

CREATING SPACES

2022

**A collection of the winning writings of the annual writing competition
entitled *Creating Spaces: Giving Voice to the Youth of Minnesota***

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Note to Readers:

Some of the works in *Creating Spaces* may not be appropriate for a younger reading audience.

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POETRY
Grades 3 & 4

Penni Moore
Hills, MN
1st Place

The State of the World

Now, the world is full of pain,
And it runs deep, deep through our very veins!
We are still recovering from some harsh days,
Where we knew, things weren't just going to fade away...
Who knows, those days might even continue to grow!
But we, yes, we, can stop this mighty blow!

Afrah Mohamed Abusali
Marshall, MN
2nd Place

The Beautiful Moon

Here I am, on the moon,
I wish to go to Earth very soon!
I can see unlimited stars,
And even see the planet Mars!

I am with the rocks and craters,
Maybe I will go and explore them later.
I came by flying on a rocket ship,
Which brought me here to enjoy this fun trip!

I love this beautiful place,
On the moon in outer space!

Hattie Klassen
Mountain Lake, MN
3rd Place

Horses

I love my horse.
Look at his beauty!
My horse is smart.
You may disagree,
but his quick mind amazes me.

In the old days
horses worked a lot.
My grandpa says
he loved his horses,
but my dad does not.

My horse notices my feelings.
Sometimes I'm sad,
other times I'm happy.
My horse knows I'm not mad.
He's my amazing friend.

FICTION
Grades 3 & 4

**Addyson Hall
Butterfield, MN
1st Place**

Winter Trouble

One day in the winter, there was a family of three. Kailey, Luke, Sofia, and a golden doodle dog named Jack. It was time for Sofia to get on the school bus. There was a blizzard coming, but school was still on.

They got to school, and the teacher said, “We might have to go back home because there could be a blizzard, but in the meantime, we are going to do math.”

A half an hour later, it started snowing very hard, and the power went out. The students and the teacher stopped what they were doing and all of a sudden it got very, very cold.

The principal came in and said, “The heater is broken, and we cannot call your parents because the cell towers are down, and the roads are too icy, so your parents are unable to come get you. We don’t have heat, so we will have to go get our extra blankets and coats from the library. We might not have enough for everyone, so you will have to huddle.”

Sofia said, “I am going on an adventure to find blankets and coats for everybody.”

She realized that she needed to go get the keys and a flashlight because the power was out in the whole school. Sofia didn’t know where the blankets and coats were in the library, but she did know where the key was. She walked to the office to get the keys, but she had to hide in between the lockers because she was not supposed to be in the office without permission. When she got in the office, there was a person standing in the corner talking on the phone.

She thought to herself, “I guess the cell towers are back up.” She had to hide from them because she did not know who

they were, and they could be office guards who could get her in trouble because she was not supposed to be in the office. Meanwhile, she whispered to herself, “I need to get the keys so we can warm up.”

A half an hour later, she walked down the hall, turned the corner, and unlocked the library. She walked in and searched every cabinet and drawer until she reached the last cabinet. It was locked. Sofia tried every key on the keyring. Finally, the last key opened the cabinet. Inside she found a room full of blankets and coats for everyone in the school!

Sofia enlisted her best friend Samantha to help her bring the coats and blankets to everyone in the gym. Half an hour later, they finished handing out all the blankets and coats.

Sofia told Samantha, “I was in the office earlier and saw people in the corner. They were talking on the phone about something.”

“I think we should listen to their conversation,” suggested Samantha. “Let’s go.”

Twenty minutes later, Sofia and Samantha were standing behind the guards listening to their conversation. The guards were talking about a plan to keep the kids at school as long as possible to make them work on homework that won’t be fun, but they will be prepared for their tests. The girls didn’t want to do homework at the school all night, so Sofia went to grab her cell phone to check to see if she could call her mom.

“Mom, I overheard the office guards coming up with a plan to keep us here and study for a test. I want to come home. Can you please come get me?”

“Sure honey I will come as soon as our driveway is clear.” An hour later, Sofia’s mom showed up with the rest of the parents. The parents were so mad at the school they took all their kids home and said they would never be back. The students never came back, and the school had to shut down.

When they got home, Sofia said, “I think I am going to go to bed so I can get some sleep.”

Mom said, “I think you had a long adventure at school, so it is okay to go to bed.”

Dad said, “Good night Honey.”

Sofia went to a new school and lived happily ever after.

Penni Moore
Hills, MN
2nd Place

Mystery Disc

In the early 1850's a boy named Carter and his sister May found the start of what movies would come to be. They may not have known it, but they had just witnessed the future. What will have to happen to pay the price is unknown, but let's hope they come back safe and sound.

Hi! My name is Carter. I live with my sister May and my grandmother! Here are some things to be aware of about me. Know that I do not always tend to be smart, but my athletic abilities kind of take its place. I always go into things without thinking, too. Now we will start at the very beginning.

Today when I got home from a long walk I found my feet pulling me towards the attic. I have always known not to disrupt people's past, especially my grandma's private stuff, but I feel today more than ever that my curiosity just needs to know! Quickly I run to May's room and grab her needles from her shelf. After years of practicing I quickly picked the lock. Trying not to make the old rusty door creak, as much as it wanted to, I slid my body into the room.

Inside I saw what I expected to see, just a bunch of old musty things from the past. As I walked around I picked up things I thought were interesting and started to create a pile. Once I finished my pile I heard a small crack beneath my right foot. Nervous of wrecking my grandmother's stuff I looked at what I had found. At the time all it was to me was a shiny circle shaped thing with a hole in the middle. That was before it started to glow.

Since the heat of the glow was very unexpected I flung the circle across the room. As soon as it touched the ground golden strings of colorful light danced around forming an arch. Soon it had grown up to the ceiling high enough that anyone of any height could fit through. I tried to recover from the shock. I thought that I should try to see where it goes, starting with my hands, then my head. I soon saw I was sticking out from a sky full of almost fake clouds. This time the shock got to me, and I started to lose my cool, scrambling to get out. I heard a small voice call out... it was May!

The little girl must have scared me soooooo much that I started falling out of the sky! Even though May was probably mystified by the golden arc, she must've jumped to try and help me. But by then we both were on the way to hitting the blocky hard ground below us. I will tell you that it was not a fun fall. Landing on the ground made pain flare inside my body like an alert telling me to get it to stop! Sadly, I knew I needed to go find help for my sister, so I started looking around but there was nothing. Quickly, I went to check on May.

Once I had found her, it appeared as though she had survived the rough fall. She mumbled something like, "Why do little sisters always have to be involved with their brothers' problems?"

I came over and told her that more than likely we needed to walk around a little farther to find help. On and on we walked with no supplies, just a heap-load of grumpiness.

After the sun had gone down, I heard a yell. May had fallen down a steep-looking hole! I pushed my body and down I went deeper into the hole. Once I reached the bottom I smelled warm tea with buttery bread. Slowly I looked up and saw a huge library. I also saw a round plump gray and black cat who welcomed me to look around with a wave of her paw. Even with the strange offer from a cat we still needed to find

a way out, and this library seemed to have been our chance. So we couldn't be too frightened by everything, especially in this crazy world.

After peeking through many of the books, I came across something called the Revealing Spell, a thing that might reveal the portal we came through. For the first time since I'd entered, the cat came over and asked why I was in need of such a strange book. I quickly changed the subject and asked it if it had any maps of where we were. Carefully it took out an ancient looking scroll, and as she opened it names I didn't know were spread out on the page. The one we were closest to was still pretty far away, but it was called Hogwarts Home of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

I thanked the cat for its time and I urged May to come with me out of the long hole. When the cat wasn't looking I slipped the Revealing Spell book and the map into my pants, and we went on our way. Finally once we made some space between us and the suspicious cat I sat down and started looking through the Revealing Spell book to find out what items we would need to have a shot at getting home. As I was reading it listed things I had no idea where to find or what they even were! It said a Nimbus 2000, Jedi master's lightsaber, and a mermaid scale. Under each word had a tiny, tiny description that I, with my limited reading abilities, couldn't understand. May, on the other hand, might be able to. So with a little bit of courage I asked May to read each one slowly.

The first one said that the only way to find it is up in the sky, saying only the richest could've bought this amazing broom. It said that it was located in the middle of Hogwarts School. I told May that was where we needed to go first if we ever wanted to get back home. Since I wanted to see my grandma so much and to go back to our tiny little home, we started walking right away. But it was going to be way too far to walk on our own. As we walked, people in carriages of all

sorts passed by us as we made our way out of the thick forest. Finally I saw our chance to hop on to one of them that was going the way we needed to go, and I pulled up May into the pinkish-reddish small hay carriage.

After a couple of hours of resting I saw where we needed to get off. When we looked up, we both saw a huge castle with dark colors almost bursting out of the landscape. This is when things got really interesting. Kids and adults had wands in their hands and were casting colorful things out and talking loudly. Each strand of light came down with some sort of effect. Chaos and happiness crisscrossed the sturdy brick path. With a little more walking we were standing in front of the large castle. Just as amazing as the colors on the path, kids flew in the sky on wooden sticks. It only took a second to realize that was the “broom” we needed, and we needed it soon! However, I remembered we didn’t need just any flying broom; we needed the Nimbus 2000. I immediately knew that we needed to get into the giant castle. I told May, who was still staring in awe at the kids flying around, that we would have to sneak in after nightfall. She agreed with my idea, and we briskly looked around for a good place to sleep.

At 1:00 a.m. we made our way to a window I had spotted that was cracked open just enough to get in. I hoisted May up, and then after she was secure I pulled myself in, too. Once I had gotten in, a hallway stretched with dorms marked with the words Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, Griffendor, and Slytheren. The hardest part was we had no idea where they put their magical flying brooms! Walking through the dark was hard, too. After wondering for about ten minutes, I ran into something other than the wall. It felt like a kid! When I looked, nothing was there, so I did the smartest thing I could think of and tried to hit it. This may sound stupid, but it did the job. Almost at once I saw a boy’s head pop out of nowhere. He had a tiny lightning shaped scar on his head.

He quickly told us to leave since he must've known we didn't belong here, but May and I begged him to help us. He must've had some nerves, that boy, because soon after we had told him we needed a broom, he said he could maybe lead us a little farther then they were right now, but only if we told him why we needed it. I explained as best as I could because I knew he was our best and only shot. With a sense of dread on how stupid May and I had been to go down through that magical portal, we started to walk down the halls with the most mysterious boy. After walking down long stairs the boy told us that we had entered the broom shack.

We peeked around through hundreds of different shapes and sizes of brooms. They all had names on the side of them, but apparently Nimbus 2000's were really hard to find. Finally I found my courage and asked the boy his name. "Harry Potter," he said. When I didn't seem to know what that name meant he told me why I should know. I was in shock! It seemed as though he had been through a lot! I knew though I had to ask him to help me find the specific type of broom. He told me that he was the only one who had one. I started to ask him if we could borrow it, but he interrupted. He said that I needed it way more than him. I think he understood how much we wanted to go back to our grandmother. I quickly thanked him and told May that we needed to leave.

We scurried through the halls looking for the fastest way to get out. After all, we still needed two more items for the revealing spell. After another hop on a carriage, we sat down and took out the Revealing Spell book. May started to read about the next item, a lightsaber. May read aloud the description under it. "You must travel to the Rebel Alliance's Hideout (just West of where we were) and find the master and get a saber."

May thought this one sounded really hard, but I waved it aside like it was going to be a piece of cake (which I would

find it wasn't). I told May to take a rest before we arrived, but as she fell asleep I went with her as if she was dragging me into the darkness of sleep.

When I woke up my head was throbbing, and I felt like I was upside down! As my eyes adjusted to the bright light I saw I was upside down and in a trap! I scrambled to turn right side up, and once I had I saw that our ride was gone. I also saw May in a trap beside me, obviously trying her hardest to get out. I saw her use her teeth like a savage dog slowly taking out bits of the knots that kept us stuck. After ten minutes straight she plopped out of the net with ease. Once she was out I asked her to come and get me out. She walked up towards me and stuck her tongue out, then said that she would find the items on her own. I was baffled. How could she do that to me? Then I realized I didn't ever need her. I could travel on my own, but could she? I could see the determination in her eyes that she wasn't going to take no for an answer, and then she started walking away towards our next destination.

It took a few minutes to recover from May leaving me before I started to yank my body through the knots. When I was out, I checked the map and started walking once again. When the sun had started to set I saw a tip of a cave that was bursting out of the ground. As I walked I wondered how May would make it anywhere without the map. I was getting really worried about her. What if she got caught or hurt? After another hour or so I arrived at the cave. Before entering, I decided to make a mark on the ground with a stick to show May I had been there. Then I stepped through the gaping hole.

What I saw once I was inside was outstanding! Crystal lights hung from the ceiling creating a wonderful glow on the walls. There were people of all shapes and sizes in homes and stores. It was an underground world! Best of all, a silvery black hut was in the middle of it. Kids sat with a small green elf. He seemed to be teaching those kids how to fight with a

green sizzling stick of light which I assumed was a saber. Maybe that was the item that we needed for the spell, but I didn't know how to get it.

The first thing I tried to do was to ask for it nicely. The answer I got from the little green elf was very strange. He said, "If you want the saber you must have a reason, and you must be worthy."

I then asked him if he could teach me if I told him why I needed it. He agreed to my plans, and I explained why the saber was so important to me. At the end of my story he didn't seem very surprised at all. He just said I must work very hard to prove worthy of a saber.

I started the next day. I learned how to handle a saber with a stick and got to see how strong sabers are. My worries were lost about getting home and about May. For the first time since I had landed there I was having fun! My master made me work my butt off, but I could tell that each practice I was getting better. Finally, after a duel with one of the older kids, Master Yoda (that was the little elf's name) took me away and walked me into the hut for the first time. I was astonished about how dull and boring the inside was. I had been expecting more crystals and other masters from the Rebel Alliance but inside it was empty and cold. We walked deeper into the cave which was surprisingly long. After we had finished walking through a corridor Yoda opened an old black door. This was where things got interesting. Sabers of all colors and sizes filled the room, but in the middle stood an old, but pristine, box holding a blue saber. At once I knew that was the saber I wanted, but Yoda steered me to the left of the box where there sat a small saber. Yoda picked it up and told me that this was an ancient saber. He gave it to me with honor and respect for the determination I had shown in training. When he looked back at me and saw I was not paying attention, he just sighed and handed me the saber. I left with a pit in my stomach even

though I had gotten another item for the revealing spell. May hadn't come back yet, and my worries had grown. As I neared the exit from the cave, I saw footprints heading south. I knew it might not be a clue, but I had to try. After a few seconds of hesitation I walked the way the stick was pointed.

When I stopped walking, I found myself at a beautiful, sparkling pond spread across the land, going on for about a mile. I looked around the peaceful area and saw at least one campfire that someone had tried to make. As I walked toward the camp I saw two shoes. They were Mays! I looked everywhere for her, and just as I was about to give up I heard gurgling beneath the surface of the water. Out came my sister smiling gleefully at a shiny scale in her palm. She only noticed me once she had fully come out of the water. Almost at once she sprang up and came to hug me. I was surprised when something else came out of the water. A human face popped up and smiled warmly at me and my sister but when the rest of her body came up I realized that where her legs should have been were replaced with a blending tail of colors. Even with the strange sight I decided to not ask questions because we obviously both had some strange days while we were apart. I walked back to the woods and sat conveniently on a wooden log. As May walked over to me I told her to summarize what she had done while she was here. This is what she said...

"I'm sorry for leaving you, but I found something we really needed, the mermaid scale! I walked until I found this wonderful place. I felt like I needed a break so I jumped into the water. It was reckless considering what we've seen here, but I really needed to relax. As soon as I got in the water it started pulling me deep underwater. I was really scared but out of nowhere a beautiful girl came and saved me. Until I saw her tail I was amazed at how she helped me! She took me to her home after she had somehow created a bubble for me to breathe underwater. Once we entered, she told her story of

why she was here. It was sad but truthful, so I told her ours. I can't believe how well she listened. She told me that she had the last item on the revealing spell list. I watched her as she ripped a piece of her tail off and handed it over to me. I asked if I could stay a few nights to be safe from what was in the woods. She welcomed me like an old friend, and I spent the last few days really happy. But of course the whole time I was still worried about you.

I explained what I had done, too, and after a few minutes of happiness we started the spell. We stacked up the items and recited the words from the book.

As we finished speaking, the items started to glow that familiar warm golden glow that had gotten us here, and soon we were standing in front of a golden portal that hopefully would lead us home. I took May's hand, and we walked through the portal. Once I opened my eyes, May and I were standing in the attic. The portal we had come through was nowhere to be seen. We were home! I raced downstairs and went back to my normal life. But somewhere in this world there is that disc that is waiting to be found, a universe waiting to be explored somewhere in our world.

Afrah Mohamed Abusali
Marshall, MN
3rd Place

Isabelle

Luna looked behind her as she heard a whisper in her ear. “Who is there?” asked Luna in a scared voice. She looked behind her and saw a ghost, sized like a 10-year-old girl. “What? How did you get here, and who are you?”

“Follow me,” said the ghost.

Luna felt like she was about to scream, but she stayed silent. She followed the ghost outside in the nighttime cold. The ghost led her to a tight, tiny room inside of an old building. Luna saw ten or even more ghosts.

“Luna, look, my name is Isabelle, and I am going to make you do a challenge. If you make it to the end, you will go back to your parents. If you do not make it, you will become one of us, a ghost. Are you in?”

Luna knew she had no choice. She looked down at her favorite watch and was reminded of something. “Yes, I will do it... but what if my parents wake up in the morning, and they get worried about me?”

“Time will stop until you’re finished with the challenge. Now I will give you your first clue. I am big and tall. I am two colors, and I let you breathe. What am I? Go now; the faster you go, the faster you will see you parents.” The ghost handed her a small piece of paper. “And here is the card of what your first clue was. Good luck.”

“Okay,” replied Luna. Then Isabelle quickly disappeared. *Well, trees are tall, and they can be big, and trees are two colors. I know there is a big willow tree in front of the oak tree forest!* Luna went to the big willow tree. Nothing unusual. *Wait, this strand of the tree has a slip of paper in it.* She picked

it up and read it. Clue 2: I can be big and usually am just one color. You sometimes can find a lot of me just in one spot. What am I? *Well, trees are just mainly one color, but they are usually skinny, and we already had a clue about that.*

“Luna!” Luna heard a scream loud and clear. It sounded like it was right next to her, and it was. It was another ghost, and one that she saw when the challenge started. “Hello!” said Luna startled.

“Please don’t tell Isabelle that I am here, because I’m here to help you escape. And... go back to your parents. Come on!”

Luna thought for a moment. “Okay, well I think that the second clue is the pumpkin patch,” said Luna. “Because not only does it fit the clues, but there is a pumpkin patch nearby!”

“Yeah, let’s go there.”

Luna went with the ghost to the pumpkin patch, and there was the next clue on a large pumpkin. It said, “You made it close, but you are not there yet, and that’s all.” Luna looked confused.

“Maybe you should turn it over,” offered the ghost.

“Okay, now it says... nothing.” Luna was disappointed but then realized something. “Wait! This is leading me farther and farther away from home because this pumpkin patch is where I got lost a long time ago. And I know for sure that this isn’t close to my house!”

“Luna, it looks like you want to turn into a ghost, because this is independent only. It means only you were supposed to do this, not with any help, including my sister Annabelle’s. All by yourself, do you hear me, Luna?” said Isabelle, from beside them.

Luna could hear Annabelle laugh and say she could not believe Luna really fell for it. Luna wanted to scream but she knew she could not, so she stayed silent. When Isabelle left, Luna looked at Annabelle, but before she could say anything to her, Annabelle faded away. Luna did not know where to go

next, so she decided to go back to the big willow tree. There she saw a button blending into the brown bark of the tree.

How did I not notice that? She pressed it, nothing happened at first, but then a map came out of the tree. It was a map to go back to her home! Luna was pleased until Isabelle came. Luna looked at her watch, she saw her special back-in-time button. She did not know what time it would take her to, so she had waited for the perfect time to use it.

“That’s not for you! It’s for something else!” Isabelle screamed. She ripped the map out of her hands. She got her hand up and ready to smack her, but Luna remembered the back-in-time button on her watch and pressed it. Luna was relieved that she had gone back to the time when she had been eating breakfast the day before. Luna happily never saw Isabelle or Annabelle again!

POETRY
Grades 5 & 6

Emma Fosso
Raymond, MN
1st Place

The Bright Red Cardinal

The bright red cardinal sits on a branch.
It stands out against the shimmering, falling, snow.

The bright red cardinal is hope, peace, and love,
As the branches on the trees start to blow.

The bright red cardinal sits at the feeder, as
It throws a squirrel a meal.

The bright red cardinal may go away as spring draws near,
But in winter, shall soon reappear.

Tyler Reith
Avoca, MN
2nd Place

Farming Cycle

Spring: turn the soil
Sow the seeds
Rain dance
Little green sprouts all in a row
Crop dusters and TerraGators
Professional rock pickers
Dirt clod fight
Bring the heat
Rain dance again
Gosh, it's hot!
Die weeds!!
Knee high by the fourth of July
Green to brown; leaves fall
Combine wheels go round and round
Tsunami: NO MORE RAIN DANCE!
Combine wheels deep down in the muck and mire
Waiting is the hardest part
Beep! Beep! Back in the field
Fake winter: snow
Waiting...waiting...waiting...WAITING
Going stir crazy
Beep! Beep! Back in the field
Yah! Finally done with harvest
Fall: turn the soil

Michaela Bambrick
Slayton, MN
3rd Place

Thick Fog

Rain is like tears,
tragedy falling from my eyes.
A dream is a far cry from reality.
Fog is like being lost and can't be found
Be found
A mountain is like an endless pile of struggles.
A shooting star is like sanity slipping away.
A friend is like a light at the end of a dark tunnel.
Happiness is like clearing the fog and being
found.

FICTION
Grades 5 & 6

Chloe Kuehn
Redwood Falls, MN
1st Place

Mr. Linden's Library

“Ann Baker!” repeated Mrs. White, the fifth grade teacher of Oakwood Middle School.

Ann Baker shot up in her seat. “Yes, Mrs. White,” she said with a smile. Ann was a pretty girl. She had long brown hair, blue eyes, and rosy cheeks.

Mrs. White spoke again, “Ann you fell asleep in class.”
“Did I?” asked Ann.

“Yes you did!” cried Mrs. White. After Mrs. White had calmed down, she asked, “Now Ann, what is the capital of Kentucky?” Of course Mrs. White thought that Ann would not know because she had been asleep while they learned the capitals of the U.S.A, but Ann was a smart girl. Ann had learned the capitals ages ago.

“Frankfort,” she answered.

Mrs. White stared at her in disbelief. “Correct,” she said quietly.

After school Ann and her best friend Jessica (Jess) Walker were walking home from school. Jessica had medium, long, blonde hair, and bright, green eyes. As they were walking, something caught their eyes. It looked like a construction site. They walked slowly over to the site, and realized that they were building a library. Jessica got really excited. She loved to read as much as Ann did, but Ann didn't even smile.

Jessica being the good friend that she is asked, “Ann what's wrong? The look on Ann said it all. “Oh, sorry, I forgot,” said Jessica.

“It's okay, Jess, it isn't your fault,” said Ann quietly.

When Ann got home she ran upstairs to her room. She fell onto her bed and started her homework.

“Ann, where are you?” screamed Ann’s older brother John loud enough for the whole town of Oakwood to hear.

“I’m up here like always,” answered Ann.

“Cool,” he replied as he collapsed onto the couch and turned on the TV.

Later that evening Mr. Baker called, “Kids I’m home,” as he walked in the door. Ann dashed down the stairs to meet her father.

“Dad I thought you weren’t supposed to be home till 8:00,” exclaimed Ann.

“Well, I got off early,” said Mr. Baker.

Mr. Baker had kind, blue eyes and short, brown hair. He appeared in his usual clothing, a sweater vest and pants, and carrying his black briefcase.

“Shall I start dinner?” Mr. Baker asked.

“The new housekeeper, Mrs. Crawley, has already started,” replied Ann.

“Wonderful!” exclaimed Mr. Baker who didn’t prefer to cook.

As the family was finishing up dessert, Mr. Baker asked his children, “Did you see anything interesting in town today?”

“I saw a rat with a bottle cap on its head!” said John excitedly.

“Fassssssinating,” said Ann sarcastically.

“I saw a new library being built!” said Ann to her father. “So I thought maybe I could...”

But before Ann could even finish, her dad answered, “Ann, you know the rule.”

“But dad!”

“No, Ann.”

“But...”

”No, Ann.”

“Fine.”

Ann Baker loved to read. She had quite a few books herself, but she had read them multiple times. She used to love to go to the library, but then her dad forbade her to go to the library, and it was all her brother’s fault.

It was a Saturday in mid-July. Ann had just checked out what seemed to be her 10,000th book from the town library and left it unattended. Her brother, yes her own brother, had used the book as a pinata and slammed it with a bat. Ann was shocked when she saw what he did to her book, and then the worst thing happened. John blamed the death of her poor book...on her! When her dad came home he told Ann she was not allowed to check out any more books from the library. Ann spent the rest of the night in her room crying.

Jessica and Ann walked home from school every day together. What started out as glancing at the new library became a daily routine. Ann and Jessica would walk by the library every single day. One day they walked by it, and it was finished!

Ann was allowed to go into the library and read the books as long as she didn’t check out any books.

The first few days, Ann and Jessica only looked at the books and had friendly little conversations with the owner/librarian named Mr. Linden.

Then one day Ann was in the library by herself reading a newspaper. She flipped to the page with the missing people on it, and to Ann’s surprise she saw ten missing people. She looked at who went missing, and she realized that all those people had been in Mr. Linden’s library! She looked even closer at the newspaper and found out that all those people had *checked out* a book from Mr. Linden’s library!

As she walked home she stopped at Jessica's house and told her, "Don't check out any books from Mr. Linden's library!"

The next day Ann didn't feel well so Jessica went to the library by herself. By that time Jessica had completely forgotten what Ann had told her and checked out a book titled *The Dark Garden*.

She went home to her quaint house. She ran up the creaking stairs and into her bedroom. She flopped down on her bed and opened her book.

When she had finished the first chapter something strange started to happen. Vines started to grow out of the book. The vines grew larger and larger as they wrapped around Jessica. She started to scream but the vines grew around her mouth until she was completely consumed by the book!

The room went silent. The book fell on the floor with a large THUD and slithered under the twin bed. The next day at school Jessica wasn't there.

Ann stopped by Jessica's house but she wasn't there!

Then Ann was reading the newspaper like she always did and saw Jessica's name in the missing people section! Ann was speechless.

The next week was hard for Ann. She felt lost without her friend. She needed to find her!

Ann asked Mr. and Mrs. Walker if she could look through Jessica's room. They said she could curiously. Ann went into the deserted bedroom and searched it top to bottom. Ann found absolutely no clues as to where Jessica may have gone until she looked under the bed. She found all sorts of stuff like nail polish, an old jewelry box, an unused coloring book, and a book from Mr. Linden's library!

Ann almost had the whole mystery worked out except for some tiny details like why the books were making people disappear and how?

Ann spent her weekends in her room thinking about the mystery and about Jessica. Then one day she figured it out. She had to check out a book from the library to solve the mystery, but how?

Then suddenly the door to her bedroom creaked open and the Baker's housekeeper, Mrs. Crawley, came in to clean up Ann's room. She looked at the newspaper with Jessica's name on it and said, "You poor dear; you must be going through alot!"

"Yeah, I am," replied Ann with a hint of annoyance.

"Is there anything I can do?" questioned Mrs. Crawley.

"Actually there is. I need to check out a book from Mr. Linden's library. Do you think you could cover up for me?" asked Ann.

"Um, wellllllllllll, oh all right!" replied Mrs. Crawley with a guilty look on her face.

"Thank you, thank you!!!!" screamed Ann with joy.

The next day Ann went to the library and checked out a book titled *A Strange Night*.

Ann went home and into her room and read it. By the third chapter the book began to glow. Ann stared at it and decided to throw something in the book.

She ran and grabbed a pencil and threw it into the book. She looked at the back of the book expecting a pencil to fall through it but it didn't.

Then it hit her right in the face! The books were sucking people into their stories, and the people didn't have a way to get out!

Ann sprinted downstairs and into the kitchen. She dialed 911 on the house phone and said, "Hello, um, I found out where all the missing people went! Meet me at Mr. Linden's library!"

"Little girl, do you really think you found *all* the missing people?" said the police in a sharp voice.

“Yes I do. Please believe me!” Ann yelled desperately.

“Oh okay; we’ll come,” replied the police officer annoyed.

Later that day Ann and multiple police officers stood outside the library. “Well where are all the missing people?” asked an angry police officer.

“Follow me,” said Ann.

All of them followed Ann into the library. Ann grabbed a book off a shelf and opened it. The book turned into a tornado. Ann dropped a pen into the book and it did not fall out the other side.

“I don’t get it,” said a police officer.

Ann shut the book and glared at the police officer in disgust.

“What is there not to get! All the people that have gone missing have checked out a book from the library!” said Ann calmly.

The police officers stared at her clueless.

“The books are sucking people into their stories, and the people can’t get out!” yelled Ann, losing her patience.

“Ohhhhhhhhh,” said all the police officers in unison.

“How do we get the people out of the books?” questioned a police officer.

“I don’t know,” said Ann, realizing this for the first time.

Suddenly Mr. Linden walked in whistling. He stopped abruptly when he saw Ann and the police standing there.

“Mr. Linden, you’re under arrest for the missing individuals!” shouted a police officer.

“What are you talking about?” asked Mr. Linden.

“This little girl figured out everything!!” yelled a police officer.

Ann cringed at being called “little.”

“So the girl figured everything out. I was wondering why we stopped our little chats,” said Mr. Linden nonchalantly.

“Get all those poor souls out of your wretched books!” screeched Ann.

“Do what the girl says....NOW!” said a police officer furiously.

“Fine, fine. I’ll do it!” said Mr. Linden with an evil grin.

Mr. Linden went over to a pile of discarded books. He picked up a book from the pile and tapped it three times and muttered something under his breath. Suddenly a person shot out of the book.

“WOW! What happened? Wasn’t I...? Wait, what!” said the confused man.

Mr. Linden did this again. A second person shot out of a book. This time, it was a woman who looked terrified. Once the woman calmed down, she started slapping Mr. Linden with her handbag and screaming at the top of her lungs, “You wretched man, how could you stoop so low! We welcomed you into this town and this is how you repay us!”

Mr. Linden ignored the woman and continued tapping the next book. This time a boy in Ann’s class sprung out of a book and said, “What happened? Why are the police here? Oh, hi Ann!” the boy said.

“Hi,” said Ann shyly.

People continued to pop out of books until Mr. Linden got to the last book in the pile. It was titled *The Dark Garden*. Vines started to grow out of the book. Ann looked closer and saw that there was a person submerged in the vines.

Mr. Linden walked up to the vines and stroked them with his forefinger, and, as if the vines could read Mr. Linden’s mind, they dropped the person reluctantly.

The person who turned out to be a girl fell onto the floor. The girl got up brushed some leaves off of her medium-long, blonde hair and wiped the dirt out of her bright green eyes. She turned around to see everyone looking at her, and Ann recognized the girl’s face immediately.

Ann sprinted to the girl, threw her arms around her, and said, “Jess!”

“Ann,” the girl replied.

There was a long silence. Then a cold sharp voice that belonged to a police officer broke the silence, “Mr. Linden, you may have returned all the missing people, and we thank you for that, but you are also the reason the people went missing in the first place! I’m sorry, but Mr. Linden you are under arrest.”

“Catch me if you can!” yelled Mr. Linden as he jumped into a book that was untitled.

“Get him!” yelled a police officer.

The next few minutes were a blur. There was a lot of noise, a bright blinding light, and then the room went dead silent. The book Mr. Linden had jumped into lay limp and lifeless on the floor. Then the room filled with a thick smoke.

The next day at school was crazy. Ann was a town celebrity. It was all over the newspaper about how she had solved the mystery of the missing people.

She just enjoyed having Jessica back. Ann and Jessica grew up to solve many mysteries, but this is the story of their very first. I hope you enjoyed it.

Lexie Overvaag
Luverne, MN
2nd Place

Tears of Onyx

Zarra watched as her father flew in from the east, the rising sun glowing through his glorious wings. Eliad landed, folding his wings neatly on his back, and placed a bush of glow-berries down at the cave entrance. “Eat up.”

Zarra obediently obeyed. The bitter fruit slipped down her throat, and she stored some in her cheek pouches. She waited for her father to eat some, but he just watched her. She glanced away, uncomfortable.

“Are you happy?” Eliad asked suddenly.

Zarra shifted. She was hurt that her father thought she was unhappy.

“I’m quite happy.” Zarra listened for Eliad’s reply. She munched another mouthful of berries. The tough skin of the glowing fruit snapped between her sharp teeth. Eliad gazed at her with such intensity she thought she would faint.

“I think you’re ready,” he murmured.

Zarra froze. “Ready for what?”

“To make a home of your own.”

“What?!” Zarra leapt up, her wings flaring and turning a bright red color. Her eyes blazed like blue fire. “Why?!”

Eliad turned, his folded wings turning violet. He looked away. “Did you ever wonder where Andriette went that one night?”

Realization hit Zarra like a boulder. “Can I still visit?”

Eliad’s eyes, soft as water, met hers. “Of course.”

“When do I go?” her voice stuttered.

Eliad straightened, his wings fading back to aqua. “Now.” His tail whipped around and grabbed her. He lunged off the

cliff with her trailing behind him. She screamed with joy as the breeze made her unfold her wings. Suddenly, Eliad let go of his daughter. Zarra shrieked as she neared the ground.

“Open your wings!” Eliad instructed from the air. “Glide on the wind!”

Zarra obeyed, as usual. She squeezed her eyes shut. Her claws sunk into soft earth. She opened her eyes. She was safe. She lifted her paw and began to clean the dirt from her long, slender, golden claws. Zarra stared after the shape of her father in the distance. She breathed a painful breath. Walking along, she sent out a signal to other dragons:

My name is Zarra and I do not mean any harm to you, your families, or your territories. I am just passing through.

She waited for a reply. Suddenly, something tackled her from the side. A scarlet dragon stood over her.

“Who are you?” he snarled. A silver dragoness watched from the woods.

“I-I am Zarra.” She gulped.

The red dragon eyed her suspiciously with one amber eye. A jagged scar ran where the other eye should have been. Menacing coal black spines trailed all down his back.

Zarra watched the crimson dragon fearfully. “Why are you a-attacking me?”

He snorted. “You could pose a threat.”

The silver dragon stepped from the forest. “Wait, Inferno. She doesn’t seem to be dangerous.”

Inferno narrowed his eye. “Still. . .” his voice trailed off.

“I don’t mean harm.” Zarra looked at him with large icy eyes. He glared at her with a fierce gaze, his eye unblinking.

There’s something about her, something. . . unusual. I just don’t trust her. Inferno swished his tail angrily. He glanced back at Silver, worry darkening his gaze. The dragoness stood

in a protective stance in front of her offspring. The sickly dragonet lay unmoving on the ground. Zarra followed his gaze, her eyes filling with pity as she spotted the meager dragon. His scales were no longer the bright orange they had been. They were now a dull beige. He weakly lifted his head and let out a raspy groan. Suddenly, a cry rang through the air. Inferno immediately looked up.

No. The Sea-cries!

He lifted off the ground and leapt in front of Silver. The ferocious blue dragons began circling the four beasts on land. Soon they landed, surrounding Silver. She whimpered, glancing around wildly. Inferno sniffed the air. Sea-cries usually didn't attack this fiercely unless they smell blood. A metallic scent touched his nose. Stinging pain in his leg made him look down. One of his claws had ripped off, and was leaving a trail of scarlet liquid wherever he walked.

He led the Sea-cries away from Silver, luring them by shaking his paw heartily. The sting was all he could think of. Just as the Sea-cries were nearly on top of him, a vibrant golden shape tackled the dragon in front. She tossed him aside, panting heavily.

Zarra turned and looked at Inferno. "Are you okay?"

His ears twitched. "Yeah."

Her eyes narrowed and she leapt at him. Her sharp claws missed Inferno's shoulder by an inch. Loud growling rose in her throat. For an instant, Inferno could only see her, claws outstretched, teeth ready to chomp his neck. Inferno turned and saw Zarra wrestling with a huge blue dragon. Gray splotches dotted it. Her teeth sunk into its throat, and the huge behemoth fell. Inferno watched as she climbed down, blood speckling her wings. She collapsed suddenly. Inferno rushed toward her, cradling her with his wings.

"You're wounded."

Her icy eyes opened slightly. "Did. . .I. ."

Inferno touched her mouth with one claw. “Don’t try to speak.”

“Did. . . I. . . *have* to save your behind?”

Inferno glared at her. He then set her on the ground and began to walk away. “You’re fine.”

Silver stepped beside him. “You know, she could be a big help.”

Inferno flattened his ears. “No.”

“We could just—”

“No.”

“We could—”

“No.”

“How about—”

“No.”

“You’re so stubborn!” Silver roared in disgust.

Zarra dragged herself toward them. “Are you fighting?”

“Yes,” Silver replied.

“No.” Inferno lifted his lip.

Zarra cocked her head. “I’m coming with you.”

“No, you’re not,” Inferno sneered. “No one asked you, and no one will.”

Silver smiled a coy grin. “That’s a lie. I’m Silver, Zarra. “Please join us.”

Inferno heaved a sigh. “Now look at what you’ve done.”

Zarra nodded her head. “You’ve invited a strong, loyal and kind, spunky dragoness, who will accept your offer, onto the team.”

Inferno groaned. “Great.”

Zarra raced ahead. “This way!”

Silver shook her head. “Slow down. Firo can’t go that fast.”

Zarra watched the dragonet with pity. *Poor thing.* A strange scent wore its way into her nose. It smelled. . . familiar, somehow. Zarra strained her mind, searching for the memory. Suddenly, Eliad's smell wafted around her as she was swept away to her hatchling years.

Her father had placed his claws on her shoulders, lifting a small scarlet berry. "Zarra, always remember this herb. It will heal any dragon with scale-fade."

Zarra had cocked her ears questioningly. "What's scale-fade?"

Eliad's ocean blue eyes had filled with sorrow. "A terrible illness. It starts with the dragon's legs becoming sore. Usually we take no notice of it, thinking it's just growing pains. But then the pain spreads to the rest of the body, especially the wings, making it impossible to fly or walk. The dragon's skin becomes covered by sores, making it painful to be carried. Eventually, color on the dragon's scales fade, and the dragon dies from not being able to walk or fly, and not being able to absorb the sun's light because the sores make it too painful."

Zarra, although shocked, had twitched her tail tip and pushed on. "What's the timeframe for it?"

"About one week." Eliad had lifted his daughter into the air with his wings and twirled her around. "Now, don't you think it's time for bed?"

Zarra's eyes flew open. "Thank you, Papa."

"What was that?" Inferno grunted.

Zarra ignored him. "Silver, how long has Firo been sick?"

"About six days. Why?" Silver arched one eyebrow.

"Mphf! We're too late." Zarra flattened her ears against her head.

Silver was alarmed. "Too late for what?!"

Zarra quickly explained her memory. "I don't think he'll make it."

Inferno's amber eye blazed. "I don't believe you!"

"Look, I know. But I'm sure. I know it's your son, and it's hard," murmured Zarra.

"Er, he's not my son." Inferno glanced around wildly. "Silver and I aren't. . ."

Silver chuckled. "Um, yeah, we're just good friends." A dark look came over her face. "My mate died a couple years ago."

Zarra folded one wing over Silver. She knew how bad it was to lose your mate. A kingdom dragon would come and take the female into slavery. Or the *Sea-Cries* could attack and . . .

Inferno sniffed skeptically. "Well, I suppose if you know a cure for scale-fade, you should use it."

Zarra's brow furrowed. "It's, uh, a small, red, berry. . ."

Silver blinked hopefully. "Yes?"

"Red . . ."

Inferno threw his paws. "Oh, come *on!* It's obvious she can't remember!"

Zarra blinked sadly. "I'm sorry."

Silver reached out her claws, shaking Zarra's shoulders. "Think! *Think!*" she sobbed.

Zarra pulled away. "I can't remember! I *can't!*"

She then trod out into the wilderness. She passed a bush of glow-berries. One particular berry caught her eye. It was a plump, scarlet, berry. Memories flashed through Zarra's head.

Always remember this common herb. . . Realization shot through her mind.

"It's just a simple glow-berry. . . Hiding in plain sight." She reached and slowly plucked the bright red berry.

"Inferno! Silver!" she roared. "I found it! I found the cure!"

Ryker Gehrke
Beaver Creek, MN
3rd Place

Diggs Pogger File

Resting without a single sound, tired at night, Diggs, the Gehrke family dog, sleeps peacefully on a comfy couch.

Suddenly, Diggs whimpers with fear. With a shocked expression on his face, he opens his doggy door and heads off onto the road. He doesn't hear a single thing—no cars, no people, no life. He bites his tail, hoping he will wake up from this terrible nightmare. But no, he was in this for real. As he walks down the street he sees lots of beautiful but quiet houses. It looked insane for 2021. Like, humanly impossible at the time.

He peers in a window only to see a floating table?! An infinite fridge?! A 60 FEET COUCH?!?! Diggs is confused and scared. He starts to whimper even more. Tears swell up in his eyes like a clogged waterfall. He thought all of this was impossible.

Which it was.

The year was 4089. All the rich people of earth had taken everyone to a new artificial planet that they named Surumrth. He doesn't know this yet, but he will soon join them. Diggs walked around town till he found Rauk's HillTop Stop. He pushed open the door and scavenged around. He saw spilled pop on the floor. He dodged the liquids so he didn't slip and fall. He went behind the counter and found a small fridge. He spent a long time trying to open the fridge, but when he finally did he found a slice of pizza. The pizza was extremely expired, but he was hungry, and he is a dog so, yeah.

As he was gobbling the pizza he heard static. He looked at the old dusty television. It was playing a commercial.

“Hey there! You have heard of mission Surumrth, right? Well, the first rocket is ready! Board today! If you board in the next 24 hours you’ll get a free rocket ride ticket! If you board, you must agree to putting your pets to sleep for 2000 or so years! We are terribly sorry about this, but it will take us a while to build all of those ships! Hey, hey! Now’s your day! Board a mission ship today!”

Diggs, as a dog, didn’t really care or know much about the TV commercials so he kept eating the pizza. As he walked out he heard a strange noise coming from the sky.

“HOLY PIXELS! AHHHHHHHHHHH!!!” he heard the mysterious figure say.

It pounded down on to the ground nearby the gas station. Dust scattered around the area, blinding Diggs’ eyes with it.

“Ugh. This better be worth it for a single dog,” the mysterious thing said while brushing the dust off its body.

“Oh hey! That was easier than I thought!”

The figure floated toward Diggs. Diggs ran away from the figure as quick as a rabbit to avoid the danger it might possess.

“Hey! Come back! I mean no harm—huh, dawgs? I mean Doogs? Diggs? Oh yeah that was it! Anyway, Come back little puppy!”

The figure floated even faster and caught Diggs.

“Ah ha! Finally!”

Diggs whimpers with fear. He closes his eyes thinking something bad was going to happen to him.

“Alright, let me strap myself,” it said.

“AHHHHHH! OH MY GOODNESS, OH MY GOODNESS, I’M GONNA DIE! Wait—HOW AM I TALKING? WHAT IS GOING ON?”

“Hush Diggs, you are okay. My name is Wags! I am a robot from the planet Surumrth. The Gehrke family has sent

me to find you and bring you to our new planet. We didn't want to build a giant ship just for a single dog. It was my duty! Now, I would bring you home, but I've lost almost all of my features from my fall. Oh well!" Wag explained.

"YOU STILL DIDN'T EXPLAIN HOW I'M TALKING!" Diggs shouted.

"Oh, yeah. Whenever I strap onto an animal I auto translate everything they say! Pretty neat, eh? Anyway, let's go get some resources! We gotta go make a pod so we can go home!"

Still confused, Diggs said, "THIS IS MY HOME! I DON'T UNDERSTAND ANYTHING YOU'RE SAYING!"

"Oh okay! I can see how this is confusing! Let me insert you with a knowledge chip! It should make you understand everything!"

"NO! GET OFF OF ME YOU FILTHY ROBOT!" Diggs yelled.

"There! Goodnight for now little buddy!"

Diggs slept (again) because of Wag's chip. He neutralized him to make it easier to put in the chip. Right now Diggs is sleeping soundly while info gets spread over his brain.

"Ugh..." Diggs sighs. "Hey! I know everything now! Guess you are not a bad guy after all, Wags!"

"Correct, puppy! Now, you do have the information in your brain to know that most, if not all, of my features have been lost because of the crash?"

"Of course, now I do! That chip was helpful! Alright, so let's build a rocket, right?"

"Yes, little puppy! Now that you know what to do, let's get going!"

"Alright, family here we come!"

The two, full of energy and determination, burst off quickly onto the road sprinting (floating for robot Wags)

towards a forest. They kept pushing on to finally get to the forest to find the resources they needed.

“Way to go puppy! We are already there! You are a lot quicker than you look!”

“Are you calling me fat?”

“Um of course not! Hehe... Gulp”

The pair kept wandering into the forest.

“So, Wags, why did they send you?”

“Oh me? Well, on the planet Surumrth I am a pet, friend, and a butler! Every one of my fellow brothers and sisters were bought. Except me. I talked back. I made mistakes. I was an outcast. Since I was programmed like a human no one liked me. They didn’t like being different. So, they sent me. They viewed me as useless. So here I am.”

Diggs noticed that Wag’s eyes drooped.

“After all, I had nothing else to do. Well, other than sitting and rotting in a dumb iPineapple store...”

Diggs walked over and sat by Wag. “It’s okay, Wag. After all, don’t you have a friend now?”

Wag looked at Diggs.

“R-Really? You think of me as a friend? We just met!”

“We may not be friends yet, but trust me. If we are going to be going through hell and back, I think we will eventually be friends. Don’t you think so?”

“But it just feels wrong! I’m not supposed to feel friendship!”

“Wag, I don’t care about what you’re supposed to be. I care about what you are.”

Wags seemed happy. His droopy eyes changed to joy filled, shining eyes.

“Alright, if we are gonna go far, let’s make it easier! Friends?”

“Friends!”

The two, with their newfound friendship, traveled deeper into the forest. They walked around the shady forest more until they found a strange object.

“What is that?” Diggs asked.

“Let me see for you, Diggs,”

Wag tried to scan the new object but soon failed.

“Huh? Are you kidding me! MY CAMERA IS BROKEN, TOO!”

In desperation Diggs tried to sniff the object.

“Kinda smells like... gunpowder? And, um, metal?”

“Hmmm, then maybe it is a weapon! Let’s bring it with us! You never know what lurks in the woods!”

“True. True.”

So they kept on marching through the dark woods and eventually found a dump.

“Hey, hey, hey! Look! A dump! Let’s set up a base here! After all, there are LOADS of materials!”

“Yeah, but how are we gonna make a rocket ship made out of trash and make it fly to a planet?”

“Man, I haven’t really thought about this too much...”

“Well?”

“Heh...”

And so the two were stuck on earth forever. The e—

“WAIT! DONT ROLL THE CREDITS YET! WE AREN’T DONE HERE, MR.NARRATOR!”

“Who are you talking to, Wag?”

“Oh, uh, nobody!”

As the two thought of a new plan, a strange noise was found in the trees.

“And then we might—”

“Wait, Wag, what’s that noise?”

A shadowy figure emerged from the shadows, saying, “Hi! My Name is—”

Wags quickly reacted, “HANDS UP BOZO! STATE YOUR NAME AND BUSINESS OR GET A HOLE IN YOUR FACE! DIGGS, HAND ME THE WEAPON. I’M NOT LETTING MY NEW FRIEND GET HURT!”

“Okay?”

Diggs tossed the mysterious weapon to Wag.

“Please, let me speak!”

“OKAY FINE! YOU HAVE 30 SECONDS!”

“U-UH OKAY! Umm... How do I say this?!”

“15 MORE SECONDS, BUD!”

The person’s face turned red and he started to stutter even more. He took a deep breath and started talking.

“Okay, so my name is Blowlee, and I am a human. I have two kids, an average house, and an IQ of 180.”

“GET TO THE POINT!”

“I HAVE BEEN SENT HERE TO FIND DIGGS!”

“FINALLY! Wait, THAT’S MY JOB! GET OUTTA HERE!” a shocked Wag replied.

“Oh, but how are you gonna do it?”

“I umm, I errrrr ughhhh.”

Suddenly Diggs broke up the conversation, “I NEED TO POOP!”

“Diggs, please stop,” said Wags.

“Okay, Wag...”

“WAIT, THAT’S DIGGS?”

“YEAH, BUT IT’S MY MISSION!”

“I HATE YOU!”

“I HATE YOU MORE!”

“I’M GOING TO KILL YOU!”

“AHHHHH.”

“AHHHHHH.”

“Guys stop!” demanded Diggs.

“Okay! Anything for you, Diggs!” the two both said at the exact same time.

“STOP COPYING ME!”

“THAT’S THE FIRST TIME I DID THAT!”

“WELL, IT BETTER BE YOUR LAST!”

“Guys, seriously stop. For real this time,” Wags pleaded.

“Fine.”

“Okay, I guess.”

“Now, Blorwlee, take me home!”

“Okie dokie! Follow me!”

Blorwlee guided the two towards his rocket ship.

“Ah ha! There is my rocket! Come on! We have no time to lose!”

“Are you sure this is stable, Mr. Smarty?”

“Shut up you dumb robot! But yes, it’s stable, trust me!”

The three stepped into the rocket to go to Surumrth.

“It’s comfy here,” exclaimed Wags.

“I agree with you, puppy! I tried to make this ship as comfortable as possible for you! Now time to launch!”

Blorwlee hit the launch button and the ground started to shake. The engines were starting to flare and blast off. The fire was like jello shaking on a spoon and like a four million degree oven in heat. Everyone braced themselves for launch and soon they were in space.

“I knew it would work,” Blorwlee bragged.

“Pfft—just luck,” responded Wags.

“Stop, friends,” said Diggs.

The three in the spaceship gently flew in space until they made it home.

“There! We are here!”

“That was quicker than I thought!” Diggs quickly ran onto the new shiny road that strangely had cracks in it. Diggs paced into a home that had a sign that said, “Gehrke Residence.” Diggs went inside (even though the lights were off). He looked in the new house but found no one. He looked for another five minutes. Then ten. And eventually forty

minutes. He never found them. Diggs walked outside and broke the news to his travel companions. They seemed frozen, just standing there. Diggs turned around to see what they were looking at. He didn't like what he saw. There was a giant mechanical spider roaming the plant. Diggs hadn't noticed because he was too excited to see his owners. Without any other thought in his head he bolted into the ship and grabbed the weapon that Wag had found back on Earth. He jumped out the door and slid it on his paw. He had no idea how to use it but knew he would find a way. He looked around for a trigger. After a little bit he saw one. He lined up his shot. He closed his eyes and fired. What pursued afterwards were a series of screams and lasers. Then finally, a dead opponent.

“Yes! Come on guys, celebrate!”

His friends were still as stuck as a rock standing in the same spot. It took him a little bit to figure out what happened. His friends were as still as stone because they were turned into stone! Diggs had an idea. He bolted to a hardware store and stole a hammer and set Wag free.

“Hazah! You freed me! Now free the other guy... I guess...”

“Blorwlee?”

“Yeah...” Diggs replied.

“We don't need them.”

“I thought you two were friends?”

“That guy was clearly evil.”

“Finally someone agrees with me!”

“Now, let's go find my parents!”

The two friends found a mysterious hole in the ground.

“I got this! My flashlight feature is like the only thing I still have!”

Wag turned on his flashlight and looked into the hole. He saw there was a safe landing.

“It’s safe to jump! Since I have no idea where your parents are, let’s check down here first.”

Here’s what happened.

They both jumped down into the hole and scavenged around and found a giant cell room full of citizens. They had been locked up by the mechanical spider. They needed to put in a passcode to open the cell and Diggs remembered there was a code on the spider’s body that said 37289. Diggs put in the code and opened the cell. Everyone came out and Diggs found his owners. They all went home. As Diggs was going to his home, his family decided to take in Wags as a new family member. And so all was well. Except that they still had to fix the spider’s mess. Other than that it was a happy ending.

The end...

...is what I would say, but there is a lot left. You’ll see soon.

NONFICTION
Grades 5 & 6

Annie Scandrett
Slayton, MN
1st Place

Rocky Mountain Adventure

Last summer, I experienced a whole new world. My family and I, including my grandparents and uncle, embarked on an adventure into the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. My immediate family and I drove from Minnesota, packed tight in our trailblazer, while my grandparents drove from South Dakota, picking my uncle up from the airport along the way. After thirteen hours of driving, two hotel stays, and hearing, “I have to go to the bathroom,” one million times, we finally arrived.

I should probably mention that my family and I were staying at a Christian summer camp in the Rocky Mountains that my dad and grandpa used to work at. The camp includes cabins for kid campers, and cabins for guests.

Anyway, after driving the topsy turvy drive up to our cabin, my three sisters and I leaped out of the car to go investigate the cabin. We entered into a small kitchen with a fridge, stove, sink, and lots of shelves. It opened up into a large room that contained a wood stove, table, and chairs. To the left of this cozy room were two bedrooms and a small bathroom. There was also another bedroom that was right next to a stairway that led to a loft. The loft had three or four couches and lots of extra blue mattresses.

Later, after deciding that my parents would sleep in the bedroom by the stairway, my grandparents and uncle would sleep in the bedrooms by the bathroom, and my sisters and I would stay in the loft together, we all settled down for a family game of *Apples to Apples*. Then, my mom and grandma made a scrumptious supper.

Before I continue, I should mention that I do not remember the exact order of events that occurred on this trip but that each one mentioned is true.

Over the days of our adventure we did many things. We fished, swam, hiked, played frisbee golf, my dad identified flowers, and we played *Apples to Apples* MANY, many times.

On one day of our stay, my family and I decided to go on a hike called The Eyebrow. It was a loong hike. Part way up, the pale blue sky started to darken. A storm was coming. Being up high in the mountains during a storm is dangerous. Although we wanted to finish our hike, we went with the safe way out. We turned around and hiked back down the majestic mountain. When we got to the bottom, it hadn't even started to sprinkle! Then we loaded back up into the car to drive back to our cabin. When we arrived, my uncle, sisters and I all played *Chutes and Ladders* and *Apples to Apples*. Suddenly, we saw my dad appear at the top of the stairway. He strode over to us with a half frown, half humorous look on his face. He turned his phone around to reveal the screen. My dad explained that the trails of The Eyebrow and Pike's Peak intersected at one point. Instead of taking The Eyebrow trail at this point, we started taking the Pike's Peak trail! We actually ended up hiking up further than The Eyebrow! We were all sort of bummed, but kind of amused, too. That night ended with playing games and a delicious dinner.

Almost every morning of our vacation, my family and I sat on the front porch which overlooked a beautiful landscape of mountains and trees. In the location where we stayed, the hummingbirds were everywhere! Each cabin at the camp included at least one hummingbird feeder. Almost everyone in my family took a turn holding the hummingbird feeder and letting the hummingbird's wings flutter against our arms.

Sometimes there were so many hummingbirds that they would fight over the feeder. Such an exciting experience!

Another day of our trip, my grandparents, parents, uncle, sisters, and me of course, hiked down to the base of the camp. At the camp there was an old mine that was still safe for walking through. Before we entered, we all took a flashlight from my dad's backpack so we could see inside. We received the keys to the mine from a camp staff member and entered into the dark, damp hole. On our adventure through the mine, we had to dodge puddles and be careful not to bang our heads on the rocks above us. When we exited back outside, I had to shield my eyes from the bright sun.

We also had the opportunity to fish for trout along the river at the base of the camp. We used a fly rod to catch the tiny fish. While we were jogging along the side of the river, we had to carry the tall fly rods with us. I kept accidentally tangling the line in the trees, so my dad and grandpa had to keep coming back to help me unwind the line. When we finally caught up with the fish, we had to creep quietly down to the bank of the river. I put my hands on top of my dad's on the rod and cast into the clear water. The trout came near and bit, so we pulled it in. My dad turned the fish over so I could see its belly. The fish had a beautiful pink and orange-yellow stomach. We released the fish back into the water and watched it swim away. My dad, grandpa and I drove back up to our cabin with a special memory and an exciting tale to tell.

One day, my family and I thought it would be cool to see the Garden of the Gods. The rocks were so tall and so majestic. While walking through, we saw several deer who were so tame that they didn't even run away when they saw us. Early on in our walk it started to rain! Just perfect! Thankfully, the rain didn't last for long and the sun returned. We took so many photos of the beautiful landscape. We drove back to our cabin content, with the beautiful scenery still yet in our mind.

When it was time to depart, we all hugged and said goodbye. (We said goodbye to the hummingbirds, too.) Our trip had gone by so fast. I couldn't believe it was really over! The games, the hikes, and the adventures. We loaded back up into our trailblazer, awaiting the long drive ahead of us. As we drove down the steep mountainside, I reflected back upon the time we had spent here in the Rocky Mountains. The laughter. The joy. But most of all, the love. The love of a family who longs to always be together. We drove away full of memories that I will never, ever forget.

Annie Scandrett
Slayton, MN
2nd Place

My Best Birthday Ever

We all have birthdays whether we celebrate them or not. We all keep getting older, but the reason I celebrate these awesome days is because on that day years ago, God brought you into the world. He created your terrific self! In my opinion, that's most definitely something to celebrate. So now I am going to tell you about my best, most fun birthday ever.

It was my ninth birthday and I was just waking up. When I remembered it was my birthday, I hopped out of my messy bed and ran to my door. There were the birthday balloons! (Every year while I'm sleeping, my parents hang up the special birthday balloons on my door.) Then I ran upstairs and breathed in the scent of fresh pancakes. My mom always cooks pancakes with M&Ms and cute sprinkles in them and shapes them as the number that we're turning on our birthday. After our scrumptious breakfast, my family and I drove to my grandparents' house. That's where my birthday party would be. My grandparents helped us decorate for my special day. We blew up bright and colorful balloons. We also hung up a birthday banner and yellow streamers since my party theme was lemons. (My artistic grandma made the birthday banner.)

A little while later, my aunt, uncle, and two cousins arrived with their fluffy, white poodle named Annie. That was everyone! But secretly, my sneaky grandparents had invited one of my great aunts and her little puppy, too. A little while later I heard a DING DONG! My great aunt and her puppy were here!

Now that everyone was there, my mom and I set up some super fun bingo prizes such as a cute blue diary, stuffed animals, sticky notes, playdough, and other fun things. Then we played a friendly game of bingo. It was so exciting to see who got the bingo first and what that person chose!

After that, my dad grilled the mouthwatering barbecue ribs. (Which in my opinion is the most delicious food on Earth.) After we devoured the ribs, we had a superb dessert which was lemon bars. My mom and I had made the bars the day before. They had white powdered sugar on top. I tasted them and they were absolutely delicious!

Then I saw my beautifully wrapped gifts. We all crowded into the living room to open them. I got some money, earrings, and something else I can't quite remember.

After that, we all competed in some fun board games and just hung out. Then the party was over. The magic that had been in the room five minutes earlier was gone. But I knew that the warm, magical feeling would be back next year.

That is the story of my favorite and most memorable birthday ever.

Adelaide Lundy
Slayton, MN
3rd Place

Life Is Hard

On September 3rd, 2020, my dad got sepsis, and he was in the hospital for a week. My Mom was with him for the whole week and yeah..... **HOLD IT! WAIT JUST ONE SECOND!** Don't you think we should tell them the **WHOLE** story and give some more detail? Now take it from the top and tell the whole story this time. And **ACTION!** On September 3rd, 2020, my dad got sepsis... now here is the rest of the story.

My mom has dysautonomia, and she was pregnant with my little brother, Gresham, but she went to stay at the hospital with my dad anyway. My dad was really sick, and I couldn't do anything about it. He was in pain, and I was stuck at home with my two brothers, horrified. I was so terrified I couldn't do my schoolwork. I knew that both of my parents could die, and if they died, I would become an orphan and go live with my grandparents in Georgia. It wasn't that I didn't want to see them; it was just that I wouldn't be able to see my parents again unless I died.

While in the hospital, my parents found out Gresham was a boy. It was happy news in the midst of all that was happening. When my parents **FINALLY** came home, my dad was still in pain. All day I watched him suffer in a chair, not being able to walk unless he was going to the bathroom or showering. He even slept in the chair. When he first saw me after a week of him being in the hospital, we both cried with happiness! But even the fact that he was home didn't change the fact that he was still suffering, and there was nothing I could do about it. Nothing. But still I rejoiced in the Lord for he was good, and I thanked him for my dad being home!

To me it is a miracle that my dad is here today! Mom told me that if Dad wasn't in the hospital when he got sepsis, he would have died. He was recovering for over a year, and he is still recovering from being so sick. Even though he is still recovering, he is here today!

NOW THAT'S THE WAY TO DO IT! That is how you tell a story. It may be a very sad story, but that is how you tell a story.

FICTION
Grades 7 & 8

Fairlane Penner
Mountain Lake, MN
1st Place

The Love that Counted

I ran to my box as fast as I could. The rain felt like a hundred bees were stinging me. I dove for cover in my box. It wasn't much, but it was my home since the day I can remember. I remember my mother's eyes filled with sadness. She looked at me and ran out into the rain, and I heard the shot of a gun. I opened my eyes and saw my mother's dead body. I saw humans pick her up and throw her in the back of their truck. I was left alone. That was a long time ago. I sometimes see her in my dreams, but I know that she's gone forever.

I waited for the humans to throw their garbage from their trucks. Then I saw another stray alley cat. I ignored him and continued waiting. Other cats would chase him out of their territory, but I know what it's like not to have a family, a home, and a decent meal. He took one look at me and ran away. I get that a lot ever since that dog fight. I have a hideous scar down my left eye. I've learned to live with it.

A few minutes later, the humans dumped their trash. I could smell some perfectly good tuna in that bag. I would eat well that night. Then, I heard something turn over a trash can. I jumped and ran to my box.

I smelled a female human coming. She stopped in front of my box and put a bundle of old towels and blankets on the ground; then she ran away. I looked closer at the bundle and smelled something that wasn't a towel or blanket. I pushed a layer of towels out of the way and saw a young human child sleeping.

My first instinct was to walk away, but then she started crying. I looked at it and saw myself in her. I saw that she was

without a mother, a home, a meal, and a friend. I pulled all the blankets and towels off and grabbed her by her diaper. I dragged her inside my box and took the thickest blanket I could find. I dragged the blanket over the baby and laid right next to her. She looked at me and reached out her hand to touch me. I walked closer, and she put her hand on my face. She yawned and fell asleep.

I looked outside and saw that the rain had turned into snow. I would've felt angry at myself if I had left the kid outside. That's when I thought I would have to think of a name for her. I searched through all the names I knew and thought of my mother's name, Glacier. I decided to name the child Glacier. She had the light blue eyes to fit the name. I started to feel sleepy, and I fell asleep.

I woke up to the sound of Glacier crying like a maniac. At least I was in the abandoned part of town; no one came here unless they were in trouble. I didn't know what to do, but then I remembered how my mother took care of me. I had to find milk.

I searched through every garbage heap I could find until I found a full jug of milk. And the best part, it expired yesterday. I dragged it back to Glacier. I pushed it to Glacier, and she knew what to do. She used her handy paws to open the jug. She lifted the jug to her mouth and drank. When Glacier was done, she grabbed me and hugged me. I thought I was going to die.

She let go and said, "Kitty. Your name, Kitty."

A year almost passed, and Glacier looked, in my opinion, the messiest child I've ever seen. Her hair was all snarly and messy. Her skin was dirty. Yet her eyes were still blue. Don't blame me for not trying. I tried to clean her.

It was almost noon when I heard a noise coming from the entrance of the alley. I saw a police officer walk in, and I saw him eye Glacier. He walked closer, and I hissed at him.

He stepped back and said, “Hi. What is your name?”

“I don’t have one,” Glacier said. I wanted to tell her she did have a name, but she didn’t understand a word I said.

“Where are your mommy and daddy?” the police officer asked.

“I don’t have one,” Glacier replied.

“Well, why don’t you stay at my house for a while until we find your parents?” he said.

Glacier looked at me and then looked at him. “Can Kitty come? She’s my family,” Glacier said.

“Yeah, of course, Kitty can come,” he replied.

Glacier grabbed me and followed the police officer to his vehicle. She climbed in and laid down. I had to admit, it was comfier than my box. He drove till he reached his home. It was a small house, and it reminded me of the house I was born in.

“Oh, and you can call me Mr. Davis,” the officer said.

Glacier looked at him with grateful eyes. We walked in and smelled a smell I never thought I’d smell again. It was my mother. I ran to her, and I sat at the entrance of the hallway. She was still beautiful as always, but she had a scar on her shoulder. She looked up and asked, “Do I know you?”

“You should. You were the one who left me in that cardboard box,” I replied.

My mother’s eyes glowed with surprise and joy. “Can it really be you? Scout?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

We rubbed each other for at least two minutes. Mr. Davis and Glacier looked at each other and shrugged.

“What do you want your name to be?” Mr. Davis asked Glacier.

“Sophi,” Glacier said.

“Sophi it is,” Mr. Davis replied.

That night I felt more loved than ever before. My mother was alive. I lived with my humans, Sophi and Mr. Davis. He never found her parents, but I liked it better this way. I don't think she would like a mother and father who would abandon their child in an alley.

Brooklyne Hubbard
Beaver Creek, MN
2nd Place

Finding the Light

Pepper, my german shepherd puppy, jumped onto me. It scared me quite a bit, since I couldn't see him. I stroked his soft fur and once again I thought of my accident. I tried not to think of that day but it's almost useless when I have nothing to see. I used to listen to music in my spare time, but the joy of hearing music was no longer in me. I had nothing to do. Mimi encouraged me to learn braille but I wasn't ready. I haven't been ready for the past three months.

Three Months Ago

"Autumn, hurry up. We might miss the bus," my little sister Rachel called, sounding annoyed. I hurried up and finished the doodle I was making and grabbed my jacket.

"Bye-bye, my love!" Mimi said lovingly on our way out the door.

Rachel was right; we *might* have missed the bus. It was a close call. All the seats were taken so I had to double up with someone. Sydney? No, she was sitting with Georgia, my ex best friend. Steve? Nope, playing Pokémon with Noah. "Sit down, Autumn!" yelled the bus driver. I plopped down by Kiki, the world's smartest kid in seventh grade.

"Did you study for the biology test, Autumn? I wonder if we'll have a pop quiz during French class. Did I bring my notes? Yup, here they are. But I see I have forgotten my water bottle. I'll have to use some of the school's water then. Did you know that 71% of the earth is covered in water and only 0.5% is drinkable?" Kiki asked me.

“First of all, Kiki, I don’t take Biology or French, so I don’t know about any test or pop quizzes, and if I did know, I would have studied for those. And yes, I did know about the water situation,” I said, a little annoyed. And I *may* have accidentally rolled my eyes. I’m not brainy like Kiki, but I am a rather good student.

“Sorry for that, Autumn,” Kiki said, noticing my eye roll.

The bus was finally at Easton Middle School, ESM for short. I walk to my locker and grab my Algebra book. In Algebra, time flies. So do the rest of my classes. Like usual, I sat by myself in lunch, ever since Georgia and I had our argument. The rest of my classes go by, and soon I’m on the bus again. I notice Rachel isn’t on the bus, so I text Mimi.

Autumn: *Where’s Rachel?*

Mimi: *She came home sick. I’m taking her to the doctor, so I won’t be home when you get home—so text me later. It’s not serious, but I just wanted to be sure :)*

I sent Mimi a thumbs up. Finally, I get off the bus. Then it happens. I’m walking the rest of the way home. Rob Reas is skateboarding and tells me to join him. I do. I run home and grab my skateboard and we go to the skate park. I try an awesome trick

----- *CRASH* -----

I wake up in a dark place.

“MIMI! HELP ME!” I scream. I jolted up but someone is holding me down. I scream again trying to see who was holding me.

“I’m here, Autumn. Please calm down,” Mimi said calmly.

Her voice calms me down. I start breathing hard. “Turn on the lights, Mimi,” I said.

I hear Mimi gasp.

“What?” I ask.

I hear someone walk in.

“Hello, Autumn! Glad to see you awake! I’m Dr. Po, as you can see, that’s what it says on my coat,” the person said.

“May I speak to you Dr. Po? Alone?” Mimi asked. I assume that was a yes because no one was in the room anymore.

After a few minutes the doctor returns. “Autumn, I turned on the lights. Can you see me now?” Dr. Po asked.

It’s still pitch black.

“No……. I…….it’s dark. I’m scared! Help me, Mimi! Am I blind? HELP ME, MIMI! PLEASE HELP ME!” I start to scream.

The doctor runs a lot of tests on me throughout the next couple of days. Mimi stays by me the whole time. Finally he tells me what his hypothesis is and he explains everything else.

“Autumn, right now you are in the hospital. I’m sure you know that by now. Your friend Rob called the ambulance after you fell, and he is waiting outside to see you. You had an accident on your skateboard. When you arrived here, you seemed to be smiling, and kept saying, *The Earth is full of water*. We took you right in and gave you some medicine and waited for you to wake up. We knew that you had a horrible concussion, but we weren’t sure how bad the injury was. We now know that you’re blind. The concussion affects your eyesight. For some people, they might regain their eyesight, but others will never see again. From your test results, I regret to inform you that there is only a 3% chance of you getting your eyesight back. I’m sorry.”

I didn’t even cry when I was told all of this. I spent another week in the hospital before I could go. The week went by slowly. I didn’t eat much, I couldn’t sleep, and I stopped talking. Mimi got concerned. She asked the doctor if any of

these symptoms were from the concussion. He told her no, this was depression. He told Mimi to find a therapy program.

Once Mimi brought me home, I had a small party that I couldn't see. Rachel, cousins, Aunts, Uncles, and classmates were there. I sat in Mimi's chair and looked into space. People hugged me, talked to me, and gave me presents, even though I didn't open them. Rachel told me she will open them. After each present she would set it in my lap, encouraging me to play with it. After an hour, Mimi shooed everyone away. She brought me to her room, where I would stay until I was stronger. *If* I got stronger anyway.

My depression worsened. Why would Mimi want to care for a blind girl? She should just give up hope because I won't get better.

I neglected Pepper. Rachel thought I hated her. I disobeyed Mimi. When I did sleep, it was full of my worries. Every day I had a visitor. Rob came over the most, almost every day for three months. I guess he was feeling guilty about what happened. Whenever he came he read me a book. Right now we are reading *Pollyanna*.

"Hey, Autumn! How is she today?" Rob said to Mimi and me.

"Well, she ate a piece of toast but didn't sleep all night." Mimi answered as though I couldn't hear also.

"Well, should we read some more?" Rob asked.

Mimi left the room so we could continue. "No," I said. I even surprised myself. I could tell Rob was looking at me like I just named all of the countries in alphabetical order.

"Autumn, did you just say something?" Rob asked. I knew I made a mistake. "Now he's going to tell Mimi, and then she will get her hopes up. She'll think I'm going to be normal again—I'll never be normal! Why can't people just see that? Why won't they just leave me alone!" I told myself. Or, at least I *thought* I said that in my head.

“Autumn! Is that how you actually feel?” Rob asked bewildered.

“Yes! If I can’t see, why should Mimi want me? If I don’t do anything, she’ll forget about me and be happy! You don’t understand. After my Mom died and Dad left to do who knows what, I’ve been stuck with Mimi. Why would she want me to worry about? If I act as though I don’t exist, she won’t remember me; anyway, I know she likes Rachel better than me, so what’s the point?” I burst out crying.

I hear Mimi come in and run toward me. “Autumn! I love you so much! I don’t know how you feel, but I’ll love you no matter what goes on in your life. Please just know that, my love!”

Mimi didn’t hate me for being blind! She loves me in whatever I do, say, or act. Mimi helped me know that I am loved and that I matter. I also want *you* to know that you matter! You may not feel the love, but I can guarantee that you are loved! I had a hard time learning that, but if you feel worthless, talk to someone, anyone, and I know that someone out there is going to help. I can guarantee that.

Cristy Renteria-Rojas
Mountain Lake, MN
3rd Place

The Peacock and the Eagle

Peacock: Confident and a little rude

Eagle: Shy, doesn't have a lot of confidence in himself

Once upon a time, in a beautiful zoo, there lived a beautiful peacock. Even though Peacock was a gorgeous creature, he was very rude because he believed he was the prettiest creature in the world. By the Peacock, there lived an Eagle. But the Eagle was always told he was ugly because he wasn't colorful.

One day, Peacock said to the Eagle, "I can't imagine not being colorful and ugly like you, Eagle! But I'm pretty, and you're not. So I don't have to worry about that!"

The Eagle looked down and flew to his nest and cried. "Why can't I be pretty like Peacock?" He sat down and tried to avoid the insulting Peacock for the rest of the night.

The next day, the Eagle woke up sad because of what Peacock said. He pretended to be okay so he could have a regular day with no problems.

As people arrived at the zoo, Peacock came out and showed off his feathers. All the people were so excited to see him. The Eagle wanted to see how many people came, so he peeked and saw people looking at him in awe!

An adult said, "Look guys! It's an eagle! It's a beautiful bird that represents freedom!"

Eagle smiled a little.

A little girl said, "Look momma! The eagle looks so pretty!"

“Hey!” thought Eagle, “I’m pretty too! I might be different, but I am wonderful just the way I am!” He smiled and started to fly around gracefully.

Peacock looked jealous since Eagle was getting all the attention. But Eagle felt like the happiest bird in the world. He ignored all Peacock’s rude comments because he knew that even though he was different, he was also such a wonderful bird. Also, thankfully, Peacock stopped bothering him after a while.

The moral of the story is: We are all beautiful, don’t judge other people.

NONFICTION
Grades 7 & 8

Cristy Renteria-Rojas
Mountain Lake, MN
1st Place

Voices That We Hear

I once was one of the happiest people I knew. But let me tell you how I got a scar that changed me forever. I decided to write *Voices in My Head* because I wanted to share my testimony that made me have a better relationship with God and help people find a way when all seems to be in darkness.

When I was younger, I was able to talk to anyone with great confidence. I was able to think I was a great person that could do anything. But when I started middle school, it disappeared. I remember having big dreams and being excited for seventh grade. I was able to call myself a middle schooler. I was definitely an extrovert and who liked to make everyone smile.

In sixth grade, when I was ready, I would look at myself in the mirror and encourage myself that no matter what happens, everything would be okay. That was hard to believe a few weeks later. Because one day, I was looking at myself in the mirror and heard a voice saying, “You’re not beautiful. You are a failure.”

I remember hearing that so clearly. I just ignored the voice, thinking it was going to go away.

A few months went by. The voice got worse, and I became broken. I then had trouble with self-confidence and became very shy and quiet. I just felt trapped; I didn’t feel like myself anymore. The voice went from, “You’re nothing,” to “Why do you even exist? Just waste yourself already!” I started to go to a point where I wondered, “Am I really a child of God? Maybe I should waste my life.”

I knew something wasn't right and went to my parents right away. We prayed that night, and I felt this freedom and peace. It was indescribably beautiful! There were even new voices saying, "You're God's beautiful princess," and "You are brave and strong."

The voice every now and then came back, but I knew that it was just the king of lies. I always prayed and became closer to God, whether I was in darkness or in joy. Of course, the depression went away, and I began to smile a lot more. My emotional scar started to heal, and my spiritual battles were won by God.

I thank God for helping me every step of the way and for giving me His armor. You always have the key out of your troubles, but sometimes you don't know you have them the whole time.

I hope this testimony gives you hope and encouragement to know that there is a God. And when you hear negative voices in your head, that's just the king of lies. Don't let him break you. Follow God and trust him.

Caleb Fast
Butterfield, MN
2nd Place

Light Bulbs

Have you ever come up with something so fantastical that it becomes the staple for good ideas? Yeah, me neither. Thomas Edison achieved this feat in 1879. Without the light bulb, you could not read this. It took one man, 200 years ago, to revolutionize the world as we know it.

The incandescent light bulb is manufactured in a variety of sizes and voltages, anywhere from 1.5 to 300 volts. As a result, incandescent light is used for commercial lighting and household lighting. And for portable lighting, such as cars, flashlights, and headlamps.

Incandescent lights are a lot less efficient than other electrical light sources. They use only 5% of energy to make visible light; the rest is wasted due to heat. Incandescent light bulbs typically have less lifetime compared to LED light. The average lifespan of an incandescent light bulb is 1,000 hours; an LED light should last anywhere from 20,000 to 30,000 hours. For a quantity of light, the incandescent light emits more power and heat than a fluorescent lamp.

The inventors of incandescent lights are Thomas Edison and Joseph Swan. The reason Thomas Edison's version of the light bulb was the best was decided by three factors; an effective incandescent material, a higher vacuum level, and power distribution which was economically viable. In 1761, Ebenezer Kinnersley demonstrated heating a wire to incandescence. In 1802, Humphry Davy used what he described as "a battery with immense size," having 2,000 cells

stored in the basement of a cellar at Britain's Royal Institution.

As you can see, a light bulb may sound forgotten, but there is quite an interesting history behind it. You may find yourself struggling to write an essay the day before it's due, then boom, "light bulb," and you finish it.

POETRY
Grades 9 & 10

Jocelyn Schlenner
Marshall, MN
1st Place

This Wall

There is a wall between you and me,
This wall you cannot see.

But I can see this wall very clearly,
The wall between you and me.

It is great in height, and towers over me,
It shines the light away from me.

But this wall you cannot see,
It was made for people like me.

We scream out names in the streets,
Only to end up under white sheets.

This wall between you and me,
It was made to keep us under lock and key.

Why do I see,
That you are so displeased?

I only wanted you to see,
What it is like to be like me.

Afsheen Mohamed Abusali
Marshall, MN
2nd Place

life in the midst of darkness

in the day soaked with darkness, with ink as the color of sky,
and ravens flying above, while the abandoned town slept.
not a single sight of sunshine, or moonlight to be sure.
but wait!
in the midst of such darkness, and such silence,
was a small bead of color in the distance.
if you looked closely,
very closely,
you would see a little girl frolicking in the fields.
and in the disturbed ground by her, lay a small seed.
after some years,
you see the town yet again.
rain was the only thing to greet you,
the girl was nowhere to be seen.
with the patters of rain,
the color of the inked sky, showering the ground.
but if you looked closely,
very closely,
you would see a small tree in the midst of the ground.
a beautiful sight, of a sloped brown trunk,
and green leaves,
bringing life to the unalive town.
it brought tears to your eyes,
dripping alongside the rain,
while you saw a simple tree,
swaying in the darkness.

Afsheen Mohamed Abusali
Marshall, MN
3rd Place

Stories Fascinate Me

Random letters put together,
Side by side, word by word.
Pages of those words.
They have the power to make me cry or laugh.
Arranged in such a way that I feel
A connection with the protagonist,
But understand the antagonist.
Words arranged in such a way,
That put you in a different time or place.
And lets you be in the characters' shoes.
How do these individual words, put together side by side,
Which used to be just random letters floating in the alphabet,
Create such a deep feeling?
As you venture into a new realm,
It consumes you and once you are done,
You feel sad to let go,
But ready for the next to begin.

FICTION
Grades 9 & 10

Claire Safranski
Eden Prairie, MN
1st Place

Silence

The popping. The silence. The two sounds that stood out the most. I don't remember hearing the screams, the cries of terror, or the prayer that my classmate muttered before her last breath. I've been told she was reciting the "Our Father" before she was shot in the head. That's what everyone says at least.

My therapist says that PTSD does that sort of thing to people. It makes them forget. It "suppresses" the most traumatic parts, like when her blood splattered all over my face like paint on a canvas or when the shooter took his own life right in front of me.

Trauma is a dangerous thing, but maybe I should just tell you what happened.

7:36 am. "Darn it." I missed my alarm, and the bus would come in fifteen minutes. My mother, face scowled and hair in a messy bun, rushed into my room with baby brother in her arms.

"Lukas, why are you still in bed? If you miss your bus, you're going to have to miss school because I am not driving you *again*."

My little brother, Simon, giggled and gripped onto my mother's hand. She hurried out of the room and went to get Simon dressed.

I closed the door and pulled out a gray sweatshirt and black sweatpants. It's only October, and Minnesota has

already been “blessed” with its first snow. *Bzz. Bzz.* My heart jumped a beat as I rushed to my phone and picked it up.

Clark 7:41 a.m.

hey lukas. are you taking the bus today?

A grin pasted itself on my face.

Lukas 7:41 a.m.

yes! see you then :)

Heat filled my face. I hope I didn’t reply back with too much excitement.

I slipped my phone into my backpack, slid on my clothes, and headed downstairs.

The kitchen table was scattered with late bills and junk mail, and on top of it all lay a yellow post-it note with scribbled handwriting sprawled across it:

Lukas, have a good day at school. Here's \$10 for lunch. –Dad

Beside the note lay a \$10 bill which I picked up and crumpled into my pocket.

Startled, I heard the low rumble of the school bus approaching my house.

“Shoot!” I rushed to grab a muffin and bolted out the doors.

Outside, snowflakes fell from the sky covering the driveway and the trees like a soft blanket. I put my hood up to protect myself from the cold that was beginning to nip at my nose.

The school bus was filled with quiet teenagers who obviously did not get enough sleep.

I looked ahead to see Clark seated at the back of the bus with an empty spot calling my name. I walked over a little too quickly, regretting the way I looked eager to get there.

“Hey, Clark.” I could feel my face immediately turn bright red and my heart rate begin to quicken.

“So, I was wondering if you want to hang out this weekend?”

I clung to the seat as the bus lurched forward onto its route. I had to bite my lip to keep the smile from spreading across my face hoping this weekend would be the weekend I would tell him.

Clark’s face, however, dropped.

“Sorry, but I don’t think it’ll work out.” He gave a sad smile.

“Oh. Shoot, okay. That’s cool.” Disappointment crept up my chest and made my heart hurt.

After Clark and I talked for fifteen minutes or so about homework and the new season of *Outer Banks*, the bus slowed to a stop in front of the high school, and I grabbed my backpack and prepared to get off along with the other students.

“Bye, Lukas.”

“Bye. I’ll see you later.”

Clark nodded and walked off the bus.

Clark and I have known each other since the third grade. On the first day of school, he came into the class, new and unrecognizable. His blonde, messy hair covered his forehead, and his dark brown eyes were wide open and scared. I introduced myself to him so he could have a familiar face to be welcomed by for the next 179 days of school. From there, we became immediate friends, but I started having feelings for him once ninth grade rolled around the corner, and it hasn’t changed for the past four years of high school. He was everything I looked for in someone: kind, humorous, and smart as hell. It’s been hard, though. I don’t know if he will ever feel the same way about me as I do him, and I know he had one girlfriend named Cora in the past that he was with for about six months. He never really talked about her at all. Clark only mentioned having to break up after she had to move away

since her mom got an impressive job that paid well in gorgeous California. After that, he hasn't had another one since. In fact, he never mentions girls anymore. Whether they look hot or they make him laugh, the topic has never been brought up, so I'm hoping that's a sign.

I strolled into biology, my first class of the day.

"Good morning, class. Happy Friday. Please get out your notebooks and take notes on page seven of the textbook. Let me know if you have any questions."

That's how the day went. First period then on to second period, on to third, and so on.

Finally, only 53 minutes left until school was let out. I would've been gone in 53 minutes. The shooter, however, had other plans.

Students filed into Spanish, my last class of the day, one by one. I took a seat at my desk and got out my Spanish homework from the night before.

I don't remember much about that class as a whole due to my PTSD. On the other hand, I did, surprisingly, remember the little, insignificant moments. For instance, when Catalina took out her favorite Flor de Izote lotion and spread it across her hands that left the room smelling like jasmine and patchouli. Or when Niccoló, my Spanish partner, who already happened to know three languages, French, Italian, and English, had to use the bathroom right when class started.

He was the first to die out of the other three victims.

"¡Hola, clase! Por favor saquen la tarea de ayer."

"Señor Madriñán?" Niccoló asked.

"Sí, Niccolo?" Señor Madriñán raised an eyebrow at him without looking up from his desk.

"¿Puedo ir al baño por favor?"

"Ah, si, si. ¡Apúrense!"

Niccoló got up in a hurry and was gone in a flash.

I, still, was only able to remember the little parts. Ten minutes had gone by, and Niccoló still wasn't back yet.

Another small, insignificant moment was when Penny spilled her water over the table soaking her notebook and muttered curse words under her breath.

Another twenty minutes had gone by. No sign of Niccoló.

Whispers lingered behind me about talk of a party at some girl's house that night.

Señor Madriñán checked his watch. Mirroring his movements, I looked ahead at the wall clock. 2:57 p.m. Only eighteen minutes left until the weekend.

Pop. Pop.

My head lifted up from my assignment along with other startled looks from students.

The first thought that jumped into my head was *balloons*. Some seniors probably decided to pop balloons in the hallway as a supposed joke. Not funny. I shook my head and looked back down at my assignment.

Pop. Pop. The sounds were louder this time

I covered my ears and winced. These sounds were *not* coming from balloons.

Señor Madriñán jumped to his feet and ran to the door.

That's all I remember. My friends told me he was shot before he got the chance to lock the door and close it.

The shooter. The man. The senior. The minor. The terrorist. The murderer. You can call him what you'd like. To me, he was Clark. Clark, the boy I loved.

"Clar-?" I cut myself off.

Tears swelled in my eyes and started running down my face when I saw the semi-automatic pistol in his hands, the one that scared him when he was a boy. His father was a cop who owned two pistols: one for work and one for protection, which Clark had gotten ahold of.

Mitchell, one of my close friends who was in the class, told me he saw the way my heart broke; how it shattered into a million pieces because if eyes were truly a window to the soul, he knew how to tell.

Other students, who weren't even in my class, heard it all.

The way Clark looked. His blonde, messy hair and the way he sweat blood.

Or the way Catalina's fear in her voice was so thick that it shook as she whispered, "Padre nuestro, que estás en el cielo, santificado sea tu nombre; venga a nosotros tu reino...", while kneeling under her desk with her hands clasped tightly together.

Pop. Catalina's body fell on top of my crouched knees, and her eyes stared lifelessly back at me. Blood soaked my face and chest to a bright red.

"NO!" I screamed in terror.

I wiped the blood off my eyelids and stood up to face the human who was no longer the Clark I knew.

I wasn't scared of him. I didn't want to be scared of him.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING, CLARK?" I pleaded.

Tears fell from Clark's eyes as he slowly raised the gun at me.

"You don't have to do this." I tried to keep my voice as steady as possible.

Clark shook his head hysterically as more tears fell to the carpet.

Bang.

I closed my eyes and waited for the impact.

The sound shook my eardrums, and I stumbled back with shock but no pain came.

Clark fell to the ground while blood pooled from his temple.

Everything went silent after that. I don't remember the rest.

Within a day the story went viral. Newspapers and magazines put it on the front page with headings like, “Eighteen-Year-Old Male Shoots Up Local Minnesota High School” or “Three Dead from School Shooting.” They wanted stories from the survivors, the teachers, parents; everybody. Every. Last. Detail. I stayed silent, however. Trauma does that sort of thing to people, my therapist says. I disagree. This was more than trauma. It was heartbreak.

Clark murdered four people that day: Niccoló who had just been accepted into Yale University; Catalina, who wanted to travel to Spain, England, and Japan, but never got to; Señor Madriñán who had two six-year-old girls; and Clark, himself.

Clark, who wanted to be a writer, but changed his mind after his father said he didn’t have the brains to do it. Clark, who loved everything and everyone, even the boxelder bugs that would live inside his small home during the fall. Clark, who was silent about his bipolar depression; one that went untreated for five years.

Clark, the boy I loved.

Dedicated to the Sandy Hook Elementary School Victims

Daniel Barden, age 7

Charlotte Bacon, age 6

Olivia Engel, age 6

Jospehine Gay, age 7

Dylan Hockley, age 6

Madeleine Hsu, age 6

Catherine Hubbard, age 6

Chase Kowalski, age 7

Jesse Lewis, age 6

Marquez Greene, age 6

James Mattioli, age 6

Grace McDonnel, age 7

Emilie Parker, age 6

Jack Pinto, age 6
Noah Pozner, age 6
Caroline Previdi, age 6
Jessica Rekos, age 6
Avielle Richman, age 6
Benjamin Wheeler, age 6
Allison Wyatt, age 6
Lauren Rousseau, age 30
Mary Sherlach, age 56
Victoria Soto, age 27
Anne Marie Murphy, age 52
Dawn Lafferty Hochsprung, age 47
Rachael D'Avino, age 29

Meghan Johnson
Mountain Lake, MN
2nd Place

Infamy

For us, the morning began at 5:30, just like it always did. But we only got two and a half hours of normalcy. On that particular Sunday, Joe Tompson and I were walking through the twisting passageways to get up to the ship's main deck, the USS Arizona, which was docked in Pearl Harbor. We climbed the ladder, emerging through the hatch on the starboard side of the ship, facing aft. Hearing a soft drone creeping up behind us, getting louder and louder, we turned around.

I saw a fleet of planes moving in our direction, coming over the horizon of Ford Island. Confusion fell over me, only for a split second, until I saw the rising sun on the wings of the aircraft rushing towards us. Someone yelled, "It's the Japanese! An air raid!" Followed by other shouts and cries echoing around us.

Without waiting for an order from the bridge, Joe and I rushed to our gunhouse on the starboard side of the ship and climbed the ladder up the foremast. As explosions echoed across the harbor, we began to operate the five-inch 25-caliber anti-aircraft battery, along with the four other men who were firing with us.

After a few minutes, a much louder explosion echoed through the gun chamber, hitting our ship and rocking it. The deafening sirens announced the air raid, although it was already evident to everyone on board what was happening.

"Where are Robert and Louis?" I demanded, yelling above the noise of another bomb that shook the ship, only seconds after the first.

"No sign of them!" Jonny shouted back.

Turning back to the battery, I looked out the port, watching men scurry on the deck below with fire hoses, helping injured men away from the fires.

We were only able to fire the guns twice more before a third bomb struck, this time much closer to our position, shattering the port in the gunhouse.

The next few minutes passed in a blur. We knew how to operate the guns. We had been trained for this. For combat. But as I looked through the shattered glass in the port, worry began to creep in.

The fourth bomb hit, diving straight into the magazine of one of the turrets. The explosion lifted the ship out of the water, cracking the hull.

The six of us were blown away by the blast; I landed with a thud on the port side of the foremast. Sprinting to my feet, I saw the flames encasing the ship.

“Joe! Joe, where are you?” I raced back to my gunhouse to see if anyone was still there, but the gunhouse itself was half destroyed. What did remain was ablaze. Fearing the worst, I turned back to what I had been trained to do. Reaching the port side gunhouse, I joined the six other men already hard at work there.

When the call to abandon ship came, we didn’t notice. Confusion reigned in our minds. We did what we knew until the heat crept towards us. Observing some of our men jumping into the oily water below was our confirmation to abandon ship. Turning back to the hatch that led to the ladder, we discovered that the fire had crept too close.

“We’re trapped!” one of the men hollered, trying to be heard above the noise. We only had the option to go further up the foremast. The fire was too close. We had to go now or risk being trapped in the flames with no escape route.

Our path to climb up the foremast took us right past the flames, singeing the tips of our hair. The heat was evident,

burning the soles of our feet through our shoes and the floor. As we neared the top of the foremast, we paused to observe the horrific scenes below. The injured were sprawled all across the main deck: missing limbs and burnt flesh. The air reeked of smoke, gunpowder, and oil.

We waited at the top of the foremast for only a couple short minutes. The fire edged closer and closer, the smoke making every breath harder. More explosions around us; the Japanese were not relenting on their air raid. Finally, one of the team spoke the words that we were all wondering, though we didn't dare to speak. "The fire's too close. Give it a couple more minutes and we're all gonna die. We can either wait, or try to jump onto the deck below. Other than that our only option is getting the attention of the USS Vestal. But that doesn't seem like a feasible option in this chaos."

We were all too stunned to speak. Our fate was all but determined. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a crew member of the USS Vestal, the smaller supply ship that was anchored next to us, make eye contact with me. "Hold on a sec, guys," I murmured, my gaze not drifting from the ship beside us. Signaling to the man on the USS Vestal for help, I said, "Someone on the Vestal is gonna try and help us." All six of them followed my gaze to the ship.

We all watched, not daring to hope, as they threw us the rope, and we secured it to the foremast. The flames were right behind us now, the heat melting our jackets and burning our flesh.

The first one stepped off the foremast, clinging to the rope. Hand over hand, inching his way forward over the fiery chasm below. The second, then the third. We were all tired. The past twenty minutes had certainly been the most intense time in our lives. The only thing that kept us hanging on was the desire, the need, to live.

I went last. I could feel the heat rising up from the abyss that my ship had become as I worked my way across the rope. My hands screamed from the weight of holding my body up. It seemed to take years for me to get even halfway across to the promised land of a ship on the other side. Near the end of the rope, it sagged so low it dipped my feet in the flames. I cried out in pain, clenched my teeth, and kept moving.

I only had twenty feet left to go, now over the oily water, when the rope gave way. The fire had reached the side of it that had previously been secured to the foremast of the USS Arizona.

I plunged into the depths of the harbor, then resurfaced, gasping for breath. I heard shouts calling to me, "Anderson! Anderson, are you all right?" But I couldn't answer. The fall had knocked the wind out of me. Taking a moment to catch my breath and recover, I looked up to find a ladder draped over the side of the boat. Though exhausted, I swam to it, knowing my life depended on it.

I reached the ladder and tried to pull myself up, but the oil coating my body and clothes made it nearly impossible. It took all of my strength and several minutes to reach the main deck of the ship. Having lost my melted shoes in the harbor, my burnt feet ached with every step from rubbing against the rope ladder. When I finally stepped over the side of the ship, I collapsed in a heap.

I woke up about a quarter of an hour later, the ship en route to the gangway. The bombing had finally ceased. When we finally reached Ford Island, we were all ordered to line up in two lines for a doctor to quickly examine us. I looked at the men around me. Burnt flesh, raw skin where the burnt flesh had fallen away, missing limbs, mangled remains of limbs dangling off their bodies. The doctor sent some of the survivors through one door, others through another.

"Name?" The doctor asked when it was my turn.

“Seamen Dennis Anderson, sir.” I waited until he motioned me to go through the first door. Once through the door, I was medically tended to. Otherwise, we all waited for what seemed like an eternity. At some point, I slipped into unconsciousness.

The next day, when most of us were coherent, we were told everything the navy knew. It was then that we found out about the second wave of Japanese planes that had hit about five minutes after I lost consciousness. I had heard rumors but no proof. We learned that the USS Arizona was slowly sinking, and several other ships, including the USS West Virginia and the USS Nevada, had also sunk. Most of the rest we didn’t learn until later. The suspense, not knowing what happened to the other men, was treacherous. Those who had gone through the second door we hadn’t seen since. We didn’t know what had become of them or so many others.

The USS Arizona burned for three days before finally sinking to rest 40 feet below the surface of the harbor. The nearly 1.5 million gallons of oil that the ship had taken on the day before the attack had leaked into the harbor, turning it black around the ship. It took a while for the death toll to be calculated and all of the facts to be uncovered. What we eventually learned horrified us.

A 1,760-pound Japanese bomb, preceded by a few smaller bombs, triggered an explosion on the USS Arizona that killed 1,177 people. Those who had been sent through the second door were lost, along with a handful who were sent through the first door. It was a separation between those who could be saved and those who couldn’t. All of the people I knew closely, like Robert, Louis, Jonny, and Joe Thompson, were lost. Of the 1,400 crew members on the USS Arizona, only 355 escaped with their lives.

From when the first bomb hit to when the USS Arizona was totally destroyed, only fourteen minutes passed. Fourteen minutes from normalcy to horrendous, gruesome deaths. For the survivors, some never recovered from the injuries they suffered that day.

December 7, 1941, was 'a day that will live in infamy,' as Franklin D. Roosevelt said. The next day Congress voted, and the United States entered World War II, fighting for four and a half years to the end of the war. It was a dark time, and many died on both sides. For the US, our experience at Pearl Harbor marked the beginning. We were regarded as heroes, but we didn't think of ourselves that way. In those moments of panic, we did what we had been trained to do. It was a reaction, a habit. Though we recovered from the attack, and the US won the war, I felt as though we had lost. All of the destruction that was caused, the men, women, and children that were lost over the course of the war could never be recovered.

It started with a normal Sunday morning, awake at 5:30. Two and a half hours until the droning hum, reaching our ears from the sky. The day that lived in infamy.

Leah Teig
Lynd, MN
3rd Place

The Enchanted Lake

Khylari ran into the forest. The crisp cold wind bit at her cheeks as she ran away from the pack of wolves. Khyleri was a princess. She had dark, caramel colored skin, red hair, bright green eyes with a ring of gold, and she wore a blue dress, covered by a black cloak. It was wintertime and there were many wolves on the prowl, hungry for fresh meat. “Awoooooooo!” called out the wolves. Dogs barked in the distance. She was out of the palace searching for her brother. The palace guards had been searching for three days and had found nothing regarding the whereabouts of the crown prince. Her legs were getting tired, and she was wearing down, the pack of wolves rapidly approaching.

They were the predators, and she was the prey. Cornered and looking for a way out, she ran. Running away from the pack of wolves, she realized she didn’t feel the cold, as if it were never there. She dropped her heavy cloak and ran faster, heading deeper into the forest. She was gliding right over fallen branches, tree stumps, rocks, and holes in the ground. Then she came across a frozen lake, made of paper-thin ice. As Khyleri stepped onto the ice, it *cracked*. She looked back; the wolves were approaching fast. She took a deep breath and with another step, slipped and fell through the thin, slippery surface down into deep, icy cold water. Holding her breath with her eyes closed, she braced for impact. She thought she would freeze into a girl shaped ice cube but didn’t. She wasn’t even cold. As Khyleri swam to the surface and pulled herself out of the water, she noticed her grip on the ice. Her fingers weren’t slipping, claws had formed. Pulling herself up onto

the ice, she continued to transform, revealing a new side of herself, something that changed everything. Shifting into her new form, she acquired spotted white fur and a tail. Her ears shifted to the top of her head. Her teeth got pointy and sharp. She was now a snow leopard. She had a fluffy tail and warm coat of fur. As the wolves neared, her green eyes turned icy and blue. A roar ripped out from her throat, followed by a guttural growl—the sound when the hunted becomes the hunter—prey becomes predator. Whimpering wolves sped deep into the forest. Khyleri was on all fours. She glanced at herself while thinking about her new abilities. Something about this transformation felt so natural to her, as if it were destiny. She didn't understand what happened, though something about it brought her tranquility. She laid down, closing her eyes. Calmness and weariness coming over her, she fell asleep.

When the princess awoke, she was covered in a thick sheet of snow. She sat up, the pile of snow falling off of her in small, fluffy, glittering-white patches. She was human again, but with the markings of a snow leopard, located around her eyes, which were revealed as blue. Her curly red hair blew in the wind, as her dark skin glowed in the morning light. She could hear everything around her, every movement among the bare trees and frost covered bushes. Her ears were now pointy, like an elf's. Her heightened sense of smell enabled her to know the whereabouts of the wolves from the previous night. A thought came to her again; this energy, this power, it was all so new to her. She had never felt anything like it before; this power felt invigorating.

Khyleri missed the luxuries of her lavish, castle home, though she loved the view of the forest, along with the peace and freedom it contained. She had come across a waterfall after walking a mile or two; the scenery was breathtaking! There were frozen icicles hanging from the trees and frost

covering the rocks, it was extravagant! She was so ecstatic that she suddenly shifted back into her leopard form. Her fur sparkled as she joyfully trotted toward an ice-covered rock. She expected it to be nice and cold but found herself being burned by it. She hopped off and observed the rock in the bright morning sky, noticing that it wasn't completely coated in ice. Khyleri curled up into a ball on the snow and soaked up the morning sun. It was such a lovely day. All she felt like doing was relaxing. "I should probably spend the day trying to find my brother, but it's just so nice to be relaxing for once!" She shivered, not because she was cold, but because it felt so right. "It couldn't hurt to take a little nap, could it?" she wondered out loud. Khyleri sprawled out in the snow, getting comfortable. She was almost asleep when she heard a noise. She darted up, her animal instincts taking over; she growled. She was only twelve years old, a hungry, tired, and scared girl. A wolf emerged from a bush, but it looked tired.

She growled even louder as the wolf came closer, but instead of attacking her as she expected, the wolf wearily stumbled to the ground. It closed its eyes and shifted into a human boy. "Who are you?" she growled at him as she shifted into her human form.

"Wayen Honeycomb, who are you?" he asked.

"Princess Khyleri Winter. I am searching for my brother, the crown prince, Harvey Winter. Call me Autumn. That's what my friends call me; it's because of my red hair and green eyes," said Khyleri.

"So, you fell in the lake, too. Huh, interesting," Wayen said.

"Yes, I fell in last night, through the thin layer of ice," said Khyleri.

"It happened to me as well. I turned into a wolf. The same must have happened to you, but you turned into a leopard," he said. Wayen had tan skin and dark brown hair. His eyes were of an arctic wolf's, bright blue and piercing, like daggers.

“So, you were turned into a wolf by enchanted water?” asked Khyleri.

“Yes, I’ve been raised by wolves since childhood. I don’t know how I ended up in the forest, but the wolves told me how I became part of the pack so...yeah. That’s that. Sometimes you’ll become more animal than human, princess. Be aware of that if you want to keep your reputation,” he looked at her. It was a look that she didn’t understand. She had never witnessed it before. Not like this. “Come on, I know the forest fairly well, we may be able to find your brother,” he said. Wayen transformed into a wolf once again, followed by Khyleri’s transformation.

As they walked together for hours without conversation in search of Khyleri’s brother, Khyleri finally broke the silence. “So, this is where you live? The forest?” asked Khyleri.

“Yeah, it’s pretty great, isn’t it?” he replied.

She looked at the star-filled sky. “Wow!” she said with awe.

Wayen looked over at the princess, “Haven’t you ever seen stars before?” he asked.

Khyleri looked from the starry sky to Wayen. “No, I’ve lived in a palace my whole life, usually stuck in my room or taking care of the animals such as the horses.” She continued, “Anyway, enough talk about me. Let us talk about how you came to live with the wolves. What was it like?”

Wayen sighed. “I was an infant, abandoned in the forest. My pack is a more accepting one. I was adopted by the alpha and have seven siblings: four brothers and three sisters. My mom is the female mate of the alpha. She was the one who raised me. When I was nine, I decided to wander off with my two older brothers, trying to prove that I truly was part of the pack. I fell into that lake and then, I really was part of the pack.

Anyway, it's almost 10:30; we'd better find a safe place to stay," said Wayen.

"Can I stay with you and your pack?" Khyleri asked.

"No, they don't accept cats or anyone who isn't part of the pack."

There were howls in the bushes. "Is that your pack?" asked Khyleri.

"No," Wayen said sternly, growling. "Princess, run," he warned. Khyleri started to take off, but a wolf jumped out in front of her.

"Hello kitty cat," the wolf said creepily. Scars marred his face and chest, along with some scratches on his legs.

Swiping with her claws, missing miserably, she was cornered and backed into a tree. Looking back, she saw Wayen. With one growl, the rest of the wolves had scampered away. She turned back to the wolf in front of her. "P-please," she said before Wayen and the other wolf brutally attacked one another. During the fight, she heard Wayen ask, "Why are you here, and how did you find us?" While they were battling, more wolves came, swiping, and snapping their jaws at Khyleri. She climbed the tree. The wolves tried to chase her but failed in all of their attempts.

Then Wayen's pack arrived. With one howl of the alpha wolf, all of the wolves rushed into the trees. Khyleri climbed down and approached Wayen. He got up and looked at the princess. He wasn't hurt, nor was she. "I-I'm sorry. I wish I could help you," he said facing the ground as he walked with his pack, heading home. His tail drooped, appearing to be distraught.

"Wait," she said.

He turned around. His pack stopped and waited for him. She wanted something, but she didn't know what it was or what it meant.

“I’m sorry, I-I can’t. I can no longer help you. I-I put you in danger princess by just being around you. I know we were lucky this time, but something bad could have happened to you. I-I’m sorry.”

She stepped forward but then put her ears back and proceeded to step back. “I understand,” she said.

“You best go home. You’re safe there. I can’t protect you here. Not anymore,” he said as he slowly walked away. Tears filled her eyes, as she made her way home.

She headed through the forest, walking slowly, the opposite direction of her wolf friend. She could see the outline of the palace in the distance. It was so far away. She was still a snow leopard, all of her senses fogged up by despair. She liked him; he cared for her, but she knew that he felt he couldn’t protect her. She was so lost in thought she didn’t see what was ahead of her. A royal hunter aimed his spear and got ready to fire upon the princess appearing as a snow leopard. Khyleri looked up in horror as the spear neared. She closed her eyes, but before the spear could harm the princess, a wolf grabbed it with its jaws and snapped it. He growled at the hunter and quickly glanced at the princess. She was so stunned by what had happened she couldn’t think clearly. “Wayen?” she asked.

With a nod, he attacked the hunter; snapping his jaws around the man’s pant leg, ripping the fabric. Scared, the hunter ran away.

“Wayen, you came back!” she said with excitement.

“I had to. I heard the hunter and smelled him from a mile away. You said that you wanted protection, so here it is,” Wayen said with a charming smile. “Besides, I believe I found something that you may be interested in.”

She was bashful and decided to follow Wayen through the forest. He led her to a small cottage. They both

transformed, human at the moment, as human as they could possibly be. “Is that?” she asked.

“I believe so princess. Go and bring him home.”

Her eyes filled with water. “Thank you,” she said and hugged him.

He was caught off guard and wasn’t used to getting hugs. He was a wolf after all.

Even though the hug was shocking at first, he dreamily looked down at the young princess hugging him. He hugged her back. “You’re welcome,” he said.

She pulled away and headed toward the cottage. Khyleri took a breath and rapped on the door. A young fifteen-year-old prince came to the door. As soon as she saw him, she let out a strangled cry and covered her mouth. “Harvey? Is that you?” she asked.

He smiled and hugged his little sister.

She hugged him back. “Don’t ever do that again,” she told him.

He pulled away when he noticed someone watching them. “Who is that?” he asked.

“Oh, him? That’s Wayen; he helped me find you,” she replied to her brother. Wayen waved a hand at the prince, then he shifted into a wolf and she transformed into a snow leopard.

Once they shifted back into humans, they explained to the prince what had happened to them. Their whole journey.

“Well, looks like you have a big future ahead of you, sis,” the prince said.

“Wha-what do you mean?” she asked, shocked at his response.

“I don’t want to go back; I don’t want to be king. I hope you understand,” he explained.

“No, I don’t. I don’t understand, how could you do this? Why did you run away from home and not tell us?” she asked.

“You know they would have stopped me from living in freedom,” he said. “I don’t want my future planned out for me. I want to create my own future,” he said.

She felt betrayed. Her own brother ran away to chase a fantasy that he knew was impossible. Being the crown prince was who he was meant to be, who he was born to be, not some kind of rando living in the forest chasing the dream of freedom. Tasting it. “You’re coming back whether you like it or not, but if you refuse to return home...I’ll be forced to tell mother and father where your little hideout is,” she threatened him.

“No, please. I just want my freedom, please sis. Don’t do this,” he pleaded, his voice already filling with panic.

“I’m sorry, but I have no choice. You WILL come home,” she replied. Her tone was harsh, and she may have been selfish, but he couldn’t take her freedom and happiness away from her either. He couldn’t take Wayen away from her. She wouldn’t let that happen.

Prince Harvey looked at his feet in despair. “Fine, I’ll come home. For now,” he said with sadness and annoyance.

“Hey, I don’t want to be queen any more than you want to be king; not anymore,” said Khyleri.

The prince sighed. “Ok then, we’ll both escape.”

“You know that won’t work,” she replied. Wayen was standing there with his arms crossed, awaiting their decision. She nodded at Wayen and the three of them headed toward the castle. The two headed homeward.

Khyleri spotted the castle in the distance getting closer every step they took. Snowflakes were lightly falling from the sky and softly landing on the ground. In the distance, she could hear wolves howling and the palace dogs barking. Oh, how she missed home, and yet she didn’t want to return. They were getting closer to the lake that she and Wayen had fallen into.

“Step with caution. We’re getting closer to The Shifting Lake,” said Wayen.

“Since when was it called The Shifting Lake?” Khyleri asked Wayen.

“Since now,” he said nonchalantly. I thought it was called The Enchanted Lake,” she replied to him. She lightly bumped into his arm. Wayen returned the playful gesture. They continued to walk until they approached The Enchanted Lake. It was several miles long. If they were to go around it, it would take three days. The prince stepped lightly on part of the lake. It cracked a little; their attention landed on the prince. He looked back at them with worry in his eyes.

“Steady. Easy, easy does it. Slow and steady,” said Khyleri.

He took another step. *Crack*. The ice was webbing out as it cracked around the prince. She shifted into her snow leopard form and headed over to her brother to help him across. His eyes were wide as he braced himself against his sister. Khyleri watched as Wayen looked over toward the prince and shifted into his wolf form, heading toward the prince’s other side. They were steady on the ice with their claws, digging into it for grounding. They made their way across the edge of the lake, trying to avoid slipping. The lake was so large, and they eventually had to head across the middle to get to the other side. Though they couldn’t stop the inevitable, they had to try. The farther they headed across the lake, the more the ice cracked beneath the prince’s feet.

With every step they took the more the ice cracked. It was getting thinner and thinner the closer they got to the center of the lake where both Khyleri and Wayen had fallen in. Another step and another crack in the ice; it was webbed out so far that no doubt they would all fall into the lake. With another step the ice shattered, and they fell into icy waters.

While Khyleri and Wayen made their way to the surface, Harvey drowned deeper into the water and transformed into a red-haired fox. The prince had glowing, yellow-gold eyes and red fur. He also became an animal. Prince Harvey pulled

himself up onto the icy surface, as did the others, all in their animal forms. They raced across the ice, only a few miles left to travel. They ran as it got darker and darker, until stars lit up the sky. It was amazing. Eventually their paws softly landed in the snow. They slowed down to observe the area around them. “Awoooooo,” called out nearby wolves. The three of them stopped as a wolf emerged from behind a tree and another from a bush. They were surrounded. “Friends of yours?” asked Khyleri.

“Nope, these guys aren’t friendly,” said Wayen.

“I’ll take your word for it,” said the prince and princess in unison.

The wolves were closing in, cornering the victims. All three of them had each other’s backs. Khyleri transformed into her human-leopard form, her adrenaline kicking in.

“What are you doing?” asked Wayen. “I-I don’t know. I can’t shift back,” she said, her eyes wide with terror. One of the wolves charged at her and something in Khyleri flicked on, like a switch. Ice blasted out of her hands like a force field. The force of it sent the wolves flying backwards. As it struck the midnight hour the moon shined brightly in the sky. The blue in her eyes flickered and glowed. Unexpectedly, a blizzard mysteriously developed around her like a tornado of snow and ice. Khyleri started to lift into the air. She maintained the glow in the moonlight. Wings sprouted from her back, white and shimmering. Khyleri opened her eyes and there was a flash of white.

Khyleri grew a horn on her head, her eyes glowing white. She spread her wings. There was a magic glow about her. She softly landed back on the ground in the snow. She blinked and winced as she got up from the snow, her back facing the boys. She turned around. Wayen’s jaw dropped and Harvey’s did as well. She was a leopracorn, Leopard-Alicorn. She was in her human form with a horn and wings and snow leopard

characteristics. She was a beautiful creature. Her skin sparkled as did her newly grown wings and horn. “What?” she asked. The boys gaped at each other.

Finally, Khyleri’s brother broke the silence. “You are a human-leopard-alicorn! How is that even possible?” he asked. They were all shocked about what had happened.

“Destiny,” replied Wayen. He again looked dreamily at Khyleri. Her dark skin and red hair glistened in the moonlight.

“You know, we should probably go,” she said as Wayen looked at her in that way she didn’t quite understand. The boys nodded, still shocked, and amazed at what they just witnessed.

They walked the short distance back to the palace. Khyleri was the first one to walk through those palace doors, accompanied by Wayen and her brother. They headed straight toward the throne room where the king and queen of the Winter Palace were usually located. Khyleri burst through the doors, Wayen and Harvey at her side. She walked to a place in front of her parents and kneeled down, bowing. The boys did the same.

“Harvey, Khylerita! My children, what has come of you?” asked the queen, covering her mouth with her hands as she sobbed.

“We are what we were always destined to be,” replied the prince.

The king stood up, tears in his eyes.

“Who is he?” asked the queen.

“Wayen, the one who brought us home,” replied Khyleri.

They looked over to Wayen. “Thank you,” said the queen.

Wayen was now standing, arms crossed, nodding in response.

The king and queen headed over to their children and hugged them. Soon after, they made Wayen a duke and betrothed Khyleri to him when she came of age. They lived happily ever after.

Nonfiction
Grades 9 & 10

Mazzi Moore
Hills, MN
1st Place

My Mind Wanders...

The saying goes, “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”
But what if I am an orange?

I’ve spent my whole life in a small town surrounded by golden swaths of corn and whirring farm machinery, a tiny village tucked in the corner of rural Minnesota. Each day, my body goes through the motions, a slight gesture to a friendly neighbor, clad in work gloves and cheerful smiles, a peaceful reading session in the slowly waning sun. My heart’s there, but my brain wanders ...

My mind drifts from the scripted words on the page and the sunny rays on the flowers, wondering if there is more somewhere out there. More opportunities, more places to discover. As I pry back the seal on my comfortable, sheltered cocoon of security, blinking eagerly at the blindingly brilliant shafts of pure light, I feel a dam, a roaring waterfall of suppressed feelings and desires, come exploding from my chest. I feel like there is more to life than this tiny town, no matter how much I love its simple people and strong community.

I have always known that I was a little bit different. “Comparing apples to oranges,” you know? My opinions a bit more pointed, my goals a bit more extravagant. Just plain different. But I never thought too much of it. I carved out a little hollow in an extremely complex, intertwining society. Found a few friends, rocks holding me together on a bumpy journey. It seemed like I had established a place in my town, like my heart had found a solid hold, but then my orange started rolling.

At first, it was just a slight movement, like beads of water slowly drifting down a pane of glass, clinging dearly to the transparent surface. I became interested in more “out there” topics, found that my core feelings and opinions were the direct opposite of my peers. The downward momentum seemed to rapidly increase as I aged, as I discovered that my little community was a tiny puzzle piece in a jigsaw containing billions. Although I still enjoyed the consistency of my clockwork-like town, my wandering mind had become distracted by the prospect of more.

I felt greedy as I slowly rolled away from my roots. Had I not devoted my life, my beating heart, to this community? But maybe my puzzle piece had always fit a bit wonkily. My jagged edges not quite linking with everyone else’s rounded curves, melted by hot summer days and even hotter gooey hotdishes. These decisions, these ponderings, felt selfish, but sometimes you have to think of yourself, right?

Today, I think my orange has stopped rolling, at least momentarily. Perched precariously on an incline, it waits. My heart remains in this little pocket of the world. Everything I know has been taught here. Everything I am is dedicated to this place. I honor that. I accept that this town hewed my stone into a jagged blade of precision, my fine point carved, sculpted with honesty, empathy, and kindness, as well as determination, passion, and perseverance. I acknowledge the benefits of this home, this carefully crafted community. I understand how it has shaped me into the eloquent person I am today. But still my mind wanders, fixated on a brighter tomorrow, a future of more opportunities with new people, new places to explore.

How much farther will my orange roll? I’m not sure yet. What I do know is that my heart will always be lodged here, in this miniscule town, for I credit it for everything that I am. But still my mind wanders ...

Zach Klassen
Mountain Lake, MN
2nd Place

The Impact of a Mentor

I would introduce myself, but this speech isn't about me. I first thought of doing this when I was thinking of the great season we had and all the people who made it that way. As the list went on and on I realized I wouldn't have enough time to fit it all in. I texted Mr. Blomgren and asked how much time I would have.

He replied, "Keep it short enough so no one thinks you are me."

So I figured I have half an hour instead of his normal forty-five minutes. No, in reality, I'll keep it short by talking about one person who has had the most impact on my cross-country career: Caden Swoboda.

Now I'm not sure I'm supposed to talk about this because it happened during the track season, and this is a cross-country banquet, but I'll say it anyway. During the track season, I was involved in a season-ending injury. A few days later, I received a text from Caden asking what one of my favorite snacks was. I said OREOs. Later that day, I heard a knock on my bedroom door and in steps Caden. In his hands was a pack of double stuffed OREOs, a gallon of ice cream, a gallon of chocolate milk, and caramel syrup. Not only did that make my day, it was the highlight of my day the next day as I remembered it. It wasn't asked for. It wasn't expected. But still, there was Caden standing at my bedroom door with those four items.

During the season, he'd constantly push me to be better, pushing his own wants away. I remember at Voss Park, specifically, in the Butterfield meet. We were running together

with a half-mile to go. With hurting legs and lungs, I told him, “Caden, you have to go without me; I can’t make it.”

He responded with something along the lines of, “Zach, shut up; you’re so much better than that. It’s only a half-mile to go; you can make it.”

I ended up beating him in that race, and I realized afterward there was no way I would’ve beat him if he hadn’t encouraged me. As you probably know, helping someone beat you in a race normally doesn’t get you a better placing, but to Caden, he didn’t care. To him, he saw that his actions made someone in a wolverine’s jersey do better. He didn’t look at it after and think, “I could’ve had that medal if only I ignored him and ran my race.” To Caden, others’ success made him happier than his own. I wish I could say this was the only time he had to encourage me during a race, but no. In almost every single race, he would run up beside me and encourage me. Whether it was “keep going” or blocking the wind, he always made my success more probable than his own.

Oscar Wilde said, “Anybody can sympathize with a friend’s suffering, but it requires a very fine nature to sympathize with a friend’s success.”

Caden is a rare friend who I wish I had more time to talk about. This was his last year in cross-country, and he made sure it would be his best, but more importantly, others’ best as well. Thank you Caden Swoboda.

Isaiah Rete
St. James, MN
3rd Place

My Room

Do you know a place that you like and is unique from other places? Maybe a special room or hideout. Well, I have a place like that, and I made it even more personal by creating it. I made it with my dad, grandma, grandpa, and mom. I painted my very own room.

Now, this isn't an ordinary room; it is now a very complex room. Before, it was a light blue to calm a person down; now, it is duck yellow, margarine orange, and the darkest navy blue we could find in Ace Hardware. And it's not just one wall yellow, one wall orange, and one wall blue. It's tangled in a functional design cramped on the walls of my small room. It took two days to cover my room with colors.

Both of my older sisters were in Duluth on these two days, and I wanted to surprise them. So on the first day that they were gone, I put two coats of yellow on each of the walls.

The second day, I worked on all the designs with my relatives, using orange, then blue. I had to tape the design on one of the walls, then try to paint it before the tape fell. I let it dry, then did the process all over again on the next wall until I finished the orange.

Next, I did the blue. Taping, painting, letting it dry, and taping all over again. I finished it with my dad at about eleven o'clock the night my sisters came back.

It is a piece of art with zigzags on the wall crossing over each other, stripes going up and down, and some blue and orange creeper faces. I feel it's my very own creation because I did most of the work, creating a place just for me. It's my own unique place.

POETRY
Grades 11 & 12

**Jaden Scholl
Westbrook, MN
1st Place**

**A Note to my Younger Self or
Do Not Open Until Your Eighteenth Birthday**

You, sweet girl, grew up too fast.
Every elder and adult above you will tell you this in the same
breath they use to minimize your maturity by calling you
quiet,
chubby,
inappropriate.

Each time you turn your head, you will see everything you
never had...everything you needed or wanted is snuggled
into the palm of your siblings, friends, and forgotten faces
you haven't seen since freshman year. To say you forgot
them is a lie. It's easier to say you don't know what hurts to
remember.

You will not be the homecoming queen.
It's a silly thing, I know.
We never wished us royalty or a kingdom but the lights
sprinkling onto your skin on stage has never felt so warm,
so at home.
You need to be looked at. You hate to be looked at but
you love it.
Maybe it's not so much about being looked at but being seen.
People *will* see you. I am changing and people see this.
As each school year passes like the moonlight over a city,
so quick you never even know when it began,
you learn that no one is special.
We are the grass:
how we see the grass, how the trees see us and how the sky
sees the trees;

bigger and mightier.

We are truly just the smaller version
of that which is grander and more worshiped than us.

And you, dear girl—so divine and vast as the nature
surrounding you—will be worshiped.

Not like a deity or a celebrity or a city of lights,
love will find you at your dreariest and bring your cheeks
back to their full rosy bloom.

And bloom, darling, for you are as bright as hibiscus,
as sweet as honey and apple slices on a summer evening,
as loud as your heartbeat each time you take the stage,
as undeniably beautiful as your smile reflected off of
your partner's irises.

There will be days, years you will forget this,
sometimes it will feel like you are your own biggest obstacle
in this life you are trying to create for yourself.

Don't worry yet, I will do that for you now,
but so soon,

your life will finally begin,
and it's going to be so worth the wait.

Jaden Scholl
Westbrook, MN
2nd Place

Growing Pains

When I think *girl*, I think *survival*.

I was seven when my mother warned me that if I were being sexually assaulted I needed to scream *fire* because if I cried *rape* no one would help me.

When describing what kind of woman I would have to be, the words *soft* and *strong* were never used in the same sentence; I had to be one or the other or else I am worse off than what I was already prematurely programmed to be.

After I graduated from primary colored tables to desks that open like shoe boxes,
my body was the first to change in ways that motherless ten year old girls did not understand.
My round cheeks and stubby stature were no longer cute but awkward and everyone noticed this.

I was called chubby before I was ever called beautiful,
called plump before pretty,
called big before brilliant.
My appearance at ten was more important than whether I had a ride home from school
or if I needed a winter coat
or if I felt safe with a male doctor.

In the fifth grade, a girl, so small and light as a colored pencil, told me my cheeks jiggled when I walked.

It took me four years to wear shoes that did not erase my heavy existence.

Freshman year, a boy with lust drooling from his lips told me that my body took up so much space on the bus that I could not go on the school field trip;
the same boy who looked at my legs the first day in six years that I had worn shorts said *no one wanted to see that*.
And isn't that the heartbreak? To not be seen...but always looked at.

Puzzle pieces of my girlhood have been missing since a man told me my worth could be found below his belt before I could call myself *woman*.
No one sends out search parties for memories that no one wants to remember...

This is girlhood: to be a woman before you could ever be a girl.

I grew too fast and became too much of myself to be safe from hungry eyes.
Growing up as a girl is to learn how to not become another cautionary tale,
or news article,
or obituary in the local newspaper.
When I think *girl*, I think *survival*,
because I survived.

So,
when you tell me I am too big to fit your space,
too dark to brighten up a room or put a smile on your face,
too much woman and not enough innocence for you to take;
remember, I have made grown men weep themselves into boys.
Taken scissors to my hair to stop the tugging at my femininity,
bared my teeth anytime I was told to *smile more*,

stomped my feet when eggshells were all I had to walk on.
Never will I let another person who did not love me quiet my voice,
so smooth and intoxicating I have made auditoriums of
audiences fall silent.

It's my turn to take the breath out of unsuspecting lungs.

It's my turn

to breathe.

It's my turn

to take up space.

Jaden Dobrenski
Marshall, MN
3rd Place

Hot Cocoa Makes Me Think of You

Hot cocoa on a snowy day
Makes it all seem not so grey
If only for a little while
You feel so close, please stay a while
White snow on your coat and boots
The stocking hat you always use
Your warm heart melts away the snow
Much like this hot cocoa I hold
White snow on your smiling lips
The smile that I always miss

FICTION
Grades 11 & 12

Eleanor Ryder
Willmar, MN
1st Place

Beauty

The sea was as restless as I was. Whitecaps dotted the dark blue water that shifted and churned. *There.* Finally, a ship, still just a small speck on the dimming horizon. I dove back under the water, taking a deep breath of relief. The current washed through me as I swam under the surface, slicing through the water like an arrow until the ship loomed above me.

It was a merchant ship, which disappointed me. I have a taste for finer things and always enjoy royalty. I swam a loop around the hull until I found my quarry. He had tawny brown hair and the tanned skin of a sailor. I don't exactly remember what drew me to him, but I chose him nonetheless.

Singing comes naturally to every siren, but I truly believe I am exceptionally talented. Occasionally I play little games to entertain myself, seeing how quickly I can pinpoint the song most suited for my prey. This time, I guessed wealth. He was young and low-ranking. What deckhand doesn't dream of untold riches? I began to weave my tune, a golden tapestry glittering with jewels and overflowing with coins.

I can always see the moment my voice reaches them. He raised his head and turned to the sea, his eyes searching for me. But I could tell I was wrong. He wasn't enraptured, merely curious. I easily switched to my most familiar tune. This time it was rich, red, and velvet. Love is the sweetest melody to compose.

His eyes were now on me, transfixed. *Too easy*, I had thought. But the boy proved me wrong. His eyebrows creased and he began to shake his head, bringing his hands to his ears

to block out my temptation. By then, his crewmates had noticed his state. Only the intended target can hear my song, but others can always see when a man is under a siren spell. They rushed to hold on to him, yelling and trying to win him back from me. But I liked a challenge.

I laced my words with visions of power, revenge, and gluttony, all to no avail. I was beginning to get frustrated. I was losing him. Then, I found it. *Adventure*. I fashioned my song to ring with excitement, danger, and discovery, of open seas and distant jungles. He stopped fighting and uncovered his ears. He was mine. He cast aside his crewmates, keeping his gaze trained on me.

I love this moment every time. The utter devotion in their eyes as they cast themselves into the sea. He dives towards me, and I gladly close the distance for him. I reach out and take his hand, rough and calloused.

I am not a creature devoid of mercy, so I always give my victims one last kindness, morphing into their ideal picture of beauty. Once they are in my grasp, I can read their every fantasy and preference. Redhead or blonde, sharp or soft features, full lips or dark eyes, I've seen it all. But when I searched into the mind of my sailor, I was taken aback.

The woman I saw had hazel eyes and auburn hair. Her nose was small and straight and her cheeks were sharp. She was the same thing I see when I gaze into still water.

"You're beautiful," said my sailor. And though the words had been spoken to me thousands of times, for the first time, I felt them as if they were true. I was still humming his lullaby as I took him by his arms and pulled him under the waves. His hair fanned around his face and swayed in the water while his eyes remained on mine, full of marvel.

I am a monster, untamable as the ocean. I am cruel, malicious, and unfeeling, but for the first time ever, it broke my heart to reach into his chest and tear out his.

**Elizabeth Wiggins
Walnut Grove, MN
2nd Place**

3:00 a.m.

Awake, I am awake now.

Breathing heavy, but awake.

Creeeeak... pause.

Creeeeaaaak... pause.

It is louder now. The 150-year-old stairs cry out, as their shapeless and unsteady wood is approached by an unwanted figure slowly but surely making its merry way up the shapeless stairs as if it had owned the place.

“Mom?” I croak, my throat dry and raspy. I do not want to speak out too loud. Because, if I remember correctly, Mom and Dad left the house around eleven o’clock to go to the 25th Annual Mayor’s Gala. The time is...2:59 a.m...and that makes sense. They should be home by now.

“Mom... Dad?” I call out into the dark of my room, a little louder this time. Whatever is on the stairs has come to a halt. I realize that I have received no response. I am sweating now as I break out in hazy hot flashes. Burglar? Mom and Dad? A kidnapper? Did the dog get inside the house?

“Calm down, Kristen,” I mumble to myself as I glance at the alarm clock sitting on my open window, for the second time.

Time. 2:59 a.m.

It has not changed. Time is so slow it feels like it must have stopped. There is a whining sound and then three sharp knocks that shutter through my bedroom door.

Crack.

Crack.

Crack.

I jump and spin around to look at my door where it now stands open.

He is tall. He is tall and skinny, like one of those slinky shadows you get when the sun starts to set. He slowly makes his way over and is standing at the foot of my bed, staring at me, and it is definitely not my father. His black jumpsuit merging into the blackness, his inky rubber boots dragging and kicking out the corner of my tie-dyed sherpa rug, and then I see it. The one identifying feature that news channels and the tabloids have been warning the surrounding public of my county for the last three months—the red surgeon’s mask that covers from the bridge of his crooked nose to the bottom of his chin—cupping it as gently as a mother would her frightened child. Printed across the bizarre mask was a simple smile. A classic ear-to-ear-Ronald McDonald-Pennywise-the-clown-smile.

Last night KARE 11 News said, “The Carter County Sheriff’s office has just issued a statement that the McDonald Murderer has officially been classified an organized serial killer after his third victim was found earlier this morning.” Later mentioned in the Sheriff’s statement, he stressed that “If approached by a white man around 6-6.3 feet tall, 180 lbs, wearing all black with a red surgeons mask, please make sure you are at a safe location and call 911 or your nearest local police departm...”

And now he is here, in my room.

He laughs. It is a deep, haughty, dirty, and gurgly giggle. It is as if he had a cold. If I am being honest, I thought it was just a nightmare, but he is still standing before me, and I just knew. McDonald Murderer...what a tacky name.

A quick over-the-shoulder glance.

Time, 2:59 a.m.

I start to cry, but it is not because I am scared. It is because I am... relieved in a sick and twisted sort of way.

“Are you going to kill me?” I breathe as if I didn’t already know what he was here for. He nods slowly, then a little faster, until he is going so fast his unholy pinhole eyes are a blur.

“Okay,” I agreed. “Do it...I guess.”

He stopped the nodding of his head so abruptly that I let out a startled yelp. He looks at me and tilts his head in what seems to be confusion.

“I was going to do it myself a couple of times, but I was pretty unsuccessful...killing myself, I mean.” I seem to be talking to the man more than I thought I would, rambling almost.

“I was going to do it tonight while my parents were gone to the Gala. That is, the Mayor’s Gala, but...never mind you don’t care about that.” I am starting to get distracted by his face. It seems to go deeper and deeper into nothing, adorned with stringy, greasy, black hair like the moldy algae at the bottom of an old lake. The red smiling mask almost glows, pulsing with the evil thing’s breathing.

“I was going to do it tonight, but when I looked in the medicine cabinet, my Mom had forgotten to refill my father’s prescription of Zolpidem. Which are just his sleeping pills he takes after working the night shift on weekends.” He takes a small step toward me. Startled, I jerk upright as I move over to my still open window on the left side of my bed and catch a glimpse of my black alarm clock with red numbers sitting patiently and observant.

Time. 2:59 a.m.

“Christ, is my clock broken?” I think to myself, “Or is this just the longest minute of my life?” I start to feel my cheeks flush and the repetitive blinking that comes seconds before the first of the tears fall. The tears cloud up my vision, which is good, because the sight of the man is enough to make me nauseous.

“*Afraid?*” The man seems to hum from deep in his throat. He stretches his spindly arm and raps three times on my wooden bed frame.

Crack.

Crack.

Crack.

I tremble as I stand eye to eye with the man, the thing. Yet, I answer in total clarity.

“Afraid of death? No. Of you? Just a little.” I am breathing heavily, puffing out my chest, trying to match the size and authority of the creature that stands over me. And, he turns around. The man makes his way across my crumpled tie-dye sherpa rug to the door, reaching out for the metal bulb of a doorknob.

“Wait!” I sputtered after the thing, “Please, just do it.”

The man hesitates but does not turn around.

“Or...take me with you?”

He turns. As he turns, I glance behind me.

Time. 2:59 a.m.

“I am not happy, and now I am all alone. I can only assume that my parents were number four and five on your body count so...please? Take me with you?” The man, the thing, the creature raises its bony skeleton of a hand and reaches out for me. I take the *thing’s* hand, and we walk down the 150-year-old stairs. They cry out as their shapeless and unsteady wood is approached by now two unwanted figures. The thing leads me out the front door tapping his blood-curdling three taps as we start down the street into the unknown. The

Crack.

Crack.

Crack,

rings in my ears as I amble, hand in hand with the creature, vanishing like shadows in the morning mist.

* * *

As I look back one more time to my sad little two-story house with chipped red brick siding and missing shingles, something catches my eye. It is the window that sits on the North wall, on the left side of my bed. I can see my alarm clock.

Time. 3:00 a.m.

Eleanor Ryder
Willmar, MN
3rd Place

Predator and Prey

It's an old tale, one that has been repeated over and over again throughout history. The strong hunt the weak, the meek run from the bold. Every story has its villain and its hero, and in turn they are the predator and the prey. Everyone knows the story of the mighty knight fighting the fearsome dragon. We cheer for the knight, because he is prey fighting back against the predator. Right?

A princess both fierce and fair strolled along a forest path. She longed for adventure, for something to interrupt her suffocating routine. The trees cast shifting shadows on the princess as she passed beneath them. Humming a twisting melody and crunching the leaves beneath her feet, the princess unwittingly alerted the creatures of the forest of her presence. Little eyes peered at her from the shadows, watching her wind her way through the trees. Having dodged her caretakers for the afternoon the princess was seeking excitement. She had overheard some of the kitchen boys whispering about a beast dwelling in the forest, and she needed to see for herself.

The princess had armed herself with her brother's old practice sword. It was crude and carved from oak, but it would have to do. If her maid discovered where she planned to go, let alone that she was going to take a sword with her, she would be having kittens. The princess trekked on, and as she walked the trees grew thicker, soon stopping most sunlight from coming through to the forest floor. The princess was beginning to grow bored with walking. She started fiddling with her wooden sword, swinging and jabbing at imaginary

beasts. Still moving forward, she pranced about parrying and slicing, making more and more of a ruckus.

“Come out and get me, beast,” said the princess, full of bravado. “You are no match for me!” Tongue out in concentration she swung around to chop at a defenseless tree. But what her sword met wasn’t bark. Instead of making a “thunk” like she had expected, her sword hit with a softer thud. The princess raised her head and blinked up at her target. No, definitely not a tree.

A dragon loomed above her. His scales gleamed in different shades of ice blue and his pale wings were folded behind his back. The princess’ gaze traveled from his angular snout, down to his broad forelegs (one of which she had hit), and to the ground where his talons grazed the dirt. Her eyes were drawn back up to his. He was about four feet taller than her and his body filled the entire forest clearing, but it was his eyes that truly unnerved. Flaming patterns of bright orange and yellow twisted around inky diamond pupils, giving the impression of blazing embers on each side of his head.

The princess’ chest rose and fell quickly with shaky breaths while her heart pounded. She stood in shock as the dragon lowered his horned face down to meet her eyes.

“I think you’ll need to hit harder than that.” His voice was smooth and gravely at the same time, deep and almost like a purr. He sounded amused with the situation. Provoked from her shock, the princess glared at the dragon.

“Well, if I had a real sword I might have done some real damage,” she said indignantly.

“I don’t doubt that, little princess,” rumbled the dragon.

“How do you know I’m a princess?” She could have sworn the dragon smirked.

“You’re well-made and clean dress, your dainty slippers that are far from worn, your refined speech, and most of all your naivety. Wandering into the forest alone when I hear

there's a frightening beast about? What would your maid say?"

The princess cowed at the scolding. She knew all the other children at the castle murmured about the spoiled princess who got whatever she desired. But all she truly wanted was company. And here it was, burning her with its gaze.

The princess lifted her chin and set her jaw. Despite the rapid beating of her heart and her twisting stomach, she was determined to be brave. She would be like her brother, strong and fearless.

"I'm not frightened by you, dragon. And I don't need a maid babying me; I'm perfectly capable of protecting myself," she said with as much confidence as she could muster.

There was that amusement in the dragon's face again. He huffed, and a gust of warm, smoky breath stirred the hair framing her face. "Well then little princess, it is I that should be frightened of you."

"Indeed you should," replied the princess, puffing out her chest and letting just a little bit of pride seep through her.

"I'll leave you be then, lest I have the misfortune of witnessing your true power. Run along home, little princess, before another hapless beast stumbles upon your path and feels the sting of your sword." The dragon tilted his head and took a parting gaze at the princess before turning his mass to retreat back into the forest.

The princess turned to leave down the path she had come but stopped short. The path was gone.

"Wait, Dragon!" The princess couldn't believe what she was doing but didn't know how else she could find a way home. The princess turned and called into the forest hoping for an answer to her pleas. "I'm lost. Can you help me find the path?" Glowing eyes met hers from the shadows. Lumbering

back out into the clearing, the dragon unfolded his magnificent wings.

“Climb on, little princess. I’ll get you home.”

It was that day that the princess found friendship in a most unlikely place. She discovered that not all was how it looked. She and the dragon became close companions. Every day she could, the princess would escape to the forest to find the dragon. The dragon loved the little princess. He sat and watched with fondness as she practiced her swordplay, and listened intently when she told him tall tales of epic quests. The princess had found her adventure and her friend, and the dragon too had found companionship and joy.

The dragon was waiting for his princess by the clearing, contentedly watching the sunlit leaves sway and drift in the breeze. He heard the crunch of feet and raised his head in expectation. But he didn’t see his princess. Instead, there was a different human, a male, covered in plated armor and bearing a real sword. The man shook his head in disbelief.

“I thought for certain she was lying.” He shifted his feet and raised the sword. The dragon rose, wary.

“I have no trouble with you, boy.”

“I am no boy,” spat the knight, “and I do have trouble with you, dragon. You’ve bewitched my sister, and now you’ll pay.”

“Your sister? The princess?” asked the dragon with concern.

“Yes, beast. She told us everything, how you found her and where you must make her meet you. She’s safe now. And I’m making sure she’ll stay safe.”

“You misunderstand, boy. I will not fight you.” The dragon knew of the prince, and knew his princess loved her brother. He knew he couldn’t hurt this boy. For her sake.

“Good. That will make this easy.” And with a snarl, the prince launched forward and slashed the dragon through the eye. The dragon roared in pain and shook his mighty head, but

he did not attack. He held in his fire, all for his princess. The prince dug his sword deeper and swung himself onto the dragon's back. He withdrew the sword and began to swing at the back of the dragon's throat. The dragon couldn't fight back. So he would have to retreat. Swiping a massive paw the dragon easily knocked the prince back to the ground. He spread his wings and flew. He flew far away from that kingdom, as prey running from a predator.

Time and time again have dragons been painted the villain. But nature knew this was not the case. And so dragons, like other prey animals, have their eyes on the sides of their heads, while humans, like other predators, have eyes on the front of their heads.

A princess, both brave and wise, sat in a forest clearing, reminiscing and longing yet again for adventure. Years had passed since she had met an old friend here. When she had learned what her brother had done, she yelled and screamed at him, but both he and her father believed her ill. She had kept to her room, heart-sick and remorseful for having mistakenly betrayed her dragon. But now the princess was no longer naïve, and she would become a good queen, with a compassionate heart for all people and creatures.

A dragon brooded in a dark cavern, scarred and bitter. He missed his princess. But he would never again trust a human. And so he would become the predator. The predator with the eyes of prey.

NONFICTION
Grades 11 & 12

Sophie Stiles
Eagan, MN
1st Place

Boxes and Wasps

My brain is a storage unit stuffed to the brim with boxes. Some are frequently accessed and shared with other people. They are full of the positive thoughts, emotions, and memories I experience. The back of my storage unit is darker. The boxes in this part are covered in spider webs or so battered they are barely holding together. Some are spilling over with memory. Some contain just a single item. Either way, I have to move them carefully so their delicate contents, which I would rather keep packed away, are not broken or unleashed.

When my thoughts are in boxes, I am in control. I choose when to take them out and when to put them back. Boxes keep my thoughts safe, but they also keep me safe from my thoughts.

“You seem different,” my sister tells me. She pauses. “Happier.” We spend our car ride home talking about the shift in my mental health that has been taking place over the last several months. I can make mistakes without crying, talk to people without overanalyzing every word, and ground myself when I feel panic start to set in. As I continue to reflect, however, I realize that there are boxes in my brain that are no longer relevant, but I continue to store them because I am afraid of looking at their contents. I am worried that if I open them up, a painful wave of memory will wash all of my progress away. But if I want to continue taking steps forward, I have to let go of the old boxes weighing me down. I need to sort my boxes.

The first box I open is plain cardboard, void of any labels or identifying features. Despite this, I know its exact contents:

piles and piles of frustration. My fists clench as I set the lid on the ground.

What is worse than an illness? An illness with no name. Words are vital to the human experience. My nameless disorder snatched the most crucial tool in my toolbox. Someone would ask me what was wrong, but I had no words to explain. My brain could not conceptualize my illness when it had no name. Instead of treating it, I spent my time obsessing over what it may be. I like labels. Labels make me feel safe. They let me organize everything into neat little boxes so that everything makes sense. Someone stole my label maker and left me stuck with an illness with no name.

After months of filling this box, I brought a new container into the storage unit and labeled it *Diagnosis*. Over time, scribbled and crossed-out notes and alternative labels drowned out the original label. *Diagnosis* is currently crudely taped together and threatens to spill all of its contents as I look inside.

Diagnosing my mental illness was long and grueling. My therapist and I tried to work through my symptoms and tendencies, but our words would not connect. I became tired of spending hours explaining every detail of my life and my mind. Then my therapist seemingly decided to abandon the process. We stopped looking for a diagnosis. I was supposed to keep marching through life with no easy explanation for my issues and no way of gaining access to specialized help. My therapist and I parted ways when I realized how different our goals were. I

found a new therapist. She guided me clearly through every necessary step along the way. We finally found our destination: Generalized Anxiety Disorder.

Next to *Diagnosis* is *Cheryl*. *Cheryl* is a small, gray box made of cloth. A year's worth of dust billows up as I lift the lid.

Cheryl was my first therapist. I spent long hours with her, a digital face on my screen, discussing the ins and outs of my compulsive behaviors and intrusive, obsessive thoughts. Talking to her did calm me somewhat, but something always felt slightly wrong during our sessions. Her perfectly styled, gray bob intimidated me. She spoke to me like she might speak to a young child incapable of understanding the complexities of their experiences and struggles. Cheryl made me feel like an imposter. Her words claimed to understand, but her face said disbelief. It became clear that she didn't grasp that talk therapy wouldn't solve my issues. Cheryl is no longer my therapist.

The next box I see is enormous. Its contents are overflowing and disorganized. The box is labeled *Anxiety* and covered in duct tape.

Generalized anxiety disorder affects my life daily. Zoloft is the duct tape that keeps my anxiety packed away. Sometimes the hysteria is too much, and not even medication can stop my panic attacks. Panic causes my breath to become shallow. I lose feeling first in my legs,

then it spreads to my arms, and finally, I can no longer feel my face. It would take me a lifetime to sort through all the memories and thoughts in the box, so I often refuse to try. When I think about all my anxieties, I start to get anxious about anxiety.

I quickly put the box back down and turn my music up loud to settle the panic unpacking it causes.

I shift my attention to a bright white box with a printed label that says *OCD*. This box is undamaged and nearly spotless. The only sign that someone touched the box is the flecks of red dotting the lid. On closer inspection, they are droplets of dried blood.

“You’re so OCD,” they say when I write in perfect cursive, when they see I’ve organized my shirts by sleeve length and color, and when I cannot work with crumbs on my desk. Is this a mental illness? Are my harmless habits OCD? No, there is more to OCD. My OCD is when I rewrite something five times because the letter does not feel right, when I wash my hands so often they bleed, and when I obsess over a word so much that all I can do is frantically write it down over and over again. I am so OCD, but not for the reasons they say.

I continue going deeper into my storage unit and find a small cluster of boxes. These boxes mostly contain single memories. I hardly ever open them, but I cannot seem to find the strength to throw them away.

The first box in this area is such a furious fire engine red that I cannot continue looking at it. The box is labeled *Laughter*.

*My dad involuntarily exhaled a laugh.
My heart broke as tears burst from my eyes.
My dad laughed.
I was talking about my mental issues, and he
laughed.
The things that had been crushing my will to
live for months, and he laughed.
The things that had broken me, and he
laughed.
And I laughed.
I laughed because he didn't understand and he
couldn't understand.
I laughed but not a funny laugh.
I laughed an angry laugh.
I laughed a frustrated laugh.
I laughed an agonizing laugh.
All I could do was laugh.*

I finally make up my mind to throw *Laughter* away. I have a new box called *Dad*, full of memories that make me smile from ear to ear. I have forgiven *Laughter*; it is time to forget.

I walk to the front of my unit to discard *Laughter*. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice a cluster of tiny gray hexagons. My heart starts to beat a little faster. I am terrified of wasps. Seeing their old nest reminds me that there used to be an extensive wasp infestation in my storage unit.

*Intrusive thoughts are like wasps. They were
unwelcome foes that entered my brain and
buzzed around, refusing to leave as I shoed
them away. Why could I not escape them? They
chewed their way through my boxes, using the
shreds of cardboard and wood to fuel the
construction of their nests. I cannot put wasps*

in boxes, but I learned how to kill them. The Zoloft medication I take every day is like wasp spray; it destroys wasps nests and makes my brain a hostile place for the wasps to reside. Friends and family help keep me calm when the wasps attack; wasps cannot overwhelm me when I have a team of exterminators with me. I write my thoughts down on paper; I release the wasps from the unit and into the open air where they have less power.

Glancing at my watch, I realize it is time to get back to life outside of my head. Today I only managed to declutter one of my boxes, but I'm still proud of myself for taking that single step. I hope someday to move to a smaller storage unit, one without a dark section. I hope not to have boxes labeled *Anxiety* or *OCD*. I smile, realizing that this goal is far more attainable than I once thought. I have the strength not only to unpack my boxes but to get rid of them. I confidently turn the key in the lock, leaving my storage unit behind but committing myself to continue sorting my boxes some other time.

Sophie Stiles
Eagan, MN
2nd Place

Julia

As a seven-year-old, navigating the dark depths of death, final goodbyes, and what may or may not lay behind the heavenly gates of life after death is like diving into the deep end of a pool for the first time and feeling that it's impossible to make it to the surface. The developing brain of a young child may not be able to solve complex arithmetic problems or write with perfect grammar. However, it is irrefutably capable of containing an intricate web of emotion. I can't remember much of second grade, but a memory that will last a lifetime is my cousin Julia laying a plaid blanket on the soft grass and finding puffy, white shapes created in the brilliant blue sky for the last time.

The crisp autumn breeze and colorful crunching leaves signaled the beginning of fall break. My family and I packed up our suitcases and set out on a seven-hour road trip east to Peoria, Illinois. As we pulled into their long driveway, our cousins ran out to greet us. As I stepped onto the gravel, I swirled into a whirlwind of outstretched arms and smiling faces. Conversation erupted like Mount Vesuvius as we moved inside, all of us eager to catch up on everything that had happened since we last saw each other.

To escape the loud kitchen, my cousin Julia led me upstairs to show me her room. A sleeping bag lays in the far corner, and the furniture has moved around to make it easier for multiple people to sleep in there. My eyes took in the kitsch yet charming decorations as I glanced around the room. A golden teddy bear smiled welcomingly at me from the bed, where it laid gently on the folds of rose-colored fabric.

After settling in, we spent our days exploring the dense woods, chasing each other through the yard, and raking hundreds of leaves into towering piles that immediately collapse as we joyfully jumped into them. We were outside from dawn till dusk when our parents forced us to come inside for dinner. The one exception was when Julia felt too weak and tired to play, in which case we would move indoors to play cards or watch cartoons.

I didn't fully understand what was happening to Julia. My parents explained she was sick. They used the word terminal, but I couldn't grasp what they meant. It was difficult to see my cousin in pain. A glass wall separated her experiences and my ability to comprehend what she was going through.

On a particularly tough day when her body was racked with the feeling of needles piercing through her skull, we took a blanket and gently laid her in the fresh air under the cerulean sky. The sun beamed down on us, and the clouds playfully danced across the sky, arranging themselves into billowy puffs of cotton candy.

Julia turned to me and asked what I wanted to be when I was older. I raised myself off the picnic blanket, propped up by my elbows, and thought for a moment. I told her I didn't know yet and asked her what she wanted to be. She smiled confidently and informed me that she would be a baby tiger when she was grown up. I chuckled and sunk back to the ground, focusing on the clouds, now lazily drifting across the sky.

We laid there, on a red and white quilt that sat atop the slowly yellowing grass, for eternity. Finally, I got up to get Julia and me a snack, as my stomach growled at me. With animal crackers in hand, I ventured back outside to our small haven, tucked in the corner of the lawn. As I approached, I noticed Julia had closed her eyes and lay perfectly still, with

her hands loosely clasped and draped on her abdomen. She was the epitome of peace and serenity.

I sat down and offered Julia a cracker. When she didn't respond, I called her name, once, twice, then over and over. That perfect picture of calm fractured as I gently yet urgently tried to shake her awake, but she did not respond or move a muscle. As fast as my tiny legs could carry me, I ran for the house, for someone to help me. My breathing became panicked and shallow. I tried to explain to my aunt and uncle what had happened. However, between my panting breath and the tears streaming down my face, they could not understand. I pointed to the yard and managed to say one word: "Julia" in my shaking, quiet voice.

After that, I felt like a buoy being knocked around by the ocean. I couldn't speak as the tense atmosphere threatened to suffocate me. My mind was running a mile a minute, unable to process everything at once. My heart was a rubber band, stretching and stretching until I was on the verge of completely snapping. My grief was gravity, an invisible force that pinned me down to the ground and was inescapable.

Cloaked in shades of midnight and onyx, we made our way into the silent, solemn room. At the front lay a rectangular, oak box that looked innocent enough, but I was too scared to look inside, to allow reality to set in. She was an angel ascending to heaven while I fell deeper and deeper into an endless cycle of grief and guilt that would continue for years.

When we got back to our cousin's house, I could barely force myself up to Julia's room to change out of my funeral attire. As my feet slowly carried me through the doorway, a faint mist clouded my vision. The only sound to be heard was soft snuffles that steadily gave way to sobs. My mind swirled with once-forgotten memories. A wave of emotion washed over me, threatening to overwhelm me in its depths. Shifting

myself away from my thoughts, I gently floated around the room, trying to leave everything just as it was. The mattress covered in soft folds of fabric held the impression of a frail figure, though the creator of the outline would never return to fill it in.

A tiger costume hung on the closet door, and I thought about how in ten days it still would, while all the other kids went from door to door asking for candy. The small stack of cards wishing Julia a happy fifth birthday was just twenty days old. The knowledge that they were the last birthday cards she would ever receive caused the chasm in my heart to expand. The honey-colored teddy bear that once sat happily on the bed had somehow made its way to the corner of the room, lying face down on the oak. I picked it up and stroked its velvet head, wishing that the bear could place a bandaid on my heart to heal the pain. Like the teddy bear, I never got to say my impossible goodbye.

The History of the Annual Creative Writing Contest
Sponsored by Southwest Minnesota State University
& Southwest West Central Service Cooperative

The Creative Writing Program at Southwest Minnesota State University, working in partnership with Southwest West Central Service Cooperative, designed and conducted the first annual Creative Writing Contest in the spring of 2005.

The contest was subtitled *Giving Voice to the Youth of Southwest and West Central Minnesota* and was established to encourage a love of language and writing among the region's young people. We wanted to recognize gifted young writers in this area of Minnesota. That first annual contest unearthed a wealth of talent and demonstrated the desire of our young people to tell their stories and express their imaginations through writing. The endeavor was so successful that SMSU and SWWC Service Cooperative have continued the contest on an annual basis. We are proud to note that the Creating Space Writing Contest is now in its 18th year as a collaborative outreach effort that supports young writers in our region.

The contest is open to all students in grades 3-12 attending public, private or home schools within the 18-county area of southwest and west central Minnesota. Students may enter the contest through a classroom assignment or on their own. The categories for submission are Fiction, Nonfiction and Poetry. Students are allowed to enter in more than one category.

Once submitted, the student's written work is first screened by SMSU creative writing students. Each submission is read by multiple student judges. The finalists are then submitted to the final judges, faculty in the SMSU English Program.

Prizes are awarded for the top three winners in each category and grade group. The most coveted prize for the contest is one of the \$2,000 SMSU tuition scholarships awarded to the three first-place winners in the 11th/12th grade categories.

The highlight of the contest is the Annual Creating Spaces Awards Ceremony, hosted by the SMSU Creative Writing Program on a Sunday in April each year. At the awards ceremony, student writers gather with their families and teachers to be recognized for their achievements. They receive medals and the *Creating Spaces* anthology in which the winning pieces from every category and group are published. The first-place winners in the 11th-12th grade category for fiction, nonfiction and poetry each receive an SMSU First-year Tuition Scholarship. This celebration begins with a keynote address by a published Midwest writer followed by a reception where the student writers meet each other, the SMSU student and faculty judges, and the keynote author.

Keynote Speakers at the Creating Spaces Writing Contest

- 2005 – Larry Gavin
- 2006 – Rebecca Fjelland Davis
- 2007 – Bill Holm
- 2008 – Vincent Wixon
- 2009 – Mary Logue
- 2010 – Kristin Cronn-Mills
- 2011 – Rebecca Fjelland Davis
- 2012 – Nicole Helget and Nate LeBoutillier
- 2013 – Thomas Maltman
- 2014 – Saara Myrene Raappana
- 2015 – James A. Zarzana
- 2016 – Christine Stewart-Nuñez
- 2017 – James Autio
- 2018 – Geoff Herbach
- 2019 – Megan Maynor
- 2020 – Terri Michels
- 2021 – Shannon Gibney

2022 Keynote Presenter: Xavier Pastrano

Xavier Pastrano earned his BA in Creative Writing from Southwest Minnesota State University, his Masters of English from the University of North Dakota, and his Masters of Education from the University of Sioux Falls. He is the author of several poetry collections including *XXX (Thirty)* (published by Prolific Press), *Seeing Sounds* (published by Harsan Publishing), and *Hey, Kid* (self-published). He has also had poetry published in regional anthologies such as *Thunderstorms*, *The Scandalous Lives of Butterflies*, and *South Dakota in Poems* by the South Dakota State Poetry Society. He currently teaches Accelerated English I at Lincoln High School in Sioux Falls, SD. When he's not teaching, writing, or reading, he enjoys listening to and making music, watching horror movies, spending time with his rad wife, and going skateboarding with his six-year-old son.

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Finally, and most importantly, to all the parents, teachers, friends, and relatives who encourage children to read, write, and submit their best work to the Creating Spaces Writing Contest each year. We owe you our most heartfelt thanks.

