at the noise of her bathroom door shutting. She was still in shock to the point that she couldn't stand any sudden noises or movements. As she tried to drift off to sleep all she could think about was the tip of the knife being inches away from the back of her head. So close to killing her right then and there. Eleanor couldn't sleep, all that filled her mind was the horrifying events that had occurred a few hours earlier. As soon as Eleanor fell asleep, she began to sweat, she shifted in her bed and began to shake her head. She sat up briskly as her heart pounded and she panted rapidly. She had another nightmare. As she struggled

to fall back asleep, her mind wandered off to her many arguments with her father about school. She had always wanted to study literature, ever since she was young, but her father wouldn't allow it since her family's legacy was to become a successful doctor. The flashing arguments escalated in her mind until she woke up again. This time she didn't go back to sleep. Eleanor realized how she came so close to death that night that she couldn't keep living her life like this. Trying her hardest to meet her father's and family's expectations of her and pushing herself to follow the path of becoming a doctor while her true passion was something completely different.

A few minutes later, she walked downstairs. She looked at the clock in her kitchen; it read "6:45 am." Eleanor yawned as she walked over to the phone, the one she had used only a few hours ago to call the police. She dialed her father's number, and it began to ring. Her father picked her up.

"Hi Eleanor," he said in a raspy voice.

"Hi Father," she said, "something happened last night, and I'll explain later but it made me realize how I can't live my life to your expectations and make decisions for myself based on what you want," she explained quickly, hoping her father wouldn't interrupt her.

"What do you mean? Didn't we just talk about this last night?" he said confused, getting annoyed once again.

"Listen, all I want to say is I will no longer be studying medicine, I am going to switch my major to English literature," she said, smiling now that she has finally stood up for herself.

"How dare you do this to me, Eleanor," he said, angry. "If you go through with this I will never speak to you again," he said, becoming furious.

"Goodbye Dad," she said, hanging up the phone. Although she was sad about her father, she was relieved knowing that she could spend the rest of her life doing what made her happy and she wouldn't come to regret her life decisions. Eleanor ultimately understood how life could end in an instant, she had to spend it in the best way possible. Soon after, she logged onto her college website and applied for a change in her major. Smiling, she went back upstairs and rested as she came to terms with what had happened the night before and was forever grateful that she had survived. She was at peace knowing that her future was full of happiness now that she would follow her dreams of becoming a writer.

Seven years later

Eleanor looked around in joy as she walked through the library hosting her book signing. She had just published her very first book in her writing career and came to an event at the library supporting the publishing. She was overjoyed with excitement for this new event in her life. Her book was based on true events of her own life, it was a horror novel titled *The Truck*. As the library filled, she walked over to the signing table. People lined up one after the other waiting with their copy of her novel. Eleanor felt so honored to be there and was able to share her life experiences with others. As a young woman came up to the table with her copy, she asked Eleanor a question,

"What motivated you to pursue your writing career?"

"Well," Eleanor said, "what happened in this book did." Pointing at the cover of the woman's copy. The woman looked at her in shock and surprise as Eleanor signed the book. She looked back on the day she confronted her father and switched her major to study English. She couldn't have been happier with her decision and was glad she didn't follow in her family's footsteps; she instead did what made her happy.

A World Without Tears

by Kirsten Hug

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

I am always happy, yet always sad. They tell me something's wrong with me; they tell me that it'll all be ok. People are looking at me oddly. People are running. My name is Celestial Karmadichi and all my life I have been happy. Before I was born my parents were rewarded with becoming part of the Beatitudo sector. They used to be Formidolosus. I grew up in happiness and with curiosity. However, one fateful day every single thing changed.

It was sunny out and I was laughing on my way back from school to get a curiosity shot. This shot is given to those who have been deemed the best thinkers. I stood in line with my friend and watched them pour the liquid into the shot. I was relaxed and had a smile on my face.

"NO!" shouted a woman. One from the Ira sector, I assumed she ran over to the lady pouring the liquid who looked up Formidolosus I thought. Formidolosus were the pathetic ones, the ones always running

"Only an 8th!" Yelled the same woman from Ira.

"NEXT!" yelled the Electi

I sat down and the person who had gotten yelled at injected at me and handed them the slip "Thank you, have a good um day. Come back in 2 months for your next d-d-dose," she stammered bowing as she left.

"WOOOOOOOO!" I yelled.

When I came home, my mom squealed and hugged me, "We are going out for dinner!" she exclaimed.

We go out for dinner every night—all Beatitudo do. Before we were given our name, we were called Happy due to being extremely wealthy. We, besides the Electi, are the only ones who could do this. I wish to become an Electi. They are the ultimate goal for all of us. We were fourth only Excogitatoris, Sapientia, and Electi came before us. We didn't used to be like this, but since the great war, it is what we have become. We walked slowly laughing on the sidewalk, my mother carrying my brother who was swaddled in blankets, his face peeking out with a peaceful expression. The streets of the Beatitudo sector were bustling, the golden lights reflecting off glass buildings, designed to look like eternal sunshine. People around us were smiling as they always did. But deep, deep, deep down, I noticed it. Their smiles didn't reach their eyes. I couldn't explain, but something about it felt slightly off.

As we reached the restaurant, a stunning atmosphere with an inviting warmth, I felt a strange sensation crawl up my spine. It wasn't fear, I've never felt fear before. It wasn't sadness either, though I have heard stories of what sadness is. It was.... Emptiness.

The meal passed uneventfully as it usually does in Beatitudo. Laughter bubbled in the air and waiters moved like performers balancing plates of perfect food. Yet I couldn't shake the strange feeling I felt. I kept glancing at the silverware, looking at my reflection, searching for something I couldn't name.

Later that night I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling. My room was designed for happiness, soft pastel walls, warm melody and a faint melody that played to soothe the mind. But tonight, it didn't seem to work. My thoughts swirled around the events of the day: the woman shouting, the stammering worker, the injection.

And then it happened.

I sat up abruptly, clutching my chest....A wave of emotion I couldn't name surged through me, intense and all consuming. My breathing quickened and tears which I didn't understand streamed down my cheeks. I tried to laugh, to push it away, but oddly enough the laugh sounded strange. I pressed my hand to my heat, to feel it race. "What is this?" I thought.

I stumbled out of bed, my vision blurry as I struggled to stay upright. I needed answers. I needed to understand what was happening to me. My feet carried me to the balcony, where I stared at the gorgeous city of Beatitudo. For the first time in my life, it didn't look perfect. It looked empty. That was the moment I realized something was deeply, profoundly wrong, not just with me but with everything.

The next morning, I woke up with resolve. If the injection had done something to me I needed to know why. And if Beatitudo wasn't what it seemed, I needed to know the truth. Little did I know that the path to find answers would lead far beyond the golden gates of my sector, and deeper into the dark, hidden heart of our society.

The next day, I sat up straight in bed. I had parchment time. This is like what people from the forgotten times would call school, but the only sector which still called it school is the people from Spietia. These people were known for their unmatched intellect, living lives full of study and innovation. They say the Sapientia are the only ones other than the Electi who hold the secrets to the very foundation of our society. But here in Beatitudo, we have no need for their deep thoughts. Our lessons focus on joy, optimism and avoiding the pitfalls of overthinking. As I dressed in my uniform- a flowing, pastel tunic with the embroidered symbols of beatitudo- my resolve grew stronger. I wouldn't find answers in parchment; the Electi would never allow us to question. They controlled the sectors, the shots, and every moment of our lives. Walking to the hall of learning, I couldn't shake the memory of the women from Ira. The anger in her voice as she shouted about the dosage ran through my mind vividly. Ira was the sector of wrath, full of smoldering resentment and fiery tempers. They were viewed as dangerous, even unworthy, by other sectors. Yet her desperation hadn't seemed dangerous- it had seemed... real.

When I reached the hall, I took a seat next to my friend Livia. Her smile greeted, perfect as always. But today I noticed a flicker in her eyes, the monetary glance down at her hands before she spoke.

"Celestial," she whispered, leaning closer. "Did something feel strange to you yesterday? At the injection station?"

I hesitated. Could she feel it too? The emptiness, the hollowness, the strange surge of unnamed?

"Why do you ask?" I replied cautiously, my voice barely audible over the cheerful hum of our instructor beginning the lesson.

"I overheard my parents talking," she admitted. "They said that someone in Formidolosus was taken to the Electi last night. Something about giving someone too much curiosity."

My chest tightened, "What happens when someone overdoses?"

She glanced around, her eyes darting to our instructor, all with a smile on her face. "They become Inanis. Empty ones. People with no emotion and no purpose," her voice dropped to a whisper. "They say they are sent to the Umbra."

The Umbra. I'd heard the name in hushed whispers. A place outside the sectors, where the scared and the lost were sent. It was rumored to be a cold, shadowed, wasteland.

"That can't happen here," I said firmly, trying to convince myself. "Not in Beatitudo."

But Livia's words had planted a seed of doubt in my mind. After parchment ended, I lingered, pretending to pack my things as people filtered out. Once the hall was empty, I slipped through the corridors, heading toward the restricted wing. I'd never dared go there before-only Electi and their agents were allowed beyond the gold-lined doors. But something inside me pushed me forward, and before I could second guess myself, I slipped through the doors and into the restricted wing, where I nearly collided with someone- a tall figure dressed in the unmistakable black and gold of the Electi, who stopped abruptly when he saw me. He was tall, dressed in the unmistakable black and gold of the Electi, their embroidered insignia gleaming on his chest. His piercing eyes met mine and for a moment the hallway seemed to shrink around us. I force my breath catching in my throat.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, his voice sharp but oddly enough not unkind.

"I... I... I got lost," I lied the words trembling on my lips.

His eyes narrowed, "This area is restricted. Beatitudo citizens have no business here."

Something in his tone told me he didn't fully believe me. I tried to muster the effortless cheer I was supposed to have, "Oh, I was just curious. You know that curiosity is the best thing to have in Beatitudo."

His expression flickered-just for a moment- before returning to the stern, unreadable mask. "Curiosity," he said slowly, "can be dangerous. Especially for someone like you."

"Someone like me?" I asked, my voice faltering.

"You don't belong here," he said firmly, stepping closer. I could feel the weight of presence, the authority, he carried as an Electi. Yet, there was something in his eyes-something that went cold or distant like I'd expected.

"Wait," I blurted out, desperation seeping into my voice. "Please, just tell me. What's really happening with the injections? What happens to people who become Inanis?"

His eyes widened slightly, a crack in his composure, "How do you know about that?"

"I overheard something," I admitted, my words rushing out. "And I felt... different after my last shot. Something isn't right. I know it."

For a moment he simply stared at me, as if weighing a decision, Then, he sighed and glanced down the empty corridor. "You shouldn't be asking these questions it's dangerous."

"But you know the answers," I pressed, stepping closer. "Don't you? You're one of them. The Electi. You know what they are hiding."

His jaw tightened, and he lowered his voice to a whisper barely audible, "You need to leave. Now. Before someone finds you here."

"I'm not leaving until you tell me the truth," I said, my resolve hardening.

He hesitated his gaze darting down the hall again. Then to my surprise, he reached out and grabbed my arm, pulling me into a nearby alcove. "Fine," he muttered, "if you're this determined to ruin your life, I'll tell you. But not here."

"Then where?" I asked, wondering if I would have to sneak out of Beatitudo and go to where the Electis lived?

"Meet me tonight," he said. "At the edge of the Beatitudo sector. Near the gate to Umbra."

"The Umbra?" I repeated, my voice barely a whisper, but a harsh one at that.

"Yes," he said, his tone leaving no room for argument. "If you want answers, then that's where you will find them."

He released my arm and stepped back—his expression unreadable once more. "Don't let anyone see you leave the sector. And don't trust anyone, not even your friends."

Before I could respond, he turned and disappeared down the corridor, leaving me alone with a thousand and one questions swirling in my mind. The Umbra. The place everyone feared, the place where the lost were sent. And now it seemed, the palace where the truth waited for me.

When I returned home, my parents greeted me with their usual cheer. My mother's radiant smile stretched wide as she cooed at my brother, while my father bustled about, preparing for our nightly ritual.

"Takeout tonight, as always!" my mother said brightly, clapping her hands. "Celestial, why don't you choose the restaurant this time?"

We went out for takeout every night, like all families in the Beatitudo sector. It was one of the privileges that we'd been granted, the freedom to dine on the finest foods, without ever lifting a finger to cook. It was routine, expected and always a joy. But tonight, it felt like a charade.

I forced a smile, "How about the golden sunrise? They always have those honey pastries you like."

My father beamed, "Excellent choice! Let's go!"

We strolled along the sparkling streets of Beatitudo, passing along others with the same idea. The golden lights of the city reflected off the polished glass buildings, leaving everything in a golden warm perpetual glow. Laughter fluted in the air, mixing with the soft hum of music.

As we approached the restaurant, my mother nudged me playfully, "You've been so quiet tonight, Celestial. Lost in thought?"

I nodded, forcing a laugh, "Just thinking about parchment. It was so interesting today."

Her eyes softened with pride. "You've always been so bright. We're so proud of you, sweetheart. One day, you'll make it to the Electi, just like you've always dreamed."

I smiled, but it felt heavy on my face. Could I still want that, knowing what I did now?

The restaurant was lively as ever, with the cheerful waitstaff bustling about and families gathered around tables, chatting and laughing. Yet as we waited for our order, I noticed it again, the subtle emptiness in their eyes. Even here in the heart of Beatitudo, where everything was perfect. Something felt off.

When we finally returned home, laden with the steaming bags of food, I excused myself quickly, claiming I wasn't hungry. My parents barely noticed, caught up in their nightly routine of laughter and indulgence.

In my room I packed a small bag and waited for the city to settle. When the lights dimmed, and the streets grew quiet, I slipped out leaving the golden glow of Beatitudo for the shadows beyond. I step cautiously through the city, clutching my bag as if it were a lifeline. The city, which was so radiant during the day, felt eerie at night. The warm golden lights now seemed overbearing, casting long, sharp, shadows that danced with every step I took.

The gate to Umbra wasn't far, but it was in a part of the sector that I'd never dared to go before. The closer I got, the more desolate the streets became. The perfectly polished walkways gave way to cracked tiles and the cheerful hum of Beatitudo was replaced by an unsettling silence.

When I reached the edge of the sector, my heart raced. The gate stood before me. Massive and foreboding, its iron bars stretching high into the sky. Beyond it, I could see nothing but darkness, a stark contrast to what I was used to.

I hesitated, the weight of my decision pressing down on me. Was this really the right choice? The Electi's words echoed in my mind: *"If you want answers, then that's where you will find them."*

Before I could second guess myself, a shadow shifted near the gate. I froze, my breath catching in my throat. Then, from the darkness, the tall figure of the Electi emerged.

"You came," he noted with a hint of surprise.

I nodded, slowly, "I need to know the truth."

He studied me for a moment then ferret towards the gate. "Once we cross this threshold, there's no turning back. You'll see things that will change everything you believe, about everyone you know and about yourself."

"I'm ready," I said, though my voice wavered slightly.

With a single fluid motion, he unlocked the gate and pushed it open. The hinges groaned a haunting sound that sent shivers down my spine.

"Stay close to me," he instructed, stepping into the abyss.

I followed; my footsteps tentative as we left the golden glow of Beatitudo behind. The air grew colder and the silence deepened, pressing against my ears like a heavy weight.

"What is this place?" I whispered, my voice barely audible.

"This is the path to Umbra," he replied. "But it's also something more. A place where the truth lies."

As we walked the shadows seemed to shift and pulse around us. I thought I saw shapes moving in the distance, vague, ghostly figures that disappeared when I tried to focus on them.

"Why are you helping me?" I asked, breaking the silence.

He hesitated before answering, "Because you're different. You've felt it haven't you? That emptiness, that sense that something isn't right? It's a sign."

"A sign of what?"

"That you don't belong in Beatitudo or any of the sectors," he said quietly. "You're not like the others. You were never meant to fit into their system."

His words sent a chill down my spine, "Then what am I?"

He stopped and turned to face me, his eyes locking onto mine. "You're something they fear. Something they've tried to suppress for generations. You are free."

The word hung in the air between us, heavy with meaning. Free. What did that mean in a world where every emotion, every thought was controlled and compartmentalized?

Before I could ask, a loud clang echoed through the darkness, following me the sound of footsteps. The Electi's expression darkened and he grabbed my arm, pulling me into the shadows.

"They've found us," he whispered urgently. "Run."

We bolted through the darkness. The chill air whipping past us as our footsteps echoed against the unseen walls of the Umbra. My heart raced. Behind us, we could hear the Electi closing in.

The Electi beside me whispered sharply, "This way!" and pulled me down a narrow corridor. It was darker here, the shadows thicker, almost alive. I stumbled on the uneven ground.

"Why are they chasing us?" I gasped.

"Because you've seen too much," he replied. "And because you have the potential to change everything they built."

The corridor opened into a vast chamber, illuminated by faint, flickering lights. Strange symbols covered the walls, glowing faintly as if responding to our presence. In the center of the room was a large, ancient looking machine with wires and tubes going out in all directions.

"What is this?" I whispered, unable to tear my eyes away from the machine.

"The heart of Umbra and of our society," he said. "It's the core of the system that controls everything, the injections, the sectors, and the very fabric of our society."

"How does it work?" I asked, as I approached the machine cautiously.

"By feeding on emotions," he explained. "The sectors, the shots, they're all designed to harness and control emotions, funneling them here. Beatitudo fuels joy, Ira feels anger, the Formidolous feels fear, and so on. It's why no one is allowed to feel the full spectrum of emotions, because if they did, they'd see the truth."

"And what truth is that?" I demanded, turning around.

"That the system isn't for your benefit," he said. "It's for them, for me, the Electi. We feed off of emotions, to maintain power and immortality; without it, all Electi would wither away."

Suddenly the sound of footsteps grew louder, echoing ominous through the chamber.

"There's no time," he said, urgently. "You need to leave now."

Before I could argue, a group of agents burst into the chamber.

"No time! Run!" he yelled.

I turned and ran, disappearing into the shadows of the Umbra. The path twisted and turned, the darkness pressing in on both sides. Finally, I stumbled into the open air. I collapse to my knees gasping for breath, my mind racing with everything I had learned.

The system was a lie; the sectors were a prison and only I could set us free.

But first I had to survive. I ran through the darkness, my heart pounding as I heard the Electi getting closer. Suddenly, the path grew narrower until I was funneled through a strange, glowing archway. On the other side the air was thick and hot, buzzing with tension. I'd crossed into the Ira sector.

The building here loomed, jagged and harp, their surfaces rough and chaotic, a stark contrast to the smooth perfection of Beatitudo. The streets were teeming with people moving like a tide, everyone's face was twisted in scowls or shouts of fury. The emotion around me was raw and unreal, unlike the hollow smiles I was used to.

I pushed forward, stumbling into the flow of the crowd. My pastel tunic stood out against the dark, fiery red and blacks of their clothing. The pressing of bodies forced me through a snaking line that went to the center of the sector.

"What's going on?" I demanded, grabbing the arm of a passing man.

He shrugged me off with a glare, "What do you think? The shot."

The shot. My heart sank. I couldn't take another injection, not after what the curiosity shot had done to me. But as I glanced around, I realized there was no escape. The crowd was too dense, the Electi agents were surely not far behind. I had no choice but to stay in line.

When it was my turn I was shoved into a chair. A woman with sharp features and tired eyes loomed over me, injector in hand.

"Hold still," she snapped and before I could react, the needle plunged into my arm.

The liquid burned as it coursed through my veins, a searing heat that spread to every corner of my body. I stumbled away from the chair, clutching my head as the world tilted. My heart pounded, my breath quickened, and a surge of fury exploded inside of me. It was like fire rippling through my mind, consuming everything: faces, places, moments, flickered and vanished, leaving only anger behind. I collapsed.

When I opened my eyes, I was lying on a rough cot in a dimly lit room. My head throbbed, but the wrath was still there. It felt... right.

"Finally up, huh?" A voice cut through the haze.

I turned to see a man leaning against the wall, his arms crossed. He wasn't looking at me with concern, just irritation.

"Where am I?" I croaked.

"Ira," he said flatly. "You're lucky you didn't get trampled out there."

I sat up, clutching my head. "What happened?"

"You got the shot. That's what happened," he gave me once over. "Didn't you think you'd make it? Most people don't."

"What's my name?" I blurted, the question escaping before I could stop it.

The man snorted, "How the hell should I know? Doesn't matter here. Nobody cares about who you were before you got the shot. Get angry, stay angry; that's all that matters."

Anger flared in my chest, hot and unrelenting. My fist clenched and my teeth ground together. The man tossed a crimson tunic at me. "Get up, Ulysses."

I'm always angry; everything is wrong with me. My name is Ulysses, and I am going to burn this place to the ground.

The Firmament

by Zain Khan

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Droplets of water were falling from the foggy, pale sky. Darkness loomed across the vast expanse of water. The surrounding areas were empty, and there was no one but me. Point Nemo - I was 1450 NM away from the farthest point from land. Only the sounds of the wind and the gushing waves hitting my laboratory could be heard. Rarely there was thunder. It was almost the dawn of the "myrietium" as they called it, *myrietes* being the Greek word for "10,000 years", December 31, 9999. 96 years ago, I had built this laboratory when I was 16, and it has been aging with rust.

"So, Grant... When are you going to start this thing? You've been having a monologue for half an hour," sighed my friend and inventor, Sylvia.

"I'll start it once the rain stops," I said. "You're welcome to come along if you want. There are many amenities I've added on the train."

"No, I think I'm good," replied Sylvia.

"Are you sure?" I said while I was boarding the train. "You'll be able to see many different universes. Just think of anything and it probably exists in the universe."

"Fine, but if I die, it's your fault," sighed Sylvia.

This train was designed to pierce through multiple realms and dimensions, at least hypothetically. I had built this bullet train which consisted of a delta wing, and adjustable jet engines. These engines were meant to break the time barrier but also served another purpose. They allowed the train to go airborne. The train also had a claw which held the tracks that the train would be on while it's airborne. So, as the clock struck 11:59 P.M. I started the engines and opened the gate to the ocean. The rain had stopped, and the train slowly started to move. I could feel the excitement growing inside me, as the train was running across the ocean. The train slowly went faster by the second, 107 MPH, 108 MPH, 109 MPH. The sound of the track got even louder than before.

"I've never traveled through time before; this is my first."

But before Sylvia could say the rest of her sentence, the train made a loud noise, and we flung into the air. The engines were making the loudest noise I had ever heard. I thought to myself that this is probably how Joseph Thompson felt like, travelling through time. He was the first person to travel through time, and I was following in his footsteps. Once we conquered time, we had to conquer space. For this I would have to go even faster.

"Put these on so the sound doesn't obliterate your ears," I said to Sylvia.

I could see Sylvia mouth the words "ok," but I couldn't be sure since I had already put the ear mufflers on. I then walked back to the cockpit where I made the bullet train go even faster than it was going before. All we could see outside was the darkness, and I then stopped the train. I looked out the window and saw a vast expanse of nothing. Then I saw **something**. Staring at me. At the blink of an eye, it then disappeared.

"Was it *him*..."

I struggled to comprehend what I had just seen.

"Are you alright", asked Sylvia. "What happened?"

I said nothing. Then I stared outside. The terrain looked glitchy and there were colours everywhere. Even some new colours I had never seen before.

"Am I dreaming, is this real?" I thought to myself.

I also saw multiple black vortexes, which I presumed were universes. My theory was confirmed when I made the train enter one of these "voids". I started to make the train go into the vortex.

"Grant, you're acting odd," said Sylvia.

"No, I'm alright," I said. "I just thought I saw something."

The train was soaring above a vast expanse of galaxies, while Sylvia kept an eye on me. But before she could say anything something appeared over us. Looming above, it looked like a titanic halo with the corpse of a massive, menacing, mechanical eye ogling at us. Part of it looked destroyed, and tar was pouring from both sides.

"It looks like it was abandoned, like it was left to rot," said Sylvia.

I then made the train head into the iris. Inside were many hex-like rooms filled to the brim with broken contraptions.

Why did this civilization leave this outpost? I thought. *Why was this in ruins?*

To not think any further, I made the train exit this luminous outpost.

Once we got back into the area with the glitchy landscape, which I named, "The Firmament," Sylvia insisted on going inside another black hole. She conducted the train to the largest black hole and then we entered.

"By the way, if you want to go outside, I have specially designed suits to make sure we don't breathe harmful air," I assured Sylvia.

In this universe the galaxy we chose was the most similar to our Milky Way. There was a planet covered in a metallic-like layer. We landed on a flat plain. Once we got out, we noticed everything was made of metal, including the animals. But unlike robots, these animals looked natural, even though they were odd. One of the animals was a creature that had a vague resemblance of a sea anemone. It floated in the air and fertilized all the plants nearby it. Another one of the creatures we met were creatures similar to humans. They had the head, and body of a human, yet they also had squid-like tentacles. These creatures lived in the water and then one started talking to us.

I shook my head in bewilderment, "What are they saying... Are they even speaking a language, or just making random noises?"

"Let me see if we can communicate with sign language," said Sylvia. "They say that they do not intend harm to us, but they are curious about how we came here."

Then Sylvia told them about our journey so far, and they seemed very interested. While Sylvia was talking to them, I felt the presence of somebody else watching us from afar. Maybe it was that slender silhouette. A few years ago, my cousin, George, was attacked by a mysterious person out at sea. Unfortunately, they had perished and a few days later, I had gotten the news. That night, before I went to bed, I looked out the window to see a slender silhouette of a human. Could it have been the one who assassinated George? I had the feeling in the back of my mind. When we first arrived in The Firmament, I thought that I had seen that familiar slender silhouette, but I brushed it off. But maybe, the silhouette was stalking both me and Sylvia.

"Grant. Grant! I think we should go back now. People may be worried about our whereabouts," said Sylvia with great intensity in her voice.

I snapped out of my deep thought and then headed for the train. Once we arrived back at the train, we started to enter back into The Firmament. We saw our universe but there was a meteor heading our way.

"Sylvia, the lever won't work," I said as the train was approaching the meteor.

I had tried my best in the short amount of time I had to fix the lever. I tried all the screws and wrenches I had but it still didn't work. Then I tried my final screw, but right before I could hear a large crash. The train tore into two pieces while I fell into darkness below, not knowing what was next. I woke up outside the ruins of one half of the train. Where I landed, it was completely white, light everywhere. I went into the back of the train to look for Sylvia but there was no sight of her. I then went outside, and there was still no sight of her. I decided to look around to see where I was.

Where am I? Where is Sylvia? I thought.

The only sounds were my footsteps and an odd noise. This noise sounded like someone humming softly. Then I felt something tap me. Was it her? I turned around to look at nothing. I then turned the way I was facing before and there was still nobody.

No, I have to be dreaming, I felt someone tap me on my shoulder, I thought to myself.

Then I heard faint voices giggling, and sobbing.

Were these voices even real? Am I the one that's not real? Is life just a thing I'm imagining? I continued to go insane by the minute. *Was this the end for me...?*

I was losing my perspective of reality, and my sanity was going down by the second. And then I remembered I had forgotten to take my pills. These pills which you could take once a month, lowered your age by three months. It works by having synthetic bacteria bring back or repair cells that died while you sleep. Then, I could see something in the distance. It had the vague resemblance of a human. It looked like it was hovering as a puppet would, towards me. The creature had exaggerated body parts. Its skin was pale, and it had large, crooked, glass shards as teeth. Its eyes were gaping voids into the abyss, and it also had Sylvia's coat. It was all torn up. I stood there paralyzed and then blinked to make sure I wasn't hallucinating. It conjured up a scream like the sound of having a loudspeaker blasting into your ear, and I was its next target. I ran in the opposite direction as I could hear its screeching getting louder. Then I heard Sylvia screaming to get my attention.

"Over here Grant, over here!"

I saw the other half of the train while Sylvia had a minor injury on her arm. Then she got up and started running towards me while also running away from the creature. Once she caught up to me, we saw a piece of the delta wing. I ripped a piece of the wing and threw it at the creature's eyes. Then Sylvia ripped another piece and threw the piece towards the creature's neck. It screamed but made the creature even angrier. Then I saw a large laser beam come from my left and pierce the creature.

"How did that beam randomly appear?!" Sylvia exclaimed in shock.

We looked in the direction of which the beam came from, and there was a human with a metal cannon going back into its hand. We approached him and he said his name was Scott.

"How did you make that beam?" Sylvia asked.

"Oh, I have cybernetically enhanced powers, I was born with this ability," Scott said calmly, "That creature, I've never seen before. Do you perhaps know what it is?"

"No, we don't," Sylvia said.

"I know what it was," I said after being quiet the whole time. "It was the creature that attacked my cousin George. The creature that has been stalking me ever since."

"Anyways, what brings you here?" Scott asked curiously.

"We were exploring this vast multitude of universes until we crashed into an asteroid," I said. "Do you know a way out?"

"Yes, in fact I do know a way out, a way back to Earth, although it may not be your Earth," Scott said reassuringly.

He revealed a spaceship with many engines. We then boarded the train ready to face what was next in our journey.

The Stages of Grief

by Luca Komaransky

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

His bottle of beer scrapped the sidewalk every time he hit his head against the wall. He was being drenched by the pouring rain but was ignorant to the fact. Instead, he was lost in the repeating flashbacks that crossed his mind every second. Every time he saw his best friend's face again his heart shriveled with agony. He couldn't bear to look at him one more time, but every time he didn't see it, he was lost. Matt was his name; it was a name he could never forget. The sense of guilt that came along with his friend's face felt like a bullet to the chest, an unbearable pain that Jack could no longer take.

Soon Jack felt his heart beating, his lungs expanding, and his stomach growling in need of food as he only got more violent. The dense grip on his empty bottle only got tighter, so tight to the point that it shattered in his hands. His hand started throbbing from the pieces of glass piercing into his pale hand but could not feel the pain.

He sat on the wall outside of Matt's favorite pub, as strangers walked past him thinking about London's problem with alcoholics. Jack couldn't care less either way; he mostly didn't even recognize someone was there. Yet there he sat with shards glazed with his blood falling onto the pavement.

Matt was his closest friend, his only friend. He was the only person in the whole world who he cared about, and he was the only person who cared about Jack. For five days Jack thought Matt was ignoring him. Until the worst day of his life, even worse than the day his family died, was



SONIA MURUGESAN | Grade 7

waiting for him in his mailbox. A black card with white writing on it that simply said, "Remembering Matt Robinson ... Join us on April 12th at John's Church." The letter still sat in the pocket of his suit, stained with Jack's tears.

His thoughts were interrupted by what seemed to be a fight from inside the pub. They were just as common as pigeons nowadays so he would normally ignore it, except this one. From all the ruckus he only heard one sentence, "You don't understand what I'm going through." Jack stopped crying because it seemed someone was also going through the same thing he was. When he tried to focus on the conversation, the screaming started getting closer and louder to him every second. The next second, the door flung open, and a man was thrown out into the street. He looked worn down and broken, physically and emotionally. He sat there for a minute before lashing out and punching the road until his knuckles started to bleed. Jack's attention was only directed to the man now; he was at first frightened but then realized the similarity of their cases. They were both broken, lost, angry men who were in desperate need of something that they lost. Jack could relate to this man, like Matt, and in that moment he felt comfortable again, knowing someone recognizes and relates to his problems.

As Jack was lost in his thoughts, he hadn't seen the man get up and approached him until he sharply said, "Hey." Jack shot his head up at the man but was blinded as the rain fell into his eyes. He started to wipe his eyes to see the man clearly, but the man didn't wait for him to see. In a deep broken voice, the man said, "Whatever it is you are going through, you can find help," before walking away, never to be seen by Jack again. Jack tried to pursue the man to see what he looked like but fell down as soon as he got up. Weakly, he looked at the man as he limped down the sidewalk until he was absorbed by the fog. Recognizing that he was all alone again, Jack let out a deep sigh before passing out.

Jack woke up to the owner of the pub yelling at him to wake up and get away from his pub. Jack lay there, reluctant to move, until the pub owner started cursing out Jack and began to kick him in his stomach. He kept doing it until the owner even got tired of doing it. He gave up and went inside in hopes that Jack would leave by himself. His wish was redeemed as Jack struggled to get up, falling many times while at it.

Anyone who walked past him during this time felt sorry. They didn't know about what was happening in his personal life, instead they felt bad because they knew where his life was going, nowhere. Bystanders would just watch to see them crumble and feel horrible, yet they would never do anything, no matter how bad they felt. That was the reason why Jack didn't dare to trust anyone, anyone who would stand their observing someone's life die without stepping in to at least comfort them. That's why he liked Matt so much; he was the only one in the cruel society they lived in that did not go by the primitive instinct to observe.

As Jack stumbled away from the pub, he only had the man from yesterday on his mind. He forgot about identifying who the man was; he was more focused on his words. Jack didn't know why he was so focused on what he said. He might have just been a drunk man who didn't have a clue what he was saying, but his words still had meaning to him. Though he was searching, he didn't know what to look for. After all, the man just said that help could be found, nothing else. Suddenly, Jack stopped in his tracks. He stood there and realized what situation he was in. He had no one, no one that could redeem his wish for help, so why even bother trying. He was reminded of the funeral once again and fell to his knees, followed by a sharp pain in his heart. He was once again exposed to the aching feeling of loss. In this moment he realized that his life only had one way to go if he remained like this. If he remained a fragile man too scared to approach anyone but only wants someone to approach him, his life would not go anywhere. But the current question for Jack was how?

He had heard of a famous therapist in town, hadn't heard much about his success in finding redemption in his patients, but had just heard about him. At this point, Jack would take anything for the sake of his future, even if it meant talking to someone in hopes of an answer. After all, that's what he did with Matt.

He remembered a poster at his local corner store of something about a therapist. He thought it would be his best bet, so he made his way to the store in hopes of finding someone to listen to him once again.

With the poster in hand, the name "FRANK HEARTH" stood out in bold capital letters. This was the man he heard of—the man that could switch his life like Matt did. He pulled out his wet phone and called the phone number that sat on the bottom of the page. A voice picked up and said in a stern voice, "Frank here."

"I would like to schedule an appointment, as soon as possible," Jack said quickly.

"Alright, I'm free this afternoon. Does that work for you, Mr....?"

"Spurt, Jack Spurt. And yes that works, thank you," Jack hung up the phone and took a deep sigh. It had been a while since he had talked to anyone about his true feelings that came from deep inside. He was excited and relieved to think that the therapist could become his new Matt and maybe build a true relationship.

That afternoon Jack made his way to the address listed on the poster, which wasn't far since he already started to make his way there right after the call had ended. The building in which Mr. Hearth worked was an old

standard London office building made from brick. It blended in with the neighborhood with no signage to tell where the office was, which left Jack to rely on the address listed on the poster.

Once he finally found the office, he rang the doorbell listed under his name. He stood there for a good ten seconds before the door creaked open. Mr. Hearth peeked out of the crack and asked, "Who is it?"

Nervous that he had the wrong house, he quickly said, "It's Jack, we spoke on the phone earlier. I made an appointment with you this afternoon."

Mr. Hearth then opened the door fully, letting Jack get a good look at his face. He seemed like a man in his 40s. His face glowed against the sun and sharpened his teeth and smile. He seemed like a welcoming and caring person, just how every therapist should strive to be. But just from opening the door, Jack knew he made a good choice to come. But what Jack didn't know was that by coming here, his whole life changed for good.

"Oh right! Well, come on in, we have time for a good and lengthy discussion today." Mr. Hearth made his way up the stairs while Jack followed him in a state of calamity. Once they got to the room, Mr. Hearth asked, "Can I fix you a cup of coffee, tea, water maybe?"

"Tea should be fine," Jack said as he sat on the couch across from the desk. He wrapped up his jacket and put it to his side while saying, "And sorry for the sudden appointment, I know it isn't called for."

"No, no, no, don't worry! That shows me you're enthusiastic to talk! Now, what genre is it? Meaning is it about a fight, love, something else maybe?" He asks as he puts down the cup of tea on the table.

"Loss, I lost one of my greatest friends. Well, my only friend really." The sudden stinging feeling from the previous night arose in him again just by thinking about his friend. His palms become sweaty and his heavy became heavy. He knew what was about to happen and quickly regretted his decision to come.

"First of all, I give you my deepest condolences. Losing someone you are so close to just like that is one of the worst things to experience."

Suddenly, all those feelings Jack had were gone. Mr. Hearth's message was heartfelt, something that he had almost never experienced before, not even with Matt. "Thank you Mr. Hearth."

"Please, call me Frank. Now losing someone hurts, but it isn't something you should let run your life. That doesn't mean you have to forget about the loss, not if you don't want to. But the best thing to do is to try to move on. It's much easier said than done but I've had many patients who have been able to do it and haven't been happier since. Now I don't want to move too fast now, let me try to get to know you and your friend better. What was his name?"

"Matt. He was such a good friend; I can't explain it to you. He would listen to you and would never judge you even if you judged him. And his death was so sudden that he basically left me alone, lost. To be honest I feel betrayed really. He couldn't tell me about his disease?! Yeah, I noticed his violent coughing, but I didn't do much of it. Instead, the way he tells me he has tuberculosis is through his funeral invitation! Now that I think of it, maybe he was a bad friend. If he wanted to keep such things hidden away from me maybe it shouldn't have been a thing in the first place!" Jack continued to ramble on and on about Matt, the good, the bad and the ugly. As he progressed he started going faster and faster while the flame of his fury grew along with it.

"Jack. Please, take a breath. It's completely normal to be feeling these ways, and we always tend to take it out on someone. But have you ever thought of why he would keep it from you?" Jack shook his head while digging his palms. "He didn't want to hurt you Jack. The last couple days he had with you didn't want to be fake and all about his disease. He probably wanted the authentic friendship, the real wonderful you that he knew and loved. And most importantly Jack," He leaned in closer, "He didn't want to hurt you. Of course, sooner or later the day would have to come, but he would do everything in his power to delay the inevitable, seeing you crumble."

Jack sat there, replaying all the final moments he had with Matt, it all made sense now. Matt just wanted to see him happy in his final days, that's all he wanted. Jack felt at ease as the tight grip of his hands let go with a deep sigh. He was finally able to let go of the immense amount of pressure weighing him down. His mind felt free as he got up and was able to breathe without the feeling of his lungs collapsing.

The following weeks Jack would visit every Saturday after he got off his shift at the pub. They expanded on the subject of Matt and even dove into new subjects to help Matt further move on. It was a time-consuming process and took a lot of dedication. In some sessions he felt as if they weren't useful anymore but kept pushing because he knew he was yet to finish moving forward. Sometimes the conversations were hard to discuss but always came out with a positive effect upon Jack.

One afternoon in late May, Jack came to Frank's office for his regular session. He had a lot of subjects he wanted to explore and was looking forward to the session that day. He had been able to get to know Frank a lot more lately, which deepened the meaning behind their conversations.

On the door to the office, there was a card. On it was written, "To Jack and Mill. Please understand the following contents of this letter. I have moved away from London. Yes I know it is very sudden and uncalled for. A new job has been offered to me and will change my life. It hurts me incredibly to leave you without a proper goodbye. There is no need to search for me since I will be out of the entire continent. I trust you will remember and use all I have given you as material to move forward. If you need someone to talk to, talk to the other name on this card, they are going through the exact same thing as you. I'm sorry and I know you will be okay.

- Frank Hearth."

Jack first thought it must have been a sick game. Halfway through the letter he was ready to go back to square one, but he knew that that's not what Frank would want. Suddenly the same feelings that appeared with Matt appeared with Frank. He was being flooded with nausea and was about to pass out. He tried to grasp onto the tactics Frank taught him but weren't strong enough and let Jack get swept away again.

He shriveled to the floor but was quickly helped against the wall by someone. He was trying to reassure him, but Jack couldn't hear much through the ringing of his ears. He noticed what the man was trying to do and reassured himself. He slowly started breathing in and out as the ringing and nausea started to fade.

Once everything had settled, a calming voice arose, "You're okay, it's okay. You must be Jack, I'm Mill. Mind if we have a quick talk? I think we both might need it."

Invisible Ink

by Camila Mak

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

London, England - September 23, 1939, 20:37 p.m.

AVA PLANTENGA | Grade 8



Rhythmic clinking of the sewing machine pierced Margot's mind. She could think no longer. The distant murmurs echoed across the enclosed room. Her foot tapped against the scratched floors, weary and roughened from the years of shoes walking upon it. Dusk was approaching and the sky was beginning to darken, as if a cloak was being draped over the sun. The last remnants of daylight whispered goodbye. Margot peered out the window, dark unbrushed curls cascaded onto her shoulders. Lazily gazing upon the sign before her eyes, she read: 'Emilia's Seamstress and Tailor Shop'. With England joining the war, more and more English soldiers came in daily for uniform alterations.

A screeching voice interrupted that thought, "Margot! You're needed in the front room -now!"

She scurried over past the sewing room, through the velvety curtains and into the main entrance. Two soldiers about the age of twenty were chatting in discrete mutters to each other. One brown-haired and tall, the other blonde and just over Margot's height.

"How can I help you today?" asked Margot, without a hint of insincerity.

The rugged voice of the shorter one replied, "Both of our buttons have been loose, and the fabric continues to rip."

Within ten minutes, both uniforms were repaired back to a perfect condition. However, the peculiar thing was not that, it was what Margot heard. It was typical to hear gossip when tailoring the dresses of the aristocratic wives of London. Yet the conversation that took place in that room that day was different.

"The city ought to be reduced to rubble by the year's end" said the brown haired one.

"If the Society cannot help, we are doomed. More and more submarines are closing the coast by the day..." the short one replied with a starchy voice.

Margot looked up at the mention of 'The Society'; she had heard several rumours about it, but this confirmed it was true. Yes, it was true! If soldiers spoke of it - it gave her hope! Due to the war, she wasn't able to graduate. Her intelligent mind was not valued at this time. She was lucky enough to even have a consistent job during the war. Yet, she yearned for recognition, that she could be more than a seamstress and that her mind knew more than how to sew buttons onto a dress. From what Margot had heard, the Society intercepted and decoded morse code messages from nearby enemy ships and submarines to help The Allies. This was saving lives. Margot's mind flashed to the pocket watch she found next to a streetlamp two weeks back. It was the only one illuminated amongst the entire street of them. The name of the society matched with the insignia on the back, a nightingale balancing a scale. The Nightingale Society haunted her thoughts, day and night. Especially with the recent drafting of her husband. Every day she would wait for letters from him. It had been almost one month, and none yet. Was there really a hidden society out there? The only thing standing in her way was discovering it herself. To become a member of the Nightingale Society you must find the clues, which are only discoverable at night -away from the crowds, when the sun is down. It would be even harder with the bombings creeping closer and closer to London. It was now or never. And she chose now.

October 27, 1939, 22:05 p.m.

The moon ghastly illuminated the empty sky. Its stars didn't seem to shine as brightly that night. Margot peered down at the opened envelope in her hand. On the table lay a crisp yet crumpled paper. Empty. No writing or marks on it of any kind. After months of waiting for a letter from husband Arthur, the only one that had arrived was an envelope carrying a blank sheet of paper. With tears trickling down her cheeks and onto the envelope, she took something out of her pocket. It was a gold pocket watch with intricate roman numerals on its face. She turned it onto the back and ran her fingers over the engraved symbol of a nightingale balancing a scale, this was the crest of the Nightingale Society. Margot had come to discover that there was a false back, and a hidden compartment which held a folded paper with orders for thirteen glass vessels. Margot knew London very well, after all she had spent most of her life there, so to her it was obvious where she needed to go.

October 28, 1939, 19:44 p.m.

Rain drops berated the sidewalk. The night sky had already swallowed the sun and the clouds. Margot quickly walked throughout the maze of cobblestone streets without trying to raise any suspicion. She hung a sharp left onto a whimsical street. Botanical aromas floated in the atmosphere. Buildings containing shops were stacked next to each other like puzzle pieces. Each adorned with intricate details and embellishments that made each shop more unique and homely. The glowing of the warm, dull lights in each shop resembled a candle in a dark room. Scanning the street, Margot found what she was searching for. Hidden away between two larger buildings, a library and an art store, lay the Bird's Eye Apothecary. Growing up she had been here many times, as her mother was bedridden. They sold potent smelling, herb infused medicines, mixtures of water and flowers which were deemed as 'potions' and most importantly to her right now, the measuring ware. It may not have been obvious to the ordinary person, but the details of the Nightingale Society matched up perfectly with this specific apothecary - down to the name and logo.

The store was charmingly empty when she walked in; her hair and shoes were drenched as if she had been swimming. Glass vessels filled with mysterious liquids lined the shelves, sitting like chess pieces on a chessboard waiting to be played. Posters with the Latin names of herbs and what they cured were plastered onto the dark walls. Old books with thick adorned covers seemed to be everywhere, next to the typewriter and piled into dusty corners, to a point where this apothecary could be mistaken as a bookstore.

The store clerk gave a baffled look at Margot, "How can I help you this evening, Miss?" His face matched his tone.

"Good evening. I am looking for a scale," she paused, then added, "for measuring my... flour." It was a terrible excuse; especially considering the fact that the scales provided here were not for baking ingredients, they were professional apothecary scales used for dosing medicine. Despite the horrid reply, the clerk seemed to know what she meant. Margot did not know how much he knew, but what mattered to her was beyond him.

In the back of the store was the scale section. About a dozen beautiful, golden scales were hidden by a velvety red curtain. The store clerk disappeared as soon as he drew the curtain, not wanting to interfere. Margot knew that the crest of the Society included an apothecary scale, but that was all the information she had. Whether it was this specific store, or another in the entirety of London, was up for her to guess. Margot peered at the scales; they all looked the same. She scanned for the smallest detail that could possibly indicate which one to choose. Eventually she began to get dizzy; they were all identical. What was she even looking for? One at a time, she carefully examined each one by picking it up and holding it very close to her eye. She had been through about seven already. However, on the eighth one she noticed something different. It was not only that this one weighed a bit heavier in the hand, but that on the bottom, beneath the base of the scale, was a tiny inscription. It read, Gale's Weights and Measures - 2766 Flockington St., SW London. There was absolutely no way this was a coincidence.

At the register, the clerk provided the best look of approval he could give (it was not very good).

"Hmmm. Good choice, very durable scale..." He mustered.

"And how much will it be?" Margot asked as she pulled her wallet.

"-Oh right! Yes, £12 please."

What an awkward encounter. At least this somehow reassured Margot that she was on the right path. She left the store in a hurry to get home, it was still raining after all. The next day, she would visit the address.

October 29, 2024, 1939, 20:59 p.m.

It was after work. Yesterday, Margot thought that the rain could not possibly worsen. Well, to say that it worsened was an understatement. Each individual raindrop slammed onto the street, as if bowling balls were being thrown from the windows. The sound was deafening to an extent where the rain was screaming. Margot looked down at her hand, holding the now drenched paper with scrawled writing of the address. She was on the correct street; the problem was trying to find the faint numbers of the building in subversive darkness and pounding rain.

After an eternity, Margot finally stumbled upon the steps of 2766 Flockington St. It had taken a lot of dashing through the rain, waiting it out on store steps and concerned stares from their managers. Yet she was at the correct place now. From the looks of it, the building appeared to be a postal office. The outside was painted a lovely light blue, and a black sign with golden writing displayed 'POSTAL OFFICE' in elaborate, swirly letters. The door smoothly swung open, and Margot was greeted with the faint scent of buttery envelopes and crisp paper.

"Name, please," stated an unknown, raspy voice, hidden by the towering piles of paper.

"Yes - I'm looking for anything to and from Gale's Weights and Measures - please," Margot said, not knowing if it was the right thing to ask.

"Hmm. I'll check but I do not recognize that name."

"Well, do you happen to have anything addressed to Margot Jones?" she asked, with a teaspoon of hope creeping into the edge of her voice.

"One minute, ma'am" and the concealed man began to rustle through the crisp letters.

The wait was torture.

"Mhm. I have one. It is quite fancy looking -hmm let's see: from the Superior Officer to Margot Jones," and the anonymous voice placed a starch white envelope with an elegant stamp onto a tower of miscellaneous letters.

She grabbed it in an instant, but she would wait to read it at home. If it were from the Superior Officer it could possibly be about an achievement of Arthur.

The shriek of her voice cut her thoughts off "-And here is one addressed to Gale's Weights and Measures - quite an odd name. The sender is anonymous but there is a note attached detailing to provide it to anyone who asks for this," This time, the envelope was a deep sage green, raised silver letters spelled gibberish across the front:

*The Nat Song Ceil Yigi
O' Poor Me Fren*

What could this mean? There was no time to dwell on it now, it was terribly late, and she had to be getting home; with each passing day the streets became more dangerous for a woman to 'stumble upon' at night. Additionally, the unopened envelope she held in her hand was begging to be opened, but she could wait until she was home -after all it's not like it would be *life-changing*.

Margot clasped the letter tightly with both hands; she had just arrived at her house. Her coat and boots were still on, she had been waiting for this. The items retrieved from the anomalous journey were scattered on her table: the pocket watch, the empty letter, the scale and the apothecary papers. Her excitement was overflowing; the letter could be recognizing a wonderful achievement Arthur accomplished or simply a message from him -they were all the same to her.

Clumsily, she ripped the envelope and opened the letter. Then, she froze. Time seemed to disappear.

Dear Mrs. Jones,

We regret to inform you of the recent loss of your husband, Arthur Jones. He died on the front lines on October 2, 1939. Unfortunately, due to the mass casualties and deaths caused by the war, we will be unable to provide further details until our records are properly filed. We are terribly sorry for your loss.

Sincerely,

The Superior Officers

The room spiraled. Margot fell but she couldn't feel it. She could not feel anything. Nothing except the sensation of oxygen leaving her lungs. A barely audible yet excruciating yell rigidly escaped her, becoming louder the closer her knees fell to the ground. If tears were streaming down her face, she did not notice - she could not notice. The ticking of the pocket watch sped up faster with each second, its bullying noise echoed in her head. Her hands trembled violently. The room was a blur. Her mind was hollow. The only thing she could see was the terrifying letter, falling ever so slowly, down to the floor.

October 15, 1940, 17:31 p.m.

Nothing had changed; yet everything had changed. Margot was still Margot, but she was different. She was still a seamstress, but that's not all she was. The pain in her heart never subsided, but her acceptance grew. The past was the past, but memories were still cherished. Acceptance had slowly conquered the stoic remnants of denial.

Days ago, the pocket watch had stopped ticking. Sometimes Margot had found it comforting when she heard the noise as she reread the letter countless times. Other days, it was the most painful noise to hear, the quick, repetitive tick brought her back to that moment - one she could never forget. Margot took this as a sign that her search for the Nightingale Society should not have ended where it did; her loss fueled her determination to help the Allies and defeat the Axis Powers.

It was not until early October of 1940, nearly a year after Arthur's death, when Margot had an epiphany. Staring at the lonely green envelope that she had taken home so many months ago, her mind began to work automatically, unscrambling the letters. What had been '*The Nat Song Ceil Yigi - O' Poor Me Fren*' translated to 'Nightingale Society - Open for More'. She must have not noticed it in the spur of the moment from the excitement of being handed that green envelope, but on the back of it was an alphabetical dial. When she turned it to those letters in the order of the translated words, the envelope opened mechanically. That is when Margot observed the miniscule, intricate turning gears inside its flap. The letter was plain white, with the stamp of the Nightingale Society's crest on the front. Inside was written a message in neat cursive:

Congratulations,

You may have solved the beginning, but can you solve the rest? Your time starts now.

Eerily, as Margot whispered that to herself in the room, the pocket watch provided one single tick. If she was still unsure of how credible the Society was, this eliminated any doubts. Below the writing was what appeared to be an untitled poem:

*Even the Greatest may be shelved away,
Rarely acknowledged,
But when chosen,
Life can be seen from a better perspective*

It was not a style she recognized. The poem didn't make too much sense either; it could be about anything. With her clever mind, Margot devised that the clues must be in the formatting or literal grammar. At first she tried rearranging the words, then everything and anything to do with the syllable count and lastly she tried translating the entire thing into a code of numbers based on the letter's placement in the alphabet. None of these worked. Margot began to read it out loud, over and over again until it was imprinted in her brain. Then it slammed her in the face: The pronunciation of the first syllable (or half of the word for single syllable words) of the first word in each stanza would translate to 'Library' when said out loud if the orders of the verses were reversed. This sounded complicated, but ironically, it was easier done than said. By doing this, 'Li - B - Rare - E' would be formed. Suddenly, the poem made much more sense.

Margot knew this now, but which library could she go to? It was extremely dangerous to be outside, even more at night, but by taking this risk she could help contribute to the fight against the Axis Powers.

That is how she ended up on the steps to a library. She had only the faintest idea whether this was the right library to be at but knowing that this library was next to the apothecary that started it all gave her confidence.

The deep oak door opened with a creak. A strong aroma of dusty books filled the room. Dark brown, wooden arches sprouted from the ground, enclosing the circular room. Books of several colors filled the shelves. A deep red carpet washed up to each one. There were countless piles of books with thick dusty covers and rough pages containing tales trapped in time. The room was empty, dull lamps provided the least amount of light possible. Suddenly, Margot realized she did not know what to look for; she felt a profuse sense of foolishness. Margot decided to check the Nature Section to see if she could find a book about birds, considering how a Nightingale clearly had some sort of significant meaning behind it in order for a prestigious society to use it in its name. It all seemed too easy though. Wouldn't there be some sort of test right in front of her?

It required climbing a ladder to the second floor. The journey up was wobbly, Margot almost fell off at one part, *perhaps this is the test* she thought jokingly. The second floor was more like an inner balcony that wrapped around the walls. In front of her was the Nature Section. Well, really, the entire level was dedicated to books on Nature. She scanned the shelves for a bird-related section, finally observing a section labeled Ornithology. Literally right in front of her, was a book titled "*Balancing Birds: A Beginner's Guide to Birdwatching*" and on the cover was a Nightingale bird. The title could not be more aligned with the Nightingale Society - even 'balancing' was part of the title which correlated to the scale. Margot continued to think that this was too easy; it had been too hard leading up to this. Hesitantly, she opened the book to find that it was hollow. A navy-blue pen with golden swirls and intricate embellishments lay inside. It had a clear rounded top that Margot had never seen before. A wave of disappointment flooded over her. Was this what she was working towards? A pen? The disappointment morphed into anger. Furiously, she grabbed the pen and ran home. Her entire search for the Nightingale Society was a waste of precious time.

October 16, 1940, 22:58 p.m.

Margot sat at her table with her head in her hands. She was processing everything. The empty, blank letter she had received so many months ago seemed to be taunting her. Without further consideration, she threw the pen down onto the table. Its top bounced on it upwards then catapulted in the air. The deafening thud

reverberated throughout the room. Suddenly, almost mechanically, a piercing blue light shot from the pen, illuminating the blank letter to reveal icy blue, cursive writing:

*Congratulations Margot,
You have passed the test. Many others have tried and failed. But you have not. If you are wise enough to
continue this path, mail this letter back to Gale's Weights and Measures and we will come to you.
Best Regards,
The Nightingale Society*

And this time, the letter did not fall to the ground.

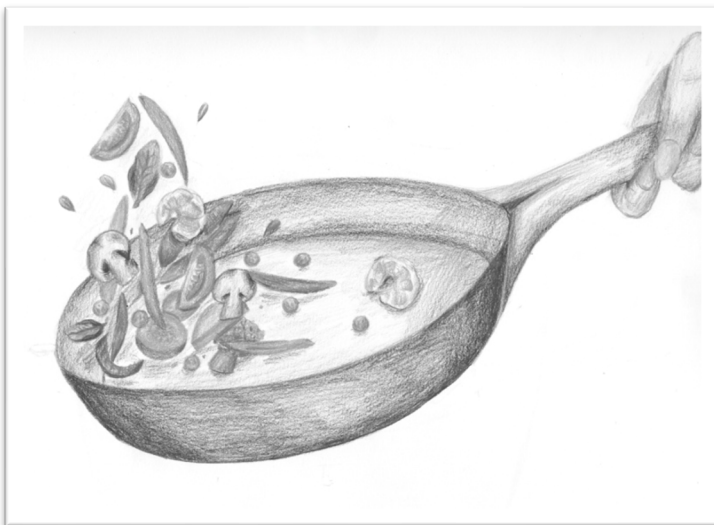
The Greasy Spoon

by Jessie Portnoy

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

SOPHIA HOPPE | Grade 8



"It is known that The Greasy Spoon just so happens to be the best diner on its corner, the best diner on its block, maybe even the best diner in town, although how long can this last? The answer is around 98 years, 98 years of running a restaurant of pure bliss, and fat. What more could you want? Traditions that have stayed in the reign for almost a century. I mean, the food should be good, am I right? So, needless to say, I am grateful to be the face of this family owned, now institution of an eatery. I don't mean to be too much of a burden, so please enjoy your meal and Happy Thanksgiving!" I said.

The crowd of customers is shrinking as the years go on. I am just happy we still have the locals hanging around. This restaurant is amazing, I just wished more people began to see this. My famous holiday speech is getting smaller and smaller every year. Am I the reason people are beginning to fade out of the holiday norms? Mr. Jones, who has been coming to our restaurant since its opening, walked up to me. There is a large smile on his face that never seems to fade.

"I am very glad you are keeping the traditions alive Lily; your grandparents were great friends of mine. If anyone, I know how much of a struggle it can be to keep this place alive sometimes."

"Well thank you Mr. Jones, I appreciate it. The holiday season really keeps us alive, so I am hoping that that tradition stays too, am I right! Please, enjoy your meal. That hamburger is not going to eat itself!"

"You have a nice sense of humor Lily, and please do me a favor. Keep serving these Holiday Pies all year round!"

"Anything for you Mr. Jones!" I replied.

The night is finally starting to slow down. Now that all of the locals were out for their early slumbers, the newbies arrived. These newbies think of the restaurant solely as a restaurant. Another place to eat on a random Wednesday night. Although to others, this Wednesday which just so happens to be the night before Thanksgiving is a fine tradition to spend at the Greasy Spoon with old friends and family. These new arrivals have no idea what the Greasy Spoon is like during the holiday season. The new customers, who will now be called the "night owls"

think of this place as a bar as they sit until the crack of closing leaving with a drink in their hand. I have to start to set some boundaries.

I began to walk over to collect some plates from a dirty table when I heard a party talking to the waitress about their food.

"Too salty."

"Do you know what flavor is?" another party said.

Usually, these comments do not bother me, as they are simple corrections I can fix in the cooking. Although, there was one comment that really caught my attention and brought me over to the table. I guess they thought the waitress was gone once they said this, but I heard laughter coming from the table and must've known someone heard it.

"I can't believe this place has been open for over 100 years; it is really not that good. The guy next door's new restaurant called Po Boys is so much better. Let's go there tomorrow."

That new restaurant that opened on our street has really begun to cause me a lot of problems. They put up flyers all around town to get people to eat there, although I cannot stand to look at them. I don't even know the person that started the restaurant. The worst part is that they are the reason my business is failing. People want a more modern restaurant rather than the old bistro we have. Po Boys has stolen all of my customers, and I despise the person who created it, even though I do not know them. I ran out of the dining room and upstairs into my bedroom. From there, I could still hear the loud chattering filling up the upstairs loft. I live here alone, and the restaurant is downstairs. It is helpful for my work schedule, as every morning all I need to do is put on my apron and walk downstairs. I finally came to my senses and closed the restaurant for the night. It is getting late anyways, and I needed to get some rest before the big Thanksgiving Day.

When I walked downstairs to close the restaurant, I got a text from Miranda. She said to meet her at Brewtown, which is the local bar in town. Brewtown is our spot for rough nights and times when we are in need of a nice casual drink. Is this really a good idea or should I stay in tonight?

"Alright, everyone out!" I exclaimed.

"Are you joking? This guy was just about to get on the table!" a night owl said.

Everyone began to boo and continued drinking their drinks. They had completely disobeyed my words and moved on as if I had said nothing. Suddenly, I hear the front door creak open and can't believe my eyes.

"Let's move it! Leave your drinks at the table, take your food with you, but get out! The Greasy Spoon is closed for the night! I hope everybody enjoyed their meals, if they even got any, but come back next week!" Miranda exclaimed.

From there on, sighs filled the room, and people were annoyed out of their minds. Although, Miranda, my best friend since kindergarten, seems to be a bit of a night owl herself, so if the others are not going to listen to her, then I don't know who they will listen to.

People started flooding out of the place; there were frowns on their faces, but according to the comment I heard earlier, they are most likely just going to the new guy's restaurant and bar across the street. Miranda came up to me and said, "I see you are stressed. We can deal with the mess later, but tonight what we really need is a big fat drink."

I mean how bad could it be? One drink, a good time, zero stress, maybe tonight will end up better than it started? We got into my car and started driving over to Brewtown. When we arrived, the parking lot was packed, and once we stepped inside the bar, there were even more people. If only my restaurant could look like this! We found a nice seat and ordered some drinks.

"And make it on the rocks please," Miranda said.

We began talking, and talking, and then talking some more. She kept on asking about me, about my love life, about my parents, so I returned the favor.

"Have you seen any cute guys lately?" I asked.

Although right as she began answering the question, I stopped listening not out of choice, but because I could not hear her. This magical man appeared right out of nowhere and completely took over my mind. He's tall, burly, muscular, young, wearing a plaid shirt, and most of all, completely my type.

"Hello? Lily? Are you there?"

"I will be right back."

With my drink in my hand, I walked over to where the handsome guy was standing. Pretending to go to the bathroom, I bumped into him and spilled my drink. This is the oldest trick in the book to get guys' attention.

"Woah there, young lady. Are you alright?" he asked.

"Well, I will be if you pay for my drink," I replied.

"Of course, it is the least I can do for you after spilling your drink. Hi, my name is Clay. Nice to meet you. And you are?"

"I am Lily. Nice to meet you, Clay."

This guy, who I just so happened to meet on a Wednesday night seems to be the man of my dreams. We began talking and our conversation never seemed to have an end. There is nothing wrong with him; he's charming, cute, funny. I don't think I can go a day of my life without talking to him. This is odd, because I never seem to fall for guys like this, literally. I have never played the old spill the drink on them trick. I look over to Miranda and she is still at the table but smiling towards me and sending me a signal to continue talking to him.

I see Miranda pay the bill and stand up to go. She still has a smile on her face, so I know she is leaving for my own good, which I appreciate. I will see her in the morning so it might be a good thing for her to leave, to give Clay and me some alone time.

"How about we get out of here?" asked Clay.

I followed him out of Brewtown, and to wherever he was taking me. We ended up going on a walk in town, grabbing some ice cream, and by the end of the night, shared our first kiss together. Being with him is magical, I feel like a princess, and he is my prince. Our conversations ended up getting deeper and deeper as the night went on, I told him everything about myself and more, and he told me everything about him. Yet, for some reason, it feels like he is keeping a secret from me. Ignored this feeling and left it alone. Before I knew it, I woke up in his bed with his shirt on me.

"Good morning Lily," he said.

Clay was walking towards me with his shirt off. He had a tray with eggs, bacon, toast, and orange juice on it. I took a deep breath in and smelled the fumes of bacon, and the smell of something burnt.

"This looks delicious, Clay," I responded with.

"And isn't the smell of burnt toast amazing? That's my favorite thing to wake up to,"

I chuckled and took a bite. It was delicious, I never knew someone could perfect the art of scrambled eggs like he does. He doesn't even need the toast. The rest of the meal is so delicious. I wonder if he cooks for fun or if it's his job. We actually never got into the descriptions of one's job, although I don't think that's so important.

"So, Lily. I have an important question to ask you. You said you were not going anywhere for Thanksgiving tonight, right?" He asked.

"Yea, so what?"

"Well, I was thinking maybe you could spend it with me and my family tonight. They live just in the next town, and I want to get to know you more, and for them to meet you,"

A smile arose on my face. I was flattered. I didn't even answer him with words but instead put the tray down on the bed and jumped on to him! That was the best news I have received in a long time. We went to bed together and turned on the parade. I could not stop thinking about tonight.

The rest of the morning, and afternoon flew by.

"Lily! Are you ready to go?"

Clay walked out of his bedroom all fresh and clean. His hair was slicked back, and it looks like he just recently got a haircut. He was wearing a gorgeous cashmere sweater, and nice linen pants to go with it. To top off the outfit, he had a fancy pair of loafers, and an expensive bottle of champagne in hand. While Clay looked all ready to go, I was still lying on the couch.

"Clay! I don't have anything to wear, and I need to impress your parents!" I exclaimed.

"Don't worry Lil, I have the perfect dress for you to wear. It is somewhere in the back of my closet, and I guess the previous owners have left it. I have been waiting for the perfect moment to see someone wear it,"

I walked out of his bathroom with the dress on, it is a perfect fit. Thankfully, I had straightened my hair yesterday so today it has a nice wave, with no frizz.

"Wow, I'm speechless. You look absolutely stunning Lily."

I did a spin, and the dress waved up and spun around. It is a warm orange with beautiful designs all around. I loved it.

"Well, are you ready to go?" I asked.

Clay took me downstairs, and we got into his car. It is a rustic jeep, a two-seater and has ducks in the windshield. The drive was only 15 minutes, as our town is small, and their house is just the next town over. I began to think to myself, for the town being so small, how is it that I have never seen Clay before? I ignored this thought and decided to just ask him later.

"And we're here!" Clay exclaimed.

He handed me the champagne bottle and said that it was from me and not him. This was a good idea because if they had been expecting a gift, it is great that I now have one. Clay is a gift in himself and does not need to give them anything besides his presence, is what he told me. I sent Miranda a text telling her that all is going great. She responded with heart eyes emoji, and that gave me just the confidence I needed for tonight. We knocked on the door and his mom immediately came out.

"Hi Clay baby! How are you?" she kissed his face and continued talking, "I have missed you so much! And who is this, lucky lady?" she asked.

"Hi! It's so nice to meet you, I am Lily," I responded.

"What a beautiful name. I am Katherine," Katherine said.

We walked inside and got a warm welcome by all of his family members. The brothers, sisters, cousins, everyone was so kind. I grabbed a drink that his father was serving, and everybody sat down at the table. We all went around the table and recited what we are grateful for. When it got to me, I knew exactly what I was going to say.

"I am grateful for my friends, my restaurant, and Clay who I have only met recently, but has felt like I have known him my whole life. And thank you Clay for introducing me to your amazing family," I said.

"That's wonderful Lily, I am so grateful to have met you, and to be surrounded by my amazing family who I love so much. I am also very grateful for the new job that I have that has really been successful for me," Clay responded with.

Is it a little bit strange that Clay has not told me about his new job? If it is so successful, then I think I would know about it, or he would at least have told me.

"Yes! How could I forget about our little entrepreneurial son? How is Po Boys going? I cannot wait to see the holiday menu you have implemented. Anyways, tell me about that later son, although I am grateful to have met Lily, you are so kind and an amazing addition to our dinner. I am grateful for my wonderful husband, and family. You all are the light of my life. To have more memories together!" Katherine lifted up her glass as she finished her toast.

I whispered to Clay, "You never told me about your restaurant."

I pushed in my chair, having everyone think I was using the restroom, although I called a cab and left immediately. Of course, how could I be so naive? My luck could never be so good to have finally met a man who I adore, who is kind, funny, smart, and ends up being my arch nemesis. The reason I have never met him is because I chose not to look at the flyers, not to look up across the street, not even to have a thought about meeting a new addition to the town. I texted Miranda to come over to my place as soon as possible. She told me she was already there waiting and is there to listen to whatever may have happened. I walked into my taxi and tears rolled down my cheeks. I will never see Clay again, and that is a promise I made to myself.

"Merry Christmas Lily! I hope you have an amazing new year. This pie, my goodness, once it is gone after the holidays, you must send me the recipe because I cannot wait another year. Who knows if I will be around in another year?" Mr. Jones said.

"You know Mr. Jones, I have taken into consideration keeping the holiday pie around year long, although I don't think I can. The Greasy Spoon may not even be around next year. I walked into an unauthorized property sign on the front door. This is because I have not made enough profit to pay for rent in my living space in the loft upstairs, which also affects the restaurant. It was nice to see you today Mr. Jones. Tell Mrs. Jones I say hi," I said.

I walked into the restaurant and closed the door. Sheer disappointment was written all over my face. I walked upstairs and lay in my bed. I looked out the window and saw Clay walk into his restaurant with a frown on his face. What could be wrong with him? He has a successful restaurant, happy customers, and good food? That is all I want—all I could possibly care for at the moment. I heard a knock at the front door downstairs, the person let themselves in and climbed upstairs. It was Miranda. She walked into my room and said,

"Girl, what you need is a Christmas miracle. Want to take a trip to Brewtown? I saw the sign on the door. Maybe we can clear our minds a bit?" she asked.

We walked downstairs in the dark restaurant that had no electricity. The food had been emptied out of the fridge for holiday break, although it would not have survived without the electricity anyways. When we walked outside, the sky was getting dark although it was only 4:00 PM. Snow began to fall on my mittens, and as I was looking down at them, someone bumped into me.

"Oh, my goodness, I am so sorry. Are you ok?"

I looked up at him and could not believe my eyes.

"Lily, is that you?" Clay asked.

"Why did you just bump into me? I never wanted to see you again," I responded.

"Lily, I don't understand. What did I do? Please, talk to me, I saw that sign on your front door. I can help if you just give me a chance. I have missed you."

I kept walking although Miranda stayed back. Clay ran up to me and stopped me from leaving him behind, again. He pulled me to a park bench and told Miranda to go, I did not have a choice besides staying with him, so that is what I did.

"I need you to believe that there is an explanation for whatever reason you walked out on Thanksgiving. I am a forgiving guy, and you have to be a forgiving girl. Just hit me, and I will answer," Clay said.

The words coming out of his mouth were sincere. His eyebrows were pointing down and his eyes wide open.

"Well Clay. You lied to me. You never told me your restaurant was Po Boys knowing that I was your competitor. You must have done that for a reason, and there is no good answer," I shared.

"Lily, the reason I did that is because I knew that if you knew that I was the owner of Pub Boys, you would have left me before you even got the chance to know me. And let me say, I had the best days of my life getting to know you, and I don't want that to stop anytime soon." He responded.

"And how exactly am I supposed to trust that?" I questioned.

"You can trust that because I came back to you, and we landed in each other's arms not by choice, but by fate. And the longer you get to know me, the longer you will know that I am falling for you and can trust me no matter what."

My mind went black. I had no idea what to do and my brain was not sending me any messages of what to say or act upon, so I let my body do the work and flow naturally. I thought I would begin to stand up and walk away, although that did not happen. My head leaned to the side and landed on Clay's shoulder. I felt a sense of rest there. He leaned on my head and we both sat in silence, knowing that I had made the correct decision.

After a while of sitting, Clay stood up. He put out his hand for me to take and I held it. He walked me into my loft and put me on my bed. Then we began talking, and talking, and talking some more. It is like I just met him all over again. Soon enough, I fell asleep while he was speaking. I heard footsteps going out of my room, and out the door. Instead of going to bed lonely as I had for the past couple weeks, I felt a sense of safety and knowing that when I wake up in the morning, everything will be ok.

I was woken up from my deep slumber by Christmas lights shining in my eye. Rudolph was lit up with a shiny bright nose, and Santa was blown up flying in the air. I look outside of my window, and all of these decorations are coming from Po Boys. I walked downstairs to get my daily coffee, and there he was, standing outside of my door with a bouquet of roses.

"Sorry I left so abruptly last night, I needed to find a flower shop still open to give to you," Clay said.

I looked at the door, and the unauthorized sign was gone. How could that be, I did not touch it?

"About that," Clay said, "I have all of that under control. Merry Christmas, Lily."

"What do you mean?"

"I spoke to your landlord, and I purchased The Greasy Spoon, so I can give it back to you. You serve amazing foods, and hold lifelong traditions, none of those things can ever go to waste."

"Clay, no you can't. This is too much," I began tearing up.

"To be honest Lily, Po Boys has not been doing too well. The only profit and customers we get are what you call the night owls. Since we have a large bar, everybody comes after their meals from wherever else they ate and just hang out. So, I was thinking, if I reinstated your restaurant, then maybe we can work together. You serve the food; I serve the drinks. It will be the best of both worlds."

This is amazing, now I get to keep my family's restaurant, and be with the man I love most. This is the Christmas miracle that I have been waiting for.

"Clay! Clay! This is amazing!" I cried.

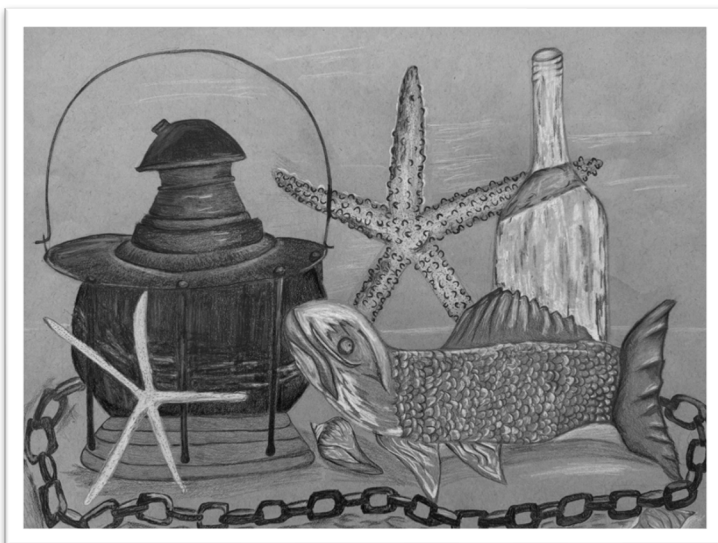
I jumped onto Clay, and he spun me around. Finally, Christmas Eve where I am not alone, I have the company of someone I love and have the restaurant back! If this is not the best present ever, then I do not know what is. I can finally sit down and sip my eggnog with my head resting on Clay's shoulder, enjoying all of the Christmas lights outside of my window. This is the way Christmas should be every year, and this will be the first of many.

The Voice of the Depths

by Jude Robinson

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon



My father's chatter normally would've reverberated around a cavern as large as this, if it hadn't been for the clutter. Once concealed wires and scraps of metal were among the discarded items I could make out shining in the light of the fire-filled lamps.

"Viv! This is important!" My father's sharp voice cut through my thoughts like a knife would cut through a piece of fabric. I *had* been attempting to absorb every detail of the continent we once called home, even if I hadn't even known about this specific part prior to a couple days ago.

"Sorry, I'm trying to," I muttered, tearing my eyes away from a broken screen, focusing on the back of his head. I'd

never managed to fully grasp why being deprived of technology was such a big deal. Although my parents had lived during the time when technology was easily accessible, I had not. It's been forty years since the Technology Ban of 2109 had been put into effect. Home raids had still been going on when she was born, the government forcibly searching through homes, confiscating any electronics they'd deemed too advanced for the public use. But throughout the last fifteen years they'd steadily become unheard of, no one spoke of them, no one wrote about them. They'd been left to get erased by time itself, along with what had been taken from us, and left for the government to handle.

I'd been left to question my dad's sudden urgency to escape, and why he'd spent so much effort crafting a submarine so we could all leave. Maybe he'd been planning this for years, concealing his true feelings, even to his own daughter. I mean, you can only smuggle so much at a time. Whatever had fueled him to take his daughter along with several friends to escape had to be pretty bad.

Thankfully, we'd already walked most of the way towards the submarine, but the distance was still enough to make my feet ache. By the time we'd arrived I was glad to hand my bags off, stretching for a moment before examining the large chunk of metal. It had been painted over in a blue that couldn't seem to stay the same shade depending on how the light hit it, the less light the darker it seemed, when I aimed my lamp's light at it, the color faded into a lighter aquamarine. Its surface still felt smooth underneath my hand, warmer than expected, the metal underneath covered by whatever was coating it.

"Viv," my dad's voice interrupted my thoughts, *again*, "hurry up and get in here, we need to get going."

"Okay, okay!" His demeanor had been off the past couple of days. I figured he was just irascible from the stress of planning such a complicated escape. It was like his work, just illegal.

The descent into the submarine was simple, the cool metal bars a relief against my sweaty palms, my hands fogging the area around them. By the time my dad was down with me, the hatch closed and all, they were already gone, as if I was never there.

My eyes drifted over the interior, clean and large. In my history class when we had learned about WWII, we'd been taught that submarines had been small, cramped, and difficult to move around, with steering wheels and levers all over the place. The contrast over the past seventy years was shocking. She'd doubted that she'd have the ability to stand at full height, but now she was left with several inches of room.

Her father interrupted her silence. "Everyone else has found themselves a room, go find the last vacant one," his tone was brusque, leaving little room for arguing.

I shuffled down the hallway, most doors were closed, muffled rustling could be heard from behind them, nonetheless. One at the end was left with its door ajar, allowing me to slide in. It felt wrong to touch anything, as if the whole structure was fragile. The bed was pushed into a far corner, one lamp placed next to it while the other sat by a chair next to the small window letting light in.

My stomach dropped when the submarine did, causing me to stumble into the chair. I clutched the armrest, my knuckles turning white as my nails dug into the fabric beneath them. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest as I turned my attention to the window.

I'd heard people talk about the horrible condition our planet had once been in, the plastic flooding bodies of water all over, big and small. I'd been taught about the loss of numerous species, how fragile the food web had once been, the thick air and immense heat, terrifying hurricanes destroying millions of people's homes. That was why the Technology Ban of 2109 exists. According to the government, our planet was making a comeback, and now I was to go with my father, but what was the point of all of this? What was he lacking? I'm able to test that claim out.

The water seemed to be clear. Although it was dark, I assumed that this was still part of the flooded path that led into the main cave where we'd come from. After a couple minutes of darkness the submarine emerged, my eyes stung at the sudden exposure to the sunlight infiltrating the water. My suspicions had been proven correct, I could see out into the sea for miles, at least I assumed it was miles. Unfortunately, I was struggling to find any sort of wildlife, no fish, octopi, dolphins, sharks, orcas, anything! I'd learnt about all these creatures in the past, although I've seen them in zoos due to field trips and simple outings, I'd never seen any out in the wild. Of course, that was illegal. Leaving city limits could prevent the animals from recovering. But now, I was questioning if there were any out here at all.

As we descended, my anxiety faded, huge coral reefs came into view and, slowly, fish did too. Skeletons, bleached of their color, were there, slowly being taken over by the brighter, new coral. There'd been numerous projects speeding up coral's comeback, and evidently, they'd worked exceptionally well. Schools of fish swam past, drifting through the water and disappearing, almost like smudged chalk, all the colors there for a moment of focus before vanishing into water, as if it hadn't been there at all.

As we continued our descent, my doubt bubbled up inside of me. The darkness of the ocean was unwelcoming as the small metal cabin I'd been offered. I felt vomit rising up in my throat as I stumbled towards the lamp, turning it on before the room could fall into total darkness.

I peeked back out into the empty hallway. Realizing my bag had been placed next to my door I shoved it open further, so the gap was big enough for me to pull the duffle into my room. I grasped the straps, ignoring the discomfort as I dragged it inside. Without a thought I scrambled to find the zipper, yanking it down the bag before immediately burying my hand in the clothing. I felt around until I got to the bottom, my heart dropping when I felt the cool metal floor of the submarine behind the thin pink fabric. With difficulty I felt around more, hoping the small book I was looking for had been tossed around. The once perfectly folded clothing was now a mess, by the time I gave up, wrinkled and crushed against the sides of my bag. My heart pounded in my chest as I pushed myself off of my knees, kicking the bag. A few shirts spilled out as I stared at the mess, groaning in frustration. I'd been intending to continue recording everything in my journal. Despite having been gifted to me only a few years prior, it was probably one of my most valuable possessions. It'd stick out like a sore thumb in my old room, the pretty green journal contrasted against the now bare room, that had been stripped of everything, left boring and grey. I massaged my temples, trying to calm myself down. Although I'd tracked and written about everyone leaving, we'd be far gone before anyone attempted to go after us.

I wasn't sure how long I stood there, lost in thought about my precious journal, but it was enough for me to talk down, but only for a moment. The ceiling lights in my cabin turned on, flashing red before a high-pitched siren went off. My hands flew to my ears, pressing down on them as if it would block out the noise. My headache had returned within an instant, the sound of my pounding heart seemed to almost drown out the blaring as I sprinted out my room, the door still being propped open. Banging on the door across from mine I couldn't tell if whoever was inside could even hear me over the commotion. The door refused to open, so I tried the next one, and so on, each closed door locked tight.

Eventually I gave up, sprinting down the hallway and into the control room. At least I could try and help there. I could see the silhouette of my dad, illuminated by the glare of the red lights.

"Dad!" I shouted, waiting for him to acknowledge my presence, "is there any way I can help??" I walked up behind him, peering over his shoulder. The large screen had a box containing large red letters that read 'WARNING! PRESSURE LIMIT! PULL UP NOW!!!'

I watched my dad ignore the warning, continuing to guide the machine lower. “Dad? What are you doing? Stop!”

I shoved him, but he refused to budge, despite being such a lean man his stiff body was oddly heavy. I tried again, putting more of my weight into the second attempt, my eyes wide as I watched his body shift... or a *part* of his body. My stomach dropped as I watched his head tilt, a metallic clang echoing throughout the room as it collided with the floor. A dent was left as it rolled away, carried by the momentum I’d given it. I blinked a couple times and attempted to process what had just happened, but no matter how much I tried to deny this reality, I was left with the headless figure in front of me and the dent in the floor.

The thing in front of me, which was clearly not my dad, was now my height without his head on. Peering into his neck, the only thing I saw was broken wires, looking past the knotted mess of those there were gears in this thing’s body, spinning silently. My own ‘gears’ in my brain slowly began spinning as I connected the pieces.

Someone had found out.

She didn’t know how, maybe her father had slipped up, maybe someone was just *that* smart, maybe he hadn’t been as inconspicuous as he’d thought. But only high up members closely associated with the government would be able to get their hands on something so advanced, nonetheless have the power to send it out for us and replace my father with it.

The loud beeping from the sirens brought me back to reality, the submarine was still getting lower and lower, and I could hear the metal on the outside crunching. I scrambled to grab onto the lever, trying to push it the opposite direction. A teenage girl’s strength is not made to compete with a robot’s, and despite my effort to prevent the unescapable, it was no use. My struggle continued, the lights flickering along with any hope I had. I felt terrible, everyone in their rooms panicking, wondering what was going on and unable to get out. The helplessness was suffocating all of us, like a blanket tightening around our necks, sucking out all the air we had left in us.

Crunch!

It only took a millisecond for all of us to disappear. Gone within the blink of an eye. All our memories, our things, our actions. Now it would all be forgotten, erased from history, all that was left of us was now a metallic pancake sinking to the bottom of the ocean.

Not all hope had evanesced, though. There was my diary, which I’d left on my bed, or dresser - somewhere in my room I knew it was there. Sooner or later, someone would go looking, they’d find it, maybe not do much with it, but it’d still be with them. It’ll still be proof of my existence which my government could not erase. Someone could go looking and uncover the unethical procedures and choices our society makes. Maybe one day we’ll realize what was truly wrong with our society. Silencing voices instead of listening, and keeping minds closed would end. Expression is a privilege—one I hope that all people will one day have in this world of ours.

Radix Purpura

by Isabella Rodriguez

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

“Hallo Vater!” Dorian and Margaret exclaimed as they quickly placed their satchels on the grubby cabin floor.

They had just come back from school and were filled with excitement to see me since I had just come back from work after two days. I worked at a shoe repair that sometimes operated the whole day, making me stay there for quite a while. Occasionally, when allowed, I made shoes for my children, and it saved me and my wife, Beatrice, a lot of money, considering how expensive things were those days. Although Beatrice and I worked incredibly hard, we were really low on money. Even so, my kids were incredibly grateful for everything they had.

Dorian was an intuitive nine-year-old who loved writing, and Margaret was a sweet seven-year-old girl who wished to be a baker when she grew up. They went to a small school on Silver Street, in which they learned all sorts of things like botany, astrology, and history.

My family and I live in the Black Forest in Germany. It is a mystical place full of wonder, but there are also areas in town where one can't linger into. The forest especially, is full of creatures of all sorts, from giants to gnomes.

"Dorian, Margaret," I called, "it is time to go to sleep, kinder."

As they went to sleep, I went outside, thinking I heard the usual creak of the mailbox. This time, the mailman wasn't there, but just a gust of wind. Walking towards the mailbox, a stench like no other lingered into my nose. It was no other than the smell of a goblin, who were feared in all the corners of the Black Forest.

I looked down the road and thought I saw a shadow sweep past the last house of Potter Street.

Hurriedly, I looked into the mailbox, in which I found a black envelope with worn out edges and a big red stamp in the center. I turned it around and the only thing I found were a few scratches.

Going back inside the house, I sat down at the kitchen table. I slowly opened the envelope as if there was a treasure inside. Inside, there was a letter that said:

Dear Asmodeus,

We hear that you have quite the passion for nature. This is a request to retrieve a whole sack of Radix Purpura in three whole days, starting now. Your reward, which is \$10,000 will be presented to you once you leave the Radix Purpura outside of your house. If you don't accept this task, however, a punishment will be served when you least expect it. No questions may be asked.

- Malcus

I sat there in utter shock, not knowing what to think. I was practically being forced to go on this adventure, since there would be consequences if I didn't, though at the same time, it would benefit my family greatly. \$10,000 was more than we could ever imagine having.

I had been an explorer long ago, studying plants that I found in the Black Forest. The reason that I had quit this passion of mine was because I wanted to be closer to my children and my wife. I hold many memories of my trips close to my heart, since they were full of thrilling moments. The question was, how did the goblins know this?

Through much debating, I finally decided I had no choice. I grabbed a pencil and paper and wrote:

Beatrice, I will be back in a few days. Don't worry, everything is fine, simply a work task I have to get to.

I made sure to place the letter into a bag that I planned to take so that Beatrice wouldn't worry if she found it. I also packed some food and a few tools that I might need, such as a Swiss knife and medicine.

I walked out the door and looked back, questioning my decision. Then, I turned around and looked forwards, reminding myself that I knew what I was doing.

I treaded onwards into my journey, heading towards the forest, which was several miles away. I could see the tall pine trees and the mountains towering over the little town of Black Forest. After walking for what seemed like hours, I was able to smell the sweet scent of the whimsical flowers that signify the beginning of the forest path. The trees surrounded me, and a feeling of vulnerability wrapped around me. Things were different now; I wasn't the explorer I had been before.

It was the afternoon, and I had to make the best of my time for it not to get dark before finding shelter, so I rushed down the path.

Radix Purpura was a plant found inside the root of Old John. Old John was the biggest tree of the whole Black Forest, and it was located in the center, giving me a sense of where to go.

While I was walking, I heard a strange noise, like the rush of water. Then, the trees started clearing, allowing me to see a huge river. Great, another obstacle slowing me down, I thought.

I decided to put my hand into the water, and when doing so, a shiver crawled up my spine, not just because of how cold the water was, but because of a noise I thought I heard behind a few shrubs.

I decided not to get too involved, and submerged my entire body into the water, ignoring the desire to get out immediately.

The current was quite strong, but I pushed against it, nearly reaching the end until a hand grabbed me and pushed me deep into the waters of the river. A feeling that I can't put into words came over me, and I had frozen in terror. All survival instincts were gone, and I let myself be dragged into the depths of the icy water.

I held my breath for as long as I could, but I was starting to reach my limits. The fogginess was starting to dissipate, and I could see clearer. Suddenly, I heard a whisper in my ear. A family of hundreds of fish swam past me, and it felt as if they were looking right into my soul.

"Breathe," they told me. "Don't be scared."

I slowly breathed in and out and found that I was still conscious. It was the strangest feeling, completely different from what I was used to.

Out of nowhere, a beautiful sea creature appeared right before my eyes. She was half woman half serpent, with her tail a dark shade of emerald green. She had sharp teeth and a serpent's tongue, wavy hair that flowed perfectly with the water. She began surrounding me with menacing eyes, and she examined me thoroughly.

"Yes, you will do just fine. But the jewels...sksksksk..., no jewels do you not?" she said, almost angry.

I hadn't the faintest idea what she was talking about, so I remained silent. She tied my hand with a rope that seemed to be made out of algae and pulled me.

She halted at an open area that had a huge throne made of a variety of rocks, including moonstone and aquamarine. To top it off, the entire throne was encrusted with sapphires.

Another one of the sea creatures was sitting at the throne, and she had a crown on her head.

"When will he be sacrificed your majesty?" the sea creature that had tied me up asked.

"Soon, very soon. They are getting everything ready for Solomon, but soon, we will be able to rest," said the sea creature on the throne.

Sacrificed?! At that moment, I began squirming around like a worm, attempting to free myself from the rope that had been tied to me. It seemed like it was no use. The rope was far too tight.

"What are you going to do to me?" I shouted, horrified.

"Sksksksk...don't worry about that darling. It will be quick. You won't feel a thing. Solomon is not known for torturing his prey. You see, every year, we have to give Solomon one sacrifice, so he doesn't kill us all. This year, that sacrifice is you," she said sweetly.

The news petrified me, so I knew I had to quickly think of something before I got turned into food.

The serpent-like creature took me to an area which seemed to be a cliff, and when I looked down, I saw a huge snake-like shadow. At this moment, I knew it was Solomon. It was impossible to stare into his eyes because they were like endless pools of darkness.

Suddenly, I got a spark of hope. I had packed a Swiss knife for the trip, and it was still in the bag that I carried around my waist. All I had to do was grab it with the hand that was free and cut the algae rope.

Slowly, I reached out for the knife. Once my hand touched it, I rapidly brought it back up and cut the rope.

The sea creature hadn't seen me, so I gently placed the knife back in the bag and pretended as if my hand were still tied. I looked at my surroundings to see if there was anything that could help me escape the deep waters.

My eyes fixed on a thick rope that looked like it was leading up and onto the surface of the water.

While the sea creature looked away, I made a dash for it and swam as fast as I could. My hand grabbed onto the rope, but I didn't see anyone coming up close behind me. Confused, I looked back to see the sea creature had smiled at me, almost laughing. I looked down, realizing why she was smiling. Solomon was gliding through the water, coming right at me. I used all my strength, pulling up on the rope, one hand after the other.

I kept getting closer and closer to the surface, but Solomon was following right behind.

With a surprise, I realized that I couldn't breathe anymore. I reached the surface, gasping for air. As I was climbing up to the shore, I saw Solomon breaking the surface of the water by surging upwards, mouth open. He had missed me by a second.

In relief, I closed my eyes, noticing how exhausted I was. Then, my eyes became droopy, and everything became dark.

I woke up in a comfy bed, and I started thinking that the adventure that I had just had was a dream, but then I realized that I was not in *my* bed, but in someone else's. I looked up and became aware of my surroundings, realizing that I was in a tent.

When I exited the tent, it was already the next morning, meaning I had slept through the whole night.

A lady with a friendly smile, blonde hair, freckles, and brown eyes walked up to me.

"Greetings! My name is Bethany, and earlier me and my friends had noticed that you were going into the river, but we have been studying it for years, and we know all about the dangers. The reason why we dropped in a rope is because we hoped we could save you," she said.

"I could never thank you enough," I exclaimed, "they were going to have me as a sacrifice! I am on a journey to find an ingredient in the forest. Could you help me by chance?"

"Well, the pleasure is all ours," she said happily, "We have many books in our library about the plants and creatures in the forest, so you may take a look.

I walked towards the library, which appeared to be a small cabin. When I opened the door, I saw rows and rows of bookshelves. I walked over to the vegetation section and opened a book that talked about the plants in the Black Forest.

The pages were worn out, but the writing was in perfect state, with gold lettering that seemed to glow. While skipping through the pages, I found what I was looking for. The page was incredibly detailed, with a big tree in the center, its roots shining with a purple color. The title read: *Radix Purpura*, just what I had been looking for. As I kept reading, I found some words that were written with a silver ink and in small lettering, and it seemed to be a riddle:

*Across the river, one may go,
Up the Mountain of the Lost Soul,
Play the sorrow tune,
Hypnotize and get past the giants,
And into the heart, Radix Purpura*

As I read, I realized that these were instructions on how to continue my journey. I had already managed to cross the river, and now, I had to go up the mountain of the lost souls.

I went outside to give me farewells to Bethany and her friends. Before I left Bethany gave me a small pouch with a flute, a bottle with a strange gold liquid, and a clock.

"These aren't weapons, and they don't seem like much, but they will serve a great purpose in the future. The mountain that you are looking for is that one," she told me, pointing north.

"It is called the Mountain of the Lost Soul because a girl named Isabel lived with her mother in a small house by that exact mountain, when one day, Isabel went missing. No one knows what happened to her, and she was never found. Her mother could not get over this tragedy, and sometimes, people say that they still hear her cries of sadness. Now, her soul lives in the mountain, and whenever anyone tries to climb up, there will be hands trying to grab you. It is said that the hands belong to Isabel's mother, who still looks for her daughter today," she said.

The story gave me chills, and I became a lot more terrified to move on with my journey, but I kept on moving.

I arrived at the bottom of the mountain and kept marching onwards. Halfway, a hand came out of the mountain and attempted to grab me, but I dodged it. I hurried to reach the top, but when I nearly got there, a hand managed to grab me by the leg. I knew I had to act quickly, so I rushed to get the pouch and take out the items inside of it. I was losing blood circulation by the second, so I played a sorrow tune on the flute, just like it had said in the riddle.

I felt the grip loosening from my leg, and once I was free, I climbed up as fast as I could.

Once I reached the top of the mountain, I crumpled to the floor. Something on my left ankle was hurting. I looked down and saw that my ankle was swollen, and it was developing a sickly green color to it. A poisonous plant must have infected it, but the problem was that without knowing what plant, I didn't know how to cure it.

When I looked up, I saw ten giants, all sleeping. I slowly crept up despite the pain and tried to walk forwards. The giants started waking up, and some even started punching their fists to the ground in hopes of crushing me. I ran across the grass plain as fast as I could, but it was too late.

One of the giants grabbed me. I took the clock out of the pouch that Bethany had given me, and although I had never tried this before, I waved the clock in front of the giant's eyes in a repetitive motion to hypnotize the creature. The giant looked at the clock, almost in a daze, and went back to sleep, dropping me to the ground.

I took my chances and decided to run into the trees that were just a few feet away. When I successfully made it across, I fell to the ground. My ankle was incredibly swollen, and I was losing my ability to walk. I remembered the gold liquid that was in the pouch and took it out. The liquid swam inside the tiny glass bottle, and after opening it and applying it to my ankle, the infection started diminishing, until a small scar was left.

With excitement, I looked up to see Old John, the heart of the Black Forest. I looked at the rest of the surroundings, and saw strange figures, stone statues of people around the tree. I got up and walked towards the tree.

The urge to look up overcame me, and when looking up at the tree, I saw my greatest fear. The image of my family suffering felt incredibly real. My children were sick and had no home.

Suddenly, I felt my feet turn into stone. I looked at the other statues beside me and the realization dawned upon me. They had all been here before me, but when looking up to see their fear, they weren't able to look away.

I ripped my horrible fear out of my mind, because I knew that if I kept thinking of it, I would have ended up like the rest. As my feet started to unfreeze, I ran to the bottom of the tree. I bent down and cut a part of the root, which had a mesmerizing purple color. After putting it in a sack, I heard a voice coming from the tree.

A spider spirals from the tree, "Good day! My name is Eleanor, and I am the spider that lives in this tree. Let me tell you, I am baffled, amazed, bewildered...! You have been the only person to pass this test which means that I will grant you one wish... and one wish only. Tell me Asmodeus, what do you wish for?" the spider asked with a mysterious smile.

"My wish is to go back home," I exclaimed desperately.

I felt wind rushing past my ears, and before I knew it, everything became black. A strange feeling rushed into my head, almost as if I was time travelling. After a few seconds, I found myself at the door of my home on Potter Street.

I left the sack with the Radix Purpura outside and I ran into my house and found my children and Beatrice sitting at the kitchen table with worried looks on their faces. When they saw me, they ran to give me a hug.

"We called your work, and when they told us you weren't there, we were worried sick," Beatrice said.

I looked at them all and smiled. Truly what mainly mattered to me was that they were safe and healthy.

I turned around to hear a noise outside, and when I looked out the window, I saw a cloaked figure grabbing the Radix Purpura I had worked so hard for. In exchange the figure replaced it with another sack, most likely with my reward.

"Well, this morning I heard a noise outside and..."

Articles of Oppression

by Gabriella Sagebien

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

January 10, 1959

It's crisp this morning. School is canceled again. Castro took over the Havana Vieja high school, and our neighborhood is going through intense home searches. Maria told me some of Castro's men came into her cousin's house the other day and demanded their valuables. Everything is happening so fast. Isn't Castro's Communism supposed to be about sharing and equality? Since I have so much free time, I should use the books at the library to look at what communism does in other countries. I want to learn more about our new reality.

In other news, Carlos got into La Universidad de la Habana! It's his dream school. I'm so proud of him. He can't wait to be a college student. I hope we can leave our houses soon so I can see my friends again. I talk to them on the landline, but it's not the same. Plus, Sophia says she has big news about her new boy—

"Carmen!" Jeanine, Carmen's mother, shouted from the kitchen. "Dinner is ready; we would love it if you came down and sat with us instead of writing in that stupid journal."

"Si, Mami. I am coming!"

Carmen's mother, Jeanine Batista was the definition of a small woman with a big voice. She was never afraid to speak her mind. She was also somewhat popular around *Havana Vieja*. Her long, brown hair, thin, pointed nose, and slim lips can be seen everywhere, all the time. Carmen surely inherited her mother's long hair, but her full lips and tan skin tone came from her father, Rene. Ever since Carmen was a little girl, they had been compared

looks wise. Rene Batista was a tall, burly man who seemed like a giant compared to Jeanine. However, he was more like a quiet, lovable teddy bear. Although Carmen looks like her dad, she behaves exactly like her mother. She was never afraid to speak her mind or stand up for what she believes in. The one thing the whole family has in common was their intellect. Carlos was graduating at the top of his class, and Carmen had been on the honor roll since she knew what the honor roll was.

"Carmen, get down here right now!" You cannot miss dinner with your family until you are at least seventeen. I don't think that journal can hug you back," Jeanine called.

"Mami, I'm coming right now!"

Once Carmen got downstairs, she found herself in her designated seat with a big plate of *arroz con pollo* and salad. That was the other thing: her mother was an amazing cook. Family dinner was a sacred time for Carmen and the others. They each loved listening to each other's problems and daily events.

"So, Carlos, what do you think you're going to major in?"

"I want to work in mechanical engineering because there are so many job opportunities in the US. I want to live in a place without the constant struggle of war and revolt."

"I think that's wonderful, but don't forget your parents here in Havana!" Rene chimed in.

The whole family laughed and agreed. Now was the time Carmen would usually say something, but tonight, she was keeping to herself, too immersed in thought to even talk. Of course, her mother picked up on this unusual silence.

"Carmen, what's on your mind?" Jeanine asked.

"Nothing, I'm just tired. I love you, but can I please go back upstairs?" Carmen responded.

Jeanine nodded her head, and Carmen put away her plate and retired to her room. She spent the rest of the night pacing her room and tossing and turning in her bed.

"What is going to happen to our country? Will I be able to go to school again? Will I get my freedom back?" Carmen thought to herself.

This kind of question weighs heavy on the mind, especially for a fifteen-year-old girl. She finally fell asleep and gave her ever-churning mind a break.

...

The next morning, Carmen woke up at around 7:00 a.m. (which was very out of character for her) and popped straight out of bed, resolved to go to her library to learn more about communism, dictatorship, and totalitarianism. She biked to the Havana Vieja Public Library. She walked in and got the familiar rush from the scent of books and the air of knowledge. She dashed straight to the politics section, where she encountered her first surprise. The section seemed to be taped off, and a guard was watching the whole section with an eagle eye. She politely asked him if she could come in the section, but he retorted with a firm answer,

"No, the government people said no one should come in here until the unwanted books are removed."

"Ok I guess, I'll look somewhere else," Carmen responded with a fake smile covering up a scowl.

If there was one thing Carmen Batista hated most, it was the word no. Especially when it had to do with learning. However, the other trait Carmen received from her mom was her stubbornness. So, Carmen waited until the guards changed shifts and ran in to grab her desired books. After all, once she got an idea in her head, it would not go away until she did something about it. Carmen biked straight home and got to reading her pile of books.

Page after page, Carmen learned more about Soviet Russia, totalitarianism, communism, Naziism, and fascism. She even found an old copy of *1984*, which she was surprised to see because her teacher had told her it was newly banned in her country. She was immersed in these worlds of politics and decided to write an article detailing what the forms of government were and what each had done in other countries. After all, she did have a lot of free time.

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January 14, 1959

I have read eight books in the last three days! Who knew depressing case studies and politics would be so interesting? Somehow, I've also written a twenty-page article about Castro, Communism, and what that might mean for our country. I read about Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini, and their respective governments. They were in different countries, yet their perceived ideal government failed horribly. The citizens of those countries living under communism and totalitarianism suffered. Even World War Two was started essentially by Hitler's radical ideas. People deserve to know about what might happen here in Cuba. What if that happens to us? I think I'm a little scared. I never thought I would utter those words. What am I going to do? Mami was right though; I put my mind to something, and I did it. I think I will post the article around town and give it to my friends and family. Everyone

deserves to be aware of what is going on around them. I guess all the annoying talk from my school teachers is true, knowledge is power!

So, just like she said she would, Carmen went around town educating her neighbors and giving them copies of her paper. She hoped people would read them so they could know about the government like her. After a full day of doing this, Carmen returned home, having fulfilled her goal. Just then, there was a knock at the door.

"Ughh Carlos! How are you going to live at college when you cannot even remember your keys," Carmen said to herself.

She walked downstairs and opened the front door to a shocking sight: four men in green military uniforms standing right there in front of her. They greeted her and asked to come inside. Carmen had no idea what to do, but she knew she could not say no, so she obliged. The men came in and one of them promptly sat in her chair, which angered her. The men began talking to her about her most recent writing.

"How do they already know about it? It hasn't even been on the streets for more than three hours," Carmen asked herself.

The men asked her why she wrote the article and why she thought it was a good idea to defy the government.

"Oh, I didn't know some paper was defying the government. I'm sorry," Carmen said flatly.

"You try something like this again, and well, you've read about what happens. I don't care if you're fifteen or fifty, punishment is the same," The guard that sat in her seat said.

"Ok. Thank you. You can see yourself out now," Carmen said with an undertone of irritation.

A couple of minutes had passed, and the men had left, but what they said did not leave Carmen's thoughts. From what Carmen had read, the punishments of her new government could be arrest, forced labor, jailing, or even death. Anyone who defied the communist "Party" could be subject to this. Carmen did not think her small words would have this much power and be seen as a threat to the government.

Later that night, at dinner, Carmen was quiet once again. She had not told her parents about her encounter with the soldiers. For the first time, Carmen was scared of the repercussions of her actions. Carmen was a stubborn, resilient, and brave girl whose life was just threatened. This was surely a new feeling. And so, Carmen excused herself to her room, much to her parent's concern.

While Jeanine and Rene were deliberating on Carmen's recent actions, Carmen was busy pacing her room. Suddenly it felt as if the walls were closing in on her. The grip of the words of the soldiers wrapped around her neck, choking her freedom away one breath at a time. But, no! Her whole life Carmen was described as strong-willed and independent. Her fear of losing the person she was, was greater than the fear of death itself. No foul dictator and his lackeys would ever take that away from her. After all, the worst of situations cannot, and would not break her spirit.

And so, against all odds, Carmen kept writing. With the newfound courage, nothing was stopping her. She kept writing article after article. Reading book after book. The Soviet Union, China, Nazism, capitalism, any book she could get her hands on in every library she could access, torn apart by her insatiable appetite to learn. In addition to learning, Carmen made sure she was teaching as well. Over the next month, Carmen took it upon herself to educate anyone she knew. This meant her parents, cousins, and friends got an unexpected political lesson. However, Carmen's passion for disseminating knowledge was not shared by anyone else, except her mother Jeanine of course.

She said, "Passion is not something that can fall away easily, especially for those like us."

At this point, Carmen still had not told her family about her encounter with the soldiers. It was still weighing heavy on her mind, but as she had previously resolved to do she kept going.

...

February 17, 1959

It has been a little more than a month since I have filled my head with this knowledge of politics. It feels like a bit too much for a little blonde girl of only fifteen, but someone in this world has to be the one to spread this knowledge I possess. I have not written here because I have been SO busy. School is still closed, and so are the libraries. At least people all over Havana Vieja are starting to see the light about Castro. With all of my rambling and their experience with the government soldiers in their own homes, they are seeing that he may not be the best for Cuba. I feel sort of fulfilled now. I did my part in this fight against Castro. I am going to keep going until someone forces me to stop-

"Carmen, can you please come get the door? It's urgent!" Carlos called from the yard.

"What now?" Carmen muttered to herself, "did he forget those keys again?"

So, Carmen hurriedly ran down the stairs so she could return to her diary as quickly as possible. She wanted to get all of her thoughts on paper. She opened the beautiful, blue door she had known her whole life to the most horrifying image even her worst nightmare could not even dream up: It was her brother and two big, burly men wearing eerily familiar green uniforms with matching green caps that barely showed their soulless eyes. Most disturbingly, the taller of the pair held an army-issued M107 semi-automatic to her brother's temple.

At that moment, everything fell away. School, her friends, her crusade against Castro, and even her family when she saw that look on her brother's face. It was as if Carlos was just a shell of the person he used to be. Carmen was pleading with the men, but no words came out. It felt as if a nuclear bomb went off all around her, or it was like she was floating in space on a planet far, far away. The one not holding the gun said,

"We gave you a warning. Why didn't you stop?"

"I tried," Carlos said, holding back tears.

And boom. He was gone. Her eighteen-year-old brilliant brother was gone, in the blink of an eye. Her companion her whole life, was dead. At that point, she was not even thinking that it was her fault, but that would come later. For now, Carmen was yanked back into reality by the quiet, yet deafening sound of the cock of the gun. Once again, there was no sound to be had. With no protest, they grabbed her arm, touched the gun to the back of her head, and walked her out to their truck, right over Carlos.

It was horrible. Carmen was a dead girl walking. In a comatose state, yet alive. She was numb with grief. It was as if a massive tsunami had rushed over her and swallowed her very being. How could this happen? Why would they do this to her? Why Carlos, and not her?

Carmen was crying, but there were no tears. The smart, bubbly girl was dead. Fifteen years of life, erased. Her new life had begun at that very moment. Carmen wasn't even conscious that the army men essentially kidnapped her. Her barely conscious state fell to the depths of unconsciousness when she fainted and ultimately woke up in a new place, with her hands tied behind her, and the soldier who shot her brother sitting right across from her, a murderer.

Days it felt like she sat there in that cold metal chair, in that reinforced concrete room, sitting no more than two feet away from a killer. In reality, it was only about 15 minutes before the soldier asked her the first question:

"What is your problem?"

"What do you mean?" Carmen said sheepishly.

"I mean you are a direct threat to Castro and our government"

"How can that be so, all I did was talk?" Carmen responded to the soldier's claims.

"Precisely. We told you not to talk, and you spoke. In this world, you follow our rules, you think the way Castro has so graciously taught us to think, or you will be subject to severe punishment. But, what I don't understand is why you did it. You are just a girl. You have a whole life of cooking, cleaning, raising kids, and needlepoint left to do. You didn't have to stick your neck out. Why, you stupid little girl?" The soldier said in his blank, lifeless voice.

"Exactly, that is why I spoke out. My little stupid voice clearly made a massive impact, or you wouldn't be here, with a fifteen-year-old girl handcuffed to a metal table made for convicts and murderers. I am neither, you are," Carmen retorted with the last argument she could muster.

This must have "emasculated" the soldier because he tightened Carmen's restraints and left her alone in the interrogation room. She did not fight back. She was numb.

...

February 24, 1959

My house is empty. My home is empty. Carlos is gone. My parents are gone. The furnishings are gone. Soldiers must have emptied the house last week while I was in prison interrogation. The only thing left in the home is my journal. They ripped all the pages out, probably to send a message. I'm writing on the back cover. Interrogation was just me sitting in a concrete room for a week. Perhaps for the best so I could regroup my thoughts. Carlos is dead and it's all my fault. This was never supposed to go bigger than my neighborhood, but apparently, my article has been circulating all around Cuba. I made an impact, but at what cost? My brother is dead, my parents probably are too. I have caused so much pain. Why didn't I listen? Why am I so stubborn?

My parents are gone? Where did they go? What am I going to do? I know Mami always kept all our valuables under a loose floorboard in their room. Hopefully, there is some money left. I'll pack a small bag and try to leave here. There's nothing left for me in Cuba. I guess I'll try to find the rest of my family and friends to say goodbye. I should do this now before the soldiers have second thoughts of letting me go. Maybe the next time I

write here I'll be in America. My uncle lives in Miami. I might be able to find him and live with him. Maybe my parents are even there.

Sure enough, Carmen found fifty-five dollars under the floorboard. Her passport was the only one there. Her parents' passports were missing. She opened her passport and found a note. It was her mother's neat cursive handwriting. It read:

Carmen,

If you find this, please read it carefully. We must have made it to Miami. We made it on a plane, and we are with your uncle. When you get to customs, call your uncle's home number. A slip with the number is on the back of your passport. If you can make it on a boat or plane and come to Miami. I am so sorry your father and I left you, but it was the only way. You are still wanted in our country. Bring only what you need and be fast. Remember what we say. I don't want you to feel an ounce of guilt for what happened to your brother. It's our rancid government, not you. Good luck, I love you more than you could ever know.

-All My Love,

Mami.

As Carmen read her mother's letter, her eyes welled up with tears. She wanted to be with her parents, to hear her mother's voice, and to feel the gentle embrace of her father. However, more than anything, she wanted her brother, but that would never happen, and that was her fault and her fault only. She could not focus on that gnawing guilt right now; she must focus on the task at hand.

In a record ten minutes, Carmen packed the passport, the money, her last remaining clothes, the journal, and a little, purple stuffed pony she had in her closet in a small duffel bag. Her mother had given the pony to her when she was all but four. And with that, she was ready. She locked her door with the key they always kept under the rock in the yard. She said a silent prayer that one day she could return to her country, however unattainable that seemed. With that, Carmen got her bike from the garage and biked down the hill to the big port with the commercial ferries and cruises.

Carmen was able to find a fifty-dollar ferry fare going straight to the port in Miami Beach. They didn't ask for ID. Thank God too because Carmen didn't have any. Everything was so hectic. They barely checked her ticket stub and passport. Carmen boarded the ferry and sat in a seat in the back corner. The whole trip lasted twelve hours. She made it to customs in Miami at around 10 pm, with five dollars in her pocket. She called Tio Alejandro's home phone number, and her parents came to customs. Tio Alejandro came too so he could state that the family was staying with them. The greeting was both happy and solemn. It felt like there was a physical divide between Carmen and her family. That was the hole Carlos's absence left in their lives. The hole the soldiers put there. Carmen was still feeling terrible, but she let that all go for a second when she reunited with her parents. Everything fell away once again but in a good connotation this time.

...

September 26, 1968

It has been 19 years since I wrote in this diary. A whole lifetime of mine has occurred. After I graduated high school here in Miami, I went to college at the University of Miami. I majored in political science, with a minor in literature and writing. I have become an accomplished writer and activist with books about my life in Cuba and politics, especially politics. This time I am not persecuted.

I am still not able to return to Cuba, but since the situation has worsened there, my family and friends have immigrated here to Miami seeking political asylum. Thank God the US government understands. They have been granting citizenship to any refugees coming from Cuba.

I might be accomplished, but I still think about my brother every day. I killed him, and that guilt will never go away. However, I strive to avenge his life every day by doing my job and speaking out against the Cuban communist regime from the safety of the States. That is the best I can do, yet the best will never bring him back. That is the hardest thing about living this life; while he was either incinerated or buried in a mass grave, I got to be with my family and go to the college he never could. Yet, I will never succumb to that guilt, I will persevere for all my fellow Cubans still being persecuted every day. Everything was taken away, yet I was able to build something out of less than nothing.

The True Equation

by Juliana Sanchez-Tobar

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

December 20, 2025

Dear Diary,

My name is Katerina, and I am 15 years old. I found you hiding away from the world behind the dumpster, and I figured we could be friends. I'm writing here because we are more alike than you may think.

The air is cold, the trees have no leaves, and snow is coming. I couldn't sleep tonight. I tossed and turned on my blanket replaying a nightmare, when I realize now it was a memory.

It was December 2, 2022, in Moscow, Russia. It was a hard week because my dad was always coming late, saying he had been playing poker with his friends, but by his slurred voice, I could tell he hadn't. My dad came home late that night at 11 and slammed the door open. He came in and began to scream at my mom. He slapped my mom across the face and kicked her. I ran into the basement, hiding from the terror, and even from far away, I could still hear my mom's screams and cries from above. I cried and sobbed, screaming all the curse words I knew into my shirt. I felt alone, and I knew I would never again have a loving father figure. I felt discontented with my life, hopeless as the thunder laughed at my face, the rain began to cry, and lightning started to strike. It went on like this for a week, I had had enough. I wish the thought hadn't crossed my mind, but it did. I felt unconscious and had a feeling in the pit of my stomach telling me to leave. At three in the morning, I made a decision that changed my life. I packed one small bag, containing a small, framed picture of my family, clothes for a day, and a \$20 bill, enough for one train ride to London.

With tears in my eyes, I return to the city sounds of Cambridge University: the students' laughter, the cars honking, and the creaking cranes of construction. I stand on my knees and have a knot in my shoulder and a headache. I reach into the pocket of my tattered coat and find 20 cents. This is not enough to buy an Advil and water. I search under my blanket/mattress and find my leftover McDonald's burger; I take one bite and decide to leave the rest for tomorrow.

A couple of hours later, I sit on the bench above where I sleep while students are being dismissed and coming out of the doors like a stampede of buffalos. I am younger than most of the students here at Cambridge, and they are spoiled brats.

One boy, around 18 years old, with dark hair, blue eyes, and a thick deep voice, stops by and says, "Oh, look! It's the homeless girl! What are you doing here, begging for scraps? Go hide under a bench. Oh, wait, you already do!"

A wave of anger boils up inside me, and I just want to scream at his ugly face! Then, all of a sudden, I hear a raspy voice, squeaky wheels, and water slushy and spilling all around, and I recognize it immediately. It is Janitor Richard and man, he is furious.

He taps the boy's shoulder and shouts above the noise, "What do you think you are doing? One more behavior like this, and I'll have to tell the dean!" The boy walks away with a face of irritation and anger. I get up and go thank Richard.

"Thank you so much!"

He responds, "Ah, don't worry. Here are the leftovers from the lunchroom." It was a black trash bag labeled lunch, "Hopefully, you find something useful in there, but I doubt it."

Richard is...an interesting person. He is a middle-aged man who loves to sneak in junk food, He seems very lonely, as the students seem to despise him, and somehow he is always at school no matter the time or situation.

It's 10 p.m., and I open the trash bag, and guess what? These kids are so disgraceful, they have thrown away full slices of pizzas, an entire half of a cake, and even a plastic container full of salad. I can only imagine these kids going home and lying to their parents saying they ate all of it. Hypocrites! I was reaching for the pizza, and I touched something hard and papery. I took it out and it was a—

December 21-22, 2025

Dear Diary,

I'm sorry I left you hanging last night, I fell asleep before I could tell you what I found inside the trash bag! I had touched a book! I have not seen a book in almost three years! I open the notebook, and it has all these numbers on it and crazy handwriting, practically impossible to read. I am skimming through the pages when the bell rings. And you know what that means, we are entering the war zone. I hide you behind the foot of my bench making sure none of the "skater dudes" run you over. I spot some girls on the far side of the flower-filled lawn, studying and reading books. I try to copy them; I open what I think is the mathematics notebook and begin to read. Then all of a sudden I hear a voice that makes my hair stand on edge, my heart beat faster, and I can even feel sweat forming.

"Hey, boys! Come here, look, she thinks she can read! Hahaha!"

These morons start high-fiving each other as if they just won the world cup. Ughhhh!

I dare to stand up and say, "For the record-"

"Oh, she speaks!"

"Yeah! Before you rudely interrupted me, I can read!"

"Oh, I'm sure you can," he says, in his mocking baby tone, and walks away.

I know I'm not the goody-two-shoes, study-all, hard-worker type, but I automatically sit down and start writing in one of your empty pages in the back. I write formulas, numbers, and notes I find in the notebook. I realize that these notes and pages filled with knowledge are the only things keeping me from going insane, so I formulate a plan to get as many books as I can, over the next few days. Why? Because Christmas is coming, the students are going on a break, meaning I may not have anything to do or have on Christmas day, except study these books.

Later that night, around 8 p.m., I got up and went to the water fountain which was right around the corner. Before going back to my wannabe bed, I take a stroll down Love Rose Way, which is right next to the University. I see all the shops alongside the sidewalk, and I can only picture the Champs-Elysees of Paris. It has always been my dream, even since I was a little girl, to visit Paris! I ran up to one of the windows of a shop named, Blooming Boutique, and OH MY GOSH! The amount of pastel-colored dresses on the rack, the high-heel shoes, the walls lined with bright green plants, and the sunny bright flowers cover every single corner! BUT, there is only one thing that truly catches my attention. A striking, white, mesmerizing vanity! It seems the kind, that the rich girls at the University would have. It has this glass-like knob, belonging to only one of the ten drawers!

On the upper right corner of the mirror, there is a sentence that reads, "Believing in yourself and your accomplishments, will give you the hope and courage to be happy, which is truly the GREATEST gift of life."

I say out loud, "How could I be hopeful when the only accomplishment I have under my belt is....nothing! Not one single thing..."

"Katerina!!!", screams someone from across the street.

I turn around to see the man whose voice has shocked me! It was Janitor Richard going home, after a long and restless day. That reminds me, I run toward him to ask him a huge favor!

"What are you doing here" he asks, "roaming the streets at night?"

"I was just looking around!" I reply with a guilty tone.

"I know this is a lot to ask, but if you ever see a worn-out book in the halls, dining hall, or anywhere, can you please pretty-please give them to me?" I ask.

"Why do you want them', they are just a pile of rubbish!"

"I want them because I think books are entertaining and are no pile of rubbish!" I reply with a hint of anger in my voice.

"Fine! I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you so much!" I turn around and happily skip back to the university, where I can sleep.

The next morning, I wake up, take a bit of my stale burger, and go to the big dumpster on the far side of campus. I open the lid to find around twenty black bags of trash. I need to change into clothes that can become dirty; however, I only own one set of clothes. There was no use in hoping. I climb in and land on something disgusting. It feels unnatural and gross. I look up to one of the central towers of Cambridge University that has a clock that reads 7:15 a.m. The students will be arriving in the next thirty minutes, so if I want to do this, I need to do it now. I grab a random trash bag and dump its contents into the trash bin. Here I search and search. Nothing valuable besides stale, and squishy remains of some random food. I go back to dumpster diving and after three more bags, I finally find a used backpack filled with books, pencils, a few pieces of paper, and candy wrappers.

After having a valuable search, I return to my bench to look through my so-called treasure. There are math and English books of all sorts. I grab one and skim through it. It is a notebook, with numbers, equations, graphs, shapes of all kinds, and long sentences full of words that didn't make sense.

Sorry, Diary, I haven't been writing here for a couple of hours since the morning! It is 8:30 PM, and I have been busy all day studying and reading the books I collected! Surprisingly, it has come easy to me, learning all these new theorems and mathematical terms! I look up from the book, to see a lean, dark figure walking rapidly towards me. I am scared, and I rush to hide behind the bench clutching tightly to you and the notebook. As the figure approaches, I can see clearly that he is a man, around 45 years old, bald, with a tall muscular shape.

He stands a few feet in front of me, and says, "I don't know who you are, but come out from behind the bench."

"Umm, ok", I responded.

He looks down at the notebook I am holding and says, "Who are you? What on earth do you think you are doing? That is school property, young lady, and I have not seen you in the halls, and by looking at the state you are in, I can tell you aren't."

"My name is Katerina and I'm not a thief, I pro--"

"Not another word. You will come with me to the Head of House, where he will decide what to do with you, rat."

I begin to protest but he tells me to be quiet and to follow him. I take you and my newly found treasure and walk hurriedly after him.

As I walk into the campus, I finally begin to truly admire the several buildings and intricate architecture. There are stained glass windows, grand columns, and a combination of modern and ancient designs.. There is a big Christmas tree at the center, with a fountain below it. There are ornate stone arcs, wrapped with vines and roses, causing me to look up at the sky and feel the snow, light as a feather, reach and touch my face. It was a castle out of a fairytale story.

I am brought back to reality by the harsh voice of "Mr. Judgmental," "Now listen hear, you are going to do whatever this man asks of you. He has control over this entire property, so if you want a place to live, and that place is here, I suggest you do exactly what he says."

"Fine."

I enter the office to find over twenty trophies, certificates, and pictures, lined up against the wall. I see an old man of around 60 years old, walking towards me with a cane, and asking me to sit down.

"Sir, I am so sorry to disturb you Headmaster, but I found her lurking on school grounds, and she is not a student here. She is holding school textbooks and notebooks, showing you all the proof that she is a thief."

"I found these books in the trashcan, so I figured since they no longer are of any use to your students, I could take them and study."

"Why are you here?"

I explained my situation to him, and Mr. Judgmental, who I later learn is Dr. Collon, turns around to stare at me with an amalgam of mixed emotions of guilt and sadness. Dr. Collon asks to see my notebook, and I show it to him. As he flips through the pages, he gasps out loud. I am scared, will they take it away, what is going on?

"How old are you Katerina?"

"Fifteen."

"You understand everything here?"

"Yes..."

Dr. Collon turns around and faces the Head of House, "Headmaster," he says, "she is extremely talented. She is learning and understands concepts of students four years older than herself."

The headmaster takes the notebook and as he flips through pages, nods his head, with whispers here and there. Dr. Collon asks to talk outside with the headmaster.

"Katerina," he says, "I am going to offer you an opportunity that will change your life. After seeing your talents and passion, I would like for you to join Cambridge University--"

I gasped and almost choked on my breath!

"However, you will need to enroll and take an exam, like everyone else. What do you say?"

"Thank you! Thank you! Thank you so much!"

I cannot believe my life right now! This is crazy! Ahhhhhh!!!!!! I plan on taking the enrollment exam tomorrow and I am super nervous! If I don't pass, then I will be stuck like this forever. Forever dreaming and hoping, of things so unlikely they seem unreal.

Good night! I'll tell you how everything goes tomorrow!

December 24, 2024

Dear Diary,

I just took the entrance exam! To tell the truth, it was incredibly difficult, however, some questions were easier than others, saving me a lot of time to write the final essay. AT 9:25 in the morning, two hours after school has started, Dr. Collon walks out of the front doors and yells for me to come to where he is. He tells me he has the test results, but he would like for me to come to the headmaster. I have learned from my past experiences that everything has a bad side, and I usually land on that side of the line.

"Katerina, sit down for me, please. We have received your test scores, and you have passed with flying colors! After discussing with the school board and telling them about your situation, we agreed that we would like to offer you a full tuition scholarship to attend Cambridge University! Do you accept our offer?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes! Thank you so much. You have changed my life!"

I still have a lingering thought in my mind. Now that I am attending such a prestigious school, I cannot be living in the rags again, but I feel arrogant to even ask for anything else.

As if Dr. Collon would have read my mind he says, "All the dorms and rooms have been filled, but it would be my honor to house you in my home for as long as you like, even if that means forever. My family and I want to offer you our home as yours."

"Dr. Collon, I don't even know where to start. It's an absolute yes!"

I didn't allow myself to even finish my thoughts and just run and hug him. I allow myself to just cry of contentment. He joyfully returns the hug. Dr. Collon takes me in his car to his home, which is ten minutes away from campus. It was perfect, a beautiful, quaint, and cozy cottage. As I enter the house, I notice a bed in one of the rooms with pink covers and three beautiful dresses with matching sweaters and socks. On the far-right side of the room, there is that wonderful vanity I once saw on Loverose Way near Cambridge.

Dr. Collon asks me to join his family at the dinner table where we feast on turkey that tastes heavenly, and as dessert, we gobbled up apple pie. Dr. Collon makes a toast, which made me remember a quote I once read in a torn magazine: "Some people are born into wonderful families. Others have to find or create them. Katerina welcome to your family!"

January 6, 2026

Dear Diary,

I am sorry I have not written here in a long time. Can you imagine what it feels like to have a warm bed and a warm meal every night? Dr. Collon and his wife Amy have been nothing but the best to me in making sure I have everything I need to feel welcome and loved.

It is 7:25 AM, and it is the first day at Cambridge, and I am so excited! I have so many butterflies in my stomach; it is the first day of university for a 15-year-old girl after all! I walk into my first class of the day, which is BioMed. The teacher asks me to introduce myself, and I do.

"Hello everyone, my name is Katerina, and I am 15 years old."

I can hear whispers across the room, "What, she's 15!? Why would they let her in here?"

I head back to my seat, wondering if because of the students' reactions, will I ever find friends. As my mind starts to wander back into dark places, the teacher starts asking questions, which honestly I forgot what they were, but I answered them correctly.

The day goes off without a hitch, the teachers truly are all nice and welcoming. However, the one thought that lingers in my head throughout the entire day is whether I would find friends. It is time for lunch and as I grab my food, I turn around to see that the campus lawn is full of students. I see the group of girls I remember seeing studying in one of the earlier days, and it is an impulsive and crazy thought, but my body is telling me to sit down and talk with them. I walk towards them.

They see me walking and they call out, "Hey! Come sit with us!"

"Ok! My name is Katerina! Thanks so much for letting me sit with you guys!"

"Of course! My name is Jessica, and her name is Amanda!"

The conversation continues for the hour-long lunch. I truly believe that these girls can become my friends, but what I know for sure is that I have a family and a father who loves me. As I remember my younger self and her life, I wish she knew that everything is okay, and that life will always give you the hope to continue.

As I close off this chapter in my life, a lot of things are coming, and I am ready. Thank you so much for being there every step of the way! I will never forget you, but it's time to let you go and for me to move on! I hope someone will admire the treasures and stories you hold just as I do.

Goodbye!

Your friend, Katerina

The Juggling Act

by Hana Smith

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

KYLIE LANDSOM | Grade 8



Jackie stared blankly at her computer screen. She could sense her teacher waiting for her to continue typing. The ticking of the clock sounded strangely loud in the empty classroom, she thought. Three fifty-eight, she thought as she looked at the clock, two minutes left.

Mrs. Martinez stood up from her desk and started to walk around her classroom. The sound of her shoes hitting the floor matched the clock's ticking.

Jackie repeatedly tapped her right foot, if she didn't finish this essay for English her grade would be a zero. Which would make her A turn into a C- and her mom would see it on Friday when the report cards came out. Jackie tried to stop thinking about her grades. She stared at the clock again. Three fifty-nine and one second, three fifty-nine and two seconds, three fifty-nine and three-

"Are you close to finishing?" Mrs. Martinez interrupted, glancing at Jackie's computer screen and her backpacks on the floor.

Jackie kicked her tennis shoes back into her sports bag. "Uh..." she paused, "I just need a few more minutes."

Jackie knew that not only did she need a few more minutes, but she also needed a whole month to finish it.

Mrs. Martinez nodded and sat on Leah's desk—the one next to her.

Jackie wondered what Leah was doing now. Maybe she was at the coffee shop or driving around in her boyfriend's car. Jackie remembered last school year when Leah got kicked off the tennis team. Yes, she remembered Coach Carter saying it now.

"You need to take this sport seriously. This sport is almost like life or death for some girls," he had said.

Leah had always made everyone laugh during drills and stretches. But before the matches, she was nowhere to be found. She always posted parties on her social media and had snuck Jackie out of her house once. Jackie would never forget that night. Aside from all the dancing and giggling, she had gotten into an unbearable amount of trouble, and she wasn't allowed to leave the house for three months. She often wondered if there was a life for her like Leah, without overbearing pressure to be perfect and to have more freedom.

Jackie shook her head and stared at her computer.

"You know, I worked day and night to make sure I was a perfect student," her mother had always said.

Jackie knew that her parents loved her, but sometimes it felt like they were more concerned about her grades or tennis than her. Her mother was prideful that Jackie always had A's and A+'s. Jackie had felt a growing sense of anxiety since the beginning of the year, and it was starting to be right. With three days left in the quarter, she knew that she would have to bring all her grades up to A's so her mother wouldn't be upset.

With that in mind, Jackie continued typing on her computer. She used her mouse to turn in the essay. "Done!" Jackie exclaimed as she shoved her computer into her bag.

Mrs. Martinez nodded and stood up from Leah's desk. "See you on Friday," she said, "your grade from the essay will be out, along with your report card."

Jackie nodded and grabbed her two backpacks before leaving the class. She checked her watch, nine past four. She ran to the locker room and threw her school bag down next to her locker. She changed out of her uniform and put on her practice clothes. She tried taking off her shoes but ended up banging her ankle on the bench in the middle. "Ow, ow, ow," she hissed. She managed to get her shoes on and tie her hair up. Jackie rechecked her watch, "four sixteen?" she said, running to her sports bag to grab her racket. She had managed to get to practice eighteen minutes late, but her teammates had finished stretching already.

"Why are you so late?" Coach Carter asked. "We've started the drill already," he said impatiently, "either join or stretch quickly." Coach Carter always expected the best out of Jackie, especially since she was co-captain of their team as a sophomore.

"Sorry! I had to do an essay," Jackie replied. Jackie started to pull her legs to stretch, shaking her arms from her nervousness about the essay. Now that she thought about it, she knew she was missing something from her essay.

"Okay Jacqueline, join the drill," he said while throwing a ball to her teammate, Lucia.

Lucia did a crossover step towards the ball and hit it with her racket. She ran to the back of the line behind Jackie. "We're doing crossover step footwork," she said.

After practice, Coach Carter made an announcement. "I'd like to recognize Lucia and Jacqueline for qualifying for the state championships. We won't be able to watch your matches in person, but we will still support you two from home," he said to the team before dismissing everyone.

"Are you ready for the math test tomorrow?" asked Lucia, after the announcement.

"There's no math test tomorrow," said Jackie, twirling her racket.

"Yes, there is. Mrs. Thompson told us to 'Study for the unit test on Friday,'" Lucia groaned. "It's taking me so long to study for the math, science, and Japanese tests. You'll probably miss training if you study," she explained.

Clearly, she would have to choose between her math grade and the state tournament. "Yeah, I guess I should study for it. My grade is a B- so I should get it up before I get put on probation," she said worriedly. "They're all on Friday, right?" Jackie asked.

Lucia nodded, "All the unit tests are in three days. I can't believe the tests take up so much of our average grade." "We should have an extension since we're playing in states," she started to walk with Jackie to her car.

Coach Carter stopped Jackie before she left campus, "Jackie, you need to work on your footwork. I don't need your opponent to find your weakness and beat you that way." He patted her back before she sat in the passenger seat.

"You need to work on something?" Jackie's dad asked. He raised his eyebrows when Jackie didn't respond. "Hello, Jacqueline??"

"Huh? Sorry, I need to study for-" Jackie was interrupted by her dad.

"You need to train for states. Your winning the trophy will be a magnet for more college scouts. Also, you've been dreaming of going professional since you were ten years old," her dad explained.

Jackie contemplated this decision. She could focus on studying and have a weak performance at states or do what her dad advised and focus on training for states. But then she would have lower scores on her tests... No, she would do both. She would make both her parents happy and study during her free time, Jackie thought.

Soon Jackie learned that her free time consisted of training and practice for the state championship. During classes, she would attempt to look over her study guides. On Thursday night, the night before her big exams, she brought her books to the dinner table.

"I think you'll be great at states. You just need to remember to keep your feet balanced and not lean onto your right foot so much," her dad explained as he ate the dinner.

Jackie nodded her head, not paying attention to her parents as she studied.

Her mom looked at her books, "Sweetie, you said your teacher gave you an extension for your exams. Why are your books at the dinner table? You can study after the tournament."

She remembered she had told her mom not to worry about her test grades and that she had an extension. "Oh... right," she said hesitantly. "No exams for me tomorrow, only training," she laughed nervously, "totally forgot." She took her books off of the table and began to eat dinner.

Before Jackie closed her eyes to go to sleep, she told herself, “I didn’t study all of it but I’ll be okay. All the tests are at separate times and on different papers, so I’ll have time to rest my brain.”

The next morning, at school she received the paper of her test from Mrs. Thompson. “Why is the packet so heavy?” she asked herself, thinking nothing serious of it. After the seventh question, Jackie started to have trouble answering. Some of the questions were in Japanese, “This test is only for math..” Jackie flipped through the pages and realized the math, Japanese, and science exams were combined into one. Jackie’s panic increased when she looked at the questions and was completely clueless about their answers. She repeatedly did her nervous habit of tapping her right foot. If she hid her report card and exam results, her mother couldn’t be angry about something she didn’t know about.

When Jackie got her results at the end of the day, she looked at them: a B in English, a B- in science and Japanese, and a C in math. She crushed up the paper and threw it in her bag angrily. If she won the tournament, it would make up for her grades, she decided.

“How was school?” her mom asked when she entered the car. The trunk was full of tennis rackets, tennis balls, and athletic clothes. “Dad wants to be on time for the first match,” her mom said.

“Oh, okay. My day was great,” Jackie lied and made sure to hide her crushed-up report card in the bottom of her bag. She threw her bag in the trunk when her mom started driving.

By about eight o’clock at the tournament, Jackie had won her first three matches. She had a hotel room to herself and laid out her match clothes. She put her backpacks in the doorway of her room and got ready for bed. When she was about to go to sleep, she noticed a paper ball in the doorway and kicked it next to her bag.

In the morning, she was getting ready for her match to qualify for the championship when she noticed her right ankle was sore. She brushed it off, knowing that the pain would probably go away. The drive to the courts felt unsettling.

“You had an extension on your exams, right?” Jackie’s mom asked.

Jackie paused, suspicious as to why her mom would ask her this, “Yes...” “why are you asking?”

“I found your exam report in your hotel room. Why are the grades so low? I thought you studied,” she said in disbelief. The car was pulling up to the parking lot of the tennis courts.

“I thought I needed to train for states,” Jackie said softly, “Dad said that I had to focus on tennis.”

“I didn’t say anything about that,” her dad said. He parked the car in front of the parking lot. “Go and warm up.”

Jackie dashed out of the car. She could hear her parents talking to each other when she opened the trunk to get her tennis bag. She was busted. Her parents knew about her grades, so now she needed to win states.

Lucia waved to her from the bleachers, “Jackie, over here!” Lucia was using her racket to hit her ball onto the fence. “I got disqualified for yelling at the umpire,” she said, rolling her eyes, “I’ll just watch you until my mom gets back.”

While Jackie stretched her arms, she became frustrated. Her dad told her to focus on practicing for states when she told him about the tests. Now, her dad denied telling her this, making it seem like she was careless about her school and sports balance.

“Let’s go, Jackie!” Lucia cheered from the bleachers.

Jackie’s mom had an upset face, and her dad was pacing around. Usually, her parents would both be sitting down but this was a big match. It was the state championship match and if Jackie won she would get offers from teams and even college scholarships.

The match was going well, and Jackie had won the first set. During the second set, Jackie started to get frustrated. She thought about her low grades and how hard she had worked to get them high at the beginning of the year.

Jackie lost the second set—1 to 1. She started to get upset, she always won her matches and was starting to get worried.

“Be careful on your feet!” “More power in your arms!” “Fix your front hand!” she heard her parents and Lucia say. Jackie turned from the bleachers while drinking water. She needed to clear her head-

“Let’s get back to the match ladies,” the umpire said.

Jackie sighed and shook her body to get warmed up. Her ankle felt funny again. Maybe it was her shoes, she thought.

During the third set, Jackie’s opponent hit the ball too far from Jackie’s reach. She did it again and again.

“40 - love,” the announcer said. Jackie could hear her dad groaning and her mom sighing at the score.

Jackie grabbed her shoes and threw them on the ground. She sat down on the bench with her head in her hands. She drank her water and switched her shoes. It was most definitely her shoes' fault, she thought, there was no way she could get beaten.

The set continued, "40 - 15," "40 - 30," the announcer said.

Jackie was determined to win. She ignored her ankle pain again and spun her racket around.

"Deuce, 40 - 40," the announcer said with a hint of surprise in his voice.

I want to win, I need to win, I will win, Jackie chanted in her mind. She served the ball again, her opponent hit the ball out of her reach again. She winced at her ankle. Why did it have to hurt now? she thought.

"Advantage," the announcer said. Jackie could hear groans of disappointment and cheers from the bleachers. All she could focus on was the pain from her ankle, but it was overpowered by her hunger for victory.

She hit the ball again, back to her opponent, back to her, the ball went back and forth. Jackie could feel her heart thumping like a drum. Her breathing was haggard, she hit the ball again. Why couldn't this girl give up? She thought as the ball came back her way. Her shoe felt weird again, she hit the ball. It was starting to hurt a lot more, but she needed to win. The ball came back her way and she dove for it, there was a snapping sound. Jackie screamed and fell to the ground. She grabbed her ankle and cried loudly.

The ball flew back to her side, hitting the fence. "Match," the announcer said. The crowd cheered.

Jackie looked at the ground and saw blood. She touched her nose then looked at her hand, blood, lots of it. She felt lightheaded as she saw shadows approaching. Her dad carried her to a tent. "I need to win," she said, clutching her ankle.

"Sweetie, I think you rolled your ankle," her mom said. They put her down on a bench.

The nurse inside checked Jackie's ankle, making sure nothing hurt. "She pulled her Achilles," she said, "she needs to be checked by a doctor and possibly therapy."

"I didn't win?" Jackie said, "My grades are going to be terrible when I get back to school."

Her parents sighed. "You pulled your Achilles, aren't you worried about your body?" her dad asked.

"When will she be able to get back to practicing?" her mom asked,

"Not for a couple of months. With physical therapy, four months at least," the nurse stated.

"I don't want to do tennis anymore," Jackie said abruptly, making her parents turn immediately.

"What?!" her dad exclaimed.

"I mean, I do, but I want to take a break," she paused, "I feel like you guys have been bombarding me with training, practice and pressuring me about my grades."

Her parents stayed silent.

"I feel like you guys have such high expectations for me that it's been affecting my health and has been making me struggle a lot," she said, nervous about what her parents would say.

They were silent for a while before her mom spoke up. "Alright, but you need to communicate about these things more with us," she said.

Her dad spoke, "Yes, I agree, please talk to us more about this. We need to prioritize your health over tennis and grades."

"I thought we were helping but maybe it was too much," her mom added.

On the ride home from the emergency room, Jackie lay in the back seat staring at the boot on her right foot. Her parents began to talk about practices and physical therapy.

"I think we should get a new coach that will help you recover," her dad said.

Her mom interrupted, "With less practices of course. We can also get you a therapist as well if you would like."

"I have to think about it," Jackie said. She opened her phone to text her friends, something she hadn't been able to do for a while because of her training.

The next week at school, she paid more attention in class and felt less stressed about sports and family pressure. She was able to hang out more with her friends outside of school, creating closer bonds with them.

About a month later, her injury, grades and communication were all showing great recovery. Jackie had realized that she should prioritize her current health over her future success.

The Trial of the Tides

by Tommy Stuart Milne

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

The island of Aeloria had always been a place of mystery, its sharp cliffs, enormous waves, and thick fog were all part of its mysterious aura. The ancestors said that the ocean itself was alive and watching the citizens of Aeloria. The villagers of Aeloria knew not to challenge the Ocean as they understood the rhythm of the tides and waves. At the heart of their traditions was the Trial of the Tides, a rite of passage ritual that tested one's courage, skill, and strength.

Today was the day for Kai's Trial of the Tides, the tradition that every young person on the island of Aeloria had to complete once they turned sixteen. It was the moment they proved themselves to the sea and their parents but few succeeded. It was a dangerous task, one that many fail, including his older sister, Aria.

Aria was a strong, brave, and courageous young woman. Two years ago, she left the shore for the Trial of the Tides, but she never returned. Kai still remembered the day that the villagers found her boat broken next to the rocks. She had been consumed by the sea.

Lena and Ivy were Kai's closest friends, each with their own way of supporting him. Lena was adventurous and fearless, always pushing him to face his fears, while Ivy was more careful, offering comfort when he needed it most.

And now it was his turn.

"Are you ready Kai?" Lena asked, her voice full of excitement. She was standing right next to Kai with her long red hair flying in the wind. Lena had always been the bold one, the one who would do anything to prove her bravery.

Kai looked at her but didn't say anything. He was way too nervous to even speak. He nodded, still trying to get his voice back.

Behind them, Ivy stood quietly, looking very concerned. Ivy had always been the most cautious of the three, the one who cared about the consequences. She placed a gentle hand on Kai's shoulder, smiling a little bit.

"Remember," Ivy said softly, "you don't have to do this if you're not ready."

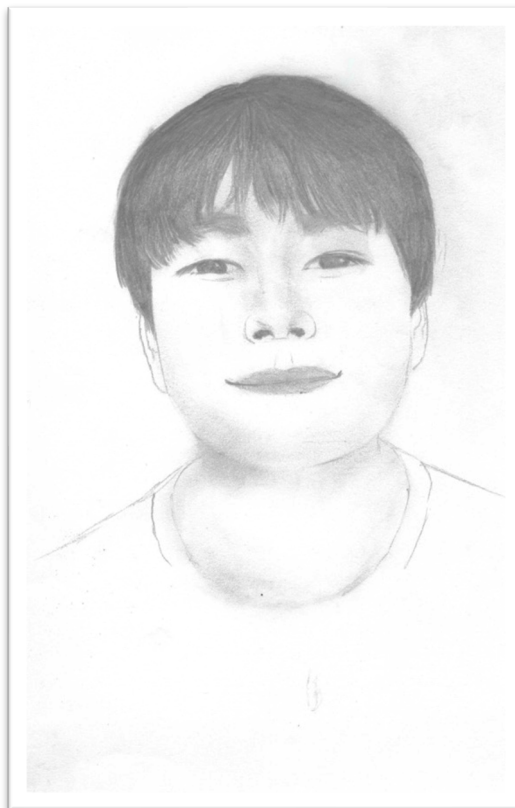
Kai desperately tried to convince himself that he was ready, that he had no choice but to be ready. He had to be for Aria, for his family, and himself. But his doubt still lingered inside of him, and it was gnawing at his heart as every second passed.

The Trial of the Tides wasn't just about courage, it was about proving that you could face your greatest fear and survive the ocean's deadly waters. If you passed, you were crowned as the leader of the island. If you failed... you became part of the sea for eternity.

Lena was already walking towards the small boat that would take them out into the waves, her steps extremely confident, as if the ocean was just a small puddle she swam across every day. Ivy stayed by Kai's side, her face filled with concern for him, but none for the fact that the ocean might swallow them.

"Don't Worry, Kai," she said softly. "You're stronger than you think."

Kai wasn't as confident in himself. He forced a smile and followed Lena toward the boat. The boat rocked as they pushed off from the shore. The wind howled and the sea churned beneath them, yet Lena still seemed as confident as ever. She took the oars and rowed with mighty strength that Kai envied. Ivy, sitting



NATALIE PERKINS | Grade 7

next to him, held onto the side of the boat. She was extremely pale and filled with worry. Kai could feel his heart pounding, almost as if it was going to come out of his chest.

The Trial of the Tides was very simple. One had to get to the Sacred Cove, a hidden place that was protected by many mystical creatures as well as supernatural waters. The cove was said to be a place of magic, where the sea god lives. In order to complete the challenge, one must grab the gem which was guarded by the sea god. But no one knows because no one had lived to tell the tale.

Kai's thoughts kept drifting back to her sister. Aria, with her immense courage, had believed she could conquer the sea and that the sea god would show her something no one else had ever seen. But now she was gone.

"Are you okay?" Ivy's voice broke the silence as well as his thoughts; she sounded worried.

Kai looked at her and forced a smile "I'm fine" But inside, he was anything but fine, he was terrified. He was scared that the sea would consume him, just like his sister Aria.

Don't worry, you're stronger than you think he thought to himself trying to convince himself that it was all going to be okay.

Lena, who noticed his hesitation, looked over her shoulder, "Stop thinking about it, you got this."

Kai nodded, but the fear didn't go away. As the waves grew bigger the sky darkened. This caused the boat to rock more violently. The wind howled like someone angry was pushing them into the water.

Hours passed, and the island was in sight. The cliffs were gargantuan, the jungle on the island was thick and mysterious. Kai felt as though something was watching them, something superior, something dangerous.

And then it happened.

A strange sound echoed beneath the water, a rumbling like the growl of a beast but ten times worse. The boat lurched violently, sending Kai's stomach racing up all the way to his throat. Ivy screamed as a colossal snake-like shape rose from the water. But no, this was nothing like a small serpent; this was the sea god himself.

An enormous sea serpent, its body twisting and twirling; its eyes glowing with an unnatural light. The sea god, Kai realized, his heart pounding even worse than before. The thing was alive, and it was angry.

Before Kai could react, Lena stood up; her face looked determined. "We have to move! Keep rowing!"

Unfortunately, it was too late. The sea serpent's head dashed towards them, its enormous jaws snapping centimeters away from their boat. A blast of cold air hit them, Kai could feel the water pulling at his legs, almost as if the sea itself was trying to drag him into it.

"I-I don't want to die!" Kai screamed, his voice cracking.

"You won't," Lena shouted. "Trust yourself!"

Kai looked at her, his eyes wide with immense fear. But then something changed, he knew what he had to do.

In that moment, a thought popped into his mind, the gem. The ancient gen of the sea god, hidden deep in the cove. If they could take it, it might be their only hope of survival.

"I know what to do," Kai whispered to himself. He reached into his pocket, pulling out the glowing gem he had kept hidden for years. The villagers said it was cursed, that no one should ever take it, but in his fear and desperation to live Kai couldn't resist.

He held it high, his finger quivering from fear, and suddenly the water around them began to stir wildly, faster than before. The sea god moved higher than it was before, its enormous body lashing around the boat, but Kai held on, staring at the gem in his hand.

"I made a terrible mistake," he whispered. "I released the sea god."

The serpent dove toward his village, its enormous tail slashing against the water. The island of Aeloria was in grave danger. The sea god was now furious, and Kai's village would have to pay the price.

"I have to stop it!" Kai exclaimed, his voice trembling from a mixture of fear as well as guilt. He knew what he had to do.

Lena and Ivy looked at him in shock, "You can't go back!" Ivy cried out loud.

But Kai stood up, determination, fueling him, "I have to." He held the gem high, the light of it glowing brighter than ever. He turned to the sea god, his heart pumping extremely fast, and whispered a prayer.

"I'll face it, I'll face my fear."

The sea god's eyes met his, and for a moment, everything went still. The waves calmed down, the serpent stopped moving, just hovering above the water; it seemed as if it was waiting.

And then, without hesitation Kai dove off of the boat.

Kai's body plunged into the icy cold water, the waves pulling him deeper into the ocean. But he didn't fight it. He sank deeper and deeper, holding the gem tightly in his hand. He could feel the sea gods power surrounding him. The sea god roared, but Kai still didn't resist.

With all of his strength, Kai threw the gem into the depths of the sea, watching as it vanished into the darkness. And just like that the sea god's rage stopped. The waves settled, the serpent disappeared, and the ocean became still.

As soon as Kai thought it was all over he felt a sharp pain in his leg. A piece of the sea god's powers had stuck with him, but he didn't mind. He had faced his fear, and most importantly saved his village.

He swam back to shore where Lena and Ivy were already waiting. They pulled him onto the beach; he was trembling, but he was still alive.

"I did it," Kai said, his voice very quiet.

"You did," Ivy said quietly, her face relaxed from relief.

But Kai wasn't so sure if he'd really won the trial yet. There was still one last thing he still needed to do.

"I'll never be the same," Kai spoke out to the sea, "But I've learned that facing your fears is the only way to progress on with life."

The Sea God had been defeated, but Kai knew the true trial had been the one inside himself, where he had to face his insecurities, his fears, as well as his guilt. And in doing so he learned that strength wasn't about fame or glory. It was about owning up to your mistakes and facing the consequences.

As Kai approached the village, Kai realized one last thing: true courage wasn't about bravery. It was also about responsibility.

Through the Eyes of the Witch

by Raphaella Tuch Bussey

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

It was past her lunch time. Melina walked in circles around the living room, impatiently waiting. The fire was cracking, the wind from outside was blowing the autumn leaves away. It was late October in Russia, and she stood within the small wooden house where all of her memories existed, near a dark and mystic forest. A knock came from the other side of the thick wooden door. Melina jumped up and quickly made it to the door. When the door slowly opened, Melina's face filled with joy.

"Ania, how are you? I have not seen you in such a long time," said Melina.

"Yes I know, I am so glad to see you again. I'm so excited about picking mushrooms in the forest with everyone," replied Ania.

Melina welcomed Ania into the house before others arrived. Soon everyone was there.

"Okay, we all are here. I think it is a good time to go to the forest before it gets too dark, so we all get lost, ha-ha," said one of Melina's friends, Sasha.

They put on their boots, hats, gloves, scarves, warm jackets and took their baskets.

"I think we are ready. Oh wait, we need to get the mushroom book!" yelled Nikolai, as he ran to the kitchen to find it.

Once they had everything they needed, before going into the forest, Melina's gardener stopped the children. The hardworking man, who was passionate about nature, had a frightened look on his face. Then he spoke to the children very gravely.

"You guys have to be careful out in the forest, you never know the great danger the forest could hold, like animals and even creatures, like the great and evil Baba Yaga. She lives in the dark and mysterious forest. She may seem like a kind elderly woman, but she is a monstrous witch. You see, when I was about your age, I went to the forest and was playing with the snow until I found a rabbit and started to chase it. All of a sudden, I lost the rabbit, and I lost my way, when I found a house with the chicken legs and so I went inside. As I entered the house, I saw this old woman, Baba Yaga, who seemed kind. She fed me and made sure I was safe, until she showed me her true

evil and hideous side as she tried to eat me! I fought back and luckily escaped. To prove it I have these scars," he said pointing to his arms "I have not been to the forest since."

Chills ran down Melina's spine when she saw the scars. She could tell that Ania felt the same sensation and was thinking twice of going to the forest. But Sasha and Nikolai brushed it off.

"I don't think it is really a good idea to go mushroom picking at this time of the day, we should go another day," said Ania.

Nikolai replied, "Oh, don't be a chicken, trust me. Nothing bad will happen to us. That Gardener is just trying to scare us, there is no such thing as a 'Baba Yaga.'"

They entered the trail inside the forest. They were looking for chanterelle mushrooms to go with their dinner but could not seem to find them anywhere. The sky blazed into a fiery canvas of orange and purple. They didn't realize how much time passed.

Melina looked up and said, "It is getting quite late, we should start heading back."

All of sudden, a gust of wind ran through the forest and the map in Sasha's hands flew away. Nikolai began to run after it but he tripped on a small log and lost the map.

"Are you alright Nikolai?" asked Melina

"Yes I'm fine," said Nikolai, "but I lost the map."

"Oh, of course Nikolai fell and hurt himself, as you always do," said Sasha, catching up to the group.

"Oh, keep your mouth shut! It is not like I am the one who just lost the map," retorted Nikolai.

"Cut it out!" shouted Ania, "we have to figure something out, and this fight won't fix it."

As silence fell over the forest, they tried to find the trail back to the house. After what felt like an interminable period of time, they stumbled upon a small wooden house in the middle of the dark and wild forest which was different from others. The house was held by the chicken legs. Blood rushed through Melina's veins, as she stared at the house. She just remembered the gardener's story and his scars.

"Oh, look at this house! It is perfect, we can stay here for the night," exclaimed Nikolai.

"Guys, I don't think it is a good idea to be near this house. This seems awfully similar to the house the gardener told us about. Let's keep looking," said Melina in a tremulous voice.

"Melina, come on, you really believe that gardener? We have been looking for a way back home for hours and I am cold and hungry. Don't be scared," said Sasha smirking.

"He has a point," said Ania, "let's go inside and I promise first thing in the morning we will find our way home."

Melina hesitated to go up those stairs to what felt like doom, but she went anyway. As Nikolai opened the old dilapidated wooden door, a loud creak reverberated through the wooden house. They were greeted by the sight of a traditional Russian house that had the essence of a grandmother's home. There were plants surrounding the house. In the corner of Melina's eye, she saw an old small woman. She was staring at them in surprise, as she spoke in a cackle that sent chills down Melina's spine.

"What are you doing here? Who are you and why have you come here?" asked the little old lady.

Melina was too frightened to speak, so Sasha answered.

"Hello, my name is Sasha and these are my friends. We came here because we got lost in the forest. What is your name, miss?" asked Sasha lightheartedly.

"Well, don't worry my dear, you can call me auntie," said the little old lady.

The old woman began to offer the children food. As Melina looked around the house, the gardener's story kept replaying in her head. The more she was there, the more she felt uneasy about the old woman, but as she turned to the friends, they all looked at ease.

Oh, I must be overreacting, but something about this old woman seems very odd. Nikolai, Sasha and even Ania don't seem to be worried about her, so am I just being paranoid?

The old woman made sure the kids were well fed and comfortable to stay the night.

"Are you kids alright? You should go to sleep soon, if you want to have the energy to find your way back home. By any chance would you like to hear a bedtime story?" asked the little old woman.

"Well, why not?" asked Nikolai

"Oh, you kids have probably heard stories similar to this one about an old woman, called Baba Yaga. She was a hideous witch who fries children and eats them. Well, I want to say that is untrue, it is more like the great story 'Vasilissa the Beautiful'."

"Oh, that woman is not even real. It's a myth!" exclaimed Sasha.

"Well, how could it be a myth if I am Baba Yaga?" said the little old woman.

Melina's heart dropped to her stomach. She turned to her friends. They looked as pale as a ghost. All of a sudden they started to run towards the door. Each step felt slower than the other, as they leapt to the door, running for their lives.

When they made it outside, they began to scatter like mice, running from a black cat. Melina, Sasha, and Ania ran anywhere away from the monster. As Melina looked, she saw that Nikolai was going another way. Melina sensed that something was wrong, so she ran after him.

"Wait, where are you going Melina?" exclaimed Sasha.

Melina was too far to hear him. She was panting from exhaustion, but knew she had to get Nikolai. In the dark distance she detected a rushing river that Nikolai was going towards.

"Nikolai!" shouted Melina, "look out! There's a river that you are going towards!"

But before he could answer, there was a loud splash, and his silhouette vanished from the distance.

Her panic rose, as she sprinted towards the river. When she came upon the riverbanks, as she anticipated jumping into the river, when she saw that the little old woman, Baba Yaga, had Nikolai in her arms.

Melina began to yell, "Get away from him you witch!"

To her surprise Baba Yaga listened. She ran towards Nikolai to see if he was in pain.

"Nikolai, are you okay?" cried Melina with fear in her eyes.

"I am okay but freezing. I would've never survived without Baba Yaga saving me," said Nikolai.

Shock appeared on Melina's face, as she looked at the old woman. Now she no longer looked very evil. She felt that the forest began to become lighter even though it was still very late at night. She began to feel that she saw Baba Yaga as a misunderstood woman.

"Let's go back to the house. Your friends are there waiting," said Baba Yaga.

She took them back to the chicken legged house, where they found Sasha and Ania waiting. When they were inside the small warm house, Baba Yaga was making something in a cauldron. She gave this mysterious pink liquid to her visitors.

"Don't worry, trust me, this will help you, my poor children," said Baba Yaga.

They hesitated but finally took a sip. Once one drop touched the lips of Melina, she felt a rush of warmth run through her body. She felt like the hot sun was above her. So, they all decided to drink the entire potion. As Melina looked to the others, she saw their pale faces flush with color again.

"I see you guys are close friends, but what I have observed from your stay, that you do not trust each other. Trust is a thread that binds us, but you need to guard it with great care. Once it breaks, no spell can weave it back together again," said Baba Yaga.

The children looked at each other. They never thought of that before. That night, the forest was filled with peace. The sun rose once again, it was shining bright, and Melina heard the birds chirping. Baba Yaga made porridge for the children to regain strength. Then Baba Yaga gave the children a mysterious glowing mushroom.

"Here, this mushroom will help you find your way back home," said Baba Yaga in a kind calm voice.

The children gave a big warm hug to Baba Yaga. They opened the door and looked at the forest as if they were looking at the world for the first time. They waved goodbye to the old sage woman, as they were going further away from the old house held by chicken legs. Melina was thinking about how she had no trust within her friends and herself, but one woman could change how she looks at life. The mysterious mushroom sparkled the way through the forest and led them back to Melina's home.

The Final Water Frontier

by Luca Vucetic

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

SOPHIA HOPPE | Grade 8



Bobbing in the waves, a little motorboat was plowing towards the lone cliff that stuck far out over the ocean. On board, the crew of three were preparing their equipment for a training dive. As the little boat rocked from one side to the other, a 14-year-old, frigid boy was screwing in the last parts of his scuba tank. For now, he had been holding his balance; when another rocky wave hit the boat, the working boy was thrown off his feet onto the cold, slippery deck. Henry lifted himself up, rubbed his bruised elbow, and looked around. All he could see was the endless dark blue ocean with only a little piece of land fading away behind the boat.

"Henry! We will be arriving soon. Get your gear on!" shouted his instructor.

"Alright!" replied Henry with a slight

irritation in his voice.

Putting on the gear on such high seas was almost impossible for Henry who was still a rather inexperienced diver, but time was ticking and being next to the cliff for long was not possible, so with a deep sigh Henry started putting on his equipment.

As the boat approached the cliff, both Henry's instructor and Henry finished putting on their equipment. "Before you jump off, grab your BCD and inflate it," said the instructor. "Don't forget to kick with your legs as well."

The cold, clear water allowed Henry to see the seafloor and the wildlife below.

As the captain pulled away with the boat to a safe distance, the instructor gave Henry the signal to start the dive. Slowly lifting his BCD above his head, Henry began to deflate. Shortly after, both divers were below the surface with only the little bubbles of air at the surface showing their presence in the area.

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The sea life was astonishing to Henry. All kinds of fish swam by him: Remoras (giant-like eels), schools of beautiful Blue Tang, occasional groups of tarpons, and rare barracudas surrounded the two. Coral of different shapes and colors made the surroundings vivid and calming. Slowly, the cold feeling went away, replaced by astonishment and surprise. *How beautiful this is!* exclaimed Henry to himself. *I never thought that I would ever see anything like this.*

Both divers slowly but steadily made their way through the fish-congested pathways toward the open where Henry would take his final test to become a professional diver.

As they approached the open, the instructor signaled to slow down, and when both were at a distance from the reefs, signaled to gently sit down on the sand. After making sure everything was intact and prepared with his gear, the instructor signaled Henry to look at him. To Henry's astonishment and shock, the instructor removed his mask. Henry's first reaction was to rush towards him and help him put it back on. In a swift motion, however, he put his mask back on and shifted his focus on Henry.

A cold sweat trickled down Henry's back. *I am going to have to take off my mask*, he realized. *Anything could go wrong.* Henry violently shook his head in rejection of that idea. Impatient, the instructor once again signaled Henry to watch him and then repeated the entire process. Now kindly, the instructor asked him to remove his mask to continue with the test.

Taking a deep breath and closing his eyes, Henry removed his mask. Instantly, the cold blast of water hit his face, making him even more frantic. Feeling his mask with his hands, Henry placed the mask back on, and after a couple of seconds completely removed all the water from his mask.

Wow, I am surprisingly all right, thought Henry.

His moment of triumph briefly dissolved first into shock, and then into fear when Henry noticed that breathing was becoming more and more difficult. For a split second, he froze, unsure of why this problem was happening. Quickly running his hand down the regulator's pipe, he felt it wobble and break loose. Henry frantically gulped down the last breaths of air.

He could feel the panic slowly creeping up in his mind. He reached behind in the hope that he could attach the regulator back onto the tank. Fumbling with his gloved hands, he located the break and then the realization hit him: something came loose early during his fall on the boat causing the regulator to not be properly secured. Understanding that it would not be possible to fix the break in time, Henry, in a panic-like motion, reached for his emergency regulator which was always strapped to his back. Either because of panic or shock, however, he could not find the regulator.

The instructor immediately noticed Henry's panic. With a calm, yet swift gesture, he motioned Henry to stay still. Swimming closer up, the instructor grabbed Henry by the tank and quickly removed his alternate air source. Henry, seeing once again hope in survival, desperately reached for the regulator. Despite never switching mouthpieces before, he performed the procedure with immense technicality and skill. Taking a cautious inhale, he felt a rush of relief as the cool, pressurized air filled his lungs.

The instructor worked quickly, tightening the loose connections and patching up the busted regulator. Despite the situation, his movements were swift and calm, which brought awe and thankfulness to Henry. Once finished, the instructor gestured for Henry to check his gauges. Henry's eyes widened when he saw that the tank's pressure had dropped significantly. They didn't have much time left before all of the air would run out of his BCD.

Without a single delay, the instructor pointed towards the surface, signaling that the dive must immediately end. Although Henry gestured his agreement toward the instructor, a slight disappointment lingered. The dive was his final test, his chance to become a real diver, and now it was being cut short.

Their ascent was slow and steady, as the safety protocol indicated. Slowly, the sunlight grew brighter above them creating shimmering patterns in the water. The bottom of the ocean slowly disappeared into the darkness. Henry's confidence returned to him little by little. He had faced a real emergency that not many had faced. As they broke the surface, a cool gush of fresh ocean air hit Henry's face. Removing the regulator, Henry deeply inhaled the refreshing air.

The instructor pulled out a flare from his pouch. "It's to signal to the boat," he explained to Henry.

The boat approached quickly. The mate on board threw out a line to help the divers board the vessel. As both clambered onto the deck, Henry vomited. The exhaustion and shock caused sickness from which he spent quite some time recovering. The instructor patted Henry on the back and afterwards gave Henry's gear a closer inspection.

"You know," said the instructor, "the gear is in good shape overall, it's just that you didn't screw in the regulator properly."

"Next time I will make sure everything is fine," said Henry in an apologizing tone.

"You handled the entire situation very well," the instructor said after a moment, his voice very kind. "A lot of people panic in such situations like that. But you stayed mostly calm and stuck to the emergency protocol and followed all of my instructions. That's a sign of a good diver."

Henry blinked in astonishment. "But the test... I failed it. I didn't do everything I was supposed to, and I neglected to check my equipment."

The instructor grinned. "Henry, you have passed the most important test. Diving isn't just a technique and skill; it is also being able to stay under pressure and accomplish any challenges under difficult natural settings. You did all of that today."

Henry felt his chest swell in pride. Glancing back at the water, its surface now glistening under the setting sun, Henry thought about the great experience he had just gone through. It taught him so many things and yet, Henry still was in disbelief of the events of that day.

As the boat made its way back towards the far island, Henry leaned against the railing looking back at the lone cliff. With each second, he reflected on what had happened. The fall, air hissing out of his tank 30 meters below sea level, the fear for his life, and the miracles made by the instructor.

Maybe performing different tests underwater isn't the hardest thing about diving, Henry thought. Maybe it is being able to perform under high-pressure situations like the one that happened to me.

Now the vast ocean stretched in front of him with its mysteries and beauties hidden under a thickness of water.

After an interminable voyage back, the boat, with a light thud, hit the small dock. The instructor sat down beside Henry and pulled out a small notebook. "Every real diver keeps a log of his dives," he explained. "Because you are a real diver now, you also need one."

Henry's heart filled with joy. Being regarded as a real diver felt wonderful.

Stepping off the boat, he looked at the horizon for one last time. Far away, casting its shadow over the now calm water, Henry saw the little lone cliff in the distance. His journey as a professional diver had just begun, and he still had many adventures ahead of him in the future. Henry put the log in his bag and started his walk towards home.

What Only the Bunny Knows

by Julia Zipse

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

The breeze blew through the circus tent, gently moving everything aside. "As if this isn't hard enough!" the magician complained. He was doing his pre-show check of his props behind the scenes. Tonight was the magician's first big show in a long time. He had been expecting that this would finally be his big break.

The magician shuffled around backstage trying to re-organize all the props that had been moved by the breeze that had flown into the circus tent. After picking up a few prop flowers, he moved over to a table with a small dark cage with a furry crouching figure inside. He opened the latch to the cage and recklessly pulled out an elderly white bunny. The rabbit twitched uncomfortably under the

magician's tight grasp on his neck scruff. The magician looked into the bunny's small black eyes and said, "After this one you're done, stupid bunny."

The bunny had gotten old, and the magician now wanted to get rid of him. He hurriedly put the bunny down and tucked him back into the cage. He did not close the latch, assuming it would stay in its place until it was needed. The magician found his assistant and told her of his plan. "After this show, that old bunny is out of here. I'll just toss him behind the cans or something, then replace him with a new, younger bunny."

The assistant sighed, "You don't feel sorry for the poor bunny?" she asked.

"Why should I? That old one's no star," the magician scoffed.

The bunny poked his head out of the cage and perked his ears. He had heard the entire conversation. First the magician told him he was done, and after overhearing his plan with the assistant, he knew it was official. His betrayal was imminent.

This old bunny wasn't just any bunny; he was special. He was magical. He could understand words and their meanings, yet he could not speak. Knowing that he would be kicked out so cruelly after being loyal for so many years, he thought that he should do all he could to spite the magician and to ruin the show because of this betrayal. He ducked back into the cage and plotted his revenge.



MATTHEW MALHERBE | Grade 6

The show had finally started, and the magician rushed out onto the stage. The seats were mostly filled, more than expected. The magician stiffened for a moment due to a quick feeling of stage fright, but then he quickly snapped back into his routine.

"Good afternoon," he addressed the crowd. "Could I interest anyone in some roses?" He swiftly whipped out a magic wand from his back pocket and performed a simple amateur trick where a wand, with a quick flick was supposed to have roses pop out. He held the wand by its end tightly and flicked it. The black wand top popped off, invisible to the audience, and the rose stems popped out. The trick had gone well, or at least that's what the magician thought. There was a blank reaction from the crowd as the magician shamefully looked at the wand and the roses. To his chagrin, he noticed that while the rose stems had come out as expected, the majority of the petals had been chewed off and mangled, leaving mostly just stems poking out. He looked to the sides of the stage where his assistant urged him to continue on with the act.

"Go on!" she urged in a whisper.

The magician was completely bewildered to see his prop messed up. It had not seemed problematic before the show when he checked all of his equipment. He did not know that that was only the start of the bunny's revenge. He did not know that right before the show, the bunny had a plan set into action that started with ruining props.

Continuing with the show, the magician experienced more and more malfunctions and errors with the props. He sped up his performance to try and hide the errors with the props, and this managed to keep the crowd only mildly amused. During one act, the magician was able to make sure that a prop was not somehow defective.

"Keep your eyes on the table," he instructed the audience as he gestured towards an empty vase. This time he seemed sure that nothing could possibly go wrong with this act. The bunny continued watching the show, peeking from behind the curtain. Right as the magician's vase act was approaching its climax, the bunny stretched its legs and bolted out from behind the stage. The magician was focused on his act until the quick blur of white diverted his attention, causing him for a second to become confused and to lose his grip on the vase he held. Seconds later, it crashed down onto the hard stage floor. A shriek sounded throughout the audience as glass shards flew across the stage.

"My apologies!" the magician nervously said as he looked for any sign of injuries in the audience. "I'll return after a short momentary recess!" he said with an even more noticeably nervous tone. Some of the crowd had already begun to leave, yet a majority still remained. After trying to remain calm in front of the audience, the magician stormed backstage calling for his assistant.

"I'm done! Seriously, as soon as the big trick is done, today's show is over, and that bunny is done for!" the magician shouted once he found his assistant.

"Look, why don't you reconsider keeping the bunny? Clearly he knows you're getting rid of him," the assistant said, speaking up for the bunny.

"It's a stupid animal! It doesn't know anything!" the magician retorted.

"But, maybe it's because of the way he's treated, if only-"

"It's a bunny! I don't do anything for it. It works for me!"

"Couldn't you just decide after? Maybe if he pulls through with this trick, if he does well, you could keep him?"

"Will you shut up already? You're *my* assistant. Stay in your place!"

"Alright, I'll prepare The Disappearing Bunny Trick," she responded as she set off past the bunny, who had hopped back to his cage after his acts of sabotage.

The Disappearing Bunny Trick had been the bunny's main purpose in the magician's act for years, and tonight would be his final performance of it.

The big moment had arrived. The magician's assistant had the bunny in her arms and walked onto the stage beneath the bright lights with him. "Good luck," she whispered as she sat him down onto a platform.

"Now ladies and gentlemen, prepare as you'll witness my final act tonight-The Disappearing Bunny Trick! Before your eyes I will make this common, old rabbit, who has caused me quite a bit of difficulty tonight, disappear and never return!"

The bunny knew the magician meant what he said.

"And now, I shall draw upon the dark forces from an ancient book I have studied for years."

The bunny knew that the magician's tricks were all the results of stage props, and that he had never read any works of true magic.

Moments later, the magician displayed all of the hand gestures and facial expressions that were typical for this trick, and then appeared a giant puff of smoke, which momentarily concealed the entirety of the stage. When the smoke cleared, only the bunny remained in the spotlight. The crowd seemed bewildered for a moment, until a glorious burst of applause erupted. The audience seemed to love the ironic twist on the stage.

The bunny had claimed the role that the magician had deemed him unworthy of. The bunny was a star. With a content wiggle of his stubby tail, he hopped backstage. The assistant scuffled to catch him, but he lost her in the darkness of a corridor. He made his way back to his cage where he enjoyed some rabbit feed, and as he settled down to rest, he looked off to the side at the old magic book which lay open to a page which read - ***How to make a man disappear.***

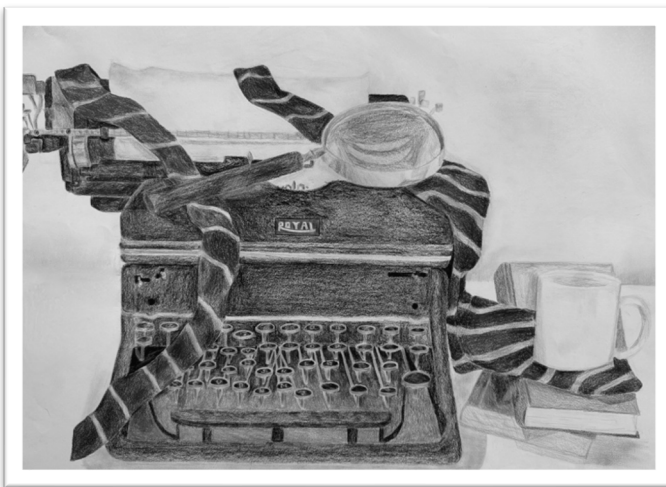
Monsters

by Mark Zipse

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

ALEKSANDER CALLOWAY | Grade 7



Jason Alicard sat down at his cluttered desk and looked at the countless papers, frustrated. He turned the small lamp on, and in a desperate attempt to escape his own despair, gazed up towards the array of movie posters on the wall and, in an instant, was transported to a world of creepy cinematic wonders from the past. This escape from reality ceased seconds later when his boss, the editor-in-chief, slammed open the office door, instantly jolting him back to his incredibly dull job of writing meaningless articles about celebrity conflicts. The editor-in-chief looked around the disheveled room before turning back to look at Jason. He stepped towards the desk and slammed his fist down on it.

"What have you been doing all this time?" he questioned.

"Sir," Jason reasoned, "I'm really sorry, I just don't know where all the time went."

"The time? It's Thursday, Jason. You have had almost a week to finish one article! I knew I would regret hiring you," his boss said.

"It's just that I can't stand to write another one of these articles about a celebrity divorce or drug issue," Jason said.

"That's what readers want these days! It's 2002 Jason; you either roll with the changes or become irrelevant," spoke the editor-in-chief. In another instant, as if intending to cut off Jason before he could reply, he added, "Listen, it's simple really. Write about whatever you want. I'm giving you free rein. However, your future at this company is at stake with this article. Have a decent article on my desk by tomorrow morning or you're out of here."

Jason did not waste his time by replying or begging. Instead, he got straight to work. He examined the story that was being covered in the current issue of *Real People Magazine* and started to form ideas in his head. The whole thing was a simple process of taking one small event and blowing it up to huge proportions in order to stretch it out into one full article. This was always what his boss had expected, and he despised this work. Jason acknowledged to himself that this was not what he had become a journalist for, and that he wanted to write something with actual meaning that could inspire others. He had been stuck writing like this for two years now, and it appeared to him that if he did not take a stand, he would be stuck in this position for at least a few more

years and would be listing a litany of complaints in his mind interminably. At once he decided that he could not bear to write the story assigned to him.

The search for a new story began, and so did the cluttering of papers on the floor adding to the already chaotic appearance of the room. He searched through two of his top drawers, and in the third one he finally came upon something of interest. He scooped an old paper clipping out of the stuffed drawer and held it up to the dim light from the lamp. It was an old horror movie poster from the 1940s. When glancing at it, something strange caught his eye. Above the horrific image of a monster was the title-*The Werewolf of Warsaw*, and below it, the names of the actors in the film- *Jim Varnsen, Michael Alterman, James Smith*. Only one struck his attention, as he recalled seeing it mentioned in an article that he had recently read. He began shifting through his papers again and found the article placed underneath his assortment of rubber bands and spare pens. The name Michael Alterman in small black letters appeared before him, and below it, an article stated that he had recently moved up to New York. Instantly, he sprang out of his chair and hurried over to the other side of the room where his cabinets were. In the large cabinet he found a phonebook and, fueled by his enthusiasm, he was able to find the actor's phone number with a bit of digging. His plan was to interview the famed actor about his role and what the film industry was like back then. He figured that it was more exciting than whatever rubbish he was assigned, but then again, he would take anything over the desired drama. When he rang up the phone, the old man, now seventy-six years old, seemed surprised at first over the inquiry, but soon after replied - "Yes," followed by the address of his house.

When Jason arrived, the menacing iron gate and the long columns with gargoyles protruding from the entrance were nowhere to be seen. In his head, Jason had pictured the old man's house a bit differently, but instead he was greeted by a beautiful assortment of flowers leading up to a door with a welcome mat placed thoughtfully below it. He knocked on the door and immediately Mr. Alterman responded. Soon they were seated at a table with cups of coffee in their hands.

In small letters, Jason began his writing with the date and the first question.

"Some of our readers don't know who you are. Would you care to explain your career?" he asked.

"Yes, well, I was thirty-five when I made the decision to become an actor. It was five years after the war had ended and I needed some money to provide for my family in Poland," the old man said with a look of retrospect on his face.

"Mr. Alterman, in the film industry, your portrayal in *The Werewolf of Warsaw* is often talked about as one of the best horror performances ever. Do you have any comments regarding how you were able to convey such horror on the screen?" Jason questioned.

"It was relatively easy, you see. Back then there was more than enough horror going around to draw inspiration from. I simply channeled it into my performance. Hordes of people going around slaughtering the innocent are not that different from barbaric monsters," Mr. Alterman spoke.

As the words came out of his mouth, flashing images of dark places and of soldiers running amid the burst of bullets and bombs, appeared in Jason's mind. He looked around the room while the old man spoke and noticed several black and white photos framed up on the gray walls. There was one photo in particular of a woman in an elegant dress. Jason figured she was the man's wife. An arrangement of medals was showcased in glass upon marble podiums, and other novelties were strewn around the house as well.

"It was a sad time, those years. You just had to move on; some did, others didn't," remarked Mr. Alterman.

"Interesting. So, the film business was some sort of an escape for you? Did playing those characters help you to forget about the hard times or-" said Jason before he was interrupted.

"I suppose so. It was a long time ago; things were different back then. From my first role in *The Werewolf of Warsaw*, I got several other jobs, primarily in horror," he answered while his fingers repeatedly tapped the rim of the cup lightly.

Jason wrote all the questions and answers down, specifically noting details regarding Mr. Alterman's past and what made him become an actor. This writing meant more than just an interview to Jason. It meant he was finally writing something with purpose that people could truly admire. This sat well with some moral complex that resided deep within his heart, and as a result, for the first time in a while, Jason was actually enjoying his job. No longer was he ashamed to be writing paparazzi pieces. Now, he had freed himself of the chains of mediocrity and despair which long bound him to his own self misery.

The retired actor glanced down at Jason's notepad, where the young journalist was working away writing sheet after sheet of inspirational material from the interview. "You seem like a genuinely decent young man," said

Mr. Alterman. "It's easy to forget who the real monsters are when they look just like you. Never forget who you are at heart." These were the last words that concluded the interview and Jason's summary in his notepad.

Both men shook hands, and Jason exited the house speaking only a few words of farewell before heading back to his office. As he walked down the street, he flipped open his notebook and looked at the words he had written down. Mr. Alterman had left a sizable impression on him, with his hope driven words dominating Jason's thoughts for the entire walk.

When he arrived at the office building, the doorman greeted him with a friendly gesture, and he proceeded to walk inside. He took the elevator up to the third floor where the journalist's offices were located and proceeded to turn down the brightly lit hallway towards his office. As he passed the other cubicles and offices he glanced at his coworkers' screens and each one of them projected the same meaningless conflicts that had caused him so much turmoil. A twitch of melancholy spewed from his heart and cast an expression of annoyance upon his face. He reached his office, locked the door, and sat down at his desk clearing away the papers that lay about the entire surface. Starting his computer, he instantly opened his notebook and got to work typing up the interview. An hour later, after editing and revising his work, he submitted it to his alleged superiors for review. He waited patiently, for this process ordinarily took no more than five minutes due to the usual nature of the work. He pulled out the old movie poster from another stack of papers and studied it once more. In an instant Jason pulled himself out of his chair and rose up to hang the horror poster on the wall as a tribute to the interview. As soon as he hung it up, a barrage of fists pounded upon the outside of his door.

"Open this door Jason!" exclaimed the editor-in-chief.

Jason obeyed the demand and in flooded the horde of coworkers and the editor-in-chief through the narrow doorway. The scene was reminiscent of an angry mob bearing torches and pitchforks violently chanting his name. Their faces all had torn expressions on them which gave the impression that they were accusing Jason of being arrogant. The very act of writing something profound and meaningful was a personal offence to them. Amidst all the commotion, he was pressured up against his desk and quickly shuffled around into his chair. The editor-in-chief shoved past all the others and slammed down a stack of papers onto his desk. It was his interview, printed, and torn in half.

"What is this!" yelled his boss as he pointed at Jason.

"It's my article for the magazine," he replied.

"It's useless trash!" his boss said amid a reaction of cheers and shouts from the crowd behind him.

"No one cares about a worthless old man! At least not our readers!" growled the editor-in-chief.

"Perhaps writing about the worst in others only brings out the worst in you," said Jason in an attempt to stand his ground.

The editor-in-chief's face turned red with rage. "Get out of my building now and don't bother packing your things."

After they all exited the room, Jason looked around and decided to heed his boss's warning and leave as soon as possible. He stared at the poster one last time before taking it off the wall so that it could go with him wherever he may land next. When he left the building, he was not in a state of despair. He left feeling proud that he had finally spoken up, and enlightened by the wisdom of Mr. Alterman, which taught him that not all monsters have claws and fangs.

Mi identidad

by Daniela Torre Blanes

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

La identidad es algo que puede ser influenciada dependiendo de experiencias personales y familiares. Toda mi familia, incluyéndome a mí, es de Puerto Rico pero mis abuelos del lado de mi padre son de Cuba. Esto ha influenciado mi identidad porque estoy muy orgullosa de ser de los dos lugares. Otra cosa que ser de dos países ha influenciado en mi vida es que puedo celebrar las dos culturas. A mí me gusta mucho ser de dos lugares diferentes porque yo he estado muy expuesta a las tradiciones que celebran las dos culturas. La identidad de alguien es algo muy importante en la vida de una persona.

Ser bilingüe viene con muchas cosas buenas y cosas malas. Uno de los desafíos de ser bilingüe es que me he acostumbrado a usar los dos idiomas en una oración. Esto es un problema porque cuando no se usa una palabra en español, se sustituye por una palabra en inglés. Otra razón de porque eso es un problema es porque cuando le estoy hablando a alguien como mi abuela, ella no entiende las palabras en inglés y se confunde. Aunque ser bilingüe viene con muchos desafíos, también tiene muchas cosas buenas. Es muy bueno porque tengo la oportunidad de poder celebrar festivos como Nochebuena. Este es un día festivo muy importante para mí porque es un día en el que toda la familia se junta. En mi opinión yo pienso que los Americanos y las otras culturas que no son hispanas no experimentan este día igual que los hispanos. A mí me gusta ser bilingüe porque viene con muchas cosas buenas, aunque hay algunos desafíos.

Mi identidad está basada en ser bicultural y bilingüe por el lugar en que vivo. Como casi todo el mundo en Miami habla inglés y español, es muy fácil confundirse y hablar “spanglish”. Ser bilingüe no solo afecta como hablamos, también afecta los festivos que celebramos. Como dije anteriormente, Nochebuena es un festivo que normalmente solo los hispanos celebran. Vivo en los Estados Unidos así que también celebro Thanksgiving. Esto es algo que aprecio mucho porque aunque Thanksgiving es un festivo “gringo” a mí me gusta mucho y es algo que une a toda la familia. Personalmente, a mí me gusta celebrar Thanksgiving aunque hay personas que no les gusta celebrarlo. Yo estoy muy orgullosa de ser bilingüe porque pienso que hablar dos idiomas es algo muy bueno. Hay muchas personas que no están orgullosas de ser bilingües porque los discriminan mucho, especialmente si viven en un lugar muy Americano. Por ejemplo, los hispanos que viven en estados donde no hay muchos hispanos, son muy discriminados por ser hispanos. En conclusión, parte de mi identidad es ser bilingüe y bicultural porque estoy muy orgullosa de ser hispana y de poder celebrar todos los festivos especiales. Hay muchas personas que no les gusta ser bilingües pero yo pienso que todos los hispanos tienen que estar orgullosos de donde vienen.

Mi herencia cultural

by Antonella Ciocca

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Cada familia de herencia hispana tiene su propia cultura. En todas las herencias hispanas, hay diferentes tradiciones, costumbres y valores. Dependiendo de la cultura hispana de la que proviene una persona, su forma de vivir, las comidas y la manera en que festejan eventos pueden variar mucho. En mi caso, mi herencia hispana es de Colombia. La he ido aprendiendo a través de mi familia y las tradiciones que tienen.

Mi conexión con mi herencia colombiana es muy importante para mí porque he crecido con los valores que mi familia me ha enseñado, como la unión familiar, la hospitalidad y el respeto por nuestras raíces. Una costumbre colombiana que valoro mucho es cuando todos se reúnen en familia para celebrar la Nochebuena en diciembre. Ese día, nos juntamos para rezar, cantar novenas y disfrutar de platos típicos como los buñuelos y la natilla. Yo también mantengo la unión familiar al participar en estas tradiciones y al aprender recetas de mi abuela, como la bandeja paisa y el sancocho, que me recuerdan a mi herencia. Además, me esfuerzo por conocer más sobre la cultura a través de la música, los programas y las historias que comparte mi familia.

Yo sé un poco sobre la historia y el legado de mi familia, especialmente por las historias que mis abuelos me han contado sobre cómo eran sus vidas en Colombia cuando eran jóvenes. Sin embargo, hay muchas cosas que todavía me gustaría investigar más, como los orígenes de nuestras costumbres. También me gustaría aprender cómo los eventos históricos de Colombia han influido en nuestra familia. A veces, por vivir fuera de Colombia, me siento un poco desconectada, especialmente cuando no entiendo bien algunas tradiciones que menciona mi familia. Sin embargo, esto me motiva a aprender más sobre la historia de Colombia y sus diferentes regiones, porque creo que mi herencia cultural puede ayudarme a entender mejor de dónde vengo y quién soy.

En el futuro, quiero que mis hijos comprendan la importancia de conocer las raíces colombianas. Me gustaría enseñarles no solo las costumbres como cocinar platos típicos, sino también los valores de resistencia, generosidad y alegría que siempre ha tenido mi familia. También sería ideal poder llevarlos a Colombia para que conozcan y experimenten la vida en ciudades como Bogotá, Cartagena, Medellín, Cali y más. Para que las futuras generaciones se conecten con las anteriores, tengo la intención de mantener viva la tradición de contar historias familiares, mostrarles fotos y enseñarles la música y los bailes que son parte de la cultura colombiana.

Para concluir, mi herencia cultural colombiana es una parte importante de mi identidad. A través de mis tradiciones, valores y costumbres, siento un sentido de pertenencia. Sin embargo, a veces me he sentido un poco alejada de mis raíces, pero siempre encuentro maneras de reconectarme. Espero que la próxima generación aprecie y continúe esta historia que, con cada persona de nuestra herencia hispana, seguimos escribiendo.

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