

CREATING SPACES

2015

**A collection of the winning writings of the 2015 writing
competition entitled *Creating Spaces: Giving Voice to the
Youth of Southwest and West Central Minnesota***

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

Tyrae Goodface
Hills, MN
1st Place

The Brightest Light in the World

There once was a light.
Which was so bright.
It was so awesome.
I thought it was a possum.
And I almost took flight.

**Brynn Beffert
Hutchinson, MN
2nd Place**

Manatees

The gentle giant of the sea,
as beautiful as he seems.
He loves warm water to swim,
but if it gets too cold he might not live.
Be careful when you're driving your boat,
because he might be afloat.

**Brynn Beffert
Hutchinson, MN
3rd Place**

Rainbow

The sun and the rain, two different things,
but together they bring peace and harmony.
The bright colors, beautiful and kind,
you see them after the darkest times.

FICTION
Grades 3 & 4

**Brooke Johnson
Hutchinson, MN
1st Place**

The Gift of Great-Grandma Emily

Drip! Drip! Drip! I was watching the rain drip slowly down the window of my 5th grade classroom. The drops of rain were moving slowly, and I tried to imagine what it would be like if I were small and could ride the raindrop down the window like a rollercoaster. I wondered if my sister Claire was watching the rain too. She is in Mrs. Peterson's 4th grade class just down the hall. It is so hard to concentrate in class right now, because spring break is coming in just two days. Our family is planning on taking a trip to Florida and visiting Disneyland. Claire and I have never been there before, so we are super excited!

Beep! I jumped at the sound of the loudspeaker. It scared me so much that I could feel my heart racing. The sound of the principal's voice came on: "Please send Bailey and Claire Brodnik to the office now!" I thought I was dreaming when I heard my name. I just sat there, not sure what to do.

My teacher, Mrs. Childers, came over and said, "Bailey, you may go to the office now." She smiled at me, which made me feel a little less nervous.

I slowly got up from my desk and left the classroom. I saw Claire just ahead, so I hurried fast to catch up to her. "What do you think is going on, Claire?" I asked. "Do you think we are in trouble for some reason?"

Claire just looked at me with worried eyes and said, "I don't know."

When we got to the office, we saw our mom sitting there with tears in her eyes. *Oh no*, we thought, *something must be wrong*. Our mom stood up, grabbed our hands, and walked us out of the school. She didn't say a word.

Once we got to the car, Claire and I were quiet. We didn't say a word, and neither did our mom. She was quietly crying. It broke our hearts to see her like that, and it made us wonder what could possibly be wrong. Soon we pulled up to the hospital. We started to wonder if someone we knew was hurt.

When all three of us got inside the hospital, we saw a lot of family members. Finally, mom was able to tell us what was wrong. She said Grandma Evelyn had a very bad heart attack this

morning and that she wasn't doing very well at all. Claire and I immediately felt sad and started to cry. *No! Why did this have to happen?* we both thought. We told our mom that we were not leaving until we saw our Grandma Evelyn. We had to wait a little while, but then a doctor came to get us and took us to the emergency room.

When we saw Grandma Evelyn, our eyes widened, and my heart started to pound really fast. Grandma looked so pale, tired and weak. I looked over at Claire, and she looked so scared. I grabbed her hand, and together we went closer to our grandma. Claire and I grabbed Grandma's hands, we kissed her cheek, and whispered, "We love you Grandma." Grandma's eyes were closed, but she must have heard us because she was able to smile. It was a small smile, but it was a smile. Grandma never opened her eyes, but we heard her whisper something so quiet that neither Claire nor I heard what she said. We leaned closer and said, "Grandma, what did you say?" Grandma whispered again, and this time we heard what she said. It was hard for her to get her words out because she was breathing quickly, but she said, "I love you girls. I have something special for you—in my house." Grandma started coughing after she spoke, and the doctors rushed Claire and me out of the room. I wasn't ready to leave. I wanted more time with Grandma—time to ask her what she meant and time to hold her hand a little longer.

When we were walking back to the waiting room where the rest of the family was, Claire said to me, "What do you think Grandma means that she has something special? Do you think it's true? If it is, how are we going to figure out what it is?"

I answered, "I don't know Claire, but if there really is something special to find, we will find it together."

We found our way to the waiting room. Mom was still in the room with Grandma, so we sat down on a couch and tried to be patient. Claire and I were both so worried about Grandma, and so curious about the secret. We waited and waited for a long time. A lot of relatives started coming to the hospital, aunts and uncles, and many of our cousins. Everyone was worried.

It seemed like hours had passed by while we were sitting in the waiting room. Soon, we got the bad news. Grandma didn't make it. My eyes filled with tears. I looked at Claire and grabbed her hand. Together we cried. We were so sad. It seemed like just a few days ago we were baking cookies at Grandma's house, and now she is gone. My heart hurt really bad, and I wanted nothing more than to give Grandma a hug. But I couldn't. She was gone.

The funeral was such a difficult day. It was cold outside and a little bit rainy, but there was a rainbow in the sky. I looked at the color in the rainbow and focused on the purple. It was so bright and colorful. Purple was Grandma Evelyn's favorite color. I thought about what she said to us in the hospital and wondered what she was talking about. I leaned over to Claire and said, "Tomorrow we will try to figure out the secret."

We woke up to the sun shining through the window in our room. Today was the day. We were going to try to figure out what Grandma meant that she had something special for us at her house. We decided it would be best to tell our mom about what Grandma had said and see if she would help us figure out what it could possibly be. So we walked out to the kitchen and shared what Grandma had said. Mom seemed surprised that Grandma mentioned there was something special for us at her house, but she replied, "Well, girls, I guess we better go to Grandma's house and see if we can figure this all out."

We decided to start searching in the kitchen. Grandma was a very good cook and spent a lot of time in the kitchen, so we thought maybe she would have something special there. It was difficult to search because we had no idea what we were even looking for. We didn't seem to find anything there, so continued to check around the house. We continued searching and searching for what seemed like hours. We checked every room in the house, every closet, and every corner. We were ready to give up for the day, so we headed down the stairs.

Grandma's pictures on the wall caught my attention. I had never really noticed them before. They were all pictures of our family, and Grandma and Grandpa. Grandpa had died two years ago in a bad car accident. Seeing his picture made me really miss him. I was thinking of how much fun we always had together and of all the awesome memories I have. I really miss him.

We were getting ready to leave when I had one more idea of where to look. I realized that we never checked under any of the beds in the house. I told Mom and Claire that we should at least go back and check under Grandma's bed.

"Bailey, we have been here a long time already and should really go," Mom said.

"Please, Mom, let me just go ahead and check quick."

Mom thought about it for a moment, then said, "Okay, sweetie, but please hurry, it's almost time for supper. Why don't you take Claire with you and she can help you look."

"Thanks, Mom!"

Claire and I ran back up the stairs to Grandma's room. I got down on my hands and knees, lifted the bed skirt, and slowly looked under the bed. It was a little dark, but I noticed a box sitting almost exactly under the middle of the bed. I reached for it and tried to pull it out. It was a little heavy for me, so Claire got on the other side of the bed and pushed the box as I pulled it. Finally, we got it out. It was a dusty black box, but it was still beautiful. It looked like it was made out of leather, and the leather was covered in a very pretty pattern. Claire and I noticed that it had a little lock on it too, so we couldn't open it.

"Claire, do you remember seeing a key anywhere while we were looking through the house?"

"Yes! I think there was a small key in Grandma's jewelry box on her dresser," Claire replied.

We quickly went to check and sure enough, we found a little silver key. We ran back to the box and tried to place it in the lock. It was a perfect fit! We looked at each other with wide eyes that were full of curiosity. We were about to open the box, but then I realized we should have Mom here too.

"Wait, Claire, let's get Mom before we open it. Mom! Mom! Come up here quick. We found something special!"

Mom quickly came upstairs and saw the special box. "Wow, girls, I think this might have been what Grandma meant by something special. It's beautiful," Mom said.

"It was locked, but we found the key in Grandma's jewelry box," Claire said.

"Mom, can we open it?" I asked with curiosity.

"Of course you can," Mom replied. So together, we all carefully opened the lid of the box.

We were absolutely astonished. Inside the box there were gold, silver, and bronze medals, followed by trophy after trophy! We looked closer at the trophies and they all had our Great-Grandma's name on them. Emily Stone. My eyes widened as we kept looking through the box. There were pictures of our great-grandma skating at the Olympics. On the back of the pictures, it said, "Emily Stone, 1928 Olympics, Switzerland, Gold Medalist."

"Mom! Our great-grandma was a gold medalist in the Olympics?" I asked with excitement.

"I guess she was. I knew she was a figure skater, but I had no idea that she was actually in the Olympics," Mom said.

All Claire could say was, "Wow!"

We kept looking through the box and found many more amazing pictures of our great-grandma skating. Then, towards the

bottom of the box, there was a very old envelope that looked like it was once white, but had turned yellow because of the years that it sat inside of this box. On the outside of the envelope was written...*To my beautiful great-grandchildren.*

Claire and I both looked at our mom. "That's us, isn't it, Mom?" I asked.

"Yes, girls, that is both of you," Mom replied.

My hands almost started to shake as I held the envelope in my hands. I could hardly believe everything that was happening, and that in front of me was something written to Claire and me from our great-grandma, someone I had never met.

"Mom, can we open it?" we asked.

"Of course you can," replied our mom.

With trembling hands and fast beating hearts, Claire and I both held the envelope and carefully started to open it. It opened easily since most of the stickiness was gone after so many years. We carefully looked inside. There was a pink piece of paper, and behind it was a very large amount of cash. It was full of \$100.00 dollar bills! I had never seen so much money in my life. I looked at Mom and her eyes were huge and she looked surprised.

"Girls, why don't you look at the paper inside. Maybe that will tell us what this money is all about," Mom said.

I carefully pulled out the pink paper. I could tell it was very old, because it felt very soft and fragile. It was folded perfectly. Claire and I opened it, and this is what we found. A letter. Mom carefully grabbed the letter and began to read it softly.

To my sweet great-grandchildren,

I am writing this letter to you because I know that I will probably not have the chance to meet you before I am gone. I wanted to leave each of you with a gift from me, so I gave careful instructions to my daughter Evelyn to save this letter and all of the items in it, and to pass it along to you when she felt the time was right. As you can see from the contents of the box, I had a passion in my life. My passion was figure skating. It has brought me a great joy over the years to be able to do something that I love so much. Because of this, I wanted to leave each of you with a gift. I saved all of the money that I had earned while I was a figure skater and wanted to pass it along to each of you. My wish for you is that you use the money to find your passion, and to do the

things in life that you enjoy. Always fight for your dreams and never give up. Life is full of wonderful opportunities, and I want each of you to live life to the fullest. Know that I love you with my entire heart and will always be close as you continue on life's journey. You are a blessing to me even though I never have had the chance to meet you. I love you so much and wish you the best life you could ever have!

*Love Forever,
Great-Grandma Emily*

Claire and I sat there with tears in our eyes. I couldn't believe that our great-grandma would care so much about us before we were even born. I feel like we have been given such an amazing gift. I am so filled with emotions. We have lost our Grandma Evelyn, but we have gained so much from finding out more about our Great-Grandma Emily. I feel truly blessed to be a part of this family and am so grateful for the gift we have been given. Going forward, I promise to find my passion in life, and when I do, I will always remember my Grandma Evelyn and my Great-Grandma Emily!

**Teagan Young
Hutchinson, MN
2nd Place**

On the Coast

Smith, party of three. Your table is ready.”

“Come on, Brynn, hurry up,” said Jack.

“Coming,” said Brynn while her little baby legs were trying to catch up.

“Sorry about that, Charlie. Let’s start talking about how that new invention should turn out. Brynn, keep your water on your coaster!”

Oh gosh, I hate it when little kids set things on me; they pound too hard. “Excuse me; what would you like to eat?” I hear those exact boring words every day; I’m sick of it!

“Give us a minute pl...BRYNN! Why did you spill your water?” Oh, ah, it’s...so...cold! Why do little kids always spill on me? I’m here so that you don’t get circles on your table, not so spills don’t touch certain areas of the table. Now I am all wet and cold. I think I turned into an ice cube. At least that family has left. Let’s hope another family doesn’t show up soon.

Okay, never mind, here they are. They look pretty old. There shouldn’t be any spills. Great...gossip. This will get annoying. I’m pretty sure people that sit at table nine have no clue that I can hear them.

“What would you like to eat?” the waitress repeated.

Again! I’m telling you, I hear those words 500 times a day! People have breakfast, lunch and dinner here. The waitress never changes the words up. Those girls are gone though. It went a lot faster than I thought it would.

Now let’s hope it’s a little while until anyone crazy walks in. I’m so messy! I have food and water on me and I’m freezing! It should be a couple min...Again! Gosh time goes really fast.

A mom and a kid. Shouldn’t be too bad.

“What would you like to eat?”

See what I mean? It’s crazy how many times I hear it!

“I am your mother, and I said when we get home you are playing with your sister!”

“But why?” asked Savana while a tear fell out of her eye. Only if she would stop crying, I won’t get soaked. Oh no, no, no.... Ugh, she just had to start crying! That only adds to my

problems. Now I'm wet from water and tears, and I'm covered in food! Stop crying; stop crying! Hey, that actually worked. I wonder who made her shut off the faucet. Whoever did, I love them. Maybe this is a waterpark because I'm soaked. I wonder if people will ever wash me. I mean people who come think I'm a dishrag. That family has left; let's see who comes next.

"Myah, party of two."

"Oh, that's us," said Myah while she started walking toward the nice-looking, somewhat old lady. "Oh, and does the kids' coloring sheet come with markers or colorful crayons?"

"Markers," the nice lady said.

Great another little kid! And he is even going to have markers! I don't need to get any dirtier. Breathe, breathe. They're sitting down. That's okay, though. I think, I hope.

"What would you like to eat?"

Okay, seriously, I think they do that just to bug me. If I'm right, then they've accomplished their goal! Oh gosh, he's got the markers out—so far just on paper. We're doing good. Keep going. Keep going on the paper, not me. If he draws on me, I might just quit my job. I'll have a new one. I'll teach people how to use a coaster. It will be fun. At least he is still drawing on the paper. Oh my, the marker is coming toward me! Please don't draw on me. Do people see that I'm already dirty? Don't keep coming toward...No! Stop! ... Ahhhh! Now I'm blue! It's so scratchy! Why won't he stop? The marker is like a screwdriver! What can be worse than this? I wonder if other coasters feel the same way I do. Well, anyway, I'm wet, covered in food, and now drawn on. It hasn't dried yet! But the family has left.

Hmm, a boy, mom, girl, and a dad. This will be interesting. Oh no, the boy looks like he has a cold. This won't turn out good.

"Okay kids, do you want dessert later?"

"YES!" screamed the kids.

The little boy was talking when all of a sudden snot fell out of his nose! Oh gosh, I'm going to die! It's coming toward me! It looks gooey, sticky and slimy. It is coming down as fast as an airpl...SPLAT! That's so gooey. It is by far the worst thing that has happened today. It just keeps coming down. Has this boy ever heard of a tissue? Do his parents recognize that snot is falling out of his nose? I mean who doesn't recognize that? His parents need to focus more because they should really see this. What am I, a tissue? Who would think that a coaster could turn into a tissue like that? Finally, it's all clear until, achoo! It's a human snot bomb. He needs to learn how to cover. Not cover like when you're in big

trouble and you go under cover. The kind that every kid needs to learn how to do—cover your sneeze.

Since that family has left I've been thinking...But now I see someone coming. He has glasses, and he looks like a nerd. I mean with those glasses plus his overalls equals total weirdo. I think he's a wild animal. People with glasses are fine, but overalls with glasses? Whoa, that brings it way too far.

"What would you like to drink?"

By the time it's my five-year anniversary, I will have heard those words 100,000,000,001 times! No one really even answers the question. The waiter either comes back one more time or never. I hope nothing happens to me this time. I mean, it's just a guy with glasses. Oh no, they broke! I can't believe I'm going to have glass poking me. As the glass was falling, I started thinking, what if the glasses were to fall on my butt? You know how bad that would hurt? Oww! It's so pinchy. This boy should pay for my brother. He'll be my back-up. My brother would love this job. He is working across the street right now. He works at the buffet. Thank goodness, the nerd finally left.

Well, now people are coming, and there is another cute little baby! Wait, I shouldn't be happy about that; it didn't turn out well last time. She looks so cute though—gitchy, gitchy, goo. Oh gosh, what am I doing? She could ruin me. Ick, she has a full diaper. She is adorable. Ahg, snap out of it, Coasty (I'm not going to actually snap—I don't have any fingers). All of a sudden this chunky stuff blobs out of her mouth! I think people call it *throw-up*. Ugh! It's slimy! And smells like a skunk just came out of her throat with the puke and farted! Now this is the worst thing ever! I think she ate pizza; it's chunky, like pizza. Or she could have eaten a whole bunch of strawberries—whole—because those are chunky! Real chunky. I am surprised her diaper hasn't exploded. It should pretty soon. Oh no, it just burst open! Now I have pee and ah, ah, ah, you know what. YOU DON'T? My oh my, I mean...*poop*. All I can say is it is disgusting! You would know, wait have you ever experienced it? I doubt it. Usually it won't happen to people, or whatever you are called. I am a coaster; you are not. Coasters are things; you're a person. Anyway, I cannot see you right now. Apparently the mom is changing the kids diaper, and she set the dirty one right on top of me and put a clean one on the baby's butt (I'm sorry for the diaper).

There was a beat...Velcro, shimmy shake, Velcro, shimmy shake, and so on. There was noise in the background; it sounded

like...Imagine Dragon's music. Now that the pants are pulled up there is no stink bomb.

There is a new family coming right as the other one is leaving. How will they wash the table? Wait, they never do that, which is why I'm so dirty. Wait, I never realized that spot on my back. It looks like a price tag. I was only \$0.99? Man, I was cheap! That is probably why they bought me. Wait, they were not supposed to buy me. I was born by my parents. That is how I have a brother. Or were they just tricking me?

Hello, family. Ah, that felt good. I have always wanted to say hello to real people even though they can't hear me. It sounds stupid, but you would know if you were a coaster. Anyway, this family is very loud. What are they saying?

"Okay, tell me what job you want around the house. I have a big list; sound like a plan?"

"YES!" screamed the kids.

"Here they are: take out the garbage."

"Me! Me! Me!" said Elizabeth.

"Okay, next is wash the dishes."

"I want that, I want that!" said Tom.

"Sounds good. So, Elizabeth, you will take out the garbage. Tom is going to wash the dishes. Shannon, you will be washing the windows, and I will be picking up toys. Does that sound like a good chore chart?"

Here comes the waitress. It would be awesome if I had the power to make her change the words. And these kids, man they are loud. I don't have ears but I can still hear the kids. I wonder if they will be the first family to not hurt me? Never mind, Tom hit me—hard! Ow! Gosh that really hurts. He used his fist. Some people call it a *punch*. I'm pretty sure his parents are going to punish him; they better. Later today, I will walk to his house and give him a lecture, right after I play head clams with my brother. Or is it headbands? Whatever it is called, it is very fun.

Ooo, la la.... I can't believe who just walked in! Taylor Swift, and she is walking this way! She is with a record labeler. Maybe I can hear her sing. She is in a very fancy dress. It looks so pretty! Ooo, oo, she is going to be singing "Blank Space." I love that song! It goes like this...Nice to meet you, where you've been, I could show you incredible things, magic, madness, heaven, sin, saw you there and thought...oh my god, look at that face, you look like my next mistake, love's a game, wanna play?...Something like that. All I know is that she will be singing. Quiet, she is starting...

“Nice to meet you, where’ve you...” SHE HAS TERRIBLE BREATH! Oh my goodness! I can barely even hear her, I’m so focused on how bad this smells!

“...’cause we’re young and we’re reckless, and we’ll take this way too far...”

Okay, I got to admit this is a good song, but the breath is just horrendous! Taylor Swift should eat a whole bottle of mints before a performance. She sings a lot during a performance, and her mouth gets really wide. If you were in the front row, you would pass out! No joke. I would lend a mint to her, but people never pay attention to me. Down here is my own little world. No one else is with me. I’m almost alone. Except for the 200 people who have come today.

Taylor Swift is done singing, and she’s signing a record! Now whenever she comes here I’m going to have to handle the breath. I need a plan. I know; I’ll do this. Whenever she comes I will walk over to the buffet where my brother works and switch with him. Then I won’t have to smell the fart-like breath. My brother can tell me all about it. In order to get him over here, I will need to trick him. I will say that Taylor Swift is coming. I already heard and I would like him to have a chance. Good plan, right? If it doesn’t work, I will say, “You know I want to try out the buffet. And you should really try out Applebee’s.” Most likely he will fall for that. If he doesn’t, I will pick him up and walk over here, plop him down, and tell him to stay. If he doesn’t stay, I will super glue his feet to the ground. He will definitely stay then.

Maybe Taylor Swift should go to the dentist office; it smells like she doesn’t brush her teeth. And I’m not trying to be funny when I say this, but she shouldn’t be a singer if she has breath that bad! The dentist would have to be rich because she must have a lot of smelly cavities. It smells like a whale’s blowhole! Even though it is hard to do that by *accident*. I am very glad I got to hear her sing. Although, the breath never got better, she is still Taylor Swift.

It looks like she is signing a contract. I don’t know what for, probably something about laws. Who cares? It doesn’t really matter. Some things don’t have to be a mystery, just saying. This one time I was in school, and this kid came running up to me and said, “Who sharpened my pencil? Who did it?” Why would that have to be a mystery? Does it really matter who *helped* you? I don’t think it does.

Taylor Swift finished signing the contract and left.

Oh no, the waitress is coming this way. I thought I was fine, and that the day was over. I should be going home now. She picked me up. This isn't good; this isn't good at all. She is bringing me into the cooking room. I was hoping I would be able to just go home and go to bed. Apparently not today. Going toward the kitchen, I see a bathtub. Okay, this won't be too shabby. I really hate water, but to get cleaned off, I don't care. I just hope that they don't see the tag and rip it off. That would hurt! After, I would be able to go to my nice cuddly home.

**Brenna Kilian
Hutchinson, MN
3rd Place**

Risky Wishes

BEEP! BEEP! —went the familiar sound of my alarm clock. My name is Logan T. Jarvis, and I'm eleven years old and in the sixth grade. Actually I'm almost twelve because my birthday is today, and I'm turning twelve at 7:14 a.m. Once I got upstairs my older sister was eating a bowl of Cheerios, and my mom was making my special birthday lunch for school. If you are wondering who my older sister is or who my mom is, I'll just tell you who my whole family is. My mom is named Hailey, and she is a substitute teacher. My older sister is seventeen, she's in eleventh grade, and her name is Chaya. Chaya can text until her thumbs fly off, and she always hangs out with her friends on Friday night. My younger sister is named Jersey. Jersey is five and only in preschool. She's a total tattletale! She's a brat when she doesn't get to watch "Super Ponies" for movie night.

Well, where were we? Oh right, at breakfast. "Happy birthday, sweetie!" My mom said as she pinched my cheeks until they were red.

"Mom, stop!" I said. I grabbed a waffle out of the box and then mom put a candle on top.

After my mom lit the candle, she said, "Oh, I have to go get Jersey out of bed for the birthday song!" My mom rushed out of the kitchen, down the hall, and into my sister's bedroom. I heard whining coming from my sister's bedroom.

"So twelve in...three minutes." Chaya told me.

"Really only three minutes?"

"Look at the clock, genius!" said Chaya in her sarcastic tone of voice.

"Here she is," Mom said while holding Jersey's hand. They sang the happy birthday song, and then Chaya and I went to school.

"Happy b-day!" said my best friend, Jake. I sat down next to him on the bus. Chaya sat down next to Rachel. Rachel is the girl who Chaya hangs out with every Friday night.

When we got to school, my other best friend named Andrew said, "Happy birthday, bro!"

“Thanks,” I said. “Here are your invitations for my birthday party!” I handed them each a bright green envelope that had the words: “*Come to Logan’s Birthday Party—if you dare,*” written on the top of the envelopes. “So can you come?” I asked them.

“Yep!” they said at the same time.

RING! RING! RING! —went the sound of the one-minute bell. We raced to the door and went to our lockers.

“Oh, Logan!” called Andrew. “Look, here comes Bailey.” Sure enough, standing by her locker getting books, there she was, Bailey May. The cutest girl in all of sixth grade. Andrew and Jake were the only people that knew I had a big crush on her. Bailey wasn’t like other girls; she liked kickball, football, baseball, and video games. She didn’t like dance or makeup. But there was one thing that she wasn’t interested in, that I wish she wasliking boys.

“Go talk to her!” said Andrew.

RING! RING! RING! “Oh, time for class,” I said as I hurried off to homeroom.

Once I got to class we watched the daily announcements. My picture was in the birthday section.

After I got home, my mom said, “Chaya, remember, no going out with friends tonight.”

“Mom, you can’t! I don’t care if it’s Logan’s birthday!” said my sister when I walked into the kitchen.

“Come on, it’s your brother’s twelfth birthday! You have to be there!” my mom ordered Chaya. Chaya stomped to her room. Wow, I’ve never seen Chaya get so upset before. It was awesome!

“Why is Chy-Chy so mad?” asked Jersey. Sometimes Jersey calls Chaya “Chy-Chy” as her nickname.

“Because she doesn’t want to go to Logan’s birthday party,” said my mom.

“Mommy, can I help you with the cake?” asked Jersey.

“Of course you can, pumpkin! Ask Logan what flavor,” said Mom.

So Jersey asked me, “What flavor?”

“Hmmm...strawberry chocolate marble,” I answered. My grandparents, aunts, and uncles came to my birthday party. It was lots of fun!

The next morning mom put us to work. “You have to go rake the leaves. All of you,” Mom ordered. We set off to work, and after we were doing pretty good, Jersey jumped in every leaf pile!

“Jersey, why did you do that?” asked Chaya. And then Jersey just started crying, really crying. It was so loud that Mom came

out and started yelling at Chaya and me. After the Jersey problem, we had to finish the job. As Chaya was throwing the leaves away, I heard a bike coming down the road. It was Bailey! I tried going inside, but then Chaya said, “Hey, Bailey!” How did she know her name? Bailey biked over to my sister, and they started talking. I was spying from the garage, but then the shelf I was leaning on tipped over! Bailey and Chaya ran over to where I was. Chaya started laughing, and Bailey helped me up.

“Are you okay?” asked Bailey. I was speechless. We talked about kickball and other sports for a little bit. When Bailey left, I got my phone and called Jake and Andrew to tell them all about it.

“Time for the party!” Mom said. After Jake and Andrew came, we went on the trampoline, then we ate, opened presents, and then ate cake. I got a new Lego set from Jake and a Nerf Gun from Andrew. After cake, we played video games for the rest of the party. We played Minecraft the whole time. Minecraft is our favorite video game. When my friends left, I got in BIG trouble!

“This is for you, Logan,” Jersey said. She handed me a big crumpled up piece of paper with a bow on top.

I said, “Well, what is it?” Jersey told me it was a “fudge ball.”

“Come to my room and I’ll give you a tea party!” said Jersey.

“No way! Tea parties are for baby girls!” Well, what I said got Jersey really, really mad. She screamed and kicked me, and it hurt! Mom was too busy upstairs getting ready for bed she couldn’t hear us.

“Stop! Stop it!” I told Jersey. But she wouldn’t. Chaya heard us, and she came running over.

“What’s going on?” asked Chaya. “I’m gonna go get Mom!”

Mom came down in no time. “Jersey stop kicking your brother!” said Mom. Mom picked Jersey up and brought her to her room. Jersey must have told mom what happened because the conversation ended with me going to my room. Mom was really mad at me. At about three o’clock in the morning, I went into the kitchen and got out the candles and lighter. I lit the candle and whispered to myself, “I wish my world would be like Minecraft where I could do things my way and create things my way,” and I blew out my candle. After I blew out the candle, I went upstairs to bed.

When I woke up, I heard something strange outside. It sounded like a creeper about to explode. But when I looked outside nothing was there. A creeper is a monster from Minecraft

that is green and can blow up. I thought I was just tired, but I was wrong. When I got upstairs, my whole family was eating.

“Good morning,” said Mom. Mom must have forgotten what happened last night. Yes! Now it was time to put it to the test.

“Um...Mom uhh...can I...umm go over to Jake’s house ummm...later today?” Okay, I should have probably said that a lot more clearly. But she said, “Yes, after you eat breakfast.” At least she said yes. I ate breakfast and went over to Jake’s house. When I got over to Jake’s house, he answered the door.

“Logan!” said Jake, full of excitement. We played outside for a while. Then I heard a chicken. Not a normal chicken, but a chicken from Minecraft! I jumped at the noise of the chicken, and that jump made me trip over Jake who was making a small leaf pile.

“What was that?” Jake asked me while he was getting up from the ground.

“I, I, I thought it sounded like a Minecraft chicken!” Jake stuttered.

“Me, too,” I said unsure.

After that, I had enough weird things on my mind, so I told Jake I would go over to his house later.

“Bye!” called Jake in a tired voice. I think we had enough weird things happen that morning. On the way home from Jake’s house, I thought (I know now) that a Minecraft cow, a bird, and even a horse made sounds loud enough that a human being could hear. After I heard the horse, I thought I had lost my mind, so I ran home and went to sleep.

The next morning I started SEEING things. What the heck was happening? And then it hit me. My wish! Now it all makes sense. Wow, maybe those wishes that come true in the movies are real in real life! To add to my list of weird things I saw, a Minecraft wolf, a Minecraft bull, and to top it all off - a Minecraft shark in the lake! That same day, Jake came over to my house looking pale.

“Are you okay?” I asked him.

“What do you think?” he asked in a loud voice that made me jump. “If you knew that Minecraft was coming to life with all the monsters, how would you feel?” he asked me.

“Well, I wouldn’t...hey! Wait a minute, you said *monsters!*” I said.

“Uhh, duh! Why, you don’t see the monsters?” Jake asked. “A zombie went by my house this morning.”

“Anything else?” I asked.

“No. I’m pretty sure that was it,” said Jake.

“The monsters are probably going – I mean spawning – at the start of town. Because you live at the start of town,” I said.

“You’re right.”

After that, we got Andrew and told him all about the monsters and animals.

“Listen very closely. YOU GUYS ARE INSANE!” said Andrew.

“Really, just list...” Jake never got time to finish his sentence because a bird came crashing into the bushes. And I bet you guessed it. The bird was from Minecraft.

“What the heck?” said Andrew full of surprise.

“Boo ya’!” Jake and I said at the same time. We all went to my house just to find Bailey talking to Chaya outside. *Really? Does it have to be right now?* I thought.

“Oh, hey guys!” said Bailey. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Logan lives here – duh!” said Jake.

“I was talking about you and Andrew,” said Bailey.

“Bailey, is it okay if I go inside?” asked Chaya, because she was bored.

“Sure. I thought I might hang out with you guys for a bit,” said Bailey.

“Sure, but you have to swear not to tell anyone this. Only if we tell you, you can,” said Jake.

“Okay, but what do I have to swear not to tell anyone?” asked Bailey.

“This is gonna sound crazy, but the world is going to end ‘cause Minecraft is coming to life and the monsters are going to kill you,” said Jake really fast because some parts of it I couldn’t even understand. Bailey could though.

“Seriously? You guys are funny! That’s so not true!” said Bailey while she was laughing her head off.

“It’s true! We’re not kidding! We saw Minecraft birds, horses, cows, bulls, and a whole lot of other stuff too!” I said.

“Okay. Well, then prove it!” said Bailey.

“We’ll prove it,” said Andrew. “See that bird by the tree over there? Watch this.” Andrew picked up a rock. He threw the rock at the bird and missed so the bird came closer. Bailey looked at the bird with big eyes.

“Wow! You’re not kidding! That bird’s from Minecraft!” said Bailey. After we convinced Bailey, we talked about how we were going to see the monsters and hopefully capture them.

“Let’s go over the game plan,” I said. “We are going to be at Jake’s house ‘cause he has the tree house and because he has the monsters. Jake, you are the lookout, and that means you are in the tree house. You’ll be looking through a telescope, and looking for monsters. If you see any monsters, text us,” I explained. “Bailey, you will be trying to get some footage of the monsters. You’ll also be watching trap number one. And now for Andrew. You will be watching trap number two, number three, and number four. I will be watching trap number five, and I will be captain. I will text you guys when it’s time to attack.” I felt certain this was going to work. I handed out everyone’s weapons. We all got Nerf guns and toy swords. The toy swords really hurt, and I should know because I got hit by one. We set up the traps. It took us until dark to finish that. After we got the game plan down and the traps all set up, we went home to bed.

“Everything is awesome! Everything is cool when you’re....” I picked up my phone and answered it when the song was just about done. “Hello?” I said into the phone.

“Come over now, captain!” It was Jake. “Bailey’s already over here, and so is Andrew!”

“Alright! I’m coming!” I said. I hung up quickly, got dressed and brushed my teeth. “I’m coming!” I yelled to Jake.

“You’re late!” they all said. We went up to the tree house.

“Battle stations,” I said. They went where they were supposed to go. I texted everybody, “Do any of you guys see the spawner?” They all texted back, “Not yet.”

I went uphill for a better look. And then I saw it. The battle. Creepers, Enderman, Gasts, Zombies, Spiders, and Slime were charging after us in full speed! I texted, “Get ready! They’re coming!” I even saw Zombie Pigmen! I tried to spot the spawner, but I couldn’t because all of the monsters were in the way. I hoped somebody would text back, but nobody did until five minutes later. But it was too late.

Andrew texted this to everyone, “HELPdbhcfnnn.” What the heck was that supposed to mean? Finally, I got it. It meant help, and then the blob of letters meant that he lost control of his phone! Oh no, that meant Andrew is in trouble! Then I got this text from Bailey: “We have to go save Andrew!”

This was our conversation:

Me - “Right! We have to go to trap number two, and three, and four.”

Jake - “Okay, and trap number two, three, and four is by the park bench, right?”

Me - "Yes! Bailey, you here?"

Jake - "I think I see Bailey by the pond."

Me - "How do you know that?"

Jake - "I'm the lookout!"

Me - "Oh yeah."

Jake - "Now I see her going to trap number two, three, and four! Andrew!"

Me - "She's probably not looking at her phone because she's busy looking for Andrew."

Jake - "Yes! Gtg. Watch your back!" Okay. "Watch your back" isn't the nicest way to end a conversation. When I put my phone away, I looked out and tried to spot Andrew and Bailey. No luck. But I did see the monsters getting closer. I didn't know what to do. I thought I should text everybody, but only Jake would see. I watched the monsters go into town. Then I jumped when I heard something behind me. I screamed with horror when I saw it. It wasn't a bird or anything like that. It was a Zombie Pigman! I got out my sword, but it was too late. I got flung off the hill and was now laying on my stomach. I think I tasted the copper taste of blood in my mouth. Yep. The monster flung me so hard I bit my tongue. I got up and ran so fast. I looked back and saw the monster chasing me. I climbed up a tree. Nobody noticed me because we live in the country so there weren't a lot of houses. Well, I was up in that tree I could see a big crowd of monsters surrounding something, or somebody. I really hoped it was a something! I got my hopes up too high. It was somebody. And those *somebodies* were Andrew and Bailey. Mr. Pigman here was still below me. So I tried to distract him with a branch. I'm not a good pitcher, so I ended up hitting him in the head. That just made him more mad. I texted everybody saying - "Need help! Pigman below me!"

To my surprise, Bailey answered, saying - "Same here! Need help! Andrew and I are surrounded!"

Jake - "Bailey. I'm trying to get a good vision of you guys."

Me- "Where's Andrew?"

Bailey - "Trapped in our trap! Some monsters got in trap number three and four. Andrew in trap number two."

Me - "Gtg!" The monster was climbing up the tree! I hit it with my sword. It didn't go down. It scratched my leg so hard it bled. That didn't stop me. I swung at it so hard it fell down. I jumped down and ran toward Andrew and Bailey.

I got this text from Jake - "All traps activated!"

I reached Andrew and Bailey and texted this to Jake - "Get down by Andrew and Bailey now!"

Bailey got Andrew down. I hit a couple of monsters on my way in. BANG! BAM! went my sword. “Run!” I shouted to them. They ran. I got a couple of cuts and bruises, but I still ran toward the spawning point with Andrew and Bailey. We found an old cave with a glow at the end of it. The glow was all the spawners. There were monsters left and right! We banged on the spawners. We only got four to break. There were monsters all around us. We were done for, but we still kept breaking.

“Get the rocks on the ground,” whispered Andrew to me.

“What do you mean?” I asked him.

“Never mind! Shoot darts at that group of skeletons,” said Andrew.

I shot darts at them, and they moved away. Then I saw a rock go flying in the air! I looked back to find that Jake threw the rock! He made it! The rock hit a stick that was holding a net full of T.N.T.

“Run!” I heard someone say. I ran out of the cave, and so did everyone else. But none of the monsters did.

“Andrew!” shouted Jake.

“We’ve got to go get the monsters!” said Bailey. At that moment the cave blew up! We ran to the monsters. We all snuck up on the monsters and pushed them into the pond. Of course that didn’t get rid of them all. We hit the monsters and got most of them.

“We have to get the trap set up!” said Bailey.

“How? There are monsters in there!” I said. Our traps are all the same. The monsters trip over a string, and trigger a net that falls on them.

“So we hit them!” said Bailey. We hit them. And caught all the monsters. It worked! We left and thought we got them all.

“That was exciting!” said Andrew.

“It was like Minecraft came to life!” said Jake.

“Because it did!” I explained.

“Aww!” we all screamed as we fell into a trap—but it wasn’t ours. My cut got bigger when I hit it on a rock. We fell into a hole full of Endermen! I knocked into one and screamed! I fell down in a daze. Was it going to end like this? No, it wasn’t! BANG! BAM! I hit a lot of Endermen. So did all of my friends. It was confusing because they were teleporting everywhere. But we got rid of them!

“Help!” we shouted. We couldn’t get out of the hole. We got out, and you’ll never believe what happened next. Bailey hugged Andrew! I felt like punching him in the gut! But they seemed happy, so I let it be.

“Jake, we could have never done this without you,” I said.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes! I’m sure,” I replied.

“I’ve got to go,” said Bailey.

“Bye!” we all said.

“Wait!” Andrew said. Andrew ran over to her and asked her something.

“What did you ask her?” I asked him.

“If she likes me,” Andrew said.

“What did she say?” asked Jake.

“She said ‘I’ll have to figure that out.’”

We turned around and I tripped, and then fell. I got up and saw everything white. What was happening?

“Help!” I shouted over and over again. I heard footsteps coming.

“What is it?” Was that my mom? I opened my eyes. Yes. It was my mom. I was in my bed. I was looking at my mom. I was in my own house. “I said, what is it?” Mom asked.

“Nothing,” I said in shock. Did I really dream the whole thing? I think I did. I was dreaming the whole thing! From my wish until now, I was dreaming. Then Jake and Andrew came over. We talked for a long time, and then we... played Minecraft.

NON-FICTION
Grades 3 & 4

Bianca Elsing
Canby, MN
1st Place

A Great Friendship

Four years ago, it was the first day of kindergarten. I was really shy. I did not know my teacher very much.

My teacher, Ms. Kockelman, said, “Sit down in your seats, please.”

I sat next to a girl named Kadynce. She seemed sad, so I said, “It’s okay; I was shy at first, too. How about I play with you at recess?”

When it was recess time, Kadynce said, “Do you want to be friends?”

I said, “No, let’s be best friends forever.”

She said, “Yes,” and we became best friends forever.

Nick Callens
Minneota, MN
2nd Place

My New Kittens

This is the story of how my new baby kittens came into my life. It all started one Friday night when my mom told me there was a surprise for me in the garage. I closed my eyes until we got there. There in the corner were three baby kittens. Their colors were two orange, one black, and their names are Stinky, Runt, and Clawedett. Ever since that day, they have been in the house and outside.

Evan Weber
Canby, MN
3rd Place

My Brother

My brother Austin and I were hunting. I said, “Austin can you shoot that deer?”

He said, “Sorry, it’s too small, ‘else I would.”

When we were leaving, he said if we see a big one he’ll shoot it. I said thanks for letting me come. It was super fun.

When we got home, we told mom we had seen a few deer. Then we all went to bed after having a fun day.

The next morning we woke up and wrestled around for a bit. Then we drove around town. At noon we went to Marshall with Autumn and ate at DQ.

POETRY
Grades 5 & 6

Carter Kresko
Slayton, MN
1st Place

The Last Day of School

Tick Tock!
Time drags on
Ring!
The sound of freedom echoes
Whoosh!
From the desks to the lockers they bolt
Cling Clang!
Slam the lockers and sprint down the hall
Bam!
Open the door and fly home
Whirling winds!
Crashing waves!
Sizzling heat!
Welcome the sounds of summer

Emma Petersen
Marshall, MN
2nd Place

The Wolf

Wolf was hunting far and wide,
Howling proudly across the sky,
Moving at the speed of light,
Hunting hungrily through the night

They left tracks in the sea of white,
Freshly scattered that very night.
They gave me quite a fright to see,
Them standing right in front of me.

As if to say see you again,
They took off running over the glen.
I saw them chase for the leaping deer,
As the moonlight shone down oh so clear.

**Conner Krumrie
Hutchinson, MN
3rd Place**

Useless Things

I like to collect useless things—claws, straws, broken rings.
Transform, reform those useless things, gears, mirrors, lots of string.
Combine, design, the lot of useless stuff, cans, fans, even fluff.
I wish I had more useless things to give new life to, that's what I'd bring.
Create a robot, create something, just use all those useless things.
Make them into something.

FICTION
Grades 5 & 6

**Ella Alsleben
Hutchinson, MN
1st Place**

The Number Twelve

Hello! My name is Esme. I am ten years old, and I live on the Jackson River in America. The year is 1871. I have ten other siblings, and they are all brothers. My brothers' names are:

Wilbert – age 21
Evan – age 21
Anthony – age 19
Brad – age 18
Karloe – age 17
Max – age 17
Jacob – age 15
Tim – age 14
Ben – age 13
Osten – age 12

I am the youngest of the siblings in my family. And my parents are...well, they are parents.

Right now I am hiding in a tree because I accidentally forgot to pen up the sheep. We live on a farm, and all of us kids have to help with chores around the farm. I often get distracted by something else and forget to do my chores. This makes my father really mad. Unfortunately, forgetting to do my chores and me getting in trouble has become a routine.

“Esme!” I hear a voice say. “Get down from there!”

Startled, I look down to see my brother, Osten, standing below the tree.

“Why should I?” I ask.

“Because I want to go fishing, but Mom won’t let me go by myself,” says Osten. “And, anyway, then we’ll be out of sight and maybe Father will forget about the sheep.”

Osten is my favorite brother. He can always find something fun to do and will invite me along, unlike many of my other brothers.

“Fine. But if I get in trouble for going fishing with you, it won’t be my fault,” I say.

“Whatever,” says Osten. “You’re already in trouble for running off without finishing your chores and penning up the sheep. Father was making his black snake whip, so you’d better watch out for him.”

“Don’t worry, I will,” I say.

“Hurry up, Esme. Come out of that tree so we can go fishing. If you don’t hurry, I’ll tell Father where you are,” Osten says.

“I am coming!” I tell Osten. I hate the feeling of the dreadful lash of Father’s whip.

“I am just kidding about telling Father, you know. In fact, if Father asks, I’ll tell him that you and Max had a deal that if you milked cows for Max, he would pen up the sheep for you. Sound like a plan?” Osten asks.

“Well, okay. But, remember, Max knows how to make a black snake whip, too!” I remind Osten.

“I’m not worried about it. We both know that Max is terrible at making them. Plus, Max is a softie, and his whipping tickles more than it hurts,” Osten says. “Hurry up! Let’s go fishing!”

Having grown up with so many older brothers, I had learned quickly to climb in and out of trees. I scrambled down from the tree, and Osten and I made our way down to the river, which is very close to our house.

Osten and I made our way through the trees near the river. As we were headed down a slope to the river bank, I heard a voice say, “Well, well, well, there’s the little pussy cat who doesn’t know how to swim.”

It was my brother Karloe, who apparently had already finished his chores and had decided to do some fishing himself. Osten and I had a little raft that we had made with logs and trees from the woods near the river. It had taken us a long time to make the raft, and it often needed repairs. On some days, Osten and I would spend the entire afternoon working on the raft so that it would float perfectly.

As Osten and I steadied ourselves on the raft and pushed off from the shore, Karloe started throwing rocks at our raft. He was always so mean.

Thankfully, Karloe didn’t continue to throw rocks for very long. But soon afterwards, we noticed that either because of being hit by a rock, or because Osten and I were trying to dodge the rocks, the raft had been damaged and was coming apart.

“You, idiot!” Osten yelled to Karloe. “Look what you did!”

The raft completely fell apart, and I fell into the water.

“Osten! Help me!” I screamed. I was not a good swimmer as it was, and the river current and my wet dress seemed to be weighing me down.

Osten reached out to try and grab hold of me and hang onto one of the logs at the same time. He yelled to Karloe, “Go get Wilbert! He was over visiting this afternoon and he can help. Hurry!”

Karloe rushed off to go get help. In the meantime, the situation in the water was getting worse. The river current was pulling us downstream, and I was starting to panic. My long, wet dress was billowing around me in the water and seemed to be pulling me down.

It seemed like forever before Karloe returned to the river. He had brought both Wilbert and Father with him. They had been running and were out of breath when they reached the river. Father looked furious, and I could see that he still had the whip in his hand.

Wilbert waded into the water and swam out to us. He was tall and strong and a very good swimmer. He quickly reached the log that Osten and I were hanging on to and helped us swim to shore. As we approached the shore, I looked at Karloe. Karloe had a mean smile curled on his face, and I could tell that he was up to something.

Father was relieved that Osten and I were safe. I was hoping that with all the commotion he would forget about my chores. As we made our way back to the house, I started coming up with excuses and stories in my mind to help me explain to my father why my chores did not get finished. I decided I could tell him that I remembered penning up the sheep earlier in the morning when my friend, Rose, had stopped over, and she and I discussed private stuff. But then it occurred to me that they wouldn’t believe that story.

Father sent Osten and me into the house and told me to wait in the house for him. As we sat in the house waiting for him to come inside, the feeling of dread filled me. Father came into the house, and my stomach sank.

“You kids went to the river without asking. And, Esme, why didn’t you pen up the sheep?” Father said.

“I did pen up the sheep, Father,” I said. The lie came out of my mouth before I knew it.

“You are lying,” Father said.

“I’m not lying, Father,” I argued.

“Father, she did pen up the sheep,” Osten said. “Karloe unhooked the pen and let them out so that she would get in trouble.” As promised, Osten had defended me, but now we were both caught in a lie.

Osten had remembered an earlier time when Karloe had unhooked the sheep pen to let the sheep out so that my brother Tim would have to round them back up. Tim, who had stopped into the house for a minute, overheard our conversation and agreed with Osten.

Father was unhappy about all the misbehavior being discussed. He felt that work should come before play. He asked that we all follow him out to the barn to discuss the situation.

At the barn, he called all of my brothers and me together and made it very clear that work was to come before play on his farm. After that, he sent me into the house to get cleaned up and change into a dry dress.

When I approached the house, I noticed that while I had been in the barn, my mother had returned home. I opened the door and breathed in the smell of apple pie. How I love apple pie, especially Mama’s apple pie with cinnamon.

“It smells like someone is making apple pie!” I said to her excitedly.

Mama looked at me in shock, because I looked like a drowned rat. I explained to her what had happened that afternoon. Mama took my soaking wet dress and hung it to dry by the fire and got me a clean, dry dress to wear.

“Sit your butt down at the table and get yourself some apple pie,” Mama said. “I was hoping to have some alone time with you anyways, because I want to talk to you.”

Mama shared some big news. She was expecting a baby! I had always been the baby of the family, and it was hard to imagine having a little brother or sister.

Then Mama shared some more big news. “Your father and I know how much you like to be with your brothers and do the same things that they do, but we think it may be a good time for you to start learning how to be more ladylike. Grandma is coming for a visit, and she can help us.”

“What?” I asked, in shock. It was too much to take in. A new baby, becoming more ladylike, and my grandma was coming to visit.

“I don’t want Grandma Minerva to teach me to be a lady! No offense to Grandma, but who would ever name their child Minerva?” I asked.

“Two things, Sweetie,” Mama said, “Grandma Minerva IS coming to stay with us, and it is rude to make fun of her name.”

“Two things for you, Mama,” I said, “Can the baby sleep with me? And, why can’t Grandma Jamie come to visit instead of Grandma Minerva?”

“Grandma Jamie isn’t up to it. Having Grandma Minerva here will be great,” Mama said. “Just think, we will have six hands cooking in this kitchen. Think of all the apple pies we can make!”

The next morning I woke up early to a knocking sound at the door. It was still early and dark, so I lit a candle and started towards the door. As I approached the door, I was startled by another very loud knock on the door. I opened the door, and there stood my Grandma Minerva. It was raining, and she was soaked from head to toe.

“How are you, young lady?” Grandma Minerva asked in a jolly voice. She always seemed to have a lot of energy, no matter the time of day.

“As fine as a diamond,” I said, just to impress her. Normally I would never say a thing like that.

Grandma Minerva bustled past me. “Well, there is a lot of work to do here, so we best get on with it.”

“But, Grandma,” I said, “It’s early. We should still be in bed right now.”

“Not when I am here,” Grandma said. “When I am here, we wake up early and get to our chores right away. We can start on breakfast right now, followed by dishes, and then we can learn how to do laundry.”

“But...” I was going to argue with her, but there was no point in arguing with that woman.

“No, ‘buts’,” Grandma said. “Get to work.”

“Grandma, the problem is that I don’t really know how to do any of those things,” I told her.

“What?” Grandma asked, in shock. “Your mother never taught you any of those things?”

“No. I’ve always wanted to work and play outside with the boys,” I told her, “And Mama let me.”

“Well, I guess that means that you probably don’t have any elegant dresses, either,” Grandma said. “We’ll go into town later this morning and do some shopping at Elena’s Boutique for Women and Children.”

“Elena’s Boutique for Women and Children?” I asked. “Isn’t that place very expensive?”

“Yes, but you have me here now, and I think that you should have some decent clothes,” Grandma said.

“I’ve never been shopping for clothes before,” I told her.

“Well, that is about to change,” Grandma said.

Grandma dried herself off and then got straight to work in teaching me how to prepare breakfast. As we worked together in the kitchen, she asked me to tell her about my brothers. I explained to her that Wilbert, Evan, Anthony and Brad had all moved out of the house. They lived nearby and were all working to start their own small farms, and all my brothers still worked together to help each other out. We also talked about the fact that my mother had three sets of twins. Wilbert and Evan were twins, and Karloe and Max were twins, and I was also a twin. I had a twin sister who had died shortly after she was born. I confided to Grandma that Karloe was like my enemy and explained to her the events that had occurred at the river the day before. It was nice talking to Grandma Minerva and telling her about all of my brothers, what each of them was like, and what we all did to help on the farm.

“Isn’t it hard keeping track of all of those brothers?” Grandma asked.

“Not really,” I said. I had always spent so much time with my brothers and, for the most part, we were all very close.

I could hear footsteps and the creak of the floorboards above our heads. It was still very early, but someone was getting up.

“It’s Osten,” I said. “He always gets up early to go fishing. Although, Father made it very clear yesterday that chores are to come before fishing!”

“You do know your brothers very well!” Grandma exclaimed.

Grandma Minerva stayed with us for several weeks. She was a very strong woman, much stronger than Mama, and she taught me how to do many things around the house that would help Mama after the baby was born.

Several months later, it was the morning of my birthday, and I had decided to wake up early and bake a cake to share with everyone. I had become quite confident in being able to do my chores both outside and inside the house. On that morning, Mama went into labor, and I was actually able to help her give birth to baby number twelve!

“Happy birthday, Esme!” Mama said. “I guess she is your birthday present.”

Mama had given birth to a baby girl! I now had a sister!

“Since it’s your birthday, you should help name her,” Mama said.

I decided to name her April, since our birthdays were in April.

“In a way, she’s kind of like your twin,” Mama said. “Born on the same day, but different ages.”

As I looked at my new baby sister, April, number twelve, I thought of all the things I would teach her, including all the things that Grandma Minerva and Mama had taught me to do around the house. And also how to climb trees, and pen sheep, and build rafts, and fish.

Lauren Tatge
Beaver Creek, MN
2nd Place

Taken

Prologue: My name is Emerald Overgaard, and I'm twelve. I live in the poorer section of Bloomington, Minnesota. Money has been hard to come by in my family since my dad died five years ago. Before the accident, my dad's job was the main source of money. My mom, Jewel, is a nurse now. I have two big brothers Topaz, age thirteen, and Jasper, age sixteen. I have one big sister, Jade, age fifteen. My best friend's name is Skye Rauk. Her dad is the mayor. She lives in the richer section of town.

That night it was snowing lightly. I was walking to Skye's house, a little over nine blocks away. She had left her brand new duffle bag at my house. She loved it; the bag was her favorite Christmas present. It was our school colors, red and white, and it had her last name written on the side.

I was just a few minutes away from my house when I noticed a white van driving by me and circling the block. After seeing it drive by a few times, it stopped. Two men climbed out. One was skinny and looked a little like a rat, and the other was fat and a little shorter than me. Before I knew what was happening, Rat Man nodded to the other guy and he pulled out a rag and held it roughly against my mouth and nose. Then everything went black.

When I woke up, everything was a little blurry. When I finally could see straight, I saw a girl sitting on a bed across from me. She smiled at me and said, "It's about time you woke up. My name's Ellie, and I'm 13."

"Hi, I'm Emerald. Where are we?" I asked, suddenly realizing I had no clue where I was.

"I don't know where we are either," she said calmly. "I have been here 14 days. My mom's a senator. My guess is they are keeping us here for a ransom."

"Oh...My family doesn't have much money," I said.

We talk a lot over the next few days, about our lives and our friends. Each night they give us something in our water that makes us fall asleep. I have started to get restless, I'm sick of being stuck in here with nothing to do. On the seventh day, I had an idea how to escape. Ellie and I talked over the plan, and she loved it. We decided to get out tonight. I'm very nervous.

It's about 9:15 when Rat Face comes in to give us our sleeping water. As soon as he shuts the door, we drop down and grab the normal water from under our beds (from earlier today) and put the other water under the bed. Ellie and I sit on our beds and drink that water. I can tell Ellie is scared too. Then we say our fake good nights, and we lie down and pretend to sleep. My heart is racing as we wait for the security cameras red light to shut off. And when it does Ellie and I both jump up and hug each other. "We did it Emerald!" Ellie exclaims quietly.

"That was only part one," I sigh.

"Yeah," she says and smiles weakly.

We both put our ears on the door listening for the two guys that kidnapped us. We wait like that for several minutes and when we both decide it is clear to go. Ellie pulls a paperclip that we had found on the floor days before. She inserts it in the door, and I know we both are holding our breath. Just as I'm giving up hope, it clicks, we both sigh and give each other wary smiles. I grasp the handle and open the door a crack, just so I can see out. I can't see anyone, and all I can hear is my heart pounding. As Ellie and I walk out into the hallway, we both notice something. Everything here is covered in dust except for footprints on the floor. The place is rundown, old, and has a musty smell. Ellie and I walk cautiously around all the nails poking out of boards littering the hallway floor. After we tiptoe down the staircase, we fling open the front door and breathe fresh air for the first time in days.

Ellie and I start running because it's about ten o'clock at our best guess, and we have no clue when Rat Man and the chubby guy will be back. It is clear that it has not snowed in quite a while. (We had grabbed our coats; they were left in our room.) As we are running away from the street we were held captive on, I glance back at the street sign and I note the address, E 2nd Avenue. We run in the shadows for about fifteen minutes when I finally realize where we are. We are near my house, and I tell Ellie that, but we both know that we can't stop if we are going to catch the kidnapers. I know we are getting close.

I yell back at Ellie, "We're getting close!"

"Yay," Ellie says weakly while gasping for air. As soon as we can see the police station, Ellie starts to sprint as fast as she can.

"Ellie, stop! You are going to get hurt!" I scream. But just as I say that she trips in a pothole and falls hard on her knees. Ellie is all right, but she is limping a little bit. As we walk the final block to the police station, I realize that Ellie is so weak she will probably not be able to go back to the house to show the police

where the kidnappers live. As I think that, I frown because she says, “What’s wrong?” I reply telling her what’s bothering me.

She says sadly, “You’re right. I am very weak. My legs are like jelly!” She says in a singsong voice and laughs. Then we are at the front door of the police station.

I open the front door to the police station and we walk through the door. The young officer on duty stared at us with shock.

“But...But...You are missing,” he stammered.

“No, we escaped, and we are here to take you to where the kidnappers live,” Ellie says boldly.

“Ok, I will radio Sheriff Johnson,” said the officer.

After he had radioed the sheriff, Ellie told him she was too weak to go, and he left her at the station with another police officer. I got in the police car, and we were off. When the police force gets there, we all hide. We wait in silence for hours. Then the kidnappers come home. The force jumps out and cuffs them. Then we go back to the station, and I’m driven home.

When I get home, it’s a joyful reunion. I’m hugged and kissed on the head. My mom tells me how much she missed me and hugs me to death. Jade said our room felt so empty. Topaz said he needed my help with math again and had to ask mom for help and he missed me. (My mom is horrible at math.) Jasper just said good to have you back. It was just like a fairytale and a happily ever after.

Epilogue

Two months later: I’m standing on a pedestal practically in front of the whole city. Sheriff Johnson is giving a (boring) speech. As he finishes up, he pulls two medals from his pocket.

“You two girls have done a great service to our community so I’m awarding you a medal for your bravery,” said the sheriff. Then he placed the medals around each of our necks. Then there was thunderous applause.

“Wait, girls! There was a reward for their capture because they had taken two other children. It amounted to two million dollars,” boomed the sheriff.

They questioned Rat Man and the chubby guy. The reason they took me was because they thought I was Skye. (Because of the bag.) But that made sense.

We used some of the money to pay off our house and then went on an awesome vacation. The best part was that Skye and Ellie were able to join me. But we saved most of the money.

Ty Schulte
Granite Falls, MN
3rd Place

The White Knight

It was a dark and stormy night in the kingdom of Nazgaurd and a perfect night for something to be stolen. As a matter of fact, two goblins were doing just that, but instead of treasure they were after a far different prize...the princess of Nazgaurd...for the reason that only they knew and their master knew.

“My King, my King,” panted a servant in a horrified voice.

“What is it this time, Mary, a dragon in the tub again?” the king said with a bit of sarcasm in his voice.

“It’s the Princess, Sire,” wheezed Mary trying to catch his breath.

“Yes, what about Athena?” King Warren said suddenly straightening up, “Has she been injured?”

“No, Sire, she...she,” stuttered Mary.

“Well, go on, spit it out then,” King Warren said urgently.

“She’s been kidnapped, Sire. I only found this note,” Mary said shakily.

“**WHAT!**” exclaimed King Warren, “Let me see that note.”

We have Princess Athena if you want her back you must pay the ransom of 30 pounds of gold leave it in the big willow tree in the middle of the vanguard valley in seven moons or you will never be able to see your daughter again.

The note was signed with a black skull. The king recognized the signature and immediately tensed.

“Call the White Knight,” King Warren said looking up from the note.

The next day the White Knight rode in on his white stallion. As he dismounted, his white armor glinted in the bright sunlight. The king was pacing back and forth when the White Knight walked in.

“What is the meaning of this? Why have you summoned me?” the White Knight asked with a worried tone. The last time King Warren had enlisted the help of the White Knight was ten years earlier when the White Knight was forced to kill an innocent man accused of assassinating the Queen.

“It’s about Athena,” King Warren moaned.

“What happened to the Princess Athena?!” the White Knight asked with a sense of urgency.

“She has been kidnapped by the Black Knight,” said King Warren. The White Knight’s eyes narrowed; he knew what the Black Knight was capable of for he used to have a family.

“I will help you capture the Black Knight for I have some unsettled business with him,” announced the White Knight with a little anger in his voice.

“I’m glad that you have decided to help us with this battle against evil. I will send for my best soldiers to help with your mission,” said King Warren.

The White Knight hesitated when he finally said, “All right, but I will choose which ones shall come with me.”

“Fine, then we best hurry before time is up,” replied King Warren.

As the men lined up, the White Knight could tell all these men would not be able to help him on his quest, except for one. As the men lined up, the White Knight didn’t have to think too long to choose the perfect man to aid him on his quest.

“These are my very best men in all the kingdom. You can take as many as you want on your journey,” King Warren said with a sense of pride.

“Alright then, I choose you,” the White Knight said, pointing a finger at Mary.

“M...me,” stuttered Mary, “I don’t even know how to fight.”

The White Knight smiled and said in a soothing voice, “We aren’t going to fight. We just need to find the lair of the Black Knight.” Mary sighed and nodded.

“Alright then. When shall we leave?” asked Mary.

“As soon as you’re ready,” the White Knight said in a kind voice.

Two hours later, our heroes set off on their quest. They made it a good distance by the time the sun was setting.

“We shall camp here tonight,” the White Knight announced. As they were making camp, there was a rustle from the bushes. The White Knight drew his sword and put a finger to his lips to signal to Mary to be quiet. Then, without warning, a goblin sprang out of the bushes as if he was propelled by a rocket. His sword was drawn. Instead of the goblin landing gracefully on his feet, he landed square on his face, his sword went flying and stuck in a nearby tree stump. As he rose to his knees, the White Knight’s blade went centimeters away from his throat. The White Knight’s

eyes locked with the goblin's as he said in a firm voice, "Well, well, well, now what would a goblin like you be doing so far away from home?"

"Why would you care about the goblin people after the battle of Rathem?!" the goblin yelled with rage.

"That is beside the point, my friend. Now tell me what be your name?" the White Knight questioned his eyebrow raising.

"I will never tell," the goblin said, spitting on the White Knight's boot.

"Very well then, Mary. Go into my pack and grab the wooden box," the White Knight ordered. Mary did as he was told and he reached into the pack and pulled out a mahogany box no bigger than a shoe.

The goblin tensed and started to squirm trying to get free of his bonds.

"Well, well, well, you've grown awfully squirmy since that box was pulled out. Now then, I'll give you one more chance, what is your name?" the White Knight urged.

The goblin was silent.

"Very well then, Mary, hand me the box," the White Knight said, extending his hand back to receive the box. Mary did so, the White Knight opened the box and delicately started to pull something out of it when the goblin shrieked, "Ronga, my name is Ronga."

The White Knight stopped and asked, "There's one thing sorted. Now for the rest. Why did you try to ambush us, you ungraceful goblin?"

"My master wanted you dead," Ronga said with hatred in his voice.

"Who is your master?" the White Knight said in a persuasive tone.

"No! The Black Knight would..." the goblin said realizing his mistake.

Mary's eyes widened.

"The Black Knight," said Mary gulping.

"The Black Knight is your master then. So where is his lair?" the White Knight said, his blade moving ever so close to the goblin's throat. Beads of sweat started dripping down Ronga's face. The White Knight once again started to pull something out of the box when Ronga suddenly screamed with terror, "The caves! His lair is in the caves!"

“Very well, now then, Mary, start putting out the fire. We should move our campsite before the rest of the horde comes looking for him,” the White Knight ordered.

Just as Mary turned around, he heard the clump as if something or someone had fallen. Mary decided to see what happened, and there on the ground lay the lifeless corpse of Ronga, the goblin.

The next day, the White Knight and Mary set off for the caves. After about five hours passed, the two heroes finally arrived at the caves.

“Mary, this might get dangerous. So I’m going to have you stay with the horses and no matter what you hear stay with the horses. If I tell you to leave, even if I’m in trouble, you are to leave and ride as fast as you can back to Nazgaurd and tell the king where the Black Knight’s hideout is. Now, tie my horse to the oak tree over there,” the White Knight said pointing to an old oak tree.

Mary nodded as the White Knight slid off of his horse and vanished into the cave. After twenty minutes passed, Mary began to grow nervous. He slid off of his horse and crept to the cave entrance. All of a sudden, a voice broke the silence. It was the White Knight.

“AHHHHH!” his voice screamed in agony.

Then a different voice broke the silence.

“Why are you here?!” the new voice yelled with anger. Mary guessed that the new voice belonged to the Black Knight. Timidly, Mary crept into the caves only to find the White Knight on his knees with the Black Knight towering over him. There in a cage was Princess Athena. The Black Knight was lifting his axe to chop off the White Knight’s head. But before the Black Knight could bring his axe down on the White Knight’s head, Mary came out of nowhere and body-slammed the Black Knight into the cave wall. Before anyone could recover from what had happened, Mary drew his knife and cut the ropes binding the White Knight’s wrists and ankles. As the White Knight stood up, the Black Knight’s minions got over their shock and charged. Mary tossed the White Knight his sword.

“Hold them off while I get the princess,” Mary said.

As Mary worked on the lock, the Black Knight stood up and charged at Mary. But the Black Knight stumbled and allowed Mary to pull out his knife and penetrate the armor of the Black Knight. The now lifeless corpse of the Black Knight lay at his feet. Mary looked shocked, dropping his knife.

Getting over his shock, Mary worked on the lock more vigorously, until CLICK, the tumblers snapped into place. Mary flung open the door and grabbed the princess by the hand and led her out of the caves, the White Knight close behind.

As they burst out into sunlight, they could hear the goblins coming after them. When they got to the horses, the White Knight quickly untied his horse's reins and jumped on, while Mary helped Princess Athena onto his. When Mary jumped on, both horses whinnied as they sped off towards Nazgaurd. When they arrived, King Warren ran to meet them.

"Oh thank you, White Knight, thank you for saving my daughter," King Warren said tearfully.

"Don't thank me. Thank Mary. He was the one who freed her and saved me from death," the White Knight said looking at Mary. The king's mouth dropped, but from the look in the White Knight's eyes he knew it was true.

After that, the White Knight vanished like a ghost, and along with him came his loyal companion, Mary, the servant who saved Nazgaurd.

NON-FICTION
Grades 5 & 6

Isaac Harrison
Minneota, MN
1st Place

My Vacation in Texas

I never suspected that this day was going to be this much fun! I woke to a hot, humid and sticky morning on Galveston Island, Texas. My mom and dad had bought doughnuts from an amazing doughnut place called the Doughnut Palace. Before long those great things were no more. They had to be the best glazed doughnuts ever made. They smelled and tasted delicious. After everyone was ready for the day, we decided to go to the beach.

If you know my family, you know that we don't go to the beach with nothing. So we had to get the boogie boards, sunscreen, beach towels, beach tent, and the chairs. After a while, we started walking to the beach. When you would step outside, you could immediately smell the fish and the salt water filling up the air. Shortly after that we could see the ocean. We had come for more than 1,000 miles to see the ocean, and it was finally there. What an amazing sight to see!

We tried to quickly set up all of our stuff as soon as possible. It was more exciting than winning the lottery! After all of the work was done, we ran into the ocean. It was more fun than eating cake for a living! I could feel the seaweed entangling my feet, but that couldn't stop me. After hours of swimming and learning how to boogie board, we started packing up. I was okay with that because I was more tired than a man who had worked all day. Another annoying thing was that I could taste salt water in my mouth and on my lips. Now I could also feel the soft sand on my feet, but if I wanted to wash my feet off, I would have to put them in the warm water. At last we went home. Although we cooled off in the water before we left, we would be sweating buckets five to ten minutes later. One of the many fun things to do was walk home and point out the old but cool houses.

During our vacation, we went to the beach pretty much every day. One of the best parts was coming home and showering. It felt amazing to be fresh and not have only seaweed or sand on you. I also enjoyed playing games and watching movies with my family and eating the great food with them that I loved every time we ate. It was really fun just being with them. My least favorite part was

the cleaning up, but if everybody helped, we could get it done quickly.

I learned on this vacation that Galveston was once a very rich city in Texas. I also learned that swimming in the ocean is not scary unless you make yourself think it is. This vacation was amazing. I loved it, and I want to go back some day!

Colin Christensen
Slayton, MN
2nd Place

Shooting Star

One night my dad and I went to the farm to pick up firewood for our fireplace at home. The weather was nice that night. There were no clouds, it wasn't raining or snowing, and it was a perfect night. We carried the wood out of the barn and put it into the trailer until we had enough. It was quickly getting dark out, so we headed home. When we were driving, we saw a bright star in the sky, but it was not just an ordinary star. In a split second the star started to fall out of the sky. For a few seconds, I thought it was an airplane that sucked up a bird in its engine and fell. It was so weird because I thought I could actually hear the shooting star falling towards the earth. When the star was in the sky, it looked like any ordinary star, but when it started to fall, it began to burn red and orange. When the star fell, my dad and I wondered where it fell or if it even made it to earth at all.

When we finally made it home, my dad and I stacked all of the wood that we got at the farm in the garage. As soon as we were done, I ran inside and told my mom the whole story of the star. She didn't believe me until my dad told her the story. I told my sister about the star, and she was amazed at what she heard. If we hadn't gone to get firewood at the farm that night, we would never have seen that falling star. I told some of my friends about the star the next day at school, and they didn't believe me at first. When I told them all of the details, they finally believed me.

I remembered in June there was a meteor shower, and one star fell every two minutes. The color of those meteors was also red, orange, white and yellow. I watched the shower with my Uncle Wayne, and he thought it was just as interesting as I did. Now I like to look in the night sky for shooting stars or meteors. I will always remember seeing my first shooting star.

Carter Clark
Marshall, MN
3rd Place

When My Brother Broke His Arm

It was a hot and humid day in my trailer. Dad, my brother, and I were getting ready to go riding at our dirt bike track by the nearby town of Tracy.

First, I got my new gear on which smelled like a new pair of shoes and started my bike to warm it up from being in the cold trailer.

Second, I rode around in the slippery grass before I rode on the track.

After a while, I got on the track. I felt pretty good and started jumping the jumps on the track. After I had done about two laps, my brother got on the track.

As I was coming around, I no longer saw Kaden on the track, so I thought he must have pulled off.

I finally came to the finish line jump and jumped it for the first time. When I was in the air, I saw Kaden on the ground below me! It seemed like slow motion when I was in the air. Since he had crashed hard and landed on his arm, he couldn't move it without feeling pain. But just in the nick of time, he rolled out of the way before I landed on him. When I did land, I landed right beside him.

Finally, Kaden was ready to move. I helped him up and told him not to move his arm because it might make it hurt worse, which it did.

After I got Kaden back to the trailer, I went back and got my bike which was on the track. I rode back to the trailer, and my dad was already looking at Kaden's arm.

For about the next hour, I rode on the track and was very careful on the jump Kaden had crashed on. My dad timed me to see how fast I was going compared to him. The crazy thing was that I was only 13 seconds different, and I don't even jump everything. (By the way, racing doesn't get that close for my dad and me.)

When I came back to the trailer with my dad, Kaden was in much more pain. It was just getting worse and worse. We wondered if we should take Kaden in to the hospital because he was really in pain.

After my dad talked on the phone with my mom, they decided it would be better if he was taken to the hospital.

Shortly after that, we got into the truck, and even though it had gotten colder, the truck was burning hot inside.

When we got to the hospital, the doctor looked at Kaden's arm and knew immediately that it was broken. My dad kind of knew it was broken before, but he just never told Kaden, because then it would just make it hurt more.

The room where Kaden's cast was put on smelled really weird because of the cast glue stuff.

After that day, I realized that you can get hurt doing anything.
SO ALWAYS BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU DO.

POETRY
Grades 7 & 8

Taryn Bedow
Tyler, MN
1st Place

Just a Few Words

they say he beat those two boys up
for no reason at all
but what you don't know are the words they said
before he threw them against the wall

they taunted his race, his family, his friends
they said his skin was too dark
he wasn't human, a fail, a mistake,
he made an easy mark

so now he sits
a high-schooler with a record of violence
when he's the real victim
it doesn't make sense

she was nervous around people
she froze, couldn't move, couldn't speak
they pushed her around
they called her a freak

but what you don't know is that behind those glasses
beyond that frizzy hair
there is a gorgeous, caring girl
they don't even know she's there

do you think they would change
if they could just see
the person
she is underneath?

every day we judge
every day we love
every day we hide
every day we die

people hurt
people hate
we claim we're innocent
but that's not the case

from the seat you take at lunch
to the clothes you choose to wear
looking the other way,
and pretending you don't care

it's like they have a mental list
of the cruelest things to say
so when they trip you in the halls
they know the perfect words to wreck your day

they'll draw emphasis to your flaws
ignore all your virtues
to hurt others or be hurt?
honestly, which would you choose?

that's a choice that no one
should have to make
to plaster on a smile
but still have to ache

I know you've heard it all before
we've all been to those seminars
on how to improve and change
this little world of ours

you probably think
it's all a bore
it never happens
but are you sure?

kids keep it all in
they think it's better that way
but just because we're quiet
doesn't mean we don't have words to say

so the next time you see someone
sad, angry, or dismayed
just go over and talk to them
you shouldn't be afraid

for just a few words
could lift up their pain
it won't all go away
but you could sure help it fade

Brooke Thomsen
Tyler, MN
2nd Place

If you're reading this:

My wife was holding me close,
So close I could hear the tears falling down her face.
It was time for me to leave
And time to say good-bye.
I'd be leaving my wife and loved ones behind,
For I must fight this fight alone.
I will stand tall for our country,
And I fight till my final breath.
My wife pleads for me not to go,
But I say to her that I'll see her soon.
Yet that is a promise I never got to keep,
For instead, I'm up with God.
If you're reading this,
I know you're sitting there,
Looking at my resting body
sleeping in my casket.
For I wish with all my heart,
I could give you one more kiss.
If you're reading this,
I'm watching over you,
Not by the field where I am laid,
But right inside your heart.
If you're reading this,
I am truly sorry I wasn't there for you
When you gave birth to our little boy
And had to pick his name alone.
I hope he looks a lot like you
And fights a ton like me.
If you're reading this,
I am already home,
And I wish that you would not cry,
And that you would hold back the tears.
And if you're reading this,
I want your heart to know
That I am in a better place
Where I'll be singing amazing grace.

And I'll be waiting there for you
At the entrance of the gate.
And once I see your beautiful face,
I'll surely give you one big hug
And one more kiss.
For me,
Myself,
And I,
Will not enter
the glorious place
without you.
If you're reading this,
I love you.

Abby Hamman
Slayton, MN
3rd Place

Digging in the Field

As I climb in and turn the key,
I know exactly where I want to be.
I sit in the seat and shut the door.
I smile as I hear the engine roar.
The smell of diesel fills my nose,
As I begin to dig up the bean rows.
The bean field is so very big,
But I sit in this tractor ready to dig.

FICTION
Grades 7 & 8

Taylor Barber
Spicer, MN
1st Place

Twisted Fates

I felt something tickle my cheek, waking me up to the chill of the day. Frost was stuck to my skin, and I felt crunchy snow surrounding my body. But the cold didn't bother me. There was something standing right over my body, breathing heavily. I sighed and opened my eyes.

"Nix, you are going to crush my lungs if you get any closer," I grumbled, looking up at the hulking form of white. A blast of steam hit my face then disappeared, allowing me to see the clear, blue sky. I sat up quickly. Shaking the snow out of my hair, I looked up at Nix. He was sitting a few feet away, looking at me with his bright blue eyes. He snorted and padded over to my side. Being 19 feet tall, it only took him about a step to reach my side. I shook my head and stood up, jumping onto him. My pack with food, clothes, and other supplies was already packed onto his back behind my saddle. I grabbed some bread and laid back onto his back, eating slowly.

"Nix, did you get a strange dream?" I asked him, staring up at the sky. He looked back, blowing steam at me. His scales glistened in the sun. They were a bright white mixed with light grey patches. In the sun, they glittered like precious gems. I've always been entranced by their beauty even after staring at them for 18 years. He snorted at me again, bringing me out of my trance. I smiled at him. "Is that a yes, then?" I asked. He nodded. I smiled, leaning back towards the pack. Grabbing some meat, I threw it at him. He lunged forward, knocking me off of the saddle.

"Ow! I was up there!" I called up to him. Nix looked down at me, the piece of meat hanging out of the edge of his mouth. I laughed, wiping the snow off of my face. I patted his neck.

"You be proud of yourself for a bit longer, then we should get moving again," I said, walking to the edge of the clearing we had been staying in. Winter was in full swing, which meant no more open ground. Well, except for where Nix had laid the night before. All the trees were bare, and most animals were asleep for the long, cold season. This was the time of year Nix and I were most comfortable with. The heat in spring and summer always drained our power, rendering us useless. But, winter was the perfect time

for us. It was also the time for the Winter Market, the annual meeting where fellow ice sorcerers and sorceresses meet and trade goods for the coming spring.

I walked back towards Nix, carrying a blanket and extra food. He was standing still; his ears pricked up. I watched him carefully, my eyes flickering around the clearing. Finally, I shook my head and jumped up onto his back, placing the stuff behind me.

“Let’s get going.” I sat in the saddle and waited, but he sat still. “Nix? You okay?” I asked, leaning down by his neck. His nostrils were flaring up, and he kept sniffing the air. I sat back up, looking over the area again. Nothing moved, and there was no sound. I shook my head. “Oh Nix, there’s nothing around here,” I sighed when he still didn’t move. “Nix, we need to get to the Winter Market soon, or we won’t get any food for spring.”

He snorted, plodding forward a few feet. He stopped in his tracks again and raised his head, growling. I groaned, jumping down and walking over to face him.

“I swear, Nix, if you don’t start moving your butt, I will...”

“Oh my, I believe he is terrified of you,” a voice rang around the clearing behind me. I whipped around, instinctively forming a saber of ice in my hand. A boy stood across the clearing from us. He was about the same age as me, his dark black hair falling over his eyes. He wore a red shirt and black pants—both clean compared to my mud-covered white shirt and black pants.

“Who are you?” I demanded. I gripped the ice more, and it slowly grew longer.

The boy gradually walked closer towards me. He tilted his head and smirked. “Aw, what’s the matter? Don’t you remember your own brother?” He feigned a pout.

I groaned as he grinned. “Aeron,” I muttered.

“Aerica,” he said, still smiling.

Nix growled and stepped up next to me, glaring at Aeron. Aeron glanced at Nix. “I see you and your lizard haven’t changed much.”

“Don’t call Nix a lizard. He is much more handsome than your flying mutt,” I snapped, petting Nix’s snout. Nix bared his teeth at Aeron.

“Ignis is not a mutt!” he snarled. The smile disappeared from his face, and a flame appeared in his palm.

I stepped towards him, and a roar ripped through the forest. A red dragon dived down through the air landing right in front of me. Its teeth snapped at my face as I backed away.

“Ignis!” Aeron yelled, running up to his dragon’s side.

I fell into the snow and watched as Nix lunged forward, barreling into Ignis. They rolled along in the snow, growling and snarling.

Aeron turned to me. “Get your monster off of Ignis!” he demanded, the flame growing in his hand.

“What about yours? He is the one who attacked us first,” I retorted.

We both took a step towards each other, but stopped. Nix and Ignis rolled to a stop near us, falling silent. We all stood still, listening. A low rumbling sound had appeared, growing louder every second. The ground below us shook and cracks began to appear. A huge chunk of earth near us broke apart, and a gap in the ground grew wider splitting Aeron and I apart. I fell to the ground scrambling away from the chasm.

“Nix!” I screamed, looking around for him. Both he and Ignis had taken to the sky, soaring high above us. I caught sight of Aeron, who was lying on the ground, struggling to get up. I shook my head and staggered close to the crack. Dark clouds of steam rose up, and I could hear something cry from below.

“Aerica, help!”

I jumped across the growing crack and ran to Aeron’s side. A chunk of stone had fallen on his legs, pinning him to the ground. I pushed at the rock trying to free him. Then I heard that terrible cry.

A huge, black dragon flew out of the chasm, blasting into the clear sky. Ignis and Nix tried to fly close to it but failed. The dragon roared and flew back to the ground, landing right before Aeron and me. Its scales were as dark as night, giving off an eerie aura. Its dark grey eyes stared at Aeron and me hungrily, its teeth sharp as blades. And on his back, a figure sat. It was tall, taller than any human. It wore black robes covering every inch of its body. And on its head sat a mask made of pure darkness—the legendary warrior of evil, the Shadow Lord.

“My gods...” Aeron mumbled.

I stared at the figure in black, fear capturing my heart. I pushed more at the rock, gasping with the force. It slid off of Aeron’s legs, releasing him from the trap. I helped him up. We stood together facing the Shadow Lord.

“We need to get to our dragons,” I whispered to Aeron, eyeing the black dragon. It still stood in our way. It snorted.

“Once I get Ignis, I’m leaving. Forget your dragon.”

“Well, you’re a kind brother.”

“I try my best.”

I rolled my eyes, turning my attention back to the man on the dragon. He started to move and stepped off of his dragon's back. He took a step towards us. I created a sharp knife of ice quickly, and Aeron created a flame in his palm.

A deep and menacing laugh came from the man as he stared at us with eyes of red. "This is what the gods send to challenge me?!" his powerful voice bounced around the clearing. "A petty sorcerer and sorceress? Why, and I thought I would be facing the most powerful people in the world!" He laughed again, pulling out a sword.

"We are not what you think! Just simple children, trying to get home," I lied hoping he was dumb enough to not notice my trembling voice.

"Well, then it will be even easier to destroy you both," he roared, charging forward. I pushed Aeron aside and held up my hands. A wall of ice appeared separating us from the Shadow Lord. I saw a flash of red appear as Ignis grabbed Aeron. Talons gripped my shoulder, and Nix flew back up to the sky with me in his grasp.

"Nix, are you alright?" I yelled over the violent winds. He glanced down at me and nodded. I took a deep breath and pointed up. He turned his head forward again. Then, he let me go. My stomach started doing flips as I fell, shooting down to the ground. I watched as Nix dived under me, and I fell straight into his saddle. The force almost made me fall off, but I gripped at his neck and pulled myself closer.

"Where did you learn that?" Aeron called, flying closer to us. I shook my head, pointing downwards. He nodded and kicked Ignis in the side. I leaned closer to Nix as he dove down, wings bent against his side. We came close to the trees, and he flung out his wings. We glided and landed on the ground, winded but safe.

"Aeron, are you alright?" I jumped off of Nix's back and walked over to Aeron.

He stumbled off of Ignis and glared up at me. "Oh please, like you care?!"

I tried to help him, but he swatted my hand away.

"I do care! What makes you think I don't?" I questioned, placing my hands on my hips.

"How about mum and da? Huh!?" he growled.

"Really? The past is over. Maybe think about the fact that you were going to abandon me with some guy who was convinced that we are powerful beings," I spat, turning back to Nix. He and Ignis were at each other's throats, snarling. I pushed at Ignis and

pulled Nix away. We had landed in the middle of the forest, so there was not much space for him to move. We sat by a huge oak tree, while Aeron moved far away from Nix and me near some Juniper bushes. I watched him as he cleaned and bound a small wound on Ignis' back, every touch filled with care.

"I guess that's what spending years away from each other brings, right, bud?" I mumbled to Nix. He laid his head on my lap, warming my legs up. I rested my hand on his snout and leaned my head back against the rough bark. My eyelids felt heavy, and the lulling bird songs started to make me drowsy...

"Um, Aerica?" I jerked awake, blinking quickly. Nix still had his head in my lap but was now staring at Aeron. He stood by my feet, his red sleeves soaked with blood. I nodded drowsily, stretching to reach my pack. I handed him a piece of meat and he sat next to me, grumbling a thanks. I watched curiously as he placed a stick at our feet and lit it, nursing a small flame into a roaring fire.

"What's it like?"

He looked up at me, confused. "What do you mean?" he asked, chewing on the meat stick.

I pointed to the fire. "Being a fire sorcerer," I said.

He smiled faintly, staring at the fire. Ignis trotted over, copying Nix, laying his head on Aeron's lap.

"It's similar to you, I think. Ignis and I just travel around, finding places to rest during winter. When summer comes, we make our way to the Summer Market," he stated.

I nodded, grabbing some bread and sharing with him. "Sounds like us. But, if you guys rest now, why were you outside in that clearing?" I looked at him.

"I don't know really," he shrugged. "I had a weird dream and when I woke up, I just had...a feeling," he mumbled.

"Let me guess, the dream was about mum and da?"

He nodded. "Yeah, it was about the day we fought..." he trailed off.

We both sat there silently for a bit, remembering the past. The day we both left was tragic for everyone. It all started out as a little feud that grew into a rivalry that I had tried to forget. But, it was our parents' faces that we could not forget, their looks of horror as we turned away from each other and ran from our home.

"You know what? I think this is the longest conversation we have had since that day," I said. We looked at each other and then burst into laughter. He grabbed my hand, leaning his head on my shoulder.

“I missed my sister,” he mumbled.

I smiled. “And I missed my brother.” We both smiled as Ignis and Nix sniffed each other, slowly easing up. “But we still have a problem,” I said.

“Right. I don’t understand it much, but I believe that man, Shadow Lord, was looking to destroy us.” Aeron sat up, patting Nix on the snout. Nix snorted at him but let Aeron touch him.

“I’m assuming as much, but I don’t think that man was the Shadow Lord,” I said.

Aeron sneezed, glancing up at me. “He rose out of the ground! No one else has that ability,” he exclaimed. Ignis growled, tilting his head at me.

“I know that, but the way legends describe him, he rises up on a dragon of black, which I know he did. But he is supposedly so terrifying that no one can simply look upon him without screaming.”

Aeron nodded as I spoke. “So, you are saying the man we faced was...a fake?” he asked.

I smiled faintly. “Yeah, a fake. But we won’t know until we look ourselves.”

He smiled. “Dear sister, does this mean you have a plan?”

I smiled. “Why yes, yes I do.”

“Nix, stay low!” I called from the top of the tree. I felt the tree shake as he flew past us, diving towards the ground.

Ignis growled as he landed next to him but didn’t protest much longer. Aeron threw a pinecone at me, catching my attention.

“I think we are all set!” I smiled, climbing down the tree towards all of them. Aeron grabbed my arm and helped me down the last branch. I looked at him, grinning. “You ready?”

He pursed his lips, pretending to think. “Am I ready to die? Hmm, what do you think, Ignis?”

I rolled my eyes at this, pushing at his shoulder. “It’s not that dangerous. Just a likely chance it will fail,” I mumbled. Just as Aeron was going to speak, I stopped him. The forest had grown silent, and I felt a small rumble rush through the ground.

“Nix! Ignis! Quickly,” I pushed at them as they took to the skies. Aeron and I stood in the center of the clearing, back to back. Cracks began to spread around us, and steam burst out. I heard that same ghastly cry of the black dragon.

“Aeron, he’s going to appear right under us,” I said.

He didn't hear me, still glancing around the clearing nervously. "What?" he yelled over the deafening sound of rolling earth.

"I said he is..." I was cut off as the ground underneath us fell away making us jump onto stable ground.

The black dragon shot up, screeching and roaring. The man on his back already had his sword out, swinging it at Ignis and Nix. They ducked aside, following the plan.

"Come on, come on," I muttered, watching as the black dragon landed near me, right in front of the trap wire.

"You mortals do not learn anything." The Shadow Lord stepped off of the dragon holding his blade.

I crossed my fingers, standing up and creating a dagger of ice.

"We are stronger than we look," I turned in surprise to hear Aeron speak. He walked next to me, flames burning all over his hand. "Come, challenge us!"

The Shadow Lord laughed, swinging his sword upward. The wire was cut and the pile of stones released. They came rolling down the hill, missing the man by inches.

"How stupid do you think I am?!" he roared with laughter at our open jaws. "Looks like your plan failed, young ones." With that, he charged at us.

I ducked to the side, flinging a cascade of icicles in his direction.

The dragon lunged forwards, reflecting them off of her hard scales. I saw the Shadow Lord stab at Aeron, missing just barely.

"Aeron!" I called, moving towards him. The dragon's jaws snapped at my side, nicking my skin. I screamed as a flash of pain erupted over my body.

"Ira!" The dragon looked up at its master. He had Aeron pinned against a tree, holding the sword in the position...the position to drive it right into his heart. "Finish off the girl," he laughed cruelly, turning back to Aeron.

I looked at Ira, the black dragon. She licked her lips, crouching and ready to pounce. I looked up at the sky and saw a bird fly by. I whispered a small prayer and cringed, waiting for the jaws to surround me, yet all I heard was an angry roar. Make that two angry roars.

"Nix!" I whooped, watching as a streak of white and red crashed into Ira, knocking into the Shadow Lord as well. They snarled and lunged at her, driving her back. She cried in terror as Nix bit at her front leg. She shook her large head and dove back into the crevice, disappearing into the depths below.

“NO!” the man cried, grabbing at his sword.

Aeron staggered to my side and looked at me in worry. I could feel the blood dripping down my side, soaking my white shirt. I winced and grabbed Aeron’s hand. We faced the man, holding hands.

“You have been defeated!” I gasped out in pain. Aeron gripped my hand harder, motioning me to stop talking.

“Oh children, don’t you see?” the man turned to face us. He laughed, pointing at the growing red dot on my side. “You have already lost. You are weak, useless, you have no worth in this world. When I leave your corpses on this land, this world will weep. For you are defeated and evil will reign!” He charged forward, his sword swinging down at us.

I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath. The man was right; we were ruined. I felt a tear stream down my face, and I sighed. Then, the voices started.

Voices, all over in my head. They were all chanting in another language, a forgotten language. Some were women, some were men, some were young children. But they all said the same thing. I hear familiar voices though, echoing among all the voices.

“*My child.*” Our mother. I hadn’t heard her voice in so long, and now it was echoing in my head.

“*Aerica, let your power reign free.*” I now heard my father. I felt a tingling feeling appear in my hand, the one Aeron was holding. “*We love you, Aerica, no matter what. Just let it free.*” I opened my eyes quickly, glancing at Aeron. I could just tell he had heard the same thing.

He smiled, turning to me. “Together?” he asked.

I looked at the Shadow Lord who was running at us still. Everything was slowed down, and that’s when I smiled. I knew what to do.

“Together.” And with that we summoned our powers, releasing them. A blast of fire and ice, twisting together, flew at the man. He screamed as it hit him head on in the chest, sending a shock wave of air around the whole area. I flew back, releasing Aeron’s hand. I saw Nix and Ignis fly up quickly, avoiding the shock wave. I hit the branches of a pine tree and fell to the ground, landing on my bad side. There was light and then nothing.

“Aerica,” Aeron helped me up, and we observed the damage together. All the trees around the area were knocked down, and the ground was littered with debris. The crevice had disappeared, but there was still one piece of the evil world here.

“You,” I spat as we approached the black bundle. The Shadow Lord’s mask was on the ground near him, torn apart. He laid on the ground, silent.

Aeron summoned some flames and touched the man’s arm.

A hand flashed up and grabbed me. “Fools! All of you mortals—fools soon to die!”

I screamed at the man. His flesh was grey and rotten; his eyes blood red. His teeth were yellow and sharpened into fangs. He laughed at my scream, scraping his nails at my gash. I fell back into Aeron’s arms, gasping.

“You aren’t the Shadow Lord?!” Aeron yelled, swatting at the man’s hand.

The man laughed hoarsely, pointing a shaky finger at us. “No, you idiots. He is coming for you though. You are never safe.” Blood started to seep out of his mouth, making him cough. “Never!” and with that final word, he dropped to the ground, never to wake up again.

“Wait, there’s a guy even worse than you?!” I kicked weakly at the man’s limp hand. The wound at my side was painful, but it was starting to feel a bit better.

“Apparently,” Aeron muttered.

Ignis and Nix landed and ran to our sides. Nix poked his snout at my side—worry filling his eyes.

“I am fine, Nix. I will heal,” I mumbled, leaning against him.

Aeron turned to me, grinning. “Guess what it means if this guy is still after us?” he tilted his head, asking me.

I shrugged. “Don’t know.”

His grin grew wider. “Family reunion time!!!!” he whooped.

I groaned. “Oh boy...”

Melissa Snyder
Porter, MN
2nd Place

Outside the Wall of Pangaea

If you've noticed, catastrophic events keep on happening to divide us, and you must wonder if maybe it's meant to be that way. Maybe it is just human nature to fight. For example, the English killed the Native Americans for their land. The Nazis tried to kill every Jew, only because they were being led by a persuasive megalomaniac.

In the year 2056 human population was so high; people were living on top of each other. Countries were going to war for more land for their people, and even vegetation died. The world had almost turned into an eternal winter. The sun hardly ever shone. The ground soon froze and so did humanity.

But there is always that one person who strives for peace and harmony, who will never lose hope no matter how many catastrophes happen. It just takes one person to tip the balance of human nature. And when our world fell into chaos, our President knew something had to be done.

Before humans roamed this Earth, the continents we know today were one land mass. That was inspiration to a new age for our ancestors. A wall was put up around the United States, which would be the home of the future. Scientists made a climate controlled dome that would be built into the wall to create green life. That left only two ways to leave. Up and down. The other continents would serve as a resource to Pangaea. This new world would have no states, no borders and barely any memory of the past. The plan was set into action for a fresh start, and it went by the name of...

PANGAEA – 300 years later

“Wake up, campers! Time to do some work.”

I let out a groan as I peeled my eyes open. Just because we slept in tents did not make us campers. I could hear the others stirring in their cots and heard a lot of groans matching my own. I sit up. The flap opens to the tent making the sun shine right in my eyes, and in walks our “camp director.” I flop back down onto my pathetic bed and cover my head with my pillow.

His actual name is Jenson. Jacob Jenson. He's in charge of our sector here at Base. "Rise and shine, ladies. Big day ahead of us. We have the Tyros coming today."

Even more groans come from my fellow tent mates.

"Aw, come on now, don't most of you remember what it was like when you were a Tyro and went on your first Check?"

"Yeah, but we were born here and knew where we were actually going. Half of them probably think we just walk around the Edge and hold hands," someone says.

I turn to the left and uncover my head. Larry Sanchez is telling Jenson his take on being a Tyro again. He's already out of bed and putting his boots on, unlike the rest of us who actually don't like this job. Jenson pretends to not have heard Larry and continues to tell us how cute we had been on our first check as Tyros. I close my eyes again and try to sleep for a few more seconds, but of course that would never last. Jenson must have stopped talking and pulled out his whistle, because the next thing I know, I hear an earsplitting shriek.

I shoot up sending my pillow flying.

"Wake up!" Jenson shouts. "Get dressed, and grab an apple and water bottle on your way out."

He turns to leave and closes the flap muttering something about how cute Tyros are going to be.

I look around to see that the others are just as wide-eyed as me. Some had even fallen off their cot. They start getting out of bed slightly faster than normal. I pull back my covers and swing around to the edge of my cot. My bare feet touch the cool plastic covering on the ground. I stand up and grab my socks and boots from underneath my bed and pull them on. We are supposed to sleep in our clothes for the next day; I'm practically ready to go. I head straight to the cubbies right next to the entrance flap to get my jacket and hat. As I slide my jacket out, I see my name, Serenity T., on it. Some people like to call me Ren. Everyone's jackets have their names stitched on, so they know who you are in case you die. But that's just a precaution.

As you walk in, there are ten cots for the girls to the right and ten cots for the boys to the left. We get three sets of clothes, so that if one pair is being washed, and you wreck one of the other pairs, you still have something to wear. Everyone has two blankets and a pillow.

Outside there are fifteen other tents making three hundred of us. If you look to the left, you will see a massive wall that seems to stretch on forever. It was decided a long time ago that we would

call it the “Wall.” Real creative, isn’t it? We are the second closest living thing to the Wall. The first are the Infected.

I go outside to get my supplies for the morning. While I’m waiting, I look towards the Wall and think about what it must have been like before it was there. What made it so terrible that we had to put a wall up to protect us? But if you look closely, you can see that the builders added on to the wall after building it.

They tell us we are located where West Virginia used to be. They also tell us that a disease outbreak had hit New York when they were almost finished building the wall, and it spread to Ohio and Vermont plus a few major cities in neighboring states. It was a lot like a disease that scientist had cured decades back called Ebola.

What really happened is the disease never went away, but hid for the right conditions to come back. It was a mutated form of Ebola that resembled its beginning symptoms with a fever and sore throat, and the later side effects of blistering skin and the whites of eyes turning red. It is unlike the original Ebola in that the patients never got weak and died but grew stronger. Inside their bodies, the molecules changed, giving them extra strength, a lot like PCP. After the initial “sick” feeling was over, the bodies went into overdrive with extra strength, super speed, and even super tough skin. It only took about twenty seconds for the disease to take over. The infected became delusional and, in some rare cases, homicidal.

They escaped reinforcements and destroyed every town or city they came in contact with. Nothing would stop them. Not bullets, not gas; bombs weren’t any good. They developed super hearing, too, so they could tell when a bomb was coming. This left enough time to run off before the bomb hit. They contained the disease by stopping transportation and importation from different countries and states.

They evacuated most of the non-infected and closed off the rest of the states. The infected were well alive, but that did not stop the builders from closing them in. They continued to live and reproduce like any other human civilization, but they were nowhere near human.

They are desperate for food now that they have eaten what was left behind after the evacuation. Since they can’t go over the Wall and the ground is frozen, their only option is through the Wall.

Now every day, everyone in this camp has to go out beyond the Wall to check on the Infected. We are called Checkers. Again,

real creative. We do this to make sure they aren't making any progress towards escaping. We now have more advanced weapons to take them down. Guns with special bullets that penetrate their skin are the only weapons we are allowed to use.

I feel a tap on my shoulder. I turn around.

"You gonna get your stuff, or are you just going to stand there and make the rest of us starve?" Andrew Langley and a few other people were glaring at me. I look to the front of the line and notice that the formation has moved, and I was next to get my supplies. I quickly get my apple and water bottle and say a quick apology to the others in line.

My next destination would be the flight deck where the air ships are and where the Tyros will be mixed in with us.

"My God! They're even worse than last month," shouted Larry. I stand on my tiptoes to see. I'm not that short with being 5'6" and all, but this time one of the taller boys decided to stand in front of me.

We are lined up outside one of the air ships and are seeing the new Tyros for the first time. Another sector, which basically means tent, comes with us. They also split into two groups that are to our left. They go further out than us. There are four groups outside the air ship pad, with ten in each group, depending on where you were stationed on the border check.

Only certain people have to teach the Tyros on certain days. We rotate so everyone gets to do it. Today was my unlucky day.

They stumble towards us like a bunch of babies learning to walk for the first time. They look at us like they don't know what to make of us exactly. I notice some of them don't trip over their own feet and walk just fine. They stare straight ahead with a calm face. Then there are the ones who are smiling, like this is the most exciting thing in the world. Those are the most dangerous. They think that what's out there isn't so bad, that it actually might be fun out there. The ones who are scared or afraid have probably already heard what was out there from their parents.

These new kids are all fourteen years old. That is the age in which every child must begin their contribution to Pangaea. You do this for four years till the week you turn eighteen. Once you turn eighteen, you have the choice to work somewhere else. I'm seventeen, so I've only got one year left. My plan is to get as far away from here as possible. It's not that I hate it here. Wait, no, I

hate it here! Just because it's nice and sunny here like the rest of Pangaea does not mean that bad things can't happen.

A voice on the speakers stationed all around the air pad tells the Tyros to get into one of the two groups to the left of them and follow us on to the air ship. As they cautiously get in line with us, the air ship in front of us lowers its deck.

Each air ship is about the size of three houses put together. This allows forty of us to fit along with all of our equipment. Plus, it doesn't hurt to have a little extra space so the Tyros don't get claustrophobic.

We move forward onto the ship. Our boots thud loudly on the metal deck. Inside, there is a machine that scans your iris to ensure you show up to do your job. It is connected to the wall in the entryway. It's like a head count to make sure everyone is here.

People start going through. It states your full name, then your parents' names, and your age. I hear the other Checker's names being said as they go through. As I listen, I learn that most of them are seventeen or eighteen, like me.

Soon it's my turn to be scanned. I spread my eyes wide, trying not to blink. The little red light moves up and down over my eye. It beeps once then says in a mechanical voice—"Serenity Anne Thomson, Daughter of Magnus James Thomson and Mary Rose Thomson, now deceased. Serenity Anne Thomson, seventeen years old, teacher of the next Checkers."

Every day I have to be reminded that my parents are gone; they were one of the unlucky few to get attacked by Infected. I shake the thought off as best I can, like I do every day.

I continue on through the ship. Next up is the suit station. Five closet-sized boxes are set up along the wall of the ship. These are machines that spray on a latex suit to keep you from getting cold. It is air tight and seamless so that it keeps the disease-polluted air out of us. We have to take off the clothes we already have on for it to spray—kind of an inconvenience.

After I go through that, I get back in formation with the others. Soon everyone else has gone through, too. The ship starts to rumble, and it begins to get off the ground. I can feel the pull in my stomach as we move towards the Wall.

Soon after that I feel the ship land. Now we have to grab our helmets and weapons. Our weapons include a gun and extra bullets, though we rarely ever use them. My job includes teaching how to use these things, and the helmet. I'm paired with John Thorn. He can be a bit extreme sometimes, so that's why I do most of the teaching.

John is rounding up some Tyros while I go over the lesson in my head. When everyone is situated, John starts talking to them.

“Okay. Listen up, and listen up good. Ren here is going to tell you how not to kill yourself on the first day. If you don’t listen to her, you’re probably going to get killed,” he finishes.

I ignore that he used Ren instead of my real name. “Always one for the theatrics, John,” I say.

He gives me a cold smile.

I go over how to use the gun properly, and how to hold it without shooting anybody, and how to look through the scope. Then I show them how to put on their helmet, use the radio, and turn on the air so they don’t suffocate.

“And finally I conclude with the walking formation. John and I will walk on the ends of the group with you in the middle. You do not walk slower or faster than us, but stay parallel with us. When we get to the posts we will assign smaller groups to patrol together. If you see anything, you call us right away. Do all of you understand?” They stare back at me with their mouths hanging open. We didn’t get any headstrong ones, but at least they usually respond.

“She asked you a question!” John shouts.

They come to life shaking and afraid as everyone mutters “yes.”

Other groups finish up, and the deck lowers again to let us out. Outside there is no sun or even clouds. The sky is a dull gray, and the ground is covered in broken buildings and trash. I look behind the ship to find the great white Wall and sunshine past it. It’s a very different world outside the Wall.

We go a few more feet, just about a mile in front of the first few structures that used to be a city. Then I divide up the groups and send them off. I keep a girl that looks like she might be hyperventilating with me. Her whimpering is really getting on my nerves. She looks as if she’s about to burst into tears at any second.

John has to go through the groups to make sure they’re doing okay. He goes off to do just that, and now this girl seems to be calming down a bit. She hasn’t stopped shaking, but she did stop whimpering. Maybe if I talk to her she’ll calm down some more. So I ask her, “What’s your name?”

“L-Laura,” she mutters.

I smile at her and tell her my name. “You know it’s not so bad out here once you get used to it. Nothing really happens,” I say to her.

“Really?” she cried.

I almost pitied the desperation in her voice. “Oh, yeah. The rumors you’ve probably heard are true. All we basically do around here is walk and talk,” I assure her.

Her body seemed to be less tense. We were quiet for a while after that. But soon I hear one of the Tyro’s voices on my radio inside my helmet.

“I’ve got movement. I’ve got movement!” a girl shouted.

Over to my right, John goes over to one of the new girls and looks where she’s pointing. He looks over at me then walks over.

“I want you and her to go down there and check out that building,” he said pointing at Laura and me.

One look at Laura tells me she would freak out at every noise. I grab his arm and pull him over to the side so no one can hear us. “She probably didn’t see anything or it was just an animal or something. Plus I cannot take her with me,” I shout-whisper. “She’s too jittery. Someone more experienced should go.”

“You know it’s not just an animal because they would have already eaten them, and she has you. One quick trip. In and out.”

I look at him for a few seconds reading his expression. Determined and grouchy. I am not going to win this one.

“Fine!” I say. I turn around and grab Laura’s arm with one hand and hold my gun with the other. We move toward the buildings the girl pointed at. It’s a good distance away, so it might take a while.

“You’ve got blonde hair,” she says.

“Yeah, and so do you. What’s your point?”

“It’s just that it’s really rare after the extinction back Before. I thought I was the only blonde living here. I guess not.”

“Yeah,” I reply.

I look down at her boots. Laura was shuffling her feet too much. If there were any Infected here, they were going to hear us for sure. “You’ve got to stop shuffling your feet. Take longer strides so it’s not so loud,” I tell her.

She nods quickly and changes her step.

Surprisingly, she holds herself together with no whimpering, and we get to the buildings shortly after we leave. I tell her to be cautious and to check the buildings carefully. We then split up in different directions to search for Infected.

We don’t find anything just as I suspected. As I turn to tell Laura that we need to get back to the others, something jumps on top of her from behind. Her scream is so loud it might have been louder than Jenson’s whistle. I raise my gun towards it ready to

shoot whatever it is. It pulls her to the ground fast and is on top of her; it rips her helmet from her head making her hair go wild. It raises its head to face me. Bloodshot eyes meet mine, and drool drips from its mouth. Tattered rags cover its body. "Laura, hold your breath," I shout. Without her helmet, she would be breathing bad air.

I'm about to pull the trigger when out of the corner of my eye, I see a blur moving towards me. All of a sudden, I'm knocked to my stomach making my gun and helmet go flying. Now I am on the ground, too. A heavy force has my body in a tight grip. Hot breath comes down on my face. I take a big breath and hope I can hold it.

"Oh my! Looks like we got us a couple of females! And they're blondes too." The first one's voice is like nails on a chalk board. I can feel the one holding me is laughing by the vibration of his body.

I look over at Laura and see that tears are spilling over her cheeks. Then the one holding her brings out a piece of glass from its rags and holds it to Laura's throat.

"Let's make sure they're exposed first and then eat 'em," the first one says. "We waited for you to think we weren't here at all before attacking you. Helps when you don't check outside first," he laughs again.

How could I have been so stupid? Why didn't I check outside first? I was set on getting the houses checked quickly so we could get out of here faster. I should have been more aware of our surroundings so we wouldn't even be in this situation. We could have been halfway back to the others by now. I am in the same situation as my parents, and we probably won't make it out like them.

"All right, let's do this quick," the second one says.

The one holding Laura hoists her up and slides his piece of glass along her arm cutting the fabric of her suit. She screams again. So do I.

I have just released my breath and am now breathing. I try to remember how long it takes for you to get infected. Twenty seconds, I think. I start counting. I feel something sharp press on my neck. My captor also has put a glass shard to my neck. They both laugh, and it's sick how they can take joy in this. I'm almost to eleven when I see that my gun is only a few inches away. Still counting, I slowly reach for my gun. Only a few centimeters now. The Infected are so busy watching Laura that they don't notice me.

I wrap my fingers around the gun and point it at my captor's ankle. It is black, and the foot is mangled. I pull.

A cry of pain rings through the building, and he falls off me. I swing around and shoot Laura's captor. Then I shoot my captor. I look at Laura. She sits up shaking. We are both breathing hard. It's past thirty seconds. She shouldn't be alive. She has come to that same conclusion. Did I count wrong? No.

She looks down my face to below my chin. My hand goes to my neck. I feel skin instead of suit. I have been exposed. It must have been when I shot him, and the glass slipped. My heart starts beating faster. All of a sudden Laura's eyes go wide, and she opens her mouth as if she is going to talk. Then she falls over and goes very, very still.

My heart hammers against my ribcage. "Laura?" I whispered. I said her name again, but she didn't move. My heart beat even faster. I shouted her name this time, but it had no effect. This wasn't right. I just saw her sitting there looking at me.

I needed to get up, but I feel so weak. I try to stand but make little movement. I need to get to her so I can maybe save her. I use every ounce of strength in my body to stand, and it is rewarded with darkness.

My body aches from head to toe. I feel that I am lying down, but I don't know where I am. I strain my ears to hear something. Silence.

A voice cuts through the quiet to say, "Hello, Serenity."

"Am I dead?" I hear my voice crack when I say it. My throat feels dry.

"Oh, no honey, you are quite alive."

All of a sudden, I remembered what had happened. "I was exposed," I say in a small voice.

"Yes; John Thorn found you and brought you to us. He said you were alive but were exposed. We discovered that you seem to be immune to the disease outside the Wall."

Her eyebrows go up, and she smiles. "Looks like you are the cure."

Jasper Nordin
New London, MN
3rd Place

The Heist

September 9, 1992
San Francisco
11th Street Hotel Basement
10:56 PM

Cold water splashed his face, getting his black suit drenched under the ten feet of rope tying him to a chair. A man stepped out of the shadows.

“Our counterfeit money was taking up a quarter of the money in San Francisco alone. Imagine how much more it woulda taken up if you hadn’t busted us. \$500,000. That’s how much we lost in a DAY.”

He punched him in the nose. “We’re gonna hafta make a pretty clean heist job to get back the money you lost us, McDougal. The Mafia is watching you now.” He turned around and turned on a light. Two men with clubs were standing behind him. “Conk him out and put him in his bed; make him think it was all a dream.”

The thugs obliged. “Poison ALL the drinks in his refrigerator. Send his kin flowers the next day. As always, leave no evidence and you get paid extra this week. Heck, I’ll even speak to the boss about promoting you.”

May 18th, 1993
San Francisco
San Francisco Museum of Archaeology
3:27 PM

The truck transporting explosives was wary as usual. The military base was just three miles away, but the driver was still thinking the sleek black limousine was following him on purpose. Inside the limo, a man pushed a button on a laptop computer, and the streetlight went red. The truck stopped, but the limo didn’t. It rear-ended the truck, knocking the back doors open. A man in a mask and a red suit came out of the car holding a tommy gun. He

had a burlap sack over his shoulder. He went inside the truck and dumped $\frac{3}{4}$ of all the explosives in the sack. He climbed into the front seat, looked at the driver, and took off his mask.

The driver gasped. "What—"

"Don't ask. Just. Drive," said the man in the red suit. He shot four rounds of bullets into the windshield, shattering it. He placed his explosives on the hood of the truck and turned on the detonator.

"Turn to the right, please," said the man.

"Toward the museum?" gulped the driver.

"Is there any other building to the right?"

"No, sir."

"Alright then. Right into the wall, if you don't mind."

"I do mind, sir," said the driver.

The man cursed and pushed the man out the truck. "Do I have to do everything myself?" He swerved the truck into the wall, giggling madly. He opened the door and dove out seconds before it crashed and set off the explosives. Still laughing, he dashed into the museum and took all manner of things. He dumped them in his burlap sack and went back into his limo. The man in the passenger seat looked at the man in the red suit.

"How'd it go?" he asked.

"Oh, I think we'll make a thousand dollars or so off the Black Market," he cackled.

June 4th, 1993

San Francisco

Police Department

7:00 PM

The police chief piled newspaper upon newspaper in front of the detective. "Urban terrorism. This is what it is, essentially. We've been trying to nail the Mafia for years. When we busted their counterfeit money operation, I thought they were off the streets for good. Then they killed our best man and blew a freakin' hole in a museum wall!"

"Sir, with all due respect, there was only a single injury, and he was only hospitalized for six months."

"I don't care, Smith! One more smart-aleck word outta you and you're fired!"

"Yes, sir."

"I want you in that museum by 9:00!"

“I’ll go get my partner.”

“Good. We’re paying you, Smith. 100 grand. 100 GRAND. Don’t mess up.

Stephen Smith took his hat and walked out of the room.

June 4th, 1993

Golden Gate Apartments

7:56 PM

Smith smacked his hand three times on the door.

“Hey, Rob, we got another case!”

“No! I’m busy!” said a muffled voice.

“Watching reruns of *The Cosby Show* isn’t busy! 100 grand.”

A man with stubble and pajamas opened the door. “I...I could upgrade to a better apartment...maybe even a HOUSE. A HOUSE, Stephen.”

“Yeah. We each get 50 grand if you come with me, Rob. Otherwise, I’m keeping 100 grand to myself.”

“All right, all right, I’m coming!” said Robert. “Lemme get dressed and shave.”

“Ten minutes.”

June 4th, 1993

San Francisco Museum of Archaeology

8:59 PM

Stephen paid the taxi driver and ran up to the entrance. A police officer stopped him. “Official business only. These premises are under investigation.”

“Stephen Smith, Private Detective. This is my partner, Robert Jones. We’ve been hired by Chief Jonathan to help with investigations.”

“Identification.”

Stephen showed him his badge.

“Go right in.”

Smith and Jones walked in and dug around the scene of the crime. After four hours of fruitless searching, they took a bathroom break. After leaving the restroom, a figure hit Jones over the head with a club and dragged him away.

“Maybe if we look in different parts of the—” began Smith. “Hey, Rob, where’d you...”

He saw a shadow at the end of the hall. “Hey!” shouted Smith, and ran after it.

The figure ducked into a room. Smith heard the click of a lock and took out a lock pick. He tried to break open the door, but the pick broke instead. Smith heard muffled voices in the room. He couldn’t make them out, but he heard the exchanging of money.

Who else is in there? he thought.

The door opened and Jones fell out, seemingly unconscious.

Smith smacked him awake. “Rob, what happened?”

“I...I don’t remember. How’d we get here?”

“Some goon knocked you out. I heard the exchanging of money. Think it’s the Mafia?”

Jones rolled his eyes. “No, it’s the Humane Society....Of course, it’s the Mafia!”

Smith opened the door and was greeted by gunfire. He rolled to the side and took an ancient Greek discus off the wall. He threw it at the would-be killer, and the discus smacked the gun away. Smith kicked the man in the abdomen and pinned him to the ground.

“Who are you, and what do you want?” asked Smith.

The man laughed. “Call me Joe Bob. I want you dead.”

Smith studied him. “You killed that McDougal guy, didn’t you?”

“I gave the command to some thugs, if that’s what you’re asking.”

He handcuffed the man and pulled out a portable radio.

“There are Mafia agents in the building, at least one. I repeat, there are Mafia agents in the building. I have one in custody, over.”

A detachment of police officers took the man to jail for murder and attempted murder.

“Why would he want you dead?” asked Jones.

“Use your head, Rob. The Mafia is behind these robberies. I come in, and they want me killed. They don’t want anyone to find out anything more than what we already know,” said Smith.

Suddenly, an alarm went off.

“I knew there were more agents in the building!” shouted Smith. He and Jones ran to the front of the building.

“This wing is directly opposite where the first robbery took place...” muttered Smith.

“What do you mean?” asked Jones.

“The explosion was in the outer wall of the west wing, the Treasures of the Far East exhibit. This one happened in the east wing, the Mesoamerican section.”

“We need more guards in those sections,” said Jones. “Move the guards from the center of the museum toward the front where the robberies happened.”

“What about the exhibits there? There’s an Egyptian necklace worth almost a billion dollars,” said Smith.

“The Mafia isn’t after those! They’re trying to get the stuff in the front!”

“Right. Notify the curator of the museum. We need his approval.”

Jones grinned. “Consider it done.”

June 5th, 1993

San Francisco Museum of Archaeology

11:00 AM

Smith decided to take another day to look for clues. He picked up Jones, and they arrived at the museum.

“I’ll take the west wing; you take the east wing,” said Smith. He handed Jones a walkie-talkie. “Call me if you find anything.” Smith turned over everything he had the authorization to turn over, finding nothing. It was as if someone had blown up the wall, and just taken any old item from its stand.

That doesn’t sound like something the Mafia would do, thought Smith. Aren’t their crimes a bit more, I don’t know, sophisticated? His radio buzzed.

“Hey!” said Jones’ garbled voice. “I think I found something!”

Smith ran over to the east wing, pushing past museum patrons and staff. Jones was holding a note. “This was hidden under a vase.”

Smith grabbed it. The note had an address written on it:

1956 OAK STREET SOUTHEAST

Smith dropped the note. “What are we waiting for? Let’s go!”

June 5th, 1993

1956 Oak Street Southeast

10:00 PM

Jones paid the taxi driver while Smith studied the building.

“It was a steel warehouse in the late 19th century and early 20th. It’s abandoned now, but the machinery is still operational.”

“How do you know all that?” asked Jones.

“California history was my minor in college.” Smith went up to the door. “Locked.”

Jones took out a ladder and set it up on the wall. The ladder reached up to the roof. Once they climbed up, Jones kicked the ladder down. One part of the roof was severely rusted. Smith took one step onto it, and it crumbled into pieces. He grabbed the edge of the hole, dangling above a twenty-foot drop. Jones pulled him back up.

Smith shined a flashlight down the hole. “There’s a catwalk about seven feet down.” He jumped into the hole, and Jones heard the clank of metal. He jumped after him, and the duo made their way to the floor.

“Are we alone?” wondered Smith aloud.

“Looks like it,” said Jones.

Smith heard the click of a gun being cocked.

“Why, Rob?”

Jones was standing behind him, pointing a pistol at him.

“I thought we were friends.”

“Money is more important than friends in this world. The amulet of Ramses III is worth ten billion dollars. The Mafia was willing to offer me one tenth of the money when they pulled off the heist.”

“I guess one hundred grand doesn’t sound as good anymore,” said Smith. “I knew you were working for them the minute I saw that note. I’d recognize your handwriting anywhere. When you were knocked out and dragged into that room, I’m guessing they struck the deal then.”

“Half a million greenbacks up front, the rest after the heist,” smiled Jones.

“I came prepared,” said Smith, and fired a bullet into Jones’ gun, smacking it out his hand. He ran over to a switch and pulled it to the ON position. Steel-making machinery started up, pouring molten steel into tanks. Smith climbed up the catwalk and onto the pulley system. Jones ran after him, cursing his bad luck.

Smith jumped onto the giant metal claw that held a bucket in place. Jones grabbed hold of the bucket’s edge. He climbed up and onto the claw. He punched Smith in the jaw and made him stagger. Smith fell off the claw but pulled Jones with him. Jones kicked the claw, sending both over the molten steel and down to the ground. Smith grabbed a chain and Jones was holding onto his foot. He climbed up to the catwalk, and finally pulled himself onto it. He pushed Jones into the chains and tied him up.

“Steve...” he hung his head. “We’ve been friends since second grade. If we were ever truly friends, you’d know I’m sincere when I say...I’m sorry.”

Smith sighed and untied Jones.

“Sorry, you’re a SUCKER!” exclaimed Jones. He pointed his gun at Smith and fired. No bullet came out. Earlier, Smith had stuck a pebble up the barrel of the gun when Jones wasn’t looking. The bullet inside the gun hit the pebble and bounced backward, causing the gun to explode, and sending Jones blasting off the catwalk into a bucket filled with molten steel.

“I know a liar when I see one,” said Smith. He turned off the machinery and ran to the museum.

San Francisco
Museum of Archaeology
June 6th, 1993
3:00 AM

The man in the red suit was wearing a mask. He went inside the museum. The guards had left the Amulet of Ramses III virtually unguarded. All had gone according to plan.

Step 1: Perform a robbery in the west wing to get their attention.

Step 2: While everyone is investigating the west wing, rob the east wing.

Step 3: Make the guards believe you are attempting to take more things from the front of the museum.

Step 4: The guards should protect the front area instead of other areas. Take the Amulet of Ramses III and sell it for 10 billion dollars.

He giggled. He used his glasscutter to get inside. He avoided security cameras and found his way to the Egyptian Wonders exhibit. He carefully placed his hands on the glass cube around it.

“I wouldn’t do that,” said a voice.

He spun around and saw a man in a tan overcoat and a brown pinstriped suit.

“Stephen Smith. I thought Robert Jones killed you,” said the man.

“Vice versa,” grinned Smith. “I’ve notified the police and guards of your plan.”

They both heard footsteps getting closer.

The man in the red suit raised his hands. “Alright, you got me...” He pressed his thumb against his palm and a red light blinked.

“What’s that?” asked Smith, worried.

“Oh nothing. Just a radio transmitter the size of a penny we bribed some scientists into developing.”

A metal lockdown door now covered every entrance and exit, including the windows.

“Some Mafia agents hacked into the main control room. Any second now...”

All the lights in the museum turned off. The intercom system had been hacked as well.

A recording of the man in the red suit laughing madly played over it. A single light near Smith turned on. The man in the red suit was holding the amulet. He removed his mask. Smith fought the urge to scream.

He had painted his lips and most of his jaw lime green. He had red paint that looked like dried blood under his eyes. He was wearing too much black eyeliner, and it was terrifying. His hair was shoulder length, and was painted ocean blue. The rest of his face was blinding white.

“Terrifying, isn’t it? I got the idea when an insane circus clown killed my family in front of me when I was five years old. I think something broke in my brain...I tracked him down and killed him just a year ago. In the middle of a performance! Imagine the shock!”

He giggled madly.

Smith smacked the amulet out of his hand. He kicked the man in the stomach and pulled the radio transmitter out of his hand. He tuned it to Emergency Services.

“Hello? SWAT? This is Private Investigator Stephen Smith! I’m in the San Francisco Museum of Archaeology! There are Mafia agents in the main control room. They’ve trapped me inside and have switched off all but one of the lights!”

San Francisco
Museum of Archaeology
June 6th, 1993
6:38 AM

Smith was sitting outside in the rain. The SWAT team had made it into the main control room and arrested all of the Mafia

agents. The man in the red suit was diagnosed with insanity and sent to an asylum. The museum had been given triple security.

Smith was diagnosed with Level 2 Traumatization, requiring a month of therapy and spending that month living with his parents. The Mafia had been removed from San Francisco. Smith had been commemorated for his bravery. Jones' apartment had been cleaned out, his possessions divided up between his family and Smith. Smith used his \$100,000 to purchase a house and a new car.

Yet, somehow, he felt empty inside. As he rode the bus to his parents' house in Sacramento, he contemplated what had happened. He had killed his best friend. Not directly. The court declared him innocent on account of self-defense, and Jones' family tried to forget their son who had betrayed his best friend and burned to death in molten steel.

Smith locked his house and drove his car to Sacramento. His parents were waiting for him outside. When he saw their relieved faces, happy to see him alive, he knew he would never return to the Private Detective business.

NON-FICTION
Grades 7 & 8

Taryn Bedow
Tyler, MN
1st Place

The Legoland Catastrophe

A couple of years ago, my family and I took a trip to the Cities for a family vacation. On the first day, we went to the Renaissance Festival and saw a lot of cool costumes. The second day, we went to the Minnesota Zoo and got to pet sharks. On the third day, we stopped by the State Fair. So far, things were going great. My feet hurt, but it was fun. On the fourth day, we went to the Mall of America. And that, my friend, is where the trouble started.

It should have been a regular and routine trip to the bathroom, but my brother, Grant, took that moment to demonstrate his sense of adventure for the whole mall. While I was waiting outside of the men's room for my then three-year-old brother, I turned away to get a drink. Grant must have slipped past me sometime in those three seconds, because I found myself waiting for him for WAY longer than necessary. That kid is like a toddler-sized spy. I called for him, but he didn't answer, so I left to go look.

I must've searched for Grant for about ten minutes, checking all the possible places he would've gone. He was really too young to remember exactly where Mom was waiting for us, so maybe he stopped at a food cart or something. I sat down on a bench to think about it, and that's when I saw him.

He was waving to me from way up on top of something...inside the Legoland area. Of course, my toy-obsessed brother would've gone straight to Legoland! I ran as fast as I could over to the huge display area, and I rushed over to where he was standing...on top of a climbing platform. My little preschooler brother had scaled the huge platform and was waving at me cheekily from the top. I yelled at him to climb down, and one of the employees tried to get him.

He insisted upon causing more trouble, however. "I want to get down all by myself!" he yelled.

I rolled my eyes, impatience threatening to take over, but I swallowed a shout of frustration and motioned for him to try.

He lowered himself down the steps like a sloth down a tree, and then he yelled for me to come over. Without warning, he just launched himself off the platform like a monkey. I tried to catch

him, but his leg flew out to the side....completely demolishing a two-foot-tall statue of a purple, Barney-like dinosaur.

Ugh. Mom was *so* going to kill me. I ran over and picked him up, trying to dulcify his tears, but by then there were employees surrounding us like an army.

“What on Earth is going on here?” someone asked. I looked over and a prestigious-looking person, whom I could only assume was the manager, was standing over us like a giant.

“Um, I was just going to take my brother to the bathroom, and he, uh, climbed up there and...” I trailed off. I could tell it was going to be awhile before we went on a family vacation again.

Jaida Stewart
Madison, MN
2nd Place

The Day My Forever Faded

I remember it like it was yesterday. I remember feeling the gentle breeze and bright sun; I can even still smell the fresh-cut grass. My friends and I had been hanging out all day, but unfortunately it was about 3 p.m. when my friends and I got really bored. We threw around a few ideas and decided we should do something active outside because it was such a beautiful day. It was a great day for a pickup football game in my Great-grandpa Bud's back yard.

Brooklyn, Chase, and I were just about to start our game of football when my brother dashed out and informed us that the macaroni was done. We all raced inside like a herd of starving elephants. We were all having an amazing day, oblivious to the darkness that was going to rain on our parade.

After we ate a warm lunch, my friends, brothers and brothers' friends sprinted outside while I stayed behind to clean up after myself. Washing my dish off, I heard my name being spoken from the other room. I ran into the other room to find that it was my Great-grandpa Bud; he called me in to remind me that he loved me. I looked him in the eyes and said, "Forever." Whenever we said I love you to each other, we always followed up with "forever" to remind each other that our love was forever. My Great-grandpa Bud was my absolute best friend.

I was prepared to walk away and heard him scrambling through the things on his desk. "What are you looking for, Gramps?" I asked.

"My phone," he replied. "I can't find it anywhere!"

I glanced at the kitchen table, and there it was, under a piece of notebook paper. "Found it!" I said. I ran over and grabbed the phone, then raced back and handed it to him. I felt as though I made his day a little more complete by doing simple things like that for him. My gramps only had one leg, so I felt really helpful when I did things for him.

Confusion and worry filled my mind when I heard him say that he thought he was having a heart attack. My heart literally sank. I, being only nine years old, wasn't positive what that meant, but I knew it wasn't good. Maybe it was the seriousness in his

voice when he spoke or the frightened look upon his face, but I had a strong feeling that I was going to lose my gramps that day. I don't know what triggered those feelings, but they were agonizing.

I slouched into the chair next to him and softly held his hand while I stared vacantly at the floor. A few minutes later, my Grandpa Neal got there and told me that I needed to go outside and play with the other children. I was a little furious with my Grandpa Neal; I felt in my heart that it was my Great-grandpa Bud's time to go. It was time for him to earn his wings and become my guardian angel. I was able to stay calm knowing he was going to watch over me, but my heart started to race when I saw the color pigment in his face slowly start to fade.

I stomped out of the house with a sad and angry look on my face. I wasn't exactly positive about what I was feeling so I ran into the yard to tell my brother. I leapt into my oldest brother, Jeffrey's, arms and told him what was happening. He told me not to worry because this was not the first heart attack he'd had.

A few minutes later, my brother and his friends decided to go visit the stream which was only a block away. They wanted to get the football out that they had thrown in earlier that day. My best friend, Brooklyn, and I stayed in the yard, and we tossed the ball back and forth. We got bored and decided to go see if the boys had gotten the ball out of the stream. Brooklyn and I charged down the block to the dirty stream that my brother and his friends were playing by. We discovered that they had gotten the ball out of the water. That was great news!

As we began our trek back to my great-grandpa's house, I looked off into the distance, only to find that my greatest fear was coming true. It was the ambulance! My stomach clenched, and I slowly fell to the ground in tears. Brooklyn's brother, Chase, saw me fall apart and came back to pick me up. Everyone else ran to my great-grandpa's yard where the ambulance with flashing lights and blaring sirens fled through town. As Chase was carrying me, I looked up to see an image that will forever live with me: it was my great-grandpa being loaded into the ambulance. I'll never forget the dull look on his face when he saw me burst into tears. It was like my heart sank into my stomach.

From across the street, we heard Brooklyn's mom telling us to come to her house. I didn't want to. I didn't want to leave. I wasn't ready to let my gramps go. I stood in the road until the ambulance drove off, taking my great-grandpa away. I finally contained myself and found the courage to go to Brooklyn's house. After a while I calmed down, and Brooklyn and I watched a

movie. Only ten minutes into the movie, someone knocked on Brooklyn's door. It was my cousin Christian relaying the message along that we were supposed to walk to my Grandpa Neal's house. My brothers, my cousin, and I walked to my Grandpa Neal's house and played hide-and-seek upstairs while we waited to hear more about Grandpa.

At 11 p.m. we got the call that changed my life forever. My great-grandpa was really gone. I thought to myself, *just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, they did.* Bud was not only my great-grandpa, he was my best friend. For the rest of the night all I thought about was the question, *how will I achieve anything without him here?* I didn't know whether I should scream or cry, but the one thing I did know was that I wanted him back.

When I prayed that night, I prayed to my gramps, telling him all the reasons why I loved him and all the reasons that I needed him in my life. I ended my prayer with "forever." That day was not only the day my life changed, but it was the day my forever faded.

Brynn Cherveney
Granite Falls, MN
3rd Place

Storm

I almost died in a tent while camping this year in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA). I had thought that things were scary enough while we were fishing on rough waters.

While fishing, the wind pushed our canoe around. The choppy waves slapped and splashed over the bow of the canoe and right into my face. The darkening sky started to drizzle. I put down my fishing pole and screamed to my Grandpa, “Drop me off at camp!” We paddled hard to get back to our camp on Lake La Croix, which borders with Canada. It is a huge lake. When we reached the shore, I took off my life jacket, grabbed my book, and retreated to the tent.

The next morning we shoved off for a new adventure under a clear sky. First, we visited the Lake La Croix Pictographs—pictures of ancient warriors and animals. It is fascinating to think that these drawings made hundreds of years ago were made on a rock cliff that stands a hundred feet straight up from the bottom of the lake.

Then, we paddled all day across the lake with no problems. It was Grandpa Tom, Grandma Cindy, my brother Owen (8), and me (13). We landed and climbed to our new, rock ledge camp surrounded by huge trees with an open view of the water. We unloaded our four-person canoe and enjoyed lunch. We set up our camp across from Pocket Creek. Grandma wanted the tent to face the water in hopes of a breeze during the night. She felt that the tent was too warm. We then went swimming before going fishing.

We paddled to the rapids by the creek to fish. We watched the shore as a little four-point buck in velvet sat drinking. It stopped and looked up. My Grandpa stopped paddling and waited for him to run. My brother started making “buck” noises that sounded like a dying hippo. As soon as my Grandma got out her camera from the bottom of the canoe, the buck bolted. She didn’t get a picture.

My Grandpa and I fished and caught at least five fish in the first half an hour, which was good. It was really amazing since we always had to move to where my Grandma and brother kept getting their lines snagged. I tried to show them how to cast away from the bushes and trees, but they could not be taught.

We slowly circled around an island as we headed back to camp. While doing this, my brother's pole dipped to the water and he started screaming and yelling, reeling viciously, and yanking hard. My Grandpa quickly told him what to do, and he soon reeled in a monstrous Small-mouth Bass. We continued traveling back towards camp making jokes to my brother when my Grandpa grabbed his pole and reeled in an even bigger Northern Pike. It was a perfect day and a beautiful evening. We ate marshmallows and talked smart about our fishing conquests. We then crawled into our tent, tired and happy that night.

I awoke with a start, my hand covering my face. A tree branch had just whacked me in the nose, and the tent was now furiously slapping me with wet fabric. I rolled over and felt my Grandma's arms encircle me; we tried talking, but the wind was too loud forcing us to yell. My brother sat up and asked, "Are we in the lake?" Grandma told him no, and he dug himself farther into his sleeping bag, unfazed by the storm going on outside our tent. I felt my sleeping bag and thermarest. Drenched.

My Grandpa, who had been awake through the whole storm, put on his rain suit and crawled out of the tent. We heard him sawing tree branches, and cursing through the ongoing storm. My Grandma and I grabbed my stowed away blanket and draped it over my freezing brother. Then we went to work on moving wet things to protect the dry things. I snuggled in with my brother. His was the only sleeping bag not soaked. My Grandpa came into the tent and said we were okay. So we settled in and went to sleep.

I awoke and tumbled out of the tent rubbing my eyes. I froze. Our whole camp that had been full of beautiful, tall pine trees was now a pile of downed trees! They were piled three high next to where I was sleeping, and I could tell where my Grandpa had sawed the night before. I could see the branch that had bent our tent poles. I saw the branch that had whacked me in the nose. You could not walk around or get to anywhere without climbing over enormous downed trees. The trees looked like a giant had pulled them out by their roots and laid them down. There were dozens of trees inches away from our tent, packs, and canoe.

Owen showed me around our destroyed camp. If we hadn't moved our canoe before the storm hit, it would have been smashed. If we had put our tent in one of the other tent sites, we could have been crushed. My Grandpa was already drinking his java (coffee) and cooking oatmeal. It was amazing to see these huge trees pulled out by their roots and scattered all over the ground. There were very few trees left standing.

That morning consisted of pulling, drying, moving, wrapping, cleaning and fixing. Everything had to be dried. My brother and I had batting practice with rocks and roots while Grandpa fixed the tent poles.

We packed and left, paddling and portaging through a swampy creek full of bugs. We had a layover day at the next camp. It had good fishing and swimming. It was dry, open and windy. It was a good place to get everything dried. We saw planes flying low and circling all day. They were counting campers. We met several travelers: two were female forest rangers. They had already been in the BWCA for a week and were heading out when they were called to stay in and help with the clean-up. They had started cleaning up from the damage. They stopped and talked to us. She told us that the winds had been 70 miles per hour and showed us the path that it took. My Grandpa pointed out our previous campsite. All I remember them saying was that we had been in the eye of the storm. She said, "Dang," when he showed her our previous campsite. We were lucky to have been okay.

That was the week of July 19-26, 2014. The winds that night were said to be over seventy miles per hour and had come straight at us. My dad and grandpa went back to the BWCA in October to go bear hunting and ran into the same rangers. She told them that it took over twelve hours to clean up our campsite. They were given permission to use chainsaws on that campsite. "Dang," she told my Grandpa again.

Poetry
Grades 9 & 10

Isaiah Streblov
Granite Falls, MN
1st Place

Dandelion Raid

One evening I from home assayed,
To kill, destroy, subsume, and raid.

The object of my fury was
A field of dandelion fuzz.

I viewed their ranks with visage grim.
Their heads were white, their bodies trim.

My mower steed I mounted fast.
The setting sun would hardly last.

We fell like thunder on their camp.
The fiery west, a reddening lamp.

I crossed the Rubicon of grass,
And plunged into the seething mass.

Their silent screams suffused the sky,
And pled, "How can you make us die?"

Yet, merciless, I plied my craft,
And, (pardon), even grimly laughed.

Young or old or short or tall,
The Mower of Vengeance killed them all.

Although they fled toward shady glades,
Not one of them escaped my blades.

Their hosts, like fog, began to thin!
Through mists of fuzz, I saw we'd win!

I left, my night's repose to seek;
They rise in rebellion every week.

Isaiah Streblow
Granite Falls, MN
2nd Place

Achilles' Lament

In Books XVI – XVIII of the Iliad, Patroclus, battle companion of the warrior Achilles, leads a raid on Troy from which he does not return. Achilles' grief at this becomes awful to behold.

The Hand of Zeus has oft bereaved me,
 Patroclus, Patroclus,
Yet never so much has it grieved me,
 Patroclus, noble Patroclus,
O cursed Troy! Upon my name,
 Until your towers lie, aflame,
I wallow in my blushing shame
 For Patroclus.

You fought while I in sulking stayed,
 Patroclus, dear Patroclus,
And led them in your final raid,
 Patroclus, Ah! Patroclus,
There, in my armor gold you fell,
Your brave heart rang a fatal knell,
And found an honored seat in Hell!
 Oh, Patroclus...

Your life was in its waking dawn,
 For you were young, Patroclus!
And ends now in a shuddering yawn.
 Rest, and rest well, Patroclus!
The gods, in scorn of human span
Cut short the fleeting race you ran,
 As is the lot of every man.
 But why? Why you, Patroclus!

Your death is like an anguished stab,
 Patroclus, my Patroclus,
From Passion's spear an awful jab,
 Patroclus, great Patroclus.
Mad sorrow shakes my aching frame,
 My soul is crying out your name,
And vengeance now my single aim!
 Patroclus!

Isaiah Streblow
Granite Falls, MN
3rd Place

Dance of the Fire

Fire spinning, twirling, dancing,
Redly glowing, darkly prancing,
Smoky figures so entrancing,
Clashingly the waltz enhancing.

Red and black and gray and yellow
Jagged hues and colors mellow,
Mingling make a laughing fallow,
Roaring, crackling voice their bellow.

Coals, now red, now black turning
In the twisted tower churning,
Moving never, yet their burning
Flickers, any darkness spurning.

Sparks, ascending, wink and twinkle
From the logs with furrowed wrinkle,
Through the fire's shifting crinkle,
As the blackened night they sprinkle.

Chiaroscuros clash and parry,
Riposting with weapons airy.
Cold and heat, of blending chary,
Circle round like duelists wary.

Glorious flames as bright as day,
Leaping, crashing, make a way,
Fill their lungs with gases fey,
Roaring loud their challenge say.

Reaching, grasping, soaring higher,
To the sky does it aspire,
But at last, the flames will tire.
Then it ends, the Dance of Fire.

Fiction
Grades 9 & 10

Rachel Sajban
Windom, MN
1st Place

Phoebe Rose and the Elder's Curse

How would you feel if one day your father just dropped life-changing news on you with little to no warning? Depending upon the news, you might experience varied emotions; in my case, it was a mix between anger, sadness, and a sense of betrayal. You see, I had lived in Dallas, Texas my entire life. I'd made many friends there, and I had to leave them all behind.

Let me explain. When I was younger, my dad had received a job offer which was too amazing to pass up. Ever since Mom died, money hadn't been as plentiful because she had had the highest paying job that provided the most for our family. Since her death, it had been getting much more difficult to support ourselves. So I understood why he took the job; but I couldn't help feeling as if he had betrayed me by not sharing the news with me sooner. It was quite a shock to hear that we were moving to Canada. Rather than discussing it with me a little, he just threw the big news on me one day, only one week before we had to leave our home and journey to Canada. I mean, sure, I did enjoy a nice adventure every once in a while, but leaving all my friends to move to Canada so suddenly?! Was that really an adventure worth taking? At the time I thought not.

I, Phoebe Rose Johansen, had to accept my fate, and I didn't let it bring me down... Okay, maybe I let it bring me down a little, but not as much as you'd expect from someone who had just been told that they had to leave everything that they'd ever known behind to go to a place absolutely foreign to them.

Despite my doubts about coming to Canada, it was probably one of the best things that could have happened to me. "Why?" you may be asking yourself. Well, let's just say that moving here is the reason I met my life-long friend, Zachary Levesque, though I recommend calling him Zach. If not, he'll threaten to send some of his little robotic bugs after you, and I learned the hard way that he wasn't kidding. Sometimes, even now, years after it occurred, I can still feel the tiny feet of a robotic spider creeping its way across my skin. But that fact is beside the point. The point is, that this is a story of Zach and me, and the first of many adventures we had, and are still having today.

“Aw c’mon, Dad, we just got here. I don’t wanna unpack everything right now. Can’t we just relax a little?” I slumped down onto the floor.

“Phoebe, the sooner we get it done, the sooner we can relax,” my dad said, turning around a corner into another room.

“Ugh, fine,” I muttered. “Just great! First I get taken away from all my friends, and now I have to work on the house that I don’t even want to be living in.”

“I heard that,” my dad said poking, his head around the corner.

“Of course, you did,” I grumbled and then got up from my spot on the floor and trudged outside to where the moving van, carrying all of our worldly belongings was parked. I mean, why fight my dad when I knew I’d end up helping out in the end anyway?

I picked up a box that didn’t look too heavy, but boy, was I mistaken. As soon as I had pulled it out of the truck I almost collapsed under the weight. That’s when Zach comes in. Zach rushed to my aid and helped me to carry the box into the house. I didn’t even bother asking who he was. I was just thankful someone had come to help me.

“Thanks, er—?”

“Zach, Zach Levesque.” He extended his hand in gesture for me to shake it, and, of course, me being ever so kind, I shook it. “My mom told me that there was a new family moving in down the street from us, and asked me to ask you if you needed any help, and it looks like I came just at the right time. So, how about it? May I help?”

“Sure, I’d appreciate it,” I said, walking back out to the moving van. “The name’s Phoebe by the way, Phoebe Johansen.”

While bringing dozens of boxes inside, I got to know Zach pretty well. He was 14 years old, just like me. He took an interest in mechanics, unlike me. And he had lived here all his life, yet he didn’t have many friends. I also learned that the forest at the end of the street was to be avoided at all costs (according to his parents), but of course hearing that it was to be avoided just made me long to go on an adventure to explore the forest.

“Have you ever asked why you weren’t allowed to go into it?” I questioned.

“Well, not exactly..” Zach rubbed the back of his neck nervously. “I’d always just assumed that there was some sort of harmful animal or poisonous plant that was in there.”

“Have you ever wanted to journey into the forest?”

“No! Despite the fact that I’m not sure what’s wrong with it, it’s always given me an eerie feeling that something was off.”

“Man, but wouldn’t it be so exciting to go and see what is in the forest? C’mon, why don’t we just go right now? We don’t even have to go in very far, maybe just in a couple of feet? Or, are you too chicken?” I taunted him.

“Pfft, I’m not too chicken.” I had definitely struck a nerve. “In fact, I think that we should go into the forest right now; I bet I can beat you there.”

“Oh, it is so on, Levesque.” And with that we were off on our first adventure together, and man, could Zach run. I didn’t even stand a chance against him. Once I got to the forest’s edge I was having trouble breathing, yet Zach looked completely fine.

“Man, I beat you by a lon—” Zach started, but then noticed I was having trouble breathing. “Wait, are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, just a little out of shape. So you won fair and square. BUT, you still haven’t proven to me that you aren’t a chicken. C’mon let’s go.” I grabbed his wrist and dragged him into the forest with me, not giving him any chance to object or escape.

“Gosh, Phoebe, you have a strong grip,” Zach said rubbing his wrists.

“Sorry, just didn’t want you to back out when we had gotten so close.”

“I wasn’t going to back out!” he protested.

I just gave him a look that seemed to say, “Mhmm, sure you weren’t going to.”

“Fine. Maybe I would have backed out, but would you blame me? This place is creepy!”

“Okay, I will admit it is kinda creepy.”

“Thank you for your honesty. So can we go back now?”

“Oh, you won’t be leaving,” a high pitched voice said. “Once you enter this forest you can’t ever leave, unless of course you defeat the Elder of the Woods, but *no one* can defeat him. By the way, I’m Grace, Fairy of the West, or am I Fairy of the East?” the fairy questioned herself. “I always seem to get the two mixed up.”

I spun around to try and find the source of the voice and then saw it, a little glowing fairy sitting on a leaf.

“I think I’m hallucinating, or maybe this is all a dream. It has to be one of the two options because you,” I gestured to Grace, “do not exist. You can’t exist; fairies do not exist.”

“Man, why does everyone who enters the forest automatically assume that fairies don’t exist? Are there no fairies in the land beyond the forest?”

“No, and quite frankly I don’t believe that there are fairies anywhere.”

“Phoebe, just let it go and focus on the important questions we should be worrying about, such as, oh, I don’t know, *how are we going to get out of here?!*” Zach said. “I knew this was a bad idea. If you had just trusted me that this place was bad news, we wouldn’t be here and in this mess right now.”

“Of course, blame it all o—” I started, but Grace cut me off.

“Look, I understand that you want to blame this on someone, but there’s nothing you can do about it unless you try and defeat the Elder of the Woods, which would be a stupid decision unless you have been trained by one of the best warriors,” Grace said, and then gave them a confident smile. “Lucky for you, I have a friend who’s an Elven warrior; she could help you to take him down. I could show you the way to her place, if you’d like.”

“I’ll do anything to get out of here, so how about it, Phoebe? Wanna go learn how to defeat an old elder dude?” Zach said, giving me a lopsided grin.

“Well, if it’ll get us out of here, I’m in. Plus, it does sound kinda fun!” I said. “So, Grace, where does this friend of yours live?”

“Not too far from here; you just have to travel across the creek, and then you’ll see a little hut built out of twigs and leaves to the left. Have fun journeying there.”

“Wait, but didn’t you say you would show us the way? What if we get lost?” I said nervously.

“Did I say that? Oops, what I meant to say was that I would inform you of the correct path to take. Anyway, you don’t need me. No one could get lost on the way there, not even a human, like you.”

“Oh, okay, thank you, then—HEY, WAIT. WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY ‘*not even a human?*’ ARE YOU IMPLYING THAT HUMANS ARE IMBECILES?”

“Oh, silly girl, not *all* humans are stupid; just most of them are.” Grace clearly didn’t realize that what she was saying was extremely insulting towards us. Or maybe she did know and just didn’t care. I wasn’t sure which, so I just shrugged it off.

“Okay, well—maybe we should go on,” Zach said. “I would like to get home as soon as possible.”

“That would be good,” I agreed. “Grace, could you repeat to me the way there again, just in case I forget?”

Grace repeated the directions, muttering something about “forgetful humans,” and then fluttered away.

“That was rather interesting,” I said, looking back over my shoulder at where the small fairy had been floating a moment before.

“It surely was,” Zach agreed, and we began our trek to the Elven’s house.

Little did we know that Grace wasn’t kidding when she said it wasn’t far from where we had entered the forest. In fact, it seemed like we hadn’t walked even five minutes before we arrived.

I’m not sure what kind of welcome I was expecting, but I certainly wasn’t expecting this. A tall, dark-haired elf, at least I assumed she was an elf from what Grace had told us, held a scythe up to Zach’s and my necks.

“Who are you, and what do you want from me?” The elf (?) demanded.

“Man, Grace didn’t warn us that her Elven friend was a psychopath,” Zach whispered to me.

“Zach, now’s not the time to make jokes,” I muttered out of the side of my mouth. “Anyway, she did inform us that her friend was an Elven *warrior*, emphasis on the warrior part.”

“You are acquaintances of Grace?” the elf asked looking at me expectantly.

“Yup, that would be us, unless that’s not a good thing. If it’s not a good thing, then I’ve never heard of Grace.” Wow, was I smooth.

“Grace has been a friend of mine for quite a while, and she only sends people here when she feels they need something important. So what is it? What do you need?” The elf lowered her weapon and gave us a smile.

“Well, she said you could give us training,” I began carefully, afraid that if I said the wrong word she would swing her scythe and well.... Let’s just say ‘bye bye to me.’ “Training to defeat the Elder of the Woods, we want to get home, but Grace told us the only way to break the curse of the forest was to break his wand. She also mentioned that it was less than possible even with training, but she said the training would help.”

“Well, I would be delighted to assist you in your endeavor,” she said enthusiastically.

Wow, I would never imagine that the girl who had been trying to kill me moments before could seem so friendly now.

“The name’s Madeleine.”

“Hello, Madeleine. I’m Zach, and that’s Phoebe,” Zach said gesturing to himself and then me.

“We really appreciate you assisting us with this,” I said.

“Hey, no sweat. I’m always happy to help friends of Grace.” Madeleine gave me a smile, and I noticed an excited glint in her eye. “So shall we begin?”

From that moment forward, Zach and I began to train with Madeleine. Lucky for us, we were speedy learners. By the time a week had passed, we had learned enough skills that she believed we were ready. I hoped she was right

Madeleine led Zach and I on the long trek to the location of the Elder of the Woods. This journey was much longer than the one to Madeleine’s hut. Each time we stopped to rest for the night, Madeleine would give us more battle tips, a whole long list of battle tips. I wasn’t positive that my brain could handle this intake of information.

Thankfully for me, my brain did survive the information intake. Once we climbed to the top of the mountain on which Madeleine informed us that the Elder lived, I felt like I had all the knowledge I needed to break the curse.

“We should rest for the night, and then attack at dawn,” Madeleine said yawning dramatically.

“I like that idea; I’m dead tired,” said Zach, already halfway asleep.

I myself wasn’t tired at the time, so I pretended to sleep. But really, my mind was racing with worries about tomorrow. What would happen if we were to fail? What would happen if we were to succeed? What if we got killed? I thought about this for what seemed like an excruciating amount of time, and then the sound of muffled voices broke my train of thought.

“Yes, Grace, they fell for everything and believe that they are some kind of professional warriors,” a voice that sounded like Madeleine’s snickered.

“Good, so everything is going according to plan?”

“So far, so good. They don’t seem suspicious of me.”

I got the feeling that the “they” they were referring to was Zach and me, and I didn’t like it one bit. I rolled over on my side and silently reached my arm over and shook Zach awake, covering his mouth with my hand in case he might make a noise.

Zach woke up and stared at me in a way that seemed to say, “What exactly are you doing?”

I put a finger to my mouth in a gesture for him to stay quiet, and then I leaned closer to him and whispered, "This was all a trap. We need to get out of here quickly and quietly." I was terrified to even whisper this. Who wouldn't be if they were in this situation? But Zach needed to be informed of what was going on.

He nodded his head to show me that he understood. We quietly got up and began to tiptoe in the opposite direction of Madeleine's voice. I wasn't sure how we were going to pull this off, but it couldn't be that hard, right?

Wrong. Almost as soon as we had relaxed, feeling safe, my fears collapsed down onto me and became a reality.

"Did you really think getting away from me would be that simple?" Madeleine's voice came from somewhere behind us. "I can run five times faster than an average human, so even if you got away, I would find you simply enough."

"What do you even want with us? I don't exactly understand what the point of tricking us was," I said looking to Madeleine.

"All we are is a couple of kids. How could we be of any importance to you?"

"Foolish children. Do you not understand how so many long for the youthfulness in you? What if I told you that the Elder of the Woods could give someone that youthfulness if they brought him children to take the youthfulness away from?" Then the realization hit me like a truck.

"You are going to have us killed, just so you can be young for a longer period of time? Is that really a life worth living?" I couldn't comprehend how someone could stand to live longer knowing that they had killed someone to achieve this extended life.

"Don't you understand? Time is valuable; the more of it you have, the better your life will be."

"Is it really worth it if you have to live knowing that you killed someone?" Zach questioned.

"The lives of others are of no importance to me. I take what I want when I want it; that's the way things work around here," said Madeleine in a vicious tone of voice.

"That's a horrible way to live your life," I said. "I can't even imagine living in such a way; it disgusts me."

"That's just how it works around here, kid. I would just tell you to get used to it, but it seems to me that you won't be alive long enough for that," Madeleine snickered.

I was about to argue that Zach and I would find a way to survive, but, almost as if she had read my mind, she said, "You

should forget those foolish thoughts, I have the magic of Elven ancestors coursing through my veins. Even if you try to run, I will find you, and I will always be able to bring you back to me. In fact, I could just teleport us to where the Elder of the Woods abides. Now that you are aware that I have the magic, I may as well utilize it to my advantage.”

With that, the world turned dark, and I felt a spinning sensation. After a few minutes of what seemed to be me spinning in total darkness, I saw a light that kept getting closer and closer. Was I dead? I didn’t know for sure; all that I knew was that the light was rushing towards me faster now.

CRASH! I crashed onto the hard ground of what seemed to be a cave. I looked to my left and saw Zach sprawled at Madeleine’s feet. He seemed to be breathing still, so I wasn’t particularly worried about him. I was more worried about what was about to happen to the both of us.

“Who dare enter the domain of the Elder of the Woods?” came a booming voice from somewhere behind me. I turned around and saw a cloaked figure standing at the top of a tall staircase. “Well, I’m waiting? What is the explanation of all this?”

“I have come to gain a longer life,” Madeleine said bowing. “I have brought two humans with me as the offering.”

The cloaked figure removed the hood from his head and looked straight at me.

“Are you sure, young one, that you wish to proceed with this?” he raised an eyebrow.

“I am positive that I wish to proceed. Do what you must.”

“Very well.” The Elder began to chant words in a language I couldn’t understand. I looked over to Zach and saw a look of terror on his face that showed that he was just as scared as I was. I sat there listening to the chanting, and it was beginning to drive me to the point of insanity. Then, a bright light flashed over the whole room and I saw that it was coming from a third eye that seemed to have magically appeared on his face.

I cowered behind my hands, because the sight before me was terrifying. Then I got the urge to just look right up into his eye. I tried my hardest to fight this urge, but soon I wasn’t able to control myself. I looked straight at the eye and then everything went black.

I assumed I was dead, but it was all just utter blackness. Shouldn’t there have been something more? I called out to see if anyone was there with me. There was no response. I felt like I had my eyes closed, but they refused to open. I began to feel around

me to see if there were any walls or surfaces I could feel. Stepping forward a few paces I felt a doorknob. I turned it slowly and then I realized that I was lying right outside the forest.

I groggily sat up and examined my surroundings. I noticed Zach on the ground a few feet away from me. He slowly sat up and looked at me.

“What exactly just happened?” Zach asked.

“I have absolutely no idea, but I think it had something to do with an elf.” I laughed.

Zach and I then went back to our homes surprised to find out that only about an hour had passed, even though we had spent what seemed to be weeks in the forest.

This was the first adventure I had with him. Afterwards while I lay awake in bed, all I did was hope for more adventures. And now, looking back, I’m very thankful that I moved to Canada and started this lifelong, adventurer friendship. So many adventures have come and gone since this one, and I do believe there shall be more to come. One can only hope.

Danica Dick
Mountain Lake, MN
2nd Place

A Graceful Friend

In a land far, far away, there lived a boy named Peter. He loved to play in his garden; he would meander through the tall trees and many flowers. It was his secret place. He found company in the animals and bugs. When his parents were out attending parties or dining somewhere, he would stay home and rest in his garden. His father, a successful English man, was a man of great stature, and his mother, a beautiful woman, was honored for her many accomplishments.

One day while Peter was catching butterflies with a net and handing them over to Charles, his best friend, an orange speckled cat, there was a loud noise coming from inside his house. He snuck into the damp kitchen and crept up the stairs, one by one. Peter's Aunt Clarisse was standing tall holding the hand of a little girl.

"Clarisse, my dear sister, what made you grace us with your wonderful presence today?" Peter's mother exclaimed.

"I am in dire need of your help." Clarisse's complexion was white and chilled.

"My, you look sick. What do you need? Who is the child?" His mother's face grew increasingly worried.

"The child is mine."

Peter's mother gasped at the thought, "But, Clarisse, you are not married."

"I know. I've come to ask of your help to fix my poor mistake."

"What do you seek?"

"That the child may work for you as a servant, receiving food and shelter, for I can give her neither."

Seeing the pain in her sister's eyes and being moved by compassion, she knew that she could not abandon the girl. "I will take the child." Peter's mother turned her attention to the small, curly-haired girl. "What is your name, dear?"

"My name is Grace. It's nice to meet you, madam." Grace curtsied politely. "I'm so pleased I get to work in my own aunt's home!"

“I would be more pleased to see you as my niece, not as a servant.”

Peter’s mother gave the child’s hand to Mrs. Holmes, the housekeeper. When Grace was gone, Clarisse began to weep. “I am so sorry I had to share my misfortune with you. I never thought I would have to give her up,” Clarisse choked the words as they came.

“Do not be worried. I will not treat her as a servant. She will be Peter’s companion! They will study and play together. Sister, I want you not to fret about the girl’s well-being. Leave that to me. It’s the least I can do for a sister whom I love so dearly.

“I could never express my gratitude.”

As Peter watched his mother and aunt hug saying their goodbyes, he felt sad about the circumstances of his dear aunt. He slowly slumped down each stair, realizing that he’d have to actually talk to the girl. Peter roamed the long halls of the mansion hearing the quiet voices of his mother explaining the situation to Mrs. Holmes. Eventually, he ended up back in the kitchen where he had started. He ventured back out to his garden when he heard Mrs. Holmes calling his name.

“Coming!” Peter ran straight for the kitchen door. “Yes?”

“Peter, this is your new companion; she will be staying with us for...” Mrs. Holmes paused, “a long time.”

“Hello, my name is Peter.” Peter hated introducing himself.

“Hello, I’m Grace. I am so glad I get to be with my cousin!”

“Peter, go show Grace the study room, where your lessons will be held, the dining room, and of course your garden.” Mrs. Holmes left the room.

“You have your own garden?” Grace’s eyes widened.

“You want to see that first?” Peter asked sheepishly.

“That sounds wonderful!”

Peter and Grace wandered across the lawn and around the large ponds.

“Here we are!” explained Peter.

“Oh, it’s lovely!”

Peter introduced Grace to all the animals and bugs by name. “The last but not least, Charles, my best friend.”

“But he’s a cat. Does he speak?” questioned Grace.

“Well, I pretend he does.”

“Oh, I love pretending. What else do you pretend?”

Peter thought for a moment. “Sometimes I pretend that Charles and I fly, or that we invent great inventions, but mostly we

pretend to be pirates. My father has read many books to me about pirates and their adventures. I love them!”

“I like pirates, too!”

Right away Peter and Grace became the best of friends, along with Charles, of course. With his new friend, Peter began to come out of his shell, and little Grace became more lady-like every day. They would spend their mornings studying and their afternoons tucked away in the garden pretending.

“Captain, we have heard that there are too many to count; how will we defeat them when they come?” Grace stood at the bottom of a large crooked tree with her sword at her side.

“We will corner them into the Rock of Doom. They will fall into the Hole of Darkness, and then we will defeat them!” Peter scouted at the bow of the tree looking for any signs of the enemy.

“There they are!” Grace jumped and hid behind a large rock.

Mrs. Holmes was coming towards the garden. Grace crept out from behind the rock and jumped into her path! Mrs. Holmes then slid right into an unseen hole covered by leaves!

“We captured the enemy!” Grace and Peter shouted in unison as they jumped around the hole.

“Now you get me out of this hole immediately, or else you won’t get any supper!”

“Alright, alright.” Peter helped Mrs. Holmes out of the hole, and they walked back to the house together. This was only the beginning of countless adventures to come.

Non-Fiction
Grades 9 & 10

Maryan Osman
Marshall, MN
1st Place

Youngin’

The red popsicle stick is drooping down all over my shirt. I slurped and licked, and it was still melting all over. It is way too hot outside, but I still was on the brown wooden steps of my door. My older sisters were babysitting me. While they were inside watching TV, I was outside lounging, waiting for the storm. Everyone in the entire neighborhood locked their doors and kept themselves tightly away from any harm or danger. If only they could see how beautiful it was outside; the sun was gone, but the large ominous clouds made up for it. I wiped my face with my forearm, climbed up the steps and hollered at Munira and Ifrah that I was leaving. They were too consumed with their show to even listen to me.

I skipped down the empty road. The air was humid and dry; the sky was a dark gray, and the clouds were wide and clear. It was going to rain today, and I couldn’t have been happier. Mom and Dad had finally warmed up to the idea of me riding a bike. Ever since I learned, I hadn’t been able to stop. There was something so satisfying in gripping the handle bars and pedaling fast, letting the wind blow through my hair. I felt alive. The bike was magenta with light pink flames. It wasn’t big, it wasn’t small and mostly, it didn’t have training wheels. Even though my older sisters, Munira and Ifrah, teased me about not knowing how to “properly ride a bike,” it didn’t stop me. I found my way across the street to Fadumo’s white house with every single kind of flower surrounding it. We were going to bike in this weather.

“Hey, Monkey, whatcha doin’ here? There’s supposed to be a storm!” Fadumo asks letting me into the house.

“Fadums, we need to bike, right now! It’s the perfect weather, and, even better, we’ll be biking in the rain! Everyone will think we’re the coolest people ever!” I exclaimed jumping up and down.

“Well, in that case, count me in!”

We ran out of her house and down the road to mine—white, plain, with three bikes setting on the tall, green grass. Fadumo is very tall. She has almond eyes and striking features. I have never heard her say an ill word our whole lives, and we’re a decade old! She’s the type of person who holds her heart open like a door.

She'd let anyone in just to be polite. That's why she's my best friend, and that's why she agreed to bike with me in this weather.

The sky was still a dark gray, but the clouds were getting lighter and lighter. They were almost discrete at this point, but Fadumo and I started biking anyway. There was a rush in me when I biked. It was as if all the problems in the world were gone. It was just me, my bike, and the wind that kept me going. We biked on the road. Fadumo's bike was purple and blue; it had flowers, and she was fast.

"C'mon, let's pick it up! Let's race; first one to the playground is the better biker!" I hollered at her turning the bike around.

"You're on!" Fadumo turned around fast, and we were set.

Having races was one of my favorite parts about biking. You can't really do that when you're older. Well, you can, but you don't get that same feeling in your stomach when you win the race or the satisfaction of being the fastest kid on the block. It's not like that anymore, and most of the time I wish it could be that way again. I rushed to the playground, Fadumo on my tail. She was fast, but every time I biked, I got better and better. Ironically enough, we both made it to the playground at the same time. It was really just a wooden box of grainy sand with a wide metallic monkey bar, but it was home.

I climbed on top of the metallic monkey bar. It was really hot because of the weather, but I climbed anyway. People in the neighborhood would call me Monkey because I was always hanging on it. I climbed on the top part and looked up at the sky. Gray clouds, and yet no rain. I put my feet in the middle of a bar and hung. Blood rushed to my face, but all I could do was laugh because Fadumo sat on the ground picking stray grass off her pants. After a while I felt dizzy and wet. Wet? I stuck my tongue out. Rain!

"Do you feel that? Rain!!" I jumped off the monkey bars as fast as possible and ran to my bike.

"I do, M, this is awesome! Let's bike!" Fadumo jumped onto her bike before I had the chance.

We circled around the neighborhood and biked, the rain falling fast, laughter filling our lungs. The humidity was gone so abruptly, and all that was on my mind was the never-ending bliss. Fadumo and I circled the block two times, and pretty soon Munira and Ifrah come outside and biked with us as the rain was falling. We could see lightning striking, but none of us cared; we were enjoying ourselves. We had a race and Ifrah won, but I was just a

split second away from winning. Neighbors from every side were coming out and biking with us now at this point. Storm, snorm, everyone just wanted to have a good time. The street was an inky black; the rain was pouring. We just biked, and some people were flailing their arms around and spun around in the rain.

Sometimes I see myself getting sad over the fact that I'm not young anymore. There's a knot in my stomach that's filled with nostalgia; it makes me miss the carefree days. I find myself staying up late day dreaming about the past; sometimes, I forget I'm in the present. When you're young, you don't have to worry about grades, school, clothes, or fitting in. I remember as a kid all I worried about was if my favorite show was going to be on or if my mom bought fruit snacks and hot Cheetos. Now I find myself staying up late to cram for exams, or trying to find the right clothes to wear, and even worse, boys! Being a kid has its perks, but sometimes I forget I am still a kid, too. I also learned that as time goes by you can't ungrow; you just grow. So, when I do get melancholy about the past, I try to think about the future and all the opportunities I'll have then. Then I can breathe.

Ashley Miller
Litchfield, MN
2nd Place

Reincarnation

It was dinner, and we were all gathered around the table, laughing and sharing the highlights and low points of our long days at school and work, just like we did every night, when it happened. The atmosphere changed suddenly with a look on my mother's face. The news she delivered did not immediately affect me that night, but it hit me hard in the short months and years to follow. A family friend had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Being only twelve years old, I was fortunate not to have much experience with sickness. I couldn't quite relate to or understand what her family was dealing with. As we silently sat around the dinner table digesting the news, I couldn't have possibly known the impact this was about to have on not only our friend's family, but my family as well.

I didn't know this woman very well at the beginning of her uphill battle, but there was something about her that caught my attention and intrigued me. And slowly, more and more each day, I grew to love this woman who had once been a stranger. Eventually, I loved her as though she were a second mother. Even though I didn't spend much time with her while she was here, I was able to realize if it wasn't for the thinning hair and tired face, I wouldn't have ever known the woman was sick. She made me feel happy and special. Even if I hadn't seen her in quite some time, she was still able to brighten my day with her smile, a smile that is missed dearly by everyone who knew her.

As the months went on, her condition bounced between, "I'm almost gone," and "just kidding," but she continued to be the strong and courageous woman I will always remember her as. She did not ask for the sympathy and pity of others, but for their gratefulness and happiness. She did not want others to feel sorry for her, but to be thankful for what they had. She talked of cherishing every moment of life because the time for it all to be taken away could come faster than the blink of an eye. She knew what was happening to herself, but she refused to fall into death's trap, the trap that shuts you down emotionally, filling you with self-pity and depression.

Two years later, my aunt told my mother she was expecting a baby. We were all excited about the news that temporarily shielded us from the cancer. We were happy for their family, but the excitement couldn't take away the pain and suffering we, as well as others around us, were still feeling. The cancer had progressed and things were only getting worse. Medications began to stop working, and scans began lighting up like Christmas trees. Eventually, there came a night where it was as bad as it was going to get. The only thing separating her from Heaven and Earth were the family members surrounding the hospital bed.

I was at a gymnastics meet that day and can remember it as if it were yesterday. It had been an endlessly long day, and I was ready to go home. When I got into the car, the expression on my father's face was one I vaguely recognized from long ago. Then it hit me. It was the same expression my mother had shown the day she delivered the news. The news that had changed my life without me even realizing it. The news I couldn't understand then, but understand clear as day now. The news I hated.

When my mother returned home from spending the night in the hospital, she told us it wouldn't be much longer. I refused to let myself shut down right then and there. Throughout the entire battle, I had been taught to believe and pray, and that is exactly what I did that night. Meanwhile, my uncle had been texting back and forth with my mother, telling her my aunt was in labor and had just gone to the hospital. It was decided. The next day we would go visit the baby, but continue to pray and hope for the woman who was dying back on the hospital bed.

As we pulled through the drive-thru at a McDonald's on our way to the hospital, we received a message from my uncle; our aunt had just given birth to a beautiful baby girl. Shortly after, we received a message saying the Lord had just gained yet another beautiful and strong angel. Instantly, the thought occurred to all of us. One of the most comforting thoughts to ever fill our minds since the beginning of this cancer battle: reincarnation. You don't have to be religious to realize just how rare and special that is, and the idea still sends goosebumps up and down my arms. My cousin is going to be one strong, beautiful, and determined lady, just like Suzanne.

Rachel Wordes
Renville, MN
3rd Place

The Nine Lives of Daisy-Orangy-Dandelion

One chilly, crisp, autumn day, quite a few years ago now, my fluffy, pregnant cat, Ella finally had her last batch of kittens in the warmth of our insulated garage. In a cardboard box filled with comfortable old rags, Ella had one black kitten with an adorable white mustache on his chin, and four little white fluffballs that were almost identical, except for one who was dusty-colored. Lastly, there was a tiny orange kitten, weak and helpless, but precious all the same. It was still in its amnion sac, unnoticed by the busy mama cat. We all waited breathlessly for Ella to save the suffocating kitten, but she took no heed of the immediate danger the little kitten was in. What should we do? Should we try and help? Although we had lots of experience in kitten-raising, nothing like this had ever happened.

Quickly grabbing a scissors, I gently picked up the newborn kitten, very carefully slitting the birth sac open. It was still alive! We discretely placed the crying kitten by its mother's side, hoping that it would get the mama cat's attention. To our great relief, Ella proceeded to bathe the content kitten and feed it along with the others. Whew!

The tiny baby kittens quickly grew into playful, frolicsome miniature cats that tumbled over each other in mock fights. Before long, they were ready to find new and loving homes. Three of the totally white kittens won the heart of our veterinarian, and the little black one with the mustache found a home with some good friends of ours. The dusty-colored white one (which we named Dusty) became an outdoor cat at our house. As for the little orange kitten who barely survived, we decided to keep her; and because we were indecisive about the name, we gave her the extensive title of Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion.

Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion was a female, which is quite rare in orange cats. As she grew from a tiny kitten to full-grown cat, she greatly enjoyed catching birds and leaving them as presents on our doorstep. She also loved to cuddle and give us lots of kisses. Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion often got herself in trouble though, earning herself a spritz from the spray bottle. But we all loved her.

When Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion was about a year old, my family and I went on a weekend vacation. Just as we were about to leave, my mom asked, “Where is Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion?” My siblings and I looked at each other in confusion. We had all assumed she was in the garage, safe and snug. But when we looked, she was not there.

We searched high and low for the lost cat, but she was not to be found. Defeated, we left on our vacation, hoping Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion would turn up when we returned.

When we arrived home, we eagerly pursued the search for Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion. But to our great disappointment, the missing cat did not appear, even after we had searched the whole house and yard.

The next day, a terrible snowstorm materialized out of the west and confined us to the warmth and safeness of our home. We were greatly concerned about our poor, cold cat, somewhere out there in the blistering cold. We hoped she had found a warm place to wait out the storm. We assured ourselves that cats were smart and could find their way home. But we were still very worried about Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion.

For the next few days, we continually checked the front door each day for any appearance of Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion. Sadly, she did not appear that week. Or the next. We had begun to give up hope that she would ever come back home.

One morning, about two weeks after the tragic disappearance of Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion, my family and I were eating breakfast and getting ready to start the day. Suddenly, a fuzzy orange face appeared in our window. Could it be? Yes! It was our lost Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion! She had come home at last. Opening the door to let the cold, exhausted cat in, we showered her with lots of loving kisses and warm hugs. Then we pampered her with creamy milk and a cozy chair by the toasty warm fire. Although we could have spoiled her more, my mom insisted that we let her rest. And boy, did she sleep! Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion continued to nap for the rest of that day and the next.

After we had let her relax for quite some time, we brought her to the vet to make sure she was alright. She wasn't in terrible shape, considering all she had been through. Her claws were almost completely worn off, and she had a nasty cut on her belly. The veterinarian assured us they would heal soon. From her injuries, we concluded that Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion had unintentionally caught a ride with a visitor at our house that day. If only cats could talk. Then we would know the true story.

As we settled back into our normal routine, Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion progressed and continued to be the same loving, cuddly cat as before. One day I noticed that the tip of her tail was bent at a slightly odd angle. Inspecting the issue further, I discovered that the top half of her tail was all crusty and hard. At her annual vet check-up, we mentioned this problem to our veterinarian. She felt it, and then pronounced that half of the cat's tail was dead. Unsure what that meant, we asked the vet to explain further. Apparently if the tail is dead, it has lost connection with the rest of the body and cannot be moved or felt anymore. Therefore, it is usually best to amputate it. We reluctantly agreed that, yes, amputating would probably be the best thing to do, and that it should be done as soon as possible.

But our vet warned us that before we make our decision, we should consider the following things: Sometimes when the tail is amputated, it can be very traumatizing, thus driving the cat, consequently, mad. Then this can sometimes lead to biting the stump so much that they have to amputate it again! Even though they are required to wear the cone of shame on their head, cats will still find ways to get it off and continue to nip at what is left of their tail. Was our dear, sweet little Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion ever going to be the same again?

The next morning, we brought Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion to the vet for the scheduled procedure. We sadly bid farewell to her tail (which is, of course, every cat's pride and joy) and gave her reassuring hugs before we walked out the door.

We received a call from the vet the following day, saying all went well. Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion had done spectacular during the procedure and was ready to take home any time. We excitedly filled her kennel with favorite blankets, toys and treats to make her feel better. Rushing to the vet's office, we found Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion quite comfortable and enjoying the spoiling of vet techs, who declared her an absolute darling.

For the first few days after her surgery, we watched her closely to make sure she did not bite at her phantom tail or any of the horrors that our vet had told us about. Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion obviously loathed the cone on her head, but other than that she was the same cute cuddly cat as before. And as for her tail (or half of it, I should say) it healed wonderfully, and we never had any more issues in that matter.

With her cute little bob-tail, Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion became a favorite among many friends and relatives. And really, who can resist an orange cat who just lives to give you kisses?

Her adventure that cost her half of her tail just made us love her all the more. Thus ends the tale of Daisy-Orangey-Dandelion.

Poetry
Grades 11 & 12

Megan Hoff
Sacred Heart, MN
1st Place

New Age

Our heads are bent over
Backs hunched
Eye contact is an endangered species
We crave the solace
Of binary code
Thinking on your own is unnecessary
And considered obsolete
Why bother when all the answers
Are only a few finger taps away?
Sighs at computer screens
Isolation comes in the form of
\$200 headphones
People who share bus seats
Are a thousand miles apart
Real life has become pixelated
Blurred and unclear from
Straining our eyes all day
I fear the world has slipped
Into irreversible digitalization

But then one day
I found myself at the library
Clutching a book in my hands
Crying because I had forgotten
The smell of paper

Megan Hoff
Sacred Heart, MN
2nd Place

Tally Marks

She hadn't felt this way
Since seventh grade
They smiled at her
But something in their eyes
Told her they might be lying.

She smiled back anyway
Ignoring the small feeling
In the pit of her stomach
It'll be fine tomorrow, she thought
But tomorrow never came.

Three months later and now
They don't even bother to look
At the girl with horse-hair and size 6 thighs
They whisper and roll their eyes
She pretends that she's deaf.

A few months more and it's worse
Now they start to bite
And slide their trays away
They speak louder to let her know
That she is unworthy and unwanted.

At night, when she is empty
Devoid of salt water and thoughts
She reaches for the slice of gray
Marks another tally on herself
A way of keeping track of time and insults.

By the end of the year
The bile spread from the cafeteria
It followed her to her locker, to class
Some threw paper and mocked her
She bit back cringes and recycled the bullets.

A week more, horrible day after horrible day
The girl decided that the gray wasn't enough.
With one visit to the bathroom cabinet
And 26 pills and 2 deep tallies
She finally stopped counting.

Megan Hoff
Sacred Heart, MN
3rd Place

Writing Contest

Chewed up lips contend with a blank page
I plead with the pen
Please? I just need one more poem
One more and then I'll leave you alone
But the ink is not one to forgive.

I can't spell quite like I used to
Is this really my handwriting?
Oh god, why can't it ever sound right?
I crumple up my latest effort and
Miss the trashcan by two miles.

My old wooden enemy is all too eager
To welcome me back
I sit back down at my desk and try again
These days I'm fluent in sighing
And scribbling and not getting enough sleep.

A finished product finds its way out of my brain
With sweaty palms I submit my work
I can see their faces in my mind as they read over it
Pursed lips straighter than the equator
Furrowed foreheads, frowning eyes.

With a pressed smile, they shake their heads
A heartfelt participation award is headed my way
Whatever is left of my poetry is
Now caught underneath neat fingernails
And casually forgotten.

Fiction
Grades 11 & 12

Abby Traxler
Madison, MN
1st Place

Complex Simplicity

I wasn't born into your average world. That's where this story begins, in your not-so-typical world. Actually, I'm not even sure what an average world is like. My world is comprised of too many neon colors, strange beats and guitar chords passed off as music, and smells that make me long to eat the pastries and cakes they waft from. I've never tried cake before, or pastries, muffins, scones, pies, or even candy because that's just the kind of world I was given to.

My name is Ninety-Nine Decimal. You can tilt your head or raise an eyebrow, but whether you choose to believe it or not, my name is as normal as they get in my world. My friends have the same basic titles and a similar life style. We have jobs, perhaps you do, too, and we hang out afterwards until both moons are side by side in the inked canvas above that's been flecked with so many different lights. We all love the stars and the pictures they reveal to us when we use our imaginations.

This may all seem not unlike your own way of living and the atmosphere you reside in. Allow me to step off the path of normalcy for a moment and wade into my own lands of oddity.

I eat peaches every day. This is not an action to illustrate the fact I like peaches. I actually detest the fruit greatly. I eat them every day so I can live the next one, and the one after that, and the one following that, just so long as I keep swallowing down chunks of vibrant peach flesh.

Why peaches? In some cultures, it symbolizes immortality and in certain art, the peach is seen as salvation. When I took my first breath of this place's oxygen, I was given a challenge that was literally for life. A peach a day would keep Death at bay. Keep eating, keep living. No other food would keep me alive like the small fruit. In fact, all other foods messed up my insides and came back to haunt me. Peaches were the only acceptable sustenance.

A strange life I suppose, but then again, as I said before, what do I know of a normal one?

It isn't just me. When everyone here is born, they're given a challenge to work with in their daily lives. Some are worse than

others. Some people get the chewed up end of the stick, like myself, though I don't complain about it out loud, and others get the immaculate, varnished end. A couple of my friends hold this end like a baton, high above their heads and out of reach of those in the gutter. It's not their fault, of course. After all, we were only infants.

Scimitar Estoc, or more commonly referred to as Chance's Black Blade, is our deity that bestows each and every one of us with our challenge. It is said once we're born, Scimitar is by our side with a black diamond blade, and a thought goes into that sword, our trial for the rest of our days. Once we're embedded with that thought, there is no way to change it, no way to bend and break fate.

All our parents see is a dark figure shrouded in smoke and shadows, and they hear a whisper telling them what they need to do for their little baby. Most of the time, parents do whatever they can to help. The more unfortunate stories involve those who can't tolerate such burdens and deny giving any assistance. Those are the children who truly have it rough.

I honestly believe Scimitar was having a bad day when I was given my challenge. (I don't exactly know what a god's kind of bad day is, but I was the victim of it.) If I don't eat a peach one day of my life, I'm history. If I eat other food, I make myself sick. Still, in the eyes of others, perhaps I have it pretty good.

My friend goes by the name Sagittal Suture and was, in my opinion, given the middle of the stick. She doesn't say much about her challenge, doesn't really complain about it, but it's not like she should waste precious minutes of the day whining about her situation. Scimitar landed her with the restricting quality of talking only between twelve o'clock and twelve-thirty a.m. and p.m. She can never speak any other time, and when she does, her lips move up and down but sound ceases to come forth. You may think this is tough, but at least she won't die if she forgets to speak during these time frames. Once the twelfth chime dies down in the city, Suture begins talking and doesn't stop. She could if she wanted to; she doesn't have to speak the whole thirty minutes, but she comes up with a lot to say. Wouldn't you?

The first time we met was in the large shopping plaza marking the center of our grand city. It happened to be twelve-eighteen, and she was jabbering away nonstop, advertising a cart of products. Customers were skirting around her, dogs taut on their leashes trying to get away, but I stared at her, a crooked frown on my face as I studied this unique individual. She had a glow to her,

something not many in our world can lay claim to. She seemed ecstatic to be alive, and I looked her up and down, trying to determine if the happiness was genuine or false.

I was too deep in thought and before I knew it, she'd strode up to me with a wide grin and inquired what had me so captivated. I fumbled for words, trying to stitch together a reply and answered truthfully, earning an even bigger smile from Suture. She told me her name, noted the challenge she'd been set with and asked me mine. I introduced myself and after a sigh, explained what the black diamond blade had pierced me with. She seemed sympathetic when I told her, large purple eyes painted over with melancholy and soon declared she was going to buy me a peach, regardless if I'd already eaten one for the day or not. A sweet gesture, and I'm sure she would've gotten me something else had I been able to stomach it, but our friendship was formed over shared slices of fruit.

We both met the third member of our group a few weeks later. We'd been returning home from a shopping run, my bags filled with peaches and a few tablets for writing down whatever came to mind, and Suture's were filled with whatever had struck her fancy at the plaza. It was around three-thirty so she couldn't speak to me, however she raised a long finger to point out a figure walking towards us, cloaked in silver and a frown etched on his face. The fact he wore a winter coat on a one hundred-two degree day had me baffled, but not as much as his other fashion choice.

He stepped around us, nodding in our direction and I called out to him, asking if he needed directions to his destination. Looking back on it now, it almost seems like an insensitive question, but he always assured me time and again it was perfectly fine.

The stranger turned, most likely fixing us with a hard stare, but the sash of chrome wrapped firmly across his eyes kept it impossible to tell what kind expression was directed at us. He didn't say anything for a few heartbeats and just as Suture grabbed my arm, a silent query if running was perfectly reasonable, he spoke.

"I'm fine, but I thank you for the offer."

His voice was a pleasant hum, almost like that of a bee meandering by to touch down on a flower. Pale lips rose in a gentle smile, and with a dip of his head, he continued on his way.

I blinked, watching the odd character step over a fallen branch on the sidewalk with the delicacy of a skater on ice. I was vaguely aware of Suture tugging on the hem of my shirt, but I

didn't move. I could feel the same whisper of curiosity that had pricked me when I'd first seen Suture as I stared after the figure clad in silver.

There was another pull from Suture, and suddenly I was dragging her along after me, leaping over the discarded tree limb and asking the stranger to hold on a moment. He slowed to a stop and lazily turned his head to look over one shoulder, a patient smile forming, and I asked him his name.

"Novel Percentile," he murmured, brushing a lock of stray hair from his face.

I introduced myself and then Suture, who was peering around me at the tall individual. When the conversation didn't move along after that, I scuffed the toe of my boot on the sidewalk and timidly asked about the blindfold he wore.

Novel reached up and ran his thumb over the edge of the sash, replying calmly, "The work of our deity, Chance's Black Blade. If you wish to know the tale, first allow me to know yours."

I quickly explained my challenge, keeping all bitter thoughts within instead of troubling the stranger with my woe. I didn't speak of Suture, peering back at the girl who gazed at Novel through amethyst pools, suspicious but fascinated.

"A troubling task," Novel whispered, leaning to the side and focusing on Suture. "I assume the same can be said of your friend?"

With a nod from Suture, I answered Novel, and he began telling us the challenge he was set.

Novel Percentile wore a sash over his eyes to keep himself from seeing anyone residing within our world. Scimitar told his parents when he was born that if their son was to ever look upon another soul, he would feel compelled to stay by that person's side until either he or his companion fell to the Grim Reaper. Immediately after hearing that, his parents wrapped satin around his eyes and hid the world from view.

Novel told us he didn't see the grass he walked on, didn't look up at the stars at night or even check himself in the mirror before going out. From the time he learned to acknowledge things, his other senses went into overdrive to make up for his lost sight. He could hear all that went on around him, felt with his feet before he took any steps, and smelled the leaves in autumn. Teaching himself to do these things, his mind grew patient and keen. He was easy to get along with.

I once asked him why he never waited until he was sitting in his room under the cover of night before taking off his blindfold.

He gave me a smile and replied he'd done that countless times when he was younger, whether it was staring up at the ceiling or through a window at the cosmos above, he'd see it all. It had only been five years prior that he'd accidentally gazed upon someone walking by his apartment complex, and his challenge took its toll.

Hearing this, I was hesitant to ask what had happened to the person, but he responded without me inquiring, murmuring that she'd died the year before. There had been an accident, he explained with a lack of emotion that left me hesitant to pry further. I simply apologized with a short nod, and he rolled his shoulders, saying it was okay and he'd let it go. However, it was because of those few minutes of his selfish desire to use his eyes that he no longer allowed himself to see anything.

The three of us gradually became more accustomed to each other's company after that. A knock on my door and Suture would be standing outside, a bright smile on her face as she raised a pocket watch reading five minutes to twelve. Another time, the two of us migrated to Novel's apartment and with his permission, set up one of my gaming consoles and taught him how to play one of my favorite games. Suture acted as Novel's eyes, telling him when to jump, run, or have his character throw a punch in my direction. They were a good team, the two of them began beating me after four rounds.

I'd met Suture and Novel in the midst of summer, just as things were getting irritably humid. To make matters worse, we all had to return to our appointed schools, so we wouldn't be seeing each other as often. I don't know how the gears of society turn in your world, but in mine, there are many different schools, each teaching a variety of different classes, depending on your interests. I happened to go to a school focused mainly on our world and everything around it. I went to classes for biology and studied the solar system, but my favorite and most cherished was astrology. To me, stars were, and still are, one of the greatest things this world has rewarded me with.

Suture's school was a ways from behind, down two streets and up three more, sitting on a great hill overlooking our community. She was into art at the time, painting her thoughts, feelings, and words on a canvas to dry every single day. Bright acrylics for good days when nothing could stop her, dark and dreary watercolors on the ones that brought her down, and clay when she was feeling particularly random. I have a three-foot vase standing in the corner of my kitchen, always there to make me smile when I look at the bright aqua and splashes of silver.

Novel was always a mystery to the two of us, and we could never guess where he went to school or even his interests. Three weeks after our first semester had started and we were all gathered around Novel's table, we figured it out. It had been twelve-fifteen, and Suture was chattering away, pinching strings of pasta with a pair of chopsticks and angling them into her mouth. After her third bite, she exclaimed it was excellent.

Novel had smiled at that, telling her he'd just learned the recipe and Suture's mind must have connected with my own for in that moment we both sprang upright, pointing and yelling that Novel went to school for cooking. The dark-haired boy looked up and raised his hands with an innocent grin. He knew we'd figure it out.

As we began learning each other's schedules, it became easier to spend more time with each other. My classes were the last to end, so I always stepped out the front doors to Suture's flying hug and Novel's gentle countenance. We'd then walk to our own houses or each other's, depending on the amount of homework or the interesting facts and skills we'd learned for the day. It was so perfectly mundane that it was only natural something disorderly should come along.

It's amazing when you consider how easily order can be thrown into disarray, tranquility to panic, and peace into calamity. The perfection of snow on a mountainside can be disrupted by a single snowflake. By the time a wall of snow is rushing down towards the ground, it's too late.

Our unchanging world of challenges and friendships was that perfect mountain and its dusting of snow. The single snowflake came in the guise of my forgetfulness. I went an entire day without eating my usual peach, and it wasn't until nightfall came that I remembered. Luckily, we were at Suture's home, and she had a few stocked up ever since she met me. I grew drained and felt wretched, but upon eating the peach, I was better.

It was in that moment we had a thought brush us, just a tiny inking on how faultless our pristine world was and how terrifying that was. Our everyday challenges delivered by Scimitar Estoc and its diamond blade were only bricks keeping our environment intact. To put a single brick in wrong would be definite obliteration for everything, but was that so bad? Putting something complex and wrong into something so simplistic? Our world needed to change and we along with it.

The three of us ran it through our minds over and over again, thinking of ways to distort everything without breaking ourselves

in the process. After all, it wasn't so easy defying a being with unbelievable power who flipped fate like fishing lines into the river. One wrong move and we'd drown in the abyss.

What we needed was a flicker of hope, a dying ember we could coax into a monstrous fire. One small rebellion to aid in the belief that our endeavor wasn't for nothing. I could've skipped one peach, frayed a single lifeline just to see if it would truly drop me. However, seeing as the skinless clutches of the Grim Reaper was all that awaited should I be wrong, we tossed the idea aside. Next came Suture, but we already knew what happened when she tried to speak. Dry breathing and gasps of air were all that came out. Novel, we decided, wasn't an option in the least. We knew when we started that this game would take sacrifices, but we weren't willing to flip the board so easily.

It became obvious the three of us weren't in the right positions to be our flames of hope. Too much would be lost and nothing would come of it. What we needed was a soul who didn't have much to lose and whose challenge could easily be deflected.

It was a clear day when I met Film Noir. My classes had gotten out early, and instead of walking home, I decided to head to Suture's academy for it was closer than Novel's. I jumped the last two steps of my school's entrance and turned onto the sidewalk, stepping purposefully around other students who were rushing elsewhere. I bumped the shoulder of one and quickly apologized before turning to a figure wrapped in black and lapis lazuli. I moved to step around him, nodding politely, but he raised a hand, an almost considerate look in his amber eyes.

I drew back, sending him a questioning look, and he smiled all straight teeth with a hint of horror.

"I apologize, but your face is quite unique. I can't say I've seen many with eyes as bright and wonderful as yours." His grin faltered. "Shame it won't make a bit of difference when you're in a wooden box beneath the dirt with rot all around you."

I flinched and my spine was seized by a sudden coldness, spreading up my back and wrapping stiff fingers around my neck. I couldn't breathe for a moment, staring at the cruel stranger in disbelief. For something so terrible to be said with such nonchalance, it was enough to make me sick.

Honestly, I had it in my mind to walk away, meet Suture and Novel along the way, wrap my arms around them and forget about the dark words. However, something stopped me. A flash of something in the stranger's eyes that had me squint a little deeper.

It was brief, but I saw the momentary flicker of guilt within the amber.

He hadn't meant it. This was Scimitar's challenge for this poor individual, something he had to do every day.

My eyes widened, and a broad grin replaced my original look of shock. He had to say something cruel to someone every day. This was a challenge that could easily be altered given the chance.

The cruel soul before me looked truly lost, so before he could walk away, I began to speak. I blatantly exclaimed he'd been given the knotted end of the stick by Scimitar and hadn't brandished the terrible thing he'd said with any truth. He was a victim like myself, my friends, and society, and he was going to help me fix it.

It was like the change between a drop of water on a flame. One moment, dark eyes were filled with a deep sorrow and the next, they were as wide as both our moons on a clear night. He opened his mouth to say something, but a strained laugh came out instead, ending quickly as he studied me.

I held out my hand and told him my name.

And so, Film Noir told me his.

It was of no surprise when Film Noir heard our plan, he was skeptical. The idea of smothering his everyday requirement given to him by our deity was risky, but I could see the initial spark of hope in his eyes upon hearing our idea. If he was unable to speak to those around him, what would become of his challenge?

The four of us sat around Novel's kitchen table discussing our course of action. A few different ideas came about, but none were strong enough to enact. Finally, by the time twelve-thirty rolled around and Suture was no longer able to speak, we had a plan in mind.

The next day was clear and pleasant, quite the opposite of our rebellious endeavor. We all walked to our respected schools in silence, staring grimly ahead and tensing whenever a group of other students passed. Suture was silent, Novel blindfolded, I rolled a peach in my fingers, and Noir worked his teeth around the sash we'd gagged him with. He'd been reluctant at first, but our plan finally ranked higher than his pride. He received a few strange looks while walking by others, but for the most part, they just assumed a challenge was a challenge and Scimitar was simply cruel.

Suture and Novel waved their farewells to Noir and me as we stepped through the front doors of our academy. The halls were crammed with people like any other day, and Noir turned left and

right, eyes widening. I quickly reassured him he'd be okay and lowered his hand as he motioned to remove the gag. He'd worn it since he'd awoken and if he could hold out all day, we would have successfully found a crack in our world.

When afternoon rolled around, Noir hadn't given in. Every now and again, he'd gnash his teeth a little stubbornly and avoid eye contact with those addressing him, but for the most part, no words ever came forth.

We walked out of school that day without any incidents and waited for Novel and Suture. When they arrived, Suture jumped up and down upon hearing of our success in the making and Novel smiled, but we weren't safe yet. The four of us returned to my house to go over work for school and wait out the rest of the day.

I don't know if anyone has ever watched the clock as closely as we did that day. I have a large one that takes up one third of the dining room wall, a great behemoth of mechanics that sits perfectly in the center. It was all we could stare at and all we could hear while reading our text books. We all imitated Suture and Noir and sat in a silence only broken by habitual *ticks* and turning pages.

The clock struck midnight, and Suture closed her book, inhaling deeply and humming a little tune. The three of us turned to Noir as he undid the knot of the sash and pulled it from between his teeth. He cleared his throat and smiled timidly at us.

"So?" he inquired as his eyebrow quirked upwards.

Novel bowed his head with a smirk and Suture gave a cry of laughter, punching her fist in the air. We'd ignited a spark of hope so now all that was left was to feed it and let it grow. If we could figure out how to beat a challenge once, we could do it again. It was somewhat unbelievable to think we were the only ones in our world to have ever tried this. There had to be others out there who saw our strict, unbreakable path. Only it wasn't unbreakable. It was sturdy, but we could bend it.

I wasn't born into your average world.

I was born into a world of calm cities and civilians, manors filled with stacks upon stacks of literature, and a number of deities who either bless us or curse us. I found a flaw in my world, a loose thread that pulled apart the fabric of normalcy. With the help of my friends, we sought to undo our world and weave a complex pattern of simplicity in its place. If we ran into issues, we worked around them. Every hurdle we jumped and with every setback, we fought back, refusing any sign of defeat for an answer. I suppose we could've accepted everything we'd received upon entering our

world, but we had a house of cards to build on. All we had to do was tear it down because the option was right there in front of us. I saw an easier life to fight for within the one we were handed because that's just the kind of world I was given to.

Skilyn Morris
Boyd, MN
2nd Place

A Different Kind of Heaven

I stared into the mirror, feeling as though I somehow lacked adequacy. I felt as though my body wasn't quite right, as if I had too much of something that was keeping me from being good enough. I stared at my body, analyzing every little detail, trying to figure out if my torso wasn't thin enough, if my thighs were too wide, if what I was wearing was wrong for going to school, if my skin-tight black tee-shirt showed too much or too little skin, if my jeans made my legs look long, if my shoes would be approved of while I walked down the halls, if I should curl my straight blonde hair or not, if there was too much or too little make-up on my eyes.

So many questions and doubts flooded through my mind, the same ones that did every single morning before I left the house. I knew that there was some way that I wasn't up to par with everyone else, but I couldn't figure out what it was.

So I stared into mirrors and tried to find the source of my problem. The problem that seemed to make few people talk to me. The problem that made it so no guys looked my way. The problem that made no one tell me that I was beautiful or special or different. The problem that made me quite near ashamed of myself, of my body. The problem that made my parents abandon me.

Today's session of morning staring proved to be as useless and unenlightening as every other morning, but I decided to put a black silk bow in my hair. I grabbed it from a box I kept hidden under my bed and gathered my bangs farther to the left and secured the bow in my hair.

I took one last look in the mirror before grabbing my backpack and setting off for school.

Once I had left the house of the foster family I had been staying with for almost five years, I slipped my headphones out of my bag and put them over my head, turning my mp3 player on as I did so, listening to the soothing sounds of rock music, such as Hellyeah, Dead Sara, and Breaking Benjamin. I proceeded to walk the half-mile from the house until I reached the school, where I stopped to return my music devices to where they had been stashed in my backpack.

My high school was a looming, three-story structure made of dark bricks where we were forced by law to spend seven or more hours a day. I had been moved up a grade from where I'd previously been, and I had no complaints, simply because it meant that I would be able to leave this building for good a year earlier than I had been scheduled to.

As I approached the gloomy building, none of the dozens of people outside it took note of me, as if I were just a ghost passing through the area, unseen, and then gone. I made it through the halls and to my locker without anyone stopping me.

At lunch, I went and sat next to the two people that I called friends. We weren't good friends, but we were past being mere acquaintances. Their names were Olivia and Stephanie; I had never inquired about their last names.

Olivia had long, black hair that fell in gentle waves down to her lower back. She had skin that was lightly tanned, and a smattering of dark freckles across her face made her light blue eyes look cyan. She was neither tall nor short but the perfect median of the two. She was slim and had a figure that was constantly attracting the attention of the male population in this school.

Stephanie had fiery red hair that curled naturally into bouncing spirals just past her shoulders. Her skin was exceptionally pale, contrasting deeply with her hair. Her eyes were a light brown that always reminded me of liquid chocolate before it cools. She was tall, especially for a girl, her lean body almost reaching six feet in height.

As I started eating my lunch, Olivia said, "So, Andy, I'm curious about your house. What's it look like?"

I continued eating my food, trying to decide what I should say to her or if I should say anything, when Stephanie added her thoughts on the subject. "Yeah. I'm curious, too. You never talk about your house. From what other people say, it's big. Is it big?"

She continued chattering on with questions about it, and I nodded answers to her as I continued to chew my food. I began to stop paying attention to the questions that were being asked until I caught myself nodding to one I didn't quite like.

"Really?" Olivia said amazed, "We can come see your house?"

Since I had already said yes, it seemed extremely rude to tell them no, especially with the hopeful smiles on their faces. I shook my head yes again and quickly finished chewing the food in my

mouth so I could speak. "Come by at five so I have a chance to make sure everything is in order."

That was a lie. I knew the house was always quite close to being immaculate, but due to its size, I barely went in most of the rooms and wanted to give myself time to go through them and remember what their purposes were if I was going to be giving a tour.

The rest of the time for lunch went by quickly, Stephanie and Olivia chattering excitedly to each other about being able to visit my house. I tuned them out again after a minute or two and finished my food.

The second half of the school-day went the same as the first half had, with no one talking to me and the classes going by with ease for me while most others struggled.

When I reached the house I now lived at, I walked inside, announcing myself to those who would be bustling about the house. I received no answer, which I found strange. Usually my foster mother was home and busy working on some meal that needed an obscene amount of preparation and time to cook. I walked into the kitchen to find a note in the middle of the island counter, which was usually bare and utterly spotless.

Andy, your father and I have gone out for a while down to one of the larger cities to pick up a new mattress and bed frame for us and a new violin for you as a special treat for doing so well in school. We probably won't be back until much later in the evening, so you will have to make yourself dinner tonight. I trust that you know the rules of what not to do while we are gone. Remember, you cannot have a large amount of guests over, host any parties, partake in the consumption of illegal substances, or stay out past eleven p.m. if we are not there to know that you could be missing.

~Elizabeth

I had suspected that something like this was bound to happen sooner or later because that was just the type of people my foster mother, Elizabeth, and my foster father, Matt, were. They were constantly rewarding me for something or another that came easily and naturally to me, such as school work and academics or playing the violin.

Elizabeth was a kind woman with a joyful smile that she used often. She had caramel-colored hair that was usually in a loose braid over her shoulder, stopping short of her elbow. Her eyes

were a deep brown that were always filled with love. She was just taller than the average person and rarely wore heels. She preferred more practical shoes or no shoes at all.

Matt was taller than Elizabeth and had eyes that were the deep green of healthy moss. His hair was slightly shaggy, not going much farther past his ears so it wouldn't get in the way if he had to do something and was a deep black that was closer to ebony than just mere black. Matt was also a kind person by nature, but not as kind as Elizabeth and would be forceful when it was needed or required.

I put my backpack in my room and proceeded to start wandering around the house, figuring out just how many rooms were in it, because aside from the bedrooms and guest bedrooms, there were seven other rooms of various sizes and each seemed to have a different use. There was what seemed to be a parlor. It seemed that we had a game room, which consisted of a pool table, a dart board, a pinball machine, a ping-pong table, and an air-hockey table. We had a very decent sized library. We had a bar. We had a sitting room, or at least I thought it was because all it had in it were a lot of chairs. We had a meeting room, which consisted of a long table surrounded by swivel chairs. The last room I encountered was a large room that was completely empty. The walls were white, and the floors were plain hardwood. There were no chairs, couches, beds, or tables. I couldn't fathom what this room was for.

It was now about half past four in the afternoon, and I had become hungry. I went back down the three flights of stairs back to the kitchen, where I started by remembering to put the note that Elizabeth had left for me in the recycling bin with other papers. I went to the fridge and found plenty of leftovers from other meals in it, deciding on one I had quite liked from about two nights ago and heated some of it up on a plate, then proceeding to sit on a stool at the island and eat the meal I had prepared for myself. When I was done, I washed my plate and fork off in the sink and dried them with a hand towel. I knew that we had a dishwasher, but I had always washed my dishes by hand for some odd reason. The feeling was somehow soothing to me, the feeling of repetition while you scrubbed something clean. I don't know why, but it was.

By this time, I still had just over fifteen minutes, so I went upstairs and started on the small bit of homework that I had yet to complete. I had nearly finished when I heard the doorbell ring. I looked at the digital clock on a barren stand by my bed and saw

that it was a few minutes past five. I put my pencil down and started my way to the door as I heard the doorbell get pressed again. And then again. It seemed that Olivia and Stephanie were impatient because just as I was almost at the door, the bell rang one final time before I opened it to see the two of them standing there with the same excited smiles on their faces that they had been wearing at lunch. I had little doubt that those smiles had been in place on their faces since lunch.

“Hey, guys. Come on in.” I stepped out of the way and extended my arm, motioning them to come in. They did so, looking around, marveling at what I’m sure they thought of as splendor and beauty. “Have you two eaten yet?” I asked. They shook their heads yes. That was one less thing I had to worry about at this moment.

They were quite excited to get on with the tour I had accidentally agreed to. As I was showing them around, they were asking many questions, which I tried to answer as best I could. I took them through each room, letting them inspect each one until they were satisfied, then moving on to the next one, repeating the process in every room. After about the sixth room, Stephanie asked, “Where are your parents?”

“Foster parents,” I corrected her. “They’re out for the time being, picking some stuff up in some city.” I watched how Stephanie reacted to the fact that I had foster parents. She seemed like she almost regretted asking me and was having a hard time deciding if she should ask me what had happened to my real parents. I looked at Olivia, and she looked like she was having the same problem with deciding to voice a question or not.

I gave a sigh. “Go ahead. Ask your questions.” They looked at me, evidently startled. Stephanie started off with the obvious, and I knew that she would regret asking me this question. “What happened to your biological parents?”

Without hesitating, I answered surely, “They abandoned me.” She looked away, again ashamed, just as I had predicted. But that answer didn’t faze Olivia.

“How long ago?” she asked.

“Almost five years,” I told her in a flat, emotionless voice.

And that was all that was said on that subject. The tension in that room became awkward, so they hurriedly finished examining it and were ready to move on, which we did.

We had made it to the last room on the third floor, the room that puzzled me. I let them go in first and could tell that they were

confused. “Why is there an empty room in your house?” Olivia asked.

“Who knows. I’ve never asked.”

They continued to look around the room for a minute or two longer, seeing if they could figure out what it was for. When they finally gave up, they wanted to go back to my room and hang out for a while before it became much too late for them to stay here and to force them to go home.

We sat on my bed, or in chairs, or just on the floor, changing positions whenever we got tired of sitting wherever we happened to be at that time, or from a venture to somewhere in the house. We talked about inconsequential things, things that had no meaning or matter. After a while, Olivia mentioned that she was bored and wanted to do something much more fun.

“Oh,” Stephanie said as she started voicing her opinion yet again, “Let’s play truth or dare!” That was all that was said on the subject as it was decided. We commenced the game and it started out as meaningless, gossip questions and stupid dares, when the two of them got serious suddenly.

“Hey, Andy. Truth or dare,” Olivia decreed.

“Might as well do dare.”

Stephanie and Olivia started whispering into each other’s ears and softly giggling.

“I dare you to take thirteen of these pills I stole from my dad’s medicine cabinet. He hasn’t taken them in years,” she said to me.

I was stricken. “Why would I do that?” I couldn’t think of a reason why I would do something that would be that dangerous. I didn’t know what they were or what they were for, or even what they did.

“Why would you do that?” Stephanie started. “You have no real friends. You’re always miserable. You just sit there with a blank expression that makes it seem like you don’t really want to be part of life. We’ve never seen you smile. Not once. You’ve got no real friends, just us, and neither of us are very close to you. I mean, we’ve been sitting together and going to someone’s house regularly for years, and this is the first time you actually let us come over here. No one likes you. No one looks at you. Your parents *abandoned* you. That means that even they didn’t want you, right? That means that there must be something wrong with you if even your own *parents* didn’t want to keep you. Your life pretty much sucks when you look at it. No friends. No parents. No happiness. No nothing except sad, dull, depressing emptiness.”

I started to think about everything that they said. And they were right. It's not like I liked anything here. No one talked to me except Olivia and Stephanie, and that was mainly just mindless chit-chat and gossip at lunch and when we went to someone's house. I didn't like going anywhere. I didn't like the fact that I passed everyone as if I was a ghost, not being seen, not knowing how people thought of me, not knowing anything that had to do with other people. I knew that there was something wrong with me; I didn't need them to tell me that. I knew it. My parents knew it, too. That's part of why they left. I was different and I was inadequate, I was worthless. I couldn't do anything good enough. I could never be enough.

They were right. Why wouldn't I do that? I couldn't think of a single reason.

"Okay," I said quietly.

They just smiled quietly at each other.

I held out my hand, and Olivia started placing the pills in it one by one. There seemed to be nothing special about these pills, but I knew that looks could be deceiving. They could be very deceiving. I didn't notice that Stephanie had disappeared from where we were until she reappeared with a can of Mountain Dew in her hand and then placed it in my other hand. She sat back down next to Olivia, and then I opened the can of pop and started swallowing the pills.

The whole time, the two of them were smiling and giggling.

I didn't know what these pills would do to me, how they would affect me, and I didn't care anymore. I was actually hoping a little bit that they would help to take away all the feelings that plagued me, the ones that told me that I wasn't good enough, that there was something everyone else had that I didn't have, that I would never fit in, that I would never be enough for the people around me, that there was something wrong with me.

Since we didn't know how long these mystery pills would take to kick in, we continued on with our game of truth or dare, although none of the dares were quite so intriguing as the one they gave me. After a few rounds of the game, I started to get cold, so I moved to my bed and covered myself up with a blanket. The two of them started smiling at each other again. That's when I realized that it had to be at least seventy degrees in my room. And I was cold to the point where I covered myself with a blanket. I took that to mean that the mystery pills were starting to kick in. As the game wore on, I started to get colder and colder. I started to get tired. After a while, I could barely keep my eyes open.

I opened my eyes to find myself lying on my side. I didn't remember lying down. I struggled to sit up and found that I couldn't. Suddenly, I found that I didn't want to sit up, that there was no reason for me to sit up, or for me to keep my eyes open either. So I stopped trying. I just shut my eyes.

I opened them again sometime later because I was *warm*. I looked out at where I was, trying to remember quite why I was surprised that I was warm, why I was lying down, where I was.

I sat up and went to push the blankets off of me, only to find that there were no blankets. I looked around and finally registered my surroundings.

I wasn't on my bed in my room with Olivia and Stephanie anymore. I didn't know where I was.

I was now sitting in an area of grass that was very soft. I looked up and saw that above me was a sky that wasn't quite blue, but was actually a more teal color, and a very beautiful color at that. Around me, there were houses that I'd never seen before, houses that were made of things that were not wood, stone, earth, or any other building material that I'd seen before. Their walls almost appeared to be woven of extremely long leaves or grasses, with thin, willowy branches intermixed. There were some trees, and they were completely bare of leaves and bark, although neither looked like it was something that people had done. There were patches of flowers with almost fluorescent-colored petals that appeared to shimmer in the light. There were things happening around me that I didn't know how to process.

There were a few butterflies that I could see drifting along with the light breeze around me and changing color. I watched one go from a light blue to a violent red in a matter of seconds, and then to a deep, emerald green. There were birds that were flying high above me that would appear and disappear at random times with no discernible pattern. There was this wonderful sound that almost seemed to brush past me with the breeze, whispering sweet things in my ear as it went. I suddenly felt so *good*. I didn't feel as if I was missing something anymore. I felt as though I was right where I belonged. I laid back down on the grass and shut my eyes, enjoying the things that this wonderful place had to offer me at this moment. I looked at the grass, and it had a tint of purple in it. I gave a deep sigh of contentment, not wondering how I got here, not wondering about any of the things that I used to wonder about, just wondering about how something this wonderful could exist. After that, I stopped thinking and simply let my body relax, let my

mind be soothed by the sounds that the breeze carried, by the sweet smell of the grass that filled the air around me.

I knew I was good enough here, that I always had been. I knew that there was nothing missing from me now. My body was the way it was supposed to be. I wasn't too fat, and I wasn't too thin. I was me, and nothing would change that. I could see the way I had been living.

And I hated it.

I had been acting meek and pathetic. I told myself that I wasn't good enough because I felt like people thought I wasn't good enough. I always tried to blend into the background of whatever was going on, trying not to draw attention to myself and then wondering why no one ever noticed me. I let everyone else make choices for me, even if I didn't like those choices. I wasn't a bad person, but I wasn't an especially good person. I never tried to do anything. I always hid behind other people, never speaking unless spoken to, never let anything about me be noticed unless it had to.

I saw all that, and I knew that I wasn't going to be like that anymore. I was free from all of that now. Stephanie and Olivia had unknowingly changed every single thing about me.

I knew now that I would never be that same person again. Now I wasn't afraid to be who I was. I wasn't afraid to speak up. I wasn't afraid to stand out. I wasn't afraid to show people that I was more than some meek person who stood in the shadows as though she was one of them. I wasn't afraid to show everyone that I was different than they were, that I was different than I was.

I stood up and started walking toward the houses when things started to change. The sound on the breeze started to fade. The color of the sky was starting to fade to a dull, normal blue of the sky from where I came from. The grass started to take on a dead-ish green look as the softness and purple tint slowly left it. I couldn't see any more butterflies at all, not a single one. Everything was changing. All the charm and magic was fading. I could feel my body growing cold and heavy again. I couldn't do anything to stop my descent back into the grass, where my eyelids were becoming heavy again with sleep. I tried to keep my eyes open as long as possible, but I knew that I wouldn't be able to for very long.

I forced my eyes open, and I suddenly wasn't there anymore. I was in a white-gray room with a light blue curtain pulled around an area that my bed occupied.

I was in a hospital.

Why was I in the hospital? How did I get here? What happened to that place that I was in? I looked around the room a little more and noticed that there was a vase with a single white

rose sitting on the table next to my bed. There was a note next to it. I struggled to lift my arm and grab it. My arm was so heavy. When I had finally gotten it, I started to read it.

Andy, I'm so sorry that you have to be reading this because it means that your father and I aren't here now that you're awake. We had to go back down to the city to talk with some specialists about your condition. I hope that you'll ask the nurse if you can use a phone to call us or at least have the doctor call us and fill us in on what's happening.

*We love you very much,
~Elizabeth"*

I flipped the paper over and, on the other side, I found another note, this one scrawled in different writing.

Andy, Olivia and I are so sorry that we dared you to do that. It was really stupid. We called 9-1-1 about ten minutes after you passed out. I hope you don't hate us.

~Stephanie

I didn't know if I could ever forgive Olivia because it was all her idea, and she's the one who pointed out how horrible my life seemed. I might be able to forgive Stephanie. She at least came to visit me and left me something that showed she was here and showed that she was sorry.

But none of that really mattered to me now. I didn't need them to think that I was good enough. I didn't need them because they were the only people I let notice me. I didn't need them because I wasn't the same anymore. I wasn't going to sit there meekly anymore and hide behind them listening to their mindless, meaningless chit-chat. I wasn't going to let myself go unnoticed any longer. I wasn't going to go through everything as a ghost, passing by people without being seen, without my actions having any effect on anything.

I was going to make myself known until I could find a way to get back to that place where everything was absolutely perfect, where there was nothing wrong with me.

I started thinking about the fact that I didn't know if it had a name. I started wondering what I could call it. It was someplace where everything was perfect and nothing could hurt me. It wasn't heaven, I knew that much. It was a different kind of heaven. It was Nevaeh. And I was going back as soon as I could.

**Matthew Frazier
Canby, MN
3rd Place**

The Beginning and the End

Six people marched across an open field. They were an odd sight, as all of them wore clothing better suited to a costume party than for a world-changing mission. Even stranger, five of the six people carried metal staffs entirely out of place with their different period style clothing.

Directly in the middle of the flat expanse, the woman in the lead held up her hand; they stopped together. This open space may have made a wonderful battlefield or a superb town, but until that day it had remained empty. Only now someone bestowed purpose upon it, but what a noble purpose it was.

The military woman faced her motley group. With head held high, she uttered one word. "Begin."

The first person in line, a man dressed in the garb of a Victorian peasant, stepped forward and pointed his staff at empty air. A thin white line slowly wove its way out of the rod. The man concentrated harder. In an instant, a thunder crack split the air in front of him. A rush of cold air smothered the group as the fracture in thin air turned into a round hole. With a grim but confident smile, the man stepped through the door in empty space. After a last salute, the white line came out of the staff again and shut the doorway from the other side. The meadow was still once more.

One by one, the men repeated the act. The crowd of waiting travelers dwindled as each person created a door in thin air and stepped through. Finally, only the last wayfarer remained with the woman.

Unlike the others, this one showed fear. The woman frowned on the inside. These five people had been training all of their lives for this. They had been carefully selected, exhaustively evaluated and taught everything that could possibly help them. This one should not show *fear*.

As the four other voyagers had done before him, the last sojourner split open the air and stepped through. In a moment, the woman was alone.

With no one to watch her, she let her emotions flow. Suddenly finding herself exhausted, she sat down heavily on the ground. The thought of the final traveler showing fear rose up in

her mind. In a burst of anger, she threw her cap across the field. They had nothing to fear! They had been equipped by the best of science, trained by the best of teachers, chosen by the most rigorous of programs! Perhaps someone had made an error...

No. The cap-less woman shook her head. No error was possible. All of the tests had come out right. Even a slight deviation from what was required eliminated a candidate from the program. After all, there is no room for error when time travel is involved.

All across history, small anomalies were recorded. A leader saved by a miracle. A town being warned of a disaster by someone who doesn't exist. A disease cured by a procedure that hadn't been invented yet. After much pondering, the brightest minds had deduced that all of the abnormalities were because of time travelers. And where could the mysterious traveler be from but this time?

The first traveler would return soon, so the woman retrieved her tossed hat and stood at attention. But in her mind, she was still thinking rapidly. These five are only the beginning. Eventually dozens, perhaps hundreds, of time travelers would come and go from this field, fixing history. If only the first voyager would get back.

Her watch read ten minutes past the return time. She was puzzled. Surely that man, with his aura of confidence, would be punctual. But he never came.

As status after status went from "on time" to "late" to "failure," the woman's despair and shock grew. Weren't these people perfect for this task? Why had they all failed?

The sun rose and fell. The woman refused to leave. They must be coming soon. They *must*.

As the light grew less plentiful and the shadows more so, a new truth lodged itself in her mind. They had failed. All of the irregularities of history, they must have been fixed by other voyagers of time.

She turned to leave. In that moment, a crack sounded. The woman whipped around to face the opening portal. Instead of being a crude round shape hanging in air, the doorway was almost a perfect rectangle sitting on the ground. A man stepped through. The officer stifled a scream.

It was the last journeyer, that much was true. But he was as the woman had never seen him. In place of his period costume, a simple, worn robe hung over his drooping shoulders. His thin hands grasped the staff that he leaned on heavily. His eyes, once youthful, had become ancient and cracked, but still radiated a

poise and spirit she had never seen before. Within a day of the woman's time, he had become elderly.

He turned back to face the way he had come. With a spasm of effort, he tossed his rod back through the closing door. For a second, the staff became wedged in the crack in the air. Then the portal won the battle, and the staff shattered into millions of pieces. Having completed that, the last time traveler collapsed on the ground.

"Captain!" she yelled as she ran to his side. His pulse was barely there.

"Heh," the sojourner replied with a grin. "No one has called me that in a very long time."

With fascination and curiosity overwhelming her horror, she asked, "Where did you go?"

"Back," he whispered with his weak lungs. "Back to the beginning." The wonder in her eyes pleaded with him to go on.

"There was nothing," he continued. "No light, no land, no life. But then..." He trailed off into a wheeze.

"But then what?"

"Then a voice said, 'Let there be light,' and all of the universe was filled with light and beauty." The old traveler smiled once more before he leaned back his head on the ground and closed his eyes.

The awestruck woman was alone once more. But not truly alone, she realized as she watched the stars come out. She would never be alone. In silence, she watched the heavens fill with the light of a million stars.

Non-Fiction
Grades 11 & 12

Jasmin Godinez
Worthington, MN
1st Place

January 11, 2014

January 10, 2014—It was around 8 p.m., and I was barely getting home. I went home because I was going to get ready to go to a party my sister was having. I quickly got ready because my sister was trying to get stuff set for that night, so I hurried up and got dressed. I went downstairs, and I noticed Karlee. She is one of my friends, but also a waitress in my parent's bar. I then started talking to her; she told me she was so happy because she had taken her first food order in Spanish. She was super excited about that. I just smiled and laughed. I told her good job, and that she would learn way more Spanish being at my house since she was there 24/7.

She was singing to some customers later that night. They enjoyed hearing Karlee sing since she has such an amazing voice. I remember that night Karlee telling me she was getting tired of singing, but they wanted her to keep singing to them. I told her to sing for tips, and I laughed. She then laughed and said the customers had been giving her tips for her singing. I was about to head to my sister's house, so I said bye to my parents. I then told Karlee bye, and that we would see her later at my sister's party. We waited that night for Karlee to get to my sister's house, but she never showed up. We even tried calling her and texting her asking where she was. We never got a response, so we decided to call it a night and go home.

January 11, 2014—It was around 9 a.m., and my mom had woken me and my sister up. She told us Karlee had gotten into a car accident at 6 a.m. on her way home this morning. I couldn't believe it. I asked my mom where Karlee was. Is she okay? Are you sure it's Karlee? My mom then came closer to me and my sister and told us, "I'm sorry, girls, but Karlee's mom called to tell me I should have someone else work for Karlee because she had been in a car accident." My mom had asked her if Karlee was okay. Her mom started crying saying Karlee didn't make it and passed away that morning.

I was in denial; it couldn't be true. This can't be right, not Karlee?! We had waited for her to arrive last night, but she never showed up. I was in a state of shock; I couldn't believe my friend

Karlee had lost her life that morning. I tried calling her; I also messaged her a couple of times, saying: “Karlee call me.” “Are you okay?” “Please answer me; this can’t be right.” I didn’t get a response. It just didn’t sink in that she was dead; we had been with her the night before. I then logged on to Facebook and saw Karlee’s grandmother’s status:

The Sherriff came to our house to tell us our beautiful, creative, unique, loving, amazing Karlee was killed in a car accident caused by icy roads. She was only two miles away from our home. We were blessed that she had moved back in with us. Just wish we could have been able to spend more time with her. She was doing what 21-year-old kids do, working, hanging out with friends and coming home to sleep. We are comforted that she is in heaven, but broken-hearted, and there is a big empty spot in my heart. We wish we had her longer. She had so many exciting plans, BUT we are so grateful God let us have her for as long as he did. She’s a blessing and a gift. No matter how angry you are with your child or how angry they are with you, make sure to hug them and tell them how much you love them. God has gained an angel today. R.I. P. Karlee Mae, forever in our hearts.

I couldn’t believe it; she is dead. She’s gone. I started crying. I didn’t know what to say or how to feel. I had just been with her the night before. I just wanted to see Karlee and her pink and purple jacket walk in to work smiling as always.

It turned out Karlee had gotten off work early last night. She wanted to go to a party her ex-boyfriend was throwing. Karlee was crazy over her ex-boyfriend—that’s all she would ever talk about—how bad she wanted to get back together with him.

I really don’t know what happened that night, but I know that Karlee and her ex got into an argument. She was supposed to spend the night at his place. I am assuming that she was so upset, she decided to leave, knowing she wasn’t in a good condition to drive. She drove off leaving behind her pink and purple jacket.

Two miles before she got to her house, the icy road caused her to slide into a median. Karlee lost control of the wheel that caused the car to spin uncontrollably. The car flipped a couple of times and went into the ditch. A post stopped the car from flipping anymore, which caused Karlee to fly out of her car. Karlee’s body

banged into this post, leaving her little, cute face deformed along with her body. She was killed instantly.

I know everything happens for a reason, but sometimes I wish I knew what that reason was. I lost a good friend that day, and not one day goes by that it doesn't come into my mind. I miss you, Karlee. Words can't explain how much we all wish you were here with us. I hope to see you soon, my good friend. May you rest in peace. Until we meet again.

Ana Hernandez
Worthington, MN
2nd Place

A Hero to Me

When I was in middle school I attended school in Storm Lake, Iowa. I had a hard time making friends and going to school. Kids picked on me and called me horrible names. I don't know why I was treated like this; I did no harm to anyone.

All during this time I would blame myself. Maybe they picked on me because I wasn't cool enough, or I didn't dress like them. I thought it was my fault that they bullied me. I would never leave my room and had no motivation to go to school; I found no point in going. I was in middle school having thoughts of dropping out because of how other kids treated me.

My mom was there by my side the whole time, giving me motivation and encouraging words to keep moving forward. She even went to my school to complain to the principal; she wanted a stop to this. Since the principal did nothing and we saw no changes, my mom decided to leave Storm Lake and find a job and home elsewhere. It wasn't easy for her to quit her job and find a new one, but she did it all for me. She saved me from this nightmare I was going through. She puts others before herself. She is a strong person mentally and emotionally. She fights for a better life. Seeing how much she can take and still move forward makes me look up to her. I don't think I'll ever be able to handle as much as she can and has.

My mom inspires me to do my best. She's had hard times, being a young single mother of four kids with no one around to help, working 7 days a week just to put food on the table and clothing on us. I wish I could help her through everything she goes through just like she helps me get over my problems. My mother is my mom, dad, and, best friend. She is the definition of a hero.

Linda Rueda
Worthington, MN
3rd Place

Visible Feelings

I can say life has been difficult the past few years. I've not been the perfect girlfriend, sister, daughter or advocate anyone can ask for, but I do try my best. I sometimes think I try too hard to keep everything perfect. I consider myself a girl walking around shaped like a heart. Another reason why the past few years have been difficult is because I was in an abusive relationship.

Thursday I was walking home from work, and there was a car following me. I ignored it. Five minutes later, I received private calls. It was my ex telling me all these types of things. I have an order of protection against him, so I made a report to the police that day. The police wanted more evidence to make sure it was him, so they could make an arrest. The next night I received private calls and text messages from my ex threatening me. I was so nervous.

That night my ex showed up to the house, armed, and threatened to kill me. I expected him to leave when I mentioned the police.

He stood up and yelled, "The police won't stop me from doing something to you!"

I was terrified knowing my mother and little sister were inside the house. The dogs were barking like crazy to catch my mother's attention. I kept telling him, "No, please. Just stop!" I felt like I was trapped in a mouse trap, that I couldn't move.

I felt my mother behind me whispering to me, "Call the police," but I didn't have the strength to even move a muscle. My mom felt like she couldn't say anything or do anything knowing he was drugged up and could potentially hurt her, too. At that moment, my whole life flashed before my eyes. I thought those would be my last few breaths. I was thinking the worst.

He finally decided to go running off. The threat of the police being called had convinced him to leave.

I immediately called the police and notified them what had happened. My ex was found and put into custody that night, but no weapon was found. I was so relieved that he was behind bars. I realized that he was not worth the fighting to change him. My hopes of seeing him become a successful guy had vanished.

Being a victim of domestic abuse is something I would not like to see anyone else go through. My mom knows that I was abused but doesn't know any details. I feel relieved letting others know the situation I went through. What I can tell every person is this: It doesn't matter the situation you're in, don't doubt yourself. Don't look at where you started; look at where you finish. I finished strong.

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 SW/WC Service Cooperative have continued the contest on an annual basis.

The contest is open to all students in grades three through twelve. 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 who score the submissions according to a rubric. Each submission is scored by multiple student judges. The works with the highest scores are submitted to the final judges, faculty in the SMSU English Department. 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 English Department in late April each year. At the awards ceremony, student writers gather with their families and teachers to be recognized for their achievements. They receive awards, medals, and the *Creating Spaces* anthology in which the winning pieces from every category and group are published. 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

James A. Zarzana Marshall, Minnesota

Jim's professional career has centered on a love of language. He is deeply devoted to writing fiction and teaching.

Drawing on his own high school teaching experience, he has often taught and advised future high school teachers; many of his former students teach in this region.

Jim is in the midst of transition. After teaching nearly 41 years, 26 of those at Southwest Minnesota State University, he is moving on to a new chapter as a full-time writer.

His first novel, *The Marsco Dissident*, is a dystopian work about a bleak future in which a single mega-corporation rules the planet. It is available via Amazon, at the Marshall Area Fine Arts Center through the Read Local initiative in downtown Marshall, and the SMSU campus bookstore. He is in the process of completing the four-novel set, *The Marsco Saga*, with the publication of Book II, *Marsco Triumphant*, in spring 2015, and Book III, *The Marsco Sustainability Project*, in December 2015. After *The Marsco Saga*, he plans to write other sci-fi and realistic novels. His website: www.themarscosaga.com.

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