

5<sup>th</sup> Annual

# Unlocked Voices

2014 Teen Writing Contest



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## A Special Thank You

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***The Friends of Henderson Libraries***

for their generous contribution to this project.



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generous contribution to this project.



*Poetry*

the poets

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Jake Wagner  
Zach Watkins

Angelica Noelle Fuller  
High School Poetry

## The Blood Countess

For the life of the flesh is in the blood  
Blood is holy, the sacred sacrament  
For it is the blood by reason of  
The life that makes atonement

And so now I take this naked dagger  
Pointed at thine unmarked flesh  
Keep my resolve, try to be strong  
In the hopes of evading death

The way your skin is soft and white  
Glittering pale beneath moonlight  
How would the deep red blood contrast with your light complexion?  
Do it now! So little time  
I made my choice when it was mine  
Do it now! Before you turn away from your reflection

And so now I take this naked dagger  
Pointed at thine unmarked flesh  
Keep my resolve, try to be strong  
In the hopes of evading death

And so I take one last deep breath  
My stare is fixed, my fist is clenched  
Around the dagger as I press it quick against your wrist  
Do it now! Before you scream  
Do it now! Or I lose everything  
Without second thought I swipe the blade against your skin

And so now I hold this naked dagger  
Newly painted rich and red  
The worst is done, hail to the blood  
In my great evasion of death

Within mere moments it quickly swells  
Deep and red the bloods of Hell  
You are confused but you say naught, you are transfixed  
You let out a gasp, not of disgust  
Your widened eyes hold my same lust  
We both pause to stare with greed as the blood begins to drip

And so now I hold you at your wrist  
And twist your newly opened flesh  
Over the bowl and wait till it's full  
Creating my escape from death

I shake my head and shake off the spell  
Now to make sure you don't tell  
"Little Anastasia, speak ye not, that I might confess."  
My rehearsed lies come quick and easily  
Ones of nobles bleeding for their pale, thin beauty  
"But this must stay between you and me, your blood countess."

And so now I have you by the blood  
And revel in triumph after you've left  
I'd truly won before I'd begun  
In living blood hath I evaded death

I hold my breath and dip my face in  
The pool of blood swaddling my skin  
And I'm hesitant to break from so sweet an embrace  
I return for air, and the still warm blood  
Rests on my face till it's dried up  
I wash it away and admire my revitalized face

And so now I have eternal life  
Beauteous youth lingering on my flesh  
Now thanks to you, it's finally true  
Never shall I taste of death

Worry no more shall I of prophecy  
A child whose days will end quickly  
Or whose days will have no end  
Those words shall harm me never again

I needn't fear death if I forever stop time  
I needn't fear life if youth forever is mine  
I needn't fear the future when I'm beautiful  
I haven't any fear, only glorious control

For the life of the flesh is in the blood  
And now eternal am I, Erzsebet  
For it is the blood by reason of  
The life that makes atonement

Madeline Hayes  
High School Poetry

## I Want To Apologize

You might not understand that there are reasons

I don't just hand you my heart.

It's covered in scars.

Written poetry wrapped around each artery.

There's a clock ticking somewhere painted with hatred and loss.

Confusion is running through my veins.

My bones are shattering each minute because the loneliness dries  
them out.

I keep breaking off pieces of my heart and giving them to boys  
who tell me they are gentle surgeons who can repair my heart  
with miracle grow-

It'll help with the parts I'll never get back.

But they always end up being more like criminals,  
Claiming they need more than I already gave just to make sure  
they're doing their job right.

But then they take off and I'm left with nothing but a smaller  
heart bursting with love for the last man who left me with no  
words.

So when you ask me why I'm so closed off,

Remember:

The last boy who touched me whispered peaceful lullabies into  
my ear and clawed lies into my skin.

Remember that I choke on the word love because I etched it into  
my hip where he used to hold me.

Or that I'm standing in the soil used to bury my innocence  
because of a guy who promised he loved me.

If you promise me forever, I'll tell you about the time I spent  
hours wishing I could see into the future so that I wouldn't have to  
keep giving the same guy more and more of my fragile heart

Because maybe on the sixth try,

He would get it right.

Kaloni Mack  
High School Poetry

[untitled]

Shield my eyes  
And hide my ears  
Sing me to sleep and  
Open my deep wasting wounds  
Then tell me the truth am I still beautiful

## Electric Chair

My father now has earned himself,  
A sentence in a chair.  
And though it is electric...  
Prison is not what put him there.  
Some that hate him, blame himself,  
And say he could blame no one else,  
But I choose to see the light, you see?  
And that doesn't mean that I blame me.

Fate can deal a cruel cruel hand to those who don't "deserve" it.  
But what if the ones that you THINK do..  
Just choose to hold instead of purge it?  
This world is a disgusting place- No fight from me in that.  
Or even in the argument,  
That the bads deserve their self-set traps.

Sickness is his keeper..  
The one who holds the keys.  
The one that gave the sentence..  
The one who made his torment unsease.  
But after years of hurting others..  
In their heads or by his scar..  
People say that he deserves..  
The verdict he's been charged.

But how could a broken homed child..  
Deserve to well walk never again?  
Even if his way to handle it was wicked..  
Does he deserve the curse he's in?  
The world is just so quick to judge:  
There's another distinguishing worldly trait..  
And this is one of the worst places to ask for sympathy:  
This earth rooted in hate.

So I won't ask you all to love him.  
Or feel bad for a monsters pain.  
I just wonder why the ones who judge,  
Think they're so much better than the blamed.





## Caged

I feel caged.  
Like a songbird under  
lock and key.  
I see life through bars  
and sun broken by slates.  
I feel caged.  
Like an animal in the circus.  
Prowling back and forth,  
growing tired of  
pointed fingers.  
I feel caged.  
Like a prisoner of war.  
A cold, damp feeling  
with rotten air.  
I feel caged.

Hannah Potts  
Middle School Poetry



## The Mighty Majesty

The glory and the terror of the seas,  
The mighty Majesty  
Her golden sails and such tales are told of her beauty,  
On display for all to see  
The battle rages by her prow,  
Her royal days are over now  
Her foe has sank long before, but the Majesty  
Will sail no more  
Before the dawn has been seen  
Over is her glorious dream  
The prince's ship with the golden sails  
Is lying in the graveyard of the whales  
Now she's just a legend of a glory  
Once before  
A dreamship made of fairytales  
From a distant shore  
A ship in a bottle  
Lying on the attic floor  
The glory and the terror  
Will sail no more  
The manta rays guard  
Their sunken prey  
Her soldier's swords, all shattered and dull lie  
Useless all around the hull  
The prince's ship with the golden sails  
Is now in the land of fairytales  
There it lies on the ocean floor  
The sails will feel the breeze, no more  
One day divers from a distant shore  
May see her beauty, Oh! Once more  
But the prince's ship with the golden sails  
Is lying in the graveyard  
Of the whales.

Anthony Sepulveda  
Middle School Poetry



## Five Hundred

Down right corner of the graveyard. Being five hundred.  
Sitting in a box with no guts to get out.  
A day of warm layers of flesh  
Lying on my back with a straight spine  
All stiff in a box. I was five hundred.

I had shiny bones and a shiny face,  
But no guts to show it.  
I was empty hearted in a beautiful and colorful box.  
It felt like everyone died. I was five hundred.

If I had the guts and heart to do it,  
I would climb and climb until I got  
To the highest mountain and stay  
There until I die. I was five hundred.

Then my eyes were  
Open as wide as they could be and stared  
At the top of the box, then  
Wondered if I could walk. I stayed  
There. Five hundred.

Anna Joy Tanksley  
High School Poetry



## What is Love to the Nine Muses?

*Erato:*

Love is the eloquent words of a poet,  
Poured out to his lost sweetheart.  
His words are sweet and dripping with honey,  
But alas! Poison is the honey  
To the nymph  
He lusts after!  
Still, he declares his love with flowing words  
Beautiful, yet distraught.

*Euterpre:*

Love is a sweeping melody,  
The birds' songs are harsh and grating  
And the bees buzz in vain;  
For nature cannot rival this melody  
Of a lover  
The flowers bloom just at the catch of a few notes.

*Thalia:*

Love is not some tragic affair;  
It is a joyful chase!  
Marked by humor, mischief, and playful  
Flirtations.  
Chase on, lover!  
Heaven's blessing is upon you,  
And your love will be boundlessly rewarded  
With joy.

*Polyhymnia:*

Love is not one song, but many:  
The lyrical poem with subtle meanings in hope of reaching the nymph's ears  
The tongue that pours forth both declarations and curses over rejection  
The joyful lips that draw in the lover, sealing eternal matrimony with a simple  
action of love  
The wordless tune, admired by many, but intended for only one.

*Calliope:*

Love is represented by my long-lost son  
Orpheus;  
His deep love for the lost bride led him even to Hades  
To retrieve his love.  
Alas, had he not doubted the fearsome god's promise

And looked back,  
He would have kept his bride!  
The love, though tragic, was true  
As shown by such measures.

*Urania:*

Love is eternal;  
Boundless;  
Much like the universe,  
Love does not quickly burn out as the stars do.  
It continues, much like a circling comet in the heavens  
To endure for all time.

*Clio:*

Ah, love is quite interesting  
As it has been shown in different ways  
By different men.  
At the dawn of time,  
Kronos showed his love of himself  
And the throne  
By daring to devour his own children.  
Arrogant also was the handsome Narcissus  
Who rejected helpless echo  
For his own beautiful reflection.  
Self-love, however, is only one side of the coin;  
Because of his intense passion for beautiful Helen  
Paris took great lengths to make her his bride;  
A war was wrought, as a result.  
But brave Odysseus, after the war  
Spent eons, through storms and giants and witches,  
To reach his beloved Penelope  
And his son  
Out of love.

*Melpomene:*

Listen not to my sister's playful fantasies;  
Love is a hardship, wrought with trials,  
And heartbreak  
And sorrow.  
It is no easy game.  
Love is a beautiful crown to wear,  
But there is a cost, a heavy cost  
To the unfortunate lovers  
Imbued with tragedy.

*Terpsichore:*

What is love, you may ask?  
My, what a simple question!  
Love is an endless dance!  
The lovers' feet move to the rhythm  
Their bodies sway to the beat  
And they rejoice in each other's happiness;  
Not even Hercules could tear them apart.

Kimberly Topalian  
Middle School Poetry

## Love Is

“What is love?” People may ask.  
“Does it hide or wear a mask?”  
I can assure you that love does not hide.  
It’s actually probably sitting at your side.

Love is looking into each other’s eyes,  
And not hiding a thing. Not a single lie.  
Love is a party you both attend,  
And not wanting the night to end.  
Love is to never fight  
And wanting to hold each other every single night.  
Love is that when you’re apart,  
You keep each other in the heart.  
Love is feeling like you can never get enough,  
And when you’re apart it’s really tough.

That there is what love is.  
You can feel it in the very first kiss.  
Everybody has his or her own match.  
You just got to put yourself out there and get snatched.  
Don’t fall for the wrong person.  
Let’s just say that’ll be a lesson.  
Just remember you won’t end up alone.  
Your heart is just waiting to get stolen.

Alexa Tribuli  
Middle School Poetry

## Between Spring and Fall

This happens every year  
My favorite time  
Summer sounds I start to hear  
Birds and ice cream trucks  
Start to rhyme

Long warm nights  
Children swimming in their pools  
Fireworks are a wonderful sight  
School doors are closed we have no rules

Pack up the car  
Trips to the sea  
The journey always feels so far  
Nothing better than the beach  
To me

Dad lights the grill  
And we all smell the food  
Chicken, burgers, and hotdogs too  
The summer eats that  
Put me in the mood

When September arrives  
I know summer  
Must leave  
But for now I'll just stand  
By the warm ocean  
Breeze

Darion Villante  
High School Poetry

## Sonnet 8

Your eyes are the stars that grace beauty's crown,

But how can that be said honestly?

The stars of earth and sky are easily found,  
But your soul-gates are beheld not easily.

Your wave rippled oceans of overcast reflection,  
Washing frozen on a beach of pearly sand,  
Are more mighty than the Bear—more resplendent than the  
Sisters complexion  
That ever dance across the high cloudland.

Heaven paves its lanes with gold,  
However, I see rivers of it that flow in tresses,  
Down to your shoulders they tranquilly unfold,  
Softer than the most royal dresses.

My heart will beat swiftly never again,  
Save when our arms meet again.



Jake Wagner  
Middle School Poetry

## Bullying

The kids Pointed and the kids laughed  
At the young girl in the back of the class

The one with her head down  
To conceal her frown  
The one who's face of confusion  
Led to all the students intrusion

Her feeling miserable was the children's desire  
They most enjoyed teasing her of her attire  
To the clothing she would wear  
To the weird styles of her hair

Why are they doing this she wondered to herself  
She was so short they would call her an elf

Is it because I'm white  
I don't want to fight  
Just leave me alone  
I want to go home

She tried to alert the teacher  
But she did not listen  
So she kept her head down  
With a really big frown

This is bullying  
It's happening everywhere  
Don't be afraid to intrude  
Because it may happen to you

Zach Watkins  
High School Poetry

## Writing

I find safety and comfort  
With a pen in hand  
And paper before me  
Writing my thoughts  
Writings my feelings  
No one can touch me  
No one can harm me  
Writing the world as I see it  
Not as they tell me to see it  
The feelings come pouring out  
Like water from a glass  
The paper soaks in the ink  
And there they are  
My words  
They are the expression  
Of who I am  
Of who I was  
Of who I will be  
This is where I found strength  
This is where I found power  
This is where I found  
Who I truly am



*Short  
Story*

the storytellers

Emily Bordelove  
Abigail Emperado  
Dante Cardinale  
Bianca Castillo  
William Culbreth  
Griffin Garcia  
Shaina Garry  
Alyssa Hunter  
Sariyah Jerome  
Madison Kleinrock  
Lexi Lane  
Nick LeVasseur  
Harlee Miscovich  
Camille Morris  
Haley Oravec  
Darice Parker  
Kieara Peery  
Summer Shelton  
Samatha Sparks

## They Were Twelve

They were twelve. It was seventh grade English class with Mrs. Owen. He sat right across from her and had a knack for pestering her about everything, so she quickly developed a knack for kicking him painfully below the brown plastic posing as their wooden desks. That's how she met her best friend all those years ago. The more she thinks about him the harder it is to remember. She can only identify splashes of recollections of their friendship, as if trying to recall a dream; the memories themselves infinitely intangible.

"I remember the time you told me about your first kiss. You called me from the church bathroom after it happened with sounds of embarrassment and excitement skipping off your tongue. You worried you had done it wrong and described to me the cherry lip gloss she was wearing when she kissed you. I silently vowed to never wear cherry lip gloss and I still haven't.

"I remember sophomore year when we joined Concert Choir together. We made faces across the choir trying relentlessly to read each other's lips during rehearsals. Whenever I saw you sing, I half cringed, half laughed at the unintentional deranged expression that was your natural singing face. It was the face of a cockatoo taking its dying breath, a very passionate gospel singer belting out the Lord's Psalms, and a body builder straining himself under a 400 pound bench press. All tied together with the bow of an ostrich about to sneeze. Even though it was demented, and sometimes I had to look away from the ridiculousness of it all, these days, I miss it.

"I remember you playing with the little plastic pearl beads on my silver ballet flats every time I wore them, and the bizarre, but assumingly chic, pullover you used to wear with the peculiar collar that I referred to as your European sweater.

"I remember the day you didn't come to school. Your empty chair

at the lunch table was casually forgotten. I just thought you were at home skipping or maybe you got the flu that was going around. Whatever it was I figured you'd tell me that night, but you never texted me that night, or any night after that. One day of your absence turned into a week, and that week into a month, and that month into a year, and now here I stand one year, four months, and twelve days without you by my side - alone.

"I remember the months when I thought you were dead. I was in my SAT prep class when a friend of mine sent me a picture of you she took when she ran into you at a restaurant. I cried when I saw it. All of the insanely intelligent kids with their wishing well deep pockets stared at me like I should be in a mental ward, but they didn't know at that moment I received proof that my missing best friend was alive. An awkward grainy photo of you standing in front of a five foot tall tomato is still the only proof I have of your life.

"I remember the first rumor that was spread around school by your church friends. They said your parents decided to pull you out of school because you were falling behind, but I knew better. You had an immaculate grade point average. I asked the girl at the rumor's epicenter if she knew anything more about why you were gone, and she told me she wasn't allowed to tell. She knew. She knows right now what happened to you, but I don't. For four years you were mine and I was yours. We didn't need anyone else. I was never your second choice and you were never mine. We knew more about each other's minds than our own, and then you left me. How could you do that? I was your best friend and you vanished.

"I remember when we were freshman we talked about what it would be like this year, senior year. We made predictions about how we'd spend senior ditch day, how horrendous we'd be at senior dodge ball, how we would apply to college and discuss which ones we wanted to attend, and how we'd go to senior prom together. When I graduate on June 13th, your name will not be called, you will not walk across the stage with your diploma, and you will not move your tassel. No one will notice anything out of the ordinary, but I will, I always do..."

Sometimes when she hears her name called she mistakes it for a

'memaly' in a Columbian accent. It is only after a moment she realizes that it is her brain's way of telling her what she wants to hear. A way of trying to console the incessant vacancy she feels within herself. Sometimes her eyes glance across the choir, looking for his unsettling singing face out of repetition and routine, only to feel the sting of the void. Going to school every day and walking the same hallways, leaves her with a hollow feeling in her torso, as if she was the tin man walking around every day without a heart.

When he first left she'd write little purple Post It sticky notes to him about what was going on in her life and stick them in the back of her closet behind her clothes. But one day she stopped. Her lungs incapable of breathing for a few seconds, because it was then she tragically realized her life is going to keep moving forward, and his life is going to keep moving forward, but their life together has stopped.

As she tries to piece together all the broken and tangled memories, she can only think about the last time she called him. It was October 18, his 18th birthday. It went straight to an automated voice messaging system, just as it had every other time she called his phone. She left a voice mail and with each word she spoke a miniscule, seemingly unnoticeable part of her disappeared through the phone and she knew she'd never get it back. The worst part wasn't that he didn't answer, or even that he'd been gone for so long; it was that she would never know if he got that message. She would never know if he heard her voice. She would never know if she was on his mind. She would never know if he received all the undetectable pieces of her she sent to him through that message.

As salty tributaries race down her face and burn her lips, the same lips he once confessed he wanted to be his first, she gasps for the answers she will never receive. A part of her, arguably the weakest or the strongest, hopes that she'll see him again. She's picturing herself ten years from now when she'll walk into the grocery store on an ordinary afternoon to buy grapes, purple grapes, and she'll look up and see him across the produce section. They won't run to each other and embrace, they won't even speak. They'll just acknowledge the other's presence with small smiles; smiles that fill the long barren nothingness within her, smiles that repair all the wounds and heal all the scars, smiles that will make her feel warm once again.

## The Maze

“Wake up!” I hear in a loud, peppy voice. Confused, I look at the clock only to see blurs. Slightly miffed, I put on my glasses to see it is 5:45 AM. Seeing this, I fall straight into my pillow, exhausted. Suddenly, the voice speaks again.

“No, don’t go back to sleep! Come on, look at the TV!” I moan at this excited and over reactive voice, when it dawns on me that I live alone.

Frightened, I look over to the television set mounted on the wall to see a game show host on the screen. I quickly let out a breath of relief, thinking that the whole thing was just an advertisement for their show.

“Listen Grant, do you want to be on the show or not?” he says. I look over at the TV screen in total shock; he just said my name, which is really Grant Peterson.

“Wait... Me?” I say, pointing at myself.

“Yes, you! Look at the e-mail I sent you, and you’ll know where to go, but honestly, the decision of accepting the challenge is up to you. I hope to see you soon!” he replies, leaving the screen. Quickly, I let out an exasperated “Wait!” but he is already gone, and the TV is now back on its normal schedule. Hurriedly, I go to my laptop to see that he did send me the e-mail. I put the address into my GPS, and I rush to the location.

When I arrive at the destination, I find that I am the first competitor to get there. After a few hours, I see it is 12:30, and we prepare to start, since the show airs at one and most of the competitors are here. We are allowed to introduce ourselves to our future adversaries or possible teammates, but I just wait in the corner for the show to begin. After about 15 more minutes, the teams (and enemies) have been set, and we are set into a launch pad. A launch pad is a very small room where competitors lay straight down until they are “launched” into the arena. Suddenly, I know the game is beginning when I hear the host say,

“Hello everyone, and welcome to the Maze! This is Mike Granite here, reporting live from Channel 732. Now, let’s get started!” I hear a deafening sound of applause, and the countdown begins, starting at the number 10. When it finishes, we, meaning the 99 competitors and I, are dropped into a maze. The maze we are in differs each week, and it is no ordinary maze; the owners of the

show have filled this maze with pranks and gimmicks, which can all be found in the 4 Areas of the maze. Also, there are hidden cameras, as you would expect, and a place called the Final Stretch. In the Final Stretch, all competitors remaining race to the finish, and the first one out wins. This is often where the teams break, because there are no gimmicks to stop the other competitors. I think about how I've watched this show each week, merely dreaming of competing, when suddenly, we are all dropped into the first Arena.

I survey the area to see it is a mirror maze, which would normally be easy, but as I mentioned, this show never follows what is normal. The mirrors are unscathed, making it look like we are all trapped. Many competitors scale the walls, and many other lie in panic, until suddenly, 5 of them vanish, then 4 more, until there are only about 40 of us left. I start to worry, until I see where someone went, and when I check the area, I see it is a hidden passage that leads further into the maze. After about 5 minutes, I've stumbled over to Area 2. This area is an area called a "Test to be the Best", where it is a normal maze, but if you touch a wall, you are faced with a question. Get it right, and you continue on. Get it wrong, and you start over from the beginning of Area 1. Luckily, I am only quizzed twice, and I proceed to Area 3 in a breeze. When I get there, only about 15 people have made it this far, and 7 are on a team. The next part is a large wall that requires 4 people for even 1 person to get up. The group of 7 mockingly lets 4 members up and asks if any of the other people want to help, but we refuse. Soon, 6 of us agree to help each other up the step. 3 of us get up, and as one of us is reaching for the fourth, an immense wall hits him and 2 that were on the other team. Another wall is approaching, but the remaining 4 of us dodge it and advance to Area 4. When we get there, it looks like a normal hallway leading straight into the Final Stretch; so one of the guys from the team of 7 pushes us out of the way and walks in. I look in the hallway to see him fall straight into a trapdoor, when I realize that it is the advanced Prank Stage. Begrudgingly, the 3 of us remaining go into it and make it out, although we are cover in crême pies and such. As we realize we have made it, we each run to the end, but the two of them fight, so I run, hoping they will take a very long time. I am almost there, when suddenly, something trips my leg, and I fall to the floor. When I see that it is the final boy who is against me, I sprint to him and dive to catch his leg, but he takes me with him. When the finish is only a few yards away, I swing his leg backwards, giving me a boost to barely finish the course.

"Well, that's the show! The winner is... Grant Peterson!!" the host says. As I realize that I actually did win, I let him lift my hand up, and accept the victory. That is how I beat The Maze.



Bianca Castillo

High School Short Story

## Notice Me

The first thing I noticed was the beeping noise and the bright lights. I felt a sharp pain in my head from the blinding lights.

"Clara?" I looked up once I heard my mother's voice. "Oh Clara!" She let out a sob and moved over to me quickly. "Clara! Why would you do that? Why would you scare all of us?" She stared at me wide eyed, quickly sitting down in the seat beside my bed. I stayed quiet for a few seconds, looking around the room and figuring out that I was in the hospital.

I opened my mouth to talk and realized how dry it was. I couldn't face my mother right now, especially since I didn't have an answer. I wiggled my fingers, trying to get feeling back into my hand. I looked up when my dad walked into the room and I felt myself feel even smaller.

My brother, Daniel, followed behind my dad, holding a pack of cookies and a cup of coffee. I assumed that they had just come from the cafeteria. "Clara, when I dropped you off at the party last night, you promised me you wouldn't drink. You promised!"

"Da-" I sputtered, coughing loudly and groaning from the dryness of my throat. Daniel quickly walked out into the hall and returned with a small Styrofoam cup. "Here, I got you some water." He handed me the cup before sitting down beside my mom. My hand shook as I lifted the cup to my mouth. I drank the water and let out a sigh of relief.

"Now answer my question Clara. Why did you do something so stupid and idiotic?" My dad's hands were clenched, along with his jaw. He wasn't even looking at me, his gaze was straight to the floor.

"I wasn't trying to get drunk dad. I swear! I just...I was so angry and hurt!"

"Angry? Hurt? From what?" He lifted his gaze and stared straight ahead at me. "What? Is there a boy who broke your heart? Are you hiding stuff from us Clara?" My mom looked at my father and then back at me.

"Did you have a boyfriend Clara?" She looked at me, hurt obvious in her eyes.

"No! No I didn't! I didn't even drink that much! I had three bottles of beer! How was I supposed to know I was going to get alcohol poisoning?"

"You're underage Clara! You shouldn't have been drinking at all! Now, why did you get drunk, ignore every single one of our phone calls, and why were you downtown in a tattoo parlor instead of at Anne's party?" My reasoning sounded extremely stupid now, even to me.

I played with my Styrofoam cup as I mumbled, "I was angry with you guys."

"Why were you angry Clara?" My dad walked up to the end of my bed, staring at me and only me.

"Because you guys don't care. You don't care about Daniel and you don't care about me!"

My mom gasped, clutching Daniel's hand that had been resting on her shoulder. "Clara, why do you think we don't care about you? That's ridiculous! We love you so much sweetheart!"

"If you do, why do you do this to me? To Daniel and I?"

"What are you talking about Clara? We're giving you guys a life!"

I snorted and then winced, the pain in my head worsening as my voice rose. "I don't ever hear from you dad. I never hear from you except for when I'm with you! And when I am, you don't listen to anything I say! It's always about you, about what happened during your week. And mom, you were so strict, always on top of us to do our chores or homework. You don't even care about the state of our grades or the state of our home. You're divorced! Get over it! You two have two children that are going to be going out into the world soon to create their own lives! Why aren't you guys there to help Daniel with all of his

college applications? He's graduating in just months!" My mom was clearly ashamed and my dad was furious.

"So you did this? You put your life in jeopardy to say this?"

My eyes were blurred with tears as I took a deep breath. "I did this so you would listen to me! So you would notice me! I wasn't meant to be in the hospital. I was just going to stay out really late and give you a little scare."

"You did more than a little scare Clara." My mom shook her head, standing up. "I'm sorry for not paying attention to you and Daniel. You're right. You are. But you had no right to do this to us!"

My dad nodded, looking over to Daniel. "You could have died Clara."

"And the worst part of it is that you all wouldn't have noticed until I was dead. It took you both a trip to the hospital to realize that you're hurting us! You've been terrible parents!" My mom and dad looked at each other, nodding.

"You're right. But there's still so much wrong with what you did Clara."

"I know. But you have to understand that this wasn't my intentions. I just wanted you all to listen. Pay attention to what you guys were doing."

My mom took my hand, wiping her eyes. "We love you so much Clara. Please don't do this again! Please just yell at us! Just please don't do something stupid!"

I nodded, making that promise. I honestly wasn't trying to put myself in the hospital. But that's what it took to get my parents to listen to me. For them to see how blind they were being. I took a deep breath before shutting my eyes again. This wasn't over. It wouldn't be over for a long time. But for now, I was glad that my parents weren't as blind anymore. They could see and realize that changes needed to be made. I wasn't willing to do anything drastic anymore and I decided to leave the planning to someone else. My plans were terrible and would probably put me back here again.

But having two parents instead of one, it wasn't so bad anymore.

# William Culbreth

## High School Short Story

### Twenty Thousand Feet High

#### Act 1: Scene 1

*(Cockpit: Pilot and the Copilot sitting at the controls. They are sitting with their backs to the audience. The sound of the engines roar in the background)*

Pilot: Dark night out there. Did you get any signals from the control tower at JFK yet?

Co-pilot: Not yet, Captain. The altimeter says we are still out twenty thousand feet. That is too high to come for a landing. Should I stay at that altitude?

Pilot: Sounds like a good idea until we made contact with them. I wish I could see some lights out there.  
*(The plane starts to shake and there is a loud noise; pilot and co-pilot mimic shaking.)*

Co-pilot: *(shaking)* What was that?

Pilot: *(The pilot swivels in his chair towards the audience and tries to take a sip of coffee and it spills on him)* I don't know. Rats, I spilled my coffee! *(Loud noise begins again and pilot wipes off the coffee).*

Pilot: *(standing up)* I am going to check that out! Maybe it's ice or there's something wrong with the wing. Take the control of the plane until I get back! *(Lights go down on the Cockpit)*

#### Act I: Scene II

*(Lights come up on the cabin. The pilot walks through the cabin looking all over the place. Suddenly a noise comes from the restroom. Pilot carefully opens the door and looks in.)*

Pilot: *(gasping)* Oh my God! *(Creature sits on the toilet. A Puppeteer in a black suits moves its body)*

Creature: Gaaah! (*Creature opens its mouth wide*) Cawww-hiss, caww-hiss! (*Creature starts to leap up and moves towards the pilot. Pilot slams the door before the creature can get out.*)

Pilot: (*breathless*) Whew! (*There is a thud as the creature tries to bang against the door*) (*wringing his hands*) Ughh, that really smelled awful! (*Pilot stands by the restroom door shaking, there is the loud sound of a heart beating. Flight attendant appears.*)

Flight attendant: (*concerned*) Sir, is there a problem?  
(*A puppeteer places a mask on the flight attendant's face. The pilot turns and looks at her with disbelief.*)

Pilot: (*screaming*) No, no, no! (*He dashes to the left and the lights go down.*)

### Act 1: Scene III

(*The lights come up on the cockpit, the pilot slams the door shut and tries to lock it. Co-pilot is staring straight ahead at his controls.*)

Co-pilot: (*matter of fact, staring out the window*) Did you solve the problem?

Pilot: (*standing by the door, screaming and shaking*) There is a ugly creature in the bathroom! Believe me! It is real!!

Co-pilot: (*The co-pilot swivels in his chair towards the pilot, he wears a mask of a burning skull with a evil laugh*)

Pilot: No!! Not you too! (*He screams and he frantically unlocks the cockpit door. The lights go down*)

### Act I Scene IV

(*The lights come up on the cabin, the pilot excitedly races through the door and runs down the aisle and bumps into the flight attendant.*)

Pilot: (*gasping*) You're..re not a monster!

Flight attendant: (*staring angrily into the pilot's eyes*) What's your problem! What's your problem! (*mildly shakes him*) Get a hold of yourself! What's wrong with you?

Pilot: Uhh-hh... *(Pilot turns away from the flight attendant and moves frantically to the policeman. The policeman is seated in the last row by the restroom.)*

Pilot: *(panting, stuttering)* Sir, sir, the-the-ere's a cre-cre-cre-ature in the bathroom and my co-co-co-pilot has a bur-bur-bur-burning skull!

Policeman Passenger: *(indignant)* What are you talking about, Are you off your rocker? Can't you just leave me alone? I'm going to a police convention! I don't have time for this!

*(The policeman takes out handcuffs and the puppeteer puts on a black mask over the cop's head. The mask on the policeman looks like a black void with no eyes, no mouth, no ears and no hair. The pilot stares at him for a second.)*

Pilot: *(screaming)* NO! *(The pilot changes direction. He runs back towards the rest room. As he goes, he stops and stares at the people. Lights go down. Lights come up again. The human passengers have changed to furry people. The pilot stops.)*

Pilot: *(screaming)* Oh no! Help me! *(Lights go down, lights come up, the furry people have changed back into human passengers. A doctor with a stethoscope gets out of seat and approaches the pilot.)*

Doctor Passenger: *(slowly, carefully)* Excuse me sir, are you having a seizure? *(The doctor extends his stethoscope out towards the pilot's chest. Puppeteer puts a mask on the doctor. It is a monstrous face with a hole in the center, jagged teeth and a long tongue. The puppeteer wraps the tongue around the pilot's leg.)*

Pilot: *(frantically shaking his leg)* Get off me! Let me go! *(The pilot gets his leg free and he sprints towards the cockpit, lights go down.)*

### Act I Scene VII

*(Lights come up on the cockpit. Puppeteer works goblins. They play with the controls. Pilot grabs an rubber ax and moves towards the goblins.)*

Pilot: *(angrily raising the ax)* Get off the controls! *(The pilot swings ax down, striking one of the goblins.)*

Goblin: *(falling)* Ugh!! *(The Puppeteer lowers the goblin and pink streamers mimic blood coming out its body. The pilot moves on to the next goblin.)*

Pilot: *(raising the ax)* I'll take care of you too! *(Pilot hits all the remaining goblins and puppeteers move pink streamers all over the cockpit. Then, the cockpit door suddenly opens. Passengers and flight attendant run in and start trying to grab hold of the pilot.)*

Passengers and Flight Attendant: *(yelling together)* Get him! Stop him!

Pilot: *(struggling)* Leave me alone! I have to save the plane from these creatures! *(Man with a Hawaiian shirt hits the pilot with a fire extinguisher, lights come down).*

#### Act I: Scene VIII

*(Lights come up on the cockpit, the pilot is alone. He begins to wake up.)*

Pilot: *(confused, rubbing his head)* What happened? *(Pilot looks around slowly. He see the damaged controls and his dead co-pilot.)*

Pilot: *(upset)* Oh my god! What have I done!?! *(Engine sound effects of a plane out of control, lights flash, pilot falls off the stage, more lights flash, Then, there is crashing noise, and lights come down.)*

#### Act I Scene IX

*(Lights come up, the stage is empty of the cabin and cockpit set, pilot is laying on big white sheet in the upstage, tufts of cotton fall from the sky to emulate snow, a projector projects a jagged mountain peak on the a cloth suspended across the rear of the stage, a piece of the front part of the plane is tilted up, stuck in the stage next to him.)*

Pilot: *(slowly, softly)* Help! *(louder)* Help me, I can't move! *(A grizzly bear appears from stage left. The pilot sees it.)*

Pilot: *(screaming)* Oh no! So, somebody pl-e-a-s-e help me! *(Lights come down as disembodied voice speaks over speaker system)*

Air Traffic Controller Voice: *(trailing off)* This is the JKF Control Tower, Flight 283, please make contact. Flight 283, are you out there...

Abigail Emperado  
High School Short Story

## Monsters In The Closet

When Caroline was seven, she believed that there were monsters in her closet. Her parents would check every night, tell her it was alright, and tuck her into bed with kind, soothing words. Caroline would smile and snuggle in her blankets until sleep claimed her for the night. And every morning after she'd wake up, she trot down the polished wooden staircase to have breakfast with her family.

“Good morning, sweetheart.” her father greeted, “Did you sleep well?”

“Yup! There were no monsters, like you said, daddy!” she exclaimed. Her mother and father exchanged looks. She was a child. Let her be.

“That’s right, Caroline.” said her mother as she set down a plate of pancakes in front of her daughter, “You shouldn’t worry about monsters. They’ll never come for you because you’re a good girl.”

“But-But what if they come for you?!”

“They won’t, I promise.”

And Caroline believed them.



A year later, eight year old Caroline stood in the kitchen with her teddy bear hanging from her loose grip. She stared at her feet which were stained with some kind of red liquid.

Her mother was in that puddle of that red liquid with a hole in her chest. Just a ways away, her father was in a similar state, but the hole was in his head and some kind of oddly shaped item in his hand that Caroline didn't recognize. It looked like the funny thing she knew her daddy kept in the drawer next to his bed and told her never to touch.

For a few minutes, she stood there.

Staring.

Wondering.

And finally realizing. Her parents had lied to her.

The monsters did come for them.

They just didn't come out of the closet.

## He's Here!

“Where is he?” I remember asking my mom when I was little.

I never met my dad, but they tell me he is fighting for us. I didn't think he was real when I was young. I thought he was like Santa because they told me that he travels in the dark. My mom keeps a picture of a man. I think his name is John. She sends letters to him and he sends letters back. I didn't know my dad. I never knew what it was like to have one.

One day a man came in my house and my mom started crying. I grabbed my toy gun. I was afraid. Suddenly, I realized it was the man in the pictures. I put down my toy gun and cried. He was my dad. I ran to him and he hugged me. At that moment it felt like the whole world stopped. We are together now. We are a family. He's here and I was finally a son.

## Lizzie

Lizzie ran her slender fingers along the rough surface of the grey, cracked walls of the rows and rows of office buildings as she walked, careful to tread quietly so she wouldn't attract attention. She knew it was dangerous, being out alone at midnight in Detroit at only fourteen, but her mother wouldn't let her back into her house until she'd sobered, and forgotten why she was mad at Lizzie in the first place, so she had no choice what to wander the dark streets.

She shivered, withdrawing her hand from skidding against the wall and choosing instead to cross her arms over her chest to try to warm herself. She was in nothing but a loose fitting tank top she'd borrowed from her overweight friend Camille, and Detroit was freezing at night, especially in October.

Lizzie chewed on her lip, which was still bleeding from when her mother had struck her, though not nearly as much. She swallowed the bile rising in her throat as she thought of returning home. It was her only option; either stay out here and freeze to death, or possible meet an even worse fate, or return home to an alcoholic mother who couldn't even take care of herself, let alone her daughter. Lizzie had always gone back, no matter what, and the cycle would surely repeat indefinitely. Her mom would yell at her, Lizzie would retreat to her room, her mother would enter uninvited after a bit of heavy drinking, and Lizzie would end up leaving with a new cut or bruise to add to her growing collection.

The teen weighed her options as she walked. Camille's place was out of the question; it was all the way on the other side of town. Her other friend, Victoria, lived in the tiny basement of her grandparents, who didn't even seem to notice her existence. Lizzie definitely couldn't go there. She had no choice. These streets weren't safe, and it'd been nearly two hours. Maybe her mother had fallen asleep.

Lizzie's head jerked up at the sound of wild laughter in an alley, and she sped her pace a little. She was almost to the bridge, which led to a short cut to a rare, golden meadow near her home. The abandoned field would be much safer than these allies, filled with creepy old men and crazy young adults.

She glanced down another dark side street and froze. There, nearly hidden in a pile of trash and leaves, was the unmistakable glint of gold.

"No way," she whispered to herself. It couldn't be. A pile of gold,

just for her!

She blinked, and it was gone.

Lizzie silently cursed herself as she began walking again.

Mentally conjuring things she desired wouldn't benefit her at all. She had to work for money. It wouldn't just miraculously appear, right before her amid a pile of garbage and foliage. She couldn't afford to be a dreamer when life insisted she keep her head out of the clouds.

Lizzie could see the bridge now, a glowing, rainbow-colored arch that was a beacon in the distance. But that wasn't true at all! The bridge was wooden! Lizzie blinked, and the inviting light disappeared, replaced by the dull light of the lone streetlight that sat beside the bridge, dutifully lighting the way for anyone who came that way.

She froze when a realization whacked her in the head. The bridge resembled her future. What she wanted and longed for- the happy, shiny rainbow bridge- resembled the future she secretly desired. The actual bridge- the dark, gloomy, lonely one just up ahead- was her real future. Lizzie felt pained by this epiphany. Would she end up like her mom? A miserable, abusive, drunken old hag? Or could she be better than that?

She turned around and headed for the old abandoned building just around the corner. It was dangerous, but one part of the building would provide a safe haven for her until morning. She entered the building as silently as possible, alarmed by loud conversation and a bon fire from another room. Silently, she jogged up the stairs, jumping when they creaked beneath her and starting to run. She carefully approached a plank of wood stretching across a large hole perhaps forty feet above the concrete floor below. Stretching her arms out for balance, Lizzie walked across the plank cautiously, before settling on the other side. It was dusty and cramped, but she was safe for the night. No one would risk their life to grab her.

Lizzie lay down, ignoring the uncomfortable hardness of the wooden floor beneath her, and watched the smoke from the homeless people's campfire drift up. Because of her extraordinary and overactive imagination, she saw shapes in the grey clouds. She was exhausted, but her eyes refused to close, so she saw a smoky lion chase an antelope until they were both out of her line of vision. An octopus appeared. Lizzie didn't like octopi, so she quickly blinked, and the creature dissipated.

Her eyes fell shut to the sight of a bluebird- technically a grey bird - leaving a nest, where a mother bird squawked after it. She smiled at the metaphor and decided she would find a way to be sure her future was bright, like the rainbow bridge. She saw an older version of herself, beaming as she received a diploma. She let sleep consume her, happy to fall asleep to such happy thoughts for once, even though the next day would probably be the same. Only, it wouldn't be, because now she had something she'd never had before. Hope.

## Alyssa Hunter

### Middle School Short Story

# Best Friends or Boyfriends?

3...2...1... “Summer time!” my class shouted as they ran out the classroom door, just like all the other classrooms did. My name is Rachelle and I go to Burkholder Middle School. Mia Luv is my best friend. Summer just started and everyone is so exciting.

“Hey girly.” I say when I find Mia at her locker. “Hey Ray,” Ray... that’s the nickname I was given last year in 6th grade. “Are you ready?” I asked her because this was the first year that she was going to be coming with me to Oregon, where my mom lives. I stay there for the whole summer but she is only going to be staying there for a month.

We both went home after school and started to pack. About three hours after I get home Mia calls me, tells me to come to the park. She is there when I arrived, but so was her boyfriend, Elijah. Her boyfriend didn’t like me. So when I walked over there they stopped talking and Mia looked upset.

After a few moments of silence between the three of us, I finally said “Mia, what’s wrong?” She pulled me to the side and said, “Elijah wants me to go to California with him.” I wasn’t quite sure what to say so I said, “That’s great! So, you’ll going with me to Oregon in June and with to California in July.” There was a long pause and then I said, “Wait you mean—““Yes, he wants me to go with him in two days.” she said as she almost started to cry. “So, you’re going to go with him?” I asked even though I already knew the answer. “Well—“she started to say when I cut her off. No, you know, it’s fine, you going to choose him over me. Whatever, I don’t have time for this I have to go finish packing!” I said almost in a yelling voice but you still could hear the sadness in my voice as I walked away. I got far enough away to ware she couldn’t see me starting to tear up.

The next day, I finished packing, put my stuff in the car and my dad drove me to the airport. I was one of the first people on the airplane. I waited for everyone to get on I watched everyone get on carefully to see if she will get on. I didn’t see her and then I knew for sure that she wasn’t coming. But just as the flight attendant was about to shut the plane door, she entered the door.

“What are your doing here!?” I said excited but confused at the same time. “You didn’t let me finish talking at the park.” “What I was going to say was, well, he might be my boyfriend but you’re my best friend and I told you I was not going to choose him over you.” She explained. “I’m so sorry Mia I—“I tried to say more but this time she cut me off. “It’s okay.” She said as the plane took off.



## What's Lost Will Always Be Found

"No! Don't take him away from me!" She reached to grab his shirt, but he was already too far. He was pulled away as her vision blurred, and she fell unconscious.

...

"Don't let her get away!" Five men chased a young teenage girl down the street. She was obviously faster than them, as she was gaining ground quickly. Soon enough the men stopped, huffing and bent double, as they tried to catch their breath. She took this as her chance to escape and ducked down an alley, racing through to the next street.

Her lips turned up into a satisfied smirk. Never had anyone been able to catch her. She ran her fingers through her short hair and quickly fixed her kimono. It had been six years since she last saw her older brother. She still searched for him though.

The only problem was that whenever she found a lead, it was either proved wrong or men would come after her, pulling her away from the search. She had a feeling that these men were connected to her brother, but she wasn't too sure how. From what she remembered, they looked nothing like the men who had taken away her brother.

She sighed as she came upon the small carnival that took place every weekend. She hid her emotions very well behind a small smile. All the booth vendors were very enthusiastic, selling their goods to the families or couples that passed by. She paused as a handsome young man stepped forward and smiled at her. "Miss, won't you come take a look at our newest selection of kimonos and hair pieces? I have some that would go nicely with beauty such as yours." His voice was calm and had a soothing feel to it. She gave a hesitant nod and stepped over to the booth he tended.

Indeed, he did have very fine kimonos in all colors, each with a hairpiece or two that matched. Her eyes took in each and every one. So much so, she failed to notice the man press a small button under the table. "Excuse me miss, but might you be so kind as totell me your name?" He tilted his head slightly as he spoke. She looked up at him slowly. "Sarah." Giving a small smile she lied to

him with ease. She must never give out her real name. Those men knew it, and if word got out about her, they would find her all too easily.

The man gave a small nod, along with a kind smile. His brief actions made her uneasy. "Um, I'm sorry, but I must be going now." She backed away, turning to leave. He grabbed her wrist quickly. "Did my selection not appeal to you?" His grip tightened slightly. "Y-yes, they are very exquisite, but I'm afraid they're much too expensive. I must be going, please let go of me." There was a hint of fear in her voice as she tried to free her wrist. He shook his head and swiftly pulled her back behind the booth. His hand was over her mouth before she could scream.

'Sarah' struggled against him, trying to at least bite his fingers. The man hissed as she nipped at his hand. His eyes widened when he felt her body heat up suddenly. Her vision went blank a moment as 'Sarah' felt the heat overwhelm her. Her short blonde hair grew long and turned black. Her kimono turned into a short top, which resembled bandages wrapped around her, along with a pair of long leather pants. A spiked choker appeared with a chain that connected it to the top of her shirt. Her eyes snapped open to reveal two hazel and aqua orbs. Around her eyes, teal and gold scales revealed themselves.

The man yelled, and let go when her skin burned his hands. She glanced over her shoulder at him, her slit pupils glaring at him. She smirked and turned around to face him. "Surprised?" Her lips curled into a smirk as she put her hands on her hips. It was at this moment that the man noticed her elfin ears. "What are you?" He looked at her curiously. "Isn't that obvious? I'm a girl." She sighed. "That's not what I meant." He pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. "Oh you mean like species?" She laughed before continuing. "Can't you tell? Need me to help you put it together? Hot skin, scales, claws, and slit pupils. Sound familiar?" Her eyes sparkled with amusement. The man smiled to himself. "So you truly are the one we're looking for. The dragon that goes by the name Emerald." She cocked her head and raised her eyebrow. "Who's 'we'?" She was obviously confused at the moment, but she didn't have time to organize her thoughts before someone grabbed her from behind.

Her skin instantly grew hotter as she tried to burn the newcomer. When she looked back at her attacker, she found that he wore black leather gloves that prevented her from burning him. Emerald hissed in annoyance and yanked her arms away from him. Her pupils grew wide when he didn't lose his hold on

her. As she looked around a moment, she found that he wasn't alone. Two men stood behind him, their arms folded in front of their chests.

One stepped forward, a small cloth in his hand. He held it over her nose and mouth a moment until he felt sure she had inhaled it. As he put the cloth back in his pocket, Emerald's eyes glazed over, and the man who held her could feel her skin cool down slightly. She was trying to fight the drug as best she could, but she was fighting a losing battle. Her arms went limp, and her legs failed to hold her up any longer. Just as she was about to hit the ground, the man with the leather gloves caught her and held her bridal style. Emerald wasn't able to remain in her true form while unconscious, for some of her power was gone at the moment. So, as the man held her, she returned to her human form, her hair once again blonde and short, along with her kimono back in place.

...

Emerald woke to find herself human once again and chained to a stone wall. As she glanced around she found that she was in a large stone room, no windows in sight. The only thing in the room was herself and the chains that held her. She shakily stood up and used the wall for support a moment. Her eyes ran over the wall once more, looking for any means of escape. In the far right corner her eyes came upon an iron door. Moving toward it slowly, the chains jerked her back. She cursed silently and pulled on them, sending pain shooting through her wrist. Emerald hissed and moved back a little, rubbing her sore wrist. At that moment a click was heard from the door. It opened to reveal two men, each with matching smirks.

She quickly backed away, holding her hands in front of her chest. They came toward her and grabbed her arms roughly, causing her to scream sharply. One of them unchained her and the chains fell back against the wall. The other man slung her over his shoulder and held her hands in place as they left the room.

Emerald kicked and thrashed as much as she could but the man overpowered her easily. She screamed in his ear in hopes of at least stunning him for even a second. He cursed loudly and slapped her. He chuckled when she cried out and adjusted his hold on her. Shutting her eyes tight, she could feel hot tears running down her cheeks.

As she silently cried, she failed to notice where the man had taken her. When she finally opened her eyes she found them in a large room with a single chair in the middle. Calling it a 'chair'



was an understatement; 'throne' was more like it. The throne was large with silver engravings all around the black velvet padding. In the throne sat a man that looked about 30 years old, but one couldn't be sure. He had dark brown hair and wore dark grey jeans with a white shirt.

Emerald tensed when she felt the man begin to move her. He dropped her onto the floor in front of the throne. She hissed in pain and propped herself up with her arms, rubbing her shoulder. The man sitting in front of her watched her blankly, leaning his head in his palm. Emerald glared up at him and stood up, brushing imaginary dirt off.

"Mind telling me why I'm here? Or who the heck you are?" She crossed her arms in front of her chest. The man showed no sign of acknowledgement for a moment. "Well?" She looked at him expectantly and moved her hands onto her hips. "Why indeed." He sat up straight and crossed his legs, leaning forward slightly. "It seems I have something that interests you, and you have something that interests me. As for who I am, you may call me Aiden" His voice was emotionless, betraying his amused expression. "And what might that be?" Emerald narrowed her eyes. "Well for one, your little 'talent' isn't normal. I've never seen another that can change like you can. It's very intriguing." He looked at her and she could feel his cold gaze rake over her. "Okay... But that doesn't explain what you might possibly have that interests me." She began to feel a pit of worry build in her stomach, making her extremely uneasy. He stayed silent for a moment before snapping his fingers once, sending the man behind Emerald away for some reason. She watched as he walked out of the room. "Oh poor Emerald, what I have for you is something that you desire desperately. You've been searching for it a very long time now, haven't you? Yes..." Aiden trailed off with a smirk as the man walked back into the room, dragging something behind him. She strained to see it clearly from where she was but that was considerably hard as she tried to hide her curiosity.

The man let go of his burden next to the throne, leaving the room once more. As Aiden stood up, she tensed when he stepped down and turned toward the item the man had left behind. He kicked it and a groan emitted from the object. She jumped at the sound and took a step closer to try and get a better look. The item below Aiden was a young man with dirty blonde hair and matching turquoise and gold scales around his eyes. Emerald's eyes widened when she recognized the man. Her hands rose to cup over her mouth in shock. "Big brother..."

## The Masked Village

In a far off land, miles away from any civilization, there lived a closed-knit community of people who lived off of the land and would have been shunned for their religious and savage ways by any civilized person. They spent months making elaborate masks for their young, and when each mask was finally done and delivered to the infant, no one ever saw the child's face again unless they choose to reveal it to someone as a sign of extreme devotion or trust or had passed on from this world. Not even the child's family was to ever look upon their beloved's face, and the mask was only removed to wash the face and brush the teeth each night unless one of the previously mentioned special conditions was met. These masks were meant to ensure that people cared about someone's personality, not their looks, and were sacred and religious to this group of people.

One day, the chief of this small number of people and his wife had a son. The chief was incredibly proud of his son, and he immediately set out to find the best materials for his baby boy's mask. You see, it was somewhat of a contest among the men of this society to see who could get the items that were the hardest and most dangerous to obtain as materials for their child's mask. As such, the chief set out to slay a mighty dragon far outside the village—a 3 day trip there and the same amount back—and collect its eggs for his little bundle of joy's mask.

A week passed, though, and then two, and the chief had still not returned. Thus, the village mourned the loss of their leader and set to choosing a new chief. Among the masked society, if you wished to be the new chief you must bring back the head of a great beast, a precious stone, or some hard-to-get or extremely beautiful item and present it to the dead chief's wife as a proclamation of your love. If the chief's widow was impressed, she accepted your gift and you were hereby her suitor and had met the first requirement. You had a month to present your gift, and then all whose offerings the previous chief's wife had accepted competed in a tournament to the death, which became a huge event and attracted quite a crowd of villagers. If you won the tournament, you had earned the hand of the late chief's wife and the title of chief.

As soon as the chief's wife was declared a widow, almost all the men in the village flocked to her dwelling, all competing to court her. Men left their wives, women impersonated the single most desirable woman in the village, and the widow, still mourning, stayed up late in the evening just to receive the gifts of all the suitors—the village was thrown into chaos.

The commotion was not helped by the fact that, by all accounts, the chief had chosen an attractive bride after his first wife died. People didn't even need to see the woman's face to determine that. The chief had taken as much pride in his beautiful wife as he had in his child, and had made her even more desirable to the other villagers by making sure she had fancy hairdos, accessories, and gowns whenever she was seen by the public. The chief had even had a new mask made for the woman when she became his wife, one of ivory that was laced with ivy and had rubies where the cheekbones jutted out. Many had been critical of this decision, and it angered the villagers. They thought that it was unthinkable to change someone's mask under any circumstances, and considered this a scandal, but he was the chief and couldn't be punished for this or any crime.

This is the story of one such suitor. His name was Mason, and he was a young, strong, handsome man that was thought by many to woo the late chief's wife and become the new chief. This young man went to slay the dragon that the chief could not and present its head to the old chief's wife.

Mason was tired, cold, and hungry when the dragon's huge cave came into view, so he thought to himself, "I'll set up camp and face the beast tomorrow." He gathered some food nearby and then plopped down on the snow that blanketed the plains near the dragon's cave and fell asleep without even setting up a tent or a fire. He was cold, and he had planned to set up a fire after just a moment of rest, but he was so tired that he fell asleep before he could do it.

That morning, Mason awoke with a start. He looked around and was terrified to discover that he was in the dragon's cave! The dragon must have seen him and flown him to its den in the night! Luckily, the dragon must not have been hungry then, because Mason was still alive and the dragon wasn't in the cave at the moment. He tried to get up and run for it, but he couldn't move his legs! He knew his plants, so he couldn't possibly have eaten something that had paralyzing properties or contained neurotoxins. What in the world was going on, then? Mason raised his head to see what was wrong with his legs and saw a man holding them down.

"Ah, you're finally up," the man said, "Are you from the same village as that guy I found a week or two ago?"

"Wait, what?! Did he have a wood carving with aquamarines where the eyes should be strung on a necklace?" The chief always

had that necklace on. Had the chief not died?

“Yes, he did,” the man responded, and excitement shot through Mason, “You know him?”

“He’s our village’s chief! Where is he?!”

“He killed the dragon that lived here, but he suffered extreme wounds. I came across him when I came here to study the dragon’s behavior. I treated him as best I could, but he passed away from the injuries just last night.” Just last night.....Mason could have seen him one last time if he had faced the beast yesterday.....

“When I left for my village to tell them the dragon was dead, I saw you lying in the grass. What were you thinking! You didn’t have a fire or blanket! If I hadn’t brought you in here, you would have died from the cold! You must know it gets freezing cold after the sun sets in these parts!” He was right. “I was an idiot!” Mason scolded himself. There’s no way he could have survived in the biting cold that took over the plains after dark.

“Thank you for saving me. I hope I wasn’t a burden to you. I have only two questions, then we can both be on our way. First off, where’s your village? I thought my village was the only one for miles.”

“Oh, it is. It took me 10 days by horseback to get here, and I didn’t stop except to sleep. Your chief and I just happened to be here at the same time. What’s your second question?”

“Did you find the Dragon’s remains?”

“Yes, the dead beast is in the back of the cave, and I laid your dead chief next to him. Now, if you’re done with your questions, I have one of my own. Both you and your chief wear elaborate masks. Why?”

“It is our culture. We wear the masks so that people learn to care about our personalities, not our looks. We never take the mask off except to clean our teeth and face each night. If that is all, I must return to my village with this news.”

“I have to return to my village, as well. They must be worried. Good day.....I didn’t catch your name.”

“Mason, sir.” With that, Mason collected the dragon’s head, put it in his pack, and slung the chief’s body over his shoulder. Mason wanted to see the face that was under the chief’s mask, but he knew it was wrong to do so before the other villagers were allowed to and resisted the temptation.

It was a terrible ordeal, lugging all that extra weight back to the village, but it was worth it. People stared in shock as Mason proceeded to the dwelling of the late chief’s wife. He walked right past them and refused to answer any of their questions, though.

“Oh, yet another suitor,” the chief’s wife said in her sweet voice when Mason proceeded into her dwelling after stowing her husband

just outside the entrance.

“My name is Mason, Isaiah,” he addressed the former chief’s wife, “I bear a gift.”

Mason produced the dragon’s head from his pack, and Isaiah’s eyes widened. “H...how did you get that! My husband was the best warrior I had ever seen, and he fell to the beast!”

“In all honesty, I didn’t slay the dragon,” Mason admitted, and he showed her her dead husband’s body and told her the whole tale.

“My sympathy, Isaiah. I knew he would want you to have the beast’s head, so I delivered it. I know that it doesn’t count as a courtship gift and will not make me eligible to become chief, since I didn’t kill the beast myself. I wanted you to have it, though, in an attempt to honor the late chief. I didn’t peer under his mask.” After that, he turned to leave and find a real gift for Isaiah.

“Wait, Mason,” Isaiah called, and he spun around, “You have given me a gift. You have given me honesty and the cause of my husband’s death. Do you know how many people would have told the truth and not claimed that dragon skull as their own? I accept this dragon’s skull and grant you permission to compete for my hand in marriage at the end of the month. I wish you good luck in the competition.”

Mason was astonished, but he didn’t object, and at the end of the month, it was time to compete in the tournament for the hand of the late chief’s wife in marriage. Everyone in the village that wasn’t competing was in the stands, watching. It was a gruesome affair, full of pitched combat and death, but the spectators were entertained.

In the end, Mason fought valiantly and won the hand of Isaiah and the title of chief. A quarter of the village had died in the tournament, but those that were alive hailed their new chief. Later, Isaiah would tell Mason that she had been secretly hoping he would win from the moment she received his gift, and they would be so happy together that they would eventually take off their masks in front of each other. The rest of the villagers never knew the true face of their chief or his bride, though, and they continued with their daily lives.

Lexi Lane

Middle School Short Story

## Luxor

The revolting smell of burning wood and smoke filled the air - along with the ominous, thick, black cloud looming directly above the flame-engulfed building. I paced toward the home quickly - my light blonde hair whipping through the wind as I ran. Maybe I could save a life, or two - it didn't hurt to try.

"Anyone in there?" I yelled at the top of my lungs, as I heaved pieces of rubble out of the way. I didn't speak, or move for maybe, a minute, and could make out a muffled scream. I darted inside the house, and searched room by room. Under a bed in a little girl's bedroom, where I could faintly make out the once pink color of the wallpaper, lay a girl severely burned. I used all the strength I had in me and picked her up. I ran back into the street, set her down on the concrete, and pushed repeatedly on her chest... This was the 9th or 10th home set fire to in the span of two weeks. I had lost count.

After about three minutes of trying, I realized that I couldn't get a pulse from her, nor would I. She was gone. I stood up, and ended up face to face with a girl. A familiar face stared back at me - her piercing, green eyes filled with shock, and a hint of anger. Her mouth curled up into a devious smirk.

"Luna." I whispered, shocked at the girl I once knew standing before me.

Just then, a maroon lighter fell out of her burned hand, and clanked loudly onto the black pavement. She looked away from me.

"H-How could you?" I inquired in anger, glancing down at the now lifeless body in my arms. Luna hung her head in shame, her brown hair flopping down also, covering full view of her face. I watched in horror as she raised her head slowly, revealing an eerie smirk upon her face, "She knew too much. And now you do too."

In a split second, Luna pivoted around, and whipped out a silver ray gun aimed straight at me.

"You. Wouldn't." I uttered looking her in the eye.

"You don't know that." Luna yelled, glaring back at me.

"Yes I do, Lun. I know everything about you - we were best friends remember?" I whispered.

*Two girls sat inside a brick house beside a lit fire, sipping hot chocolate.*

*"Luxor... I'm sorry," I said sadly, my head hung low, "I didn't choose this. They did." "No. You're not sorry. If you were you would step up and fight for what you think is right. Instead of letting those girls use you like that!" Luxor's voice rose to a shout. In anger, she threw the glass teacup on the wooden floor, and watched it shatter into millions of pieces.*

*"No! I'm sorry that I was even friends with a girl like you! Real friends don't throw teacups at me! You're just mad because you wanted to be on The Trio after Saturn left, but they picked me!" I yelled back, as tears started to fill my eyes.*

*Luxor's brown eyes filled with shock, as she said, "Real friends don't have friends set people's houses on fire, how about that, Luna?"*

*"How about you leave me alone, and just let me be with Galaxy and Jupiter!" I said, my voice rising to a shout, as I slammed Luxor's wooden door behind me.*

"That was the past." Luna said, placing her finger on the trigger, "Life's about the present." In a split second, I heard a loud boom, and felt the sharp pain in my side. Slowly, I touched the bruise with my fingers, pulling back two blood-drenched ones, and watched as everything started to fade into blackness.

I awoke in an unfamiliar place, with a dark shadow looming over me. I couldn't make out the gender quite yet, nor the face, but they were doing something with their fingers. I was pretty sure it was snapping. I blinked a bit, and carefully sat up. My vision was starting to return to me, after blacking out.

"Heaven Wright, at your service!" shouted a tall blonde girl, clothed in all black. I hesitated for a second, and then decided to speak to the stranger before me, "Who are you, and how did I get here?"

"Well, I told you, I'm Heaven," She rolled her eyes, "After you rescued me from an Evil Trio attack, one of them shot you in the stomach, and thought we were both dead. The Luna girl went to get the others, so I bandaged you all up, so let's get with it, and hide!"

"Wait... You were the girl I grabbed from the fire? You weren't dead?" I asked puzzled.

"Nope, just really good at pretending to be. Right now, we're somewhere in," Heaven stated, glancing around at the large, rock structures, "I think it used to be the good ol' Red Rock, according to the history books I've read."

"Ah, I see. So, why did the Trio try to assassinate you?" I turned toward Heaven to ask her.

"I used to work in their palace; I was one of the chefs. One night at dinner, the Trio girls were discussing why they started the chain of house burnings; a young child overheard his mother discussing how bad the Trio really is. Turns out, the Trio had

been suspicious of the mom for a while, and they bugged the phones. They heard everything, so one night, BOOM; up in flames the first house went. After I realized how malicious those girls really were, and why they were called the Evil Trio, I quit that job and went on the run. Guess they realized I'd overheard their conversation, and didn't want the truth out there," Heaven explained, glancing around at the desert and the dark night sky, "I never did get your name."

"Luxor."

Heaven nodded, and continued to glance around the desert frantically.

"What's wrong?" I asked Heaven, as the blood drained out of Heaven's face, as if in fear.

"Get behind a rock, now. Talk in a whisper. Better yet, don't say a word." Heaven spoke quietly, placing a hand over my mouth, and dragging me behind a rock, "Someone's here. I heard footsteps."

"The Trio?" I mouthed, as soon as Heaven removed her hand off my lips. She shook her head, as if to say yes, and whispered, "They must've followed us here. Quick, take this." Heaven placed a futuristic shiny ray gun into the palm of my hands, "Only use if necessary."

"Got it."

She expected me to shoot someone? Who was this girl? I thought to myself.

I clutched the gun tightly.

Just then, three shadows appeared from behind a rock. The two girls, Galaxy (the leader), and Jupiter (co-captain), approached while Luna kept watch. I suppose they heard Heaven and I, or saw us make movement, but Galaxy ran toward the rock we hid behind, her gun raised in the air.

"Put your hands up!" Galaxy yelled, as Jupiter and Luna trailed behind her.

"Should we?" I whispered into Heaven's ear, and she replied with a nod.

Slowly, Heaven and I rose from the stone; our hands rose in the air, and exchanged nervous glances.

There we were, Heaven and I, with a vicious girl pointing a gun, who would switch the target between Heaven and I. I could tell, she didn't know who to shoot first.

"Luna, get up here." Galaxy yelled, tossing the gun to her, "You shoot."

I stared as Galaxy rubbed her sweaty hands through her long brown hair, and began to whisper to Jupiter.

"I had the little newbie do my dirty work," Galaxy whispered with a grin.



“I applaud you for that.”

Luna hesitated to shoot, and shifted her gaze, just like Galaxy did. Quickly, she pivoted around, toward Jupiter and Galaxy, her gun still raised in the air.

“You know what... no! I don’t deserve this! You and Jupiter treat me like a third wheel and make me do the dirty work – shoot and burn houses, and I’m sick of it! Luxor was right! You two are the meanest people I’ve met, and I don’t care if I’m not a Trio, I won’t turn my back on my friends.” Luna yelled at Galaxy and aimed the gun at her.

“What do we do?” Jupiter whispered to Galaxy.

“Don’t worry, she won’t shoot. She’s bluffing.” Galaxy said with a smirk.

“You want to bet?” Luna yelled, placing a polished finger on the trigger.

*Talk about Déjà vu.*

“Luna, please consider what you’re doing. I’m truly sorry. I agree that Galaxy can be a little bossy and rude sometimes, but we’re sorry.” Jupiter said, tears streaming down her cheeks. Luna nodded, “I forgive you, but what you made me do was horrid. No more threats. No more fires. No more Trio.”

She tossed her gun to the ground and kicked it aside.

Jupiter smiled, and hugged Luna, “I agree.”

I sat calmly in a leather chair, my head fixed on the moving image displayed on the television screen. Beside me, my newly found friends: Heaven, Luna, Galaxy, and Jupiter, began to laugh at a joke someone told. Galaxy stood up, brushed her brown hair off her shoulder, and faced the rest of us.

“Anyone want anything to eat?” she questioned, with a grin.

I liked the new Galaxy, and well, the rest of the trio. For the first time in a while, they weren’t as evil, as they were portrayed to be. They were just normal girls who got mixed up in the wrong crowd.

“I’ll take a quesadilla.” I replied, and the girls nodded in agreement.

I think that in the end, that this experience, just made all of us better versions of ourselves. I learned that there is more to some people than you think. It turned out the once ‘Evil Trio’ had a nice side, and everyone liked it. Plus, I made four new best friends.

“I’ll help you.” I smiled, and entered the kitchen, with Luna trailing behind.

After that, us girls, got lost, and well, covered in tortillas, cheese, and flour.

The rest is food fight history.

## A Man and A Mouse

As Jay approached the steps leading to his front door, he heard his daughter Mia screaming at the top of her lungs, “STOP, COME BACK HERE! DROP IT NOW!” Jay approached Mia and her cat, Nibbles, wrestling over a minute white mouse, no larger than his thumb, that Nibbles had dangling precariously from his teeth. Jay snatched the teeny mouse from Nibbles’ grasp and proceeded to take the mouse to a safer place, which was up in the rafters in the barn and made him a cozy little nest. Jay never thought about the mouse again until a few months later when he went hunting in the woods near his house when he got caught in a one hundred year monstrous blowing Alaskan snowstorm.

The blowing snow was so dreadful Jay couldn’t see two feet in front of him. He dredged through the snow for what seemed like miles until he discovered an abandoned cabin that he went into and collapsed into a deep slumber caused by exhaustion.

When he awoke, Jay was disorientated, freezing to death, and famished, so he found some wood in the cabin, put it in the fireplace, and cooked some venison he killed before he got lost. While eating his deer meat, Jay saw two beady little eyes in a dark corner of the room. Jay slowly approached the set of darting eyes and was filled with unbounded amazement when he recognized this tiny mouse. As Jay and the little mouse he named Mr. Cotton became fast friends, Mr. Cotton started to sleep in Jay’s top pocket in his jacket and kept each other from being lonely.

Jay talked to Mr. Cotton often, and he seemed to really listen especially when Jay told him the story about when his wife, Brianna, giggled and said, “That mouse will save you someday because you saved its life.” Sure enough, Brianna was right about that mouse. Mr. Cotton gave Jay a purpose to stay strong until they were both rescued a month later by Tanana Fire Department.

Nibbles the cat passed away in the massive snowstorm, so Mia was ecstatic that Mr. Cotton and Jay saved each other. Now, Mia has a new pet, and Brianna was bewildered that Mr. Cotton returned the favor after all. Nowadays, Mr. Cotton is frequently spoiled and still sleeps in Jay’s top pocket of his jacket.

Harlee Miscovich  
High School Short Story



## Flawless

Everything about him was flawless. His polka dot socks. His mismatched t-shirt and tie. The way his mouth was half open as if he was saying something. Even the few stray hairs sticking up and gleaming in the sunlight. If I could position my head in the right spot, his eyes would meet mine. His stunning blue eyes. Not blue like the sky, that's too common. And not blue like the sea either, that's too poetic. Blue like the table cloth my father used to lay on the picnic table in the park. Blue like my brother's polo shirt he would wear every Friday. Yes, that kind of blue. Oh man. I could've stared at that poster all day. Sadly, I didn't have time for that and I needed to finish my geometry homework.

I tore my body away from the comforter and trudged over to my backpack. It was Sunday evening and I still couldn't believe that my bag had remained untouched the entire weekend. If I had cared more about my grades, I would have finished my homework before leaving campus. But school wasn't my strong suit. It was my brother's. He was the brain of the family. He was ranked number three out of his junior class of 468. My mother said that if he had finished high school, he would have graduated as the valedictorian. I believed that. It wasn't just good grades and high rankings that was my brother's strong suit; everything about school was his strong suit. He was smart, he was athletic, he was popular, he was talented, and he was "cute" according to every sophomore girl. He was perfect. Unlike me. I'm just a measly little freshman with bad grades, no athletic abilities, no talents, no friends, and certainly no boys chasing me down to get my phone number.

Comparing my perfect older brother to myself as I completed geometry turned out to not be as productive as I thought. After ten minutes of writing nonsense numbers, I tossed my homework across the room. I closed my eyes as I heard a clank and bang in hopes that it was just my dreams of passing being shot. The investigative side of me persuaded my eyes to look at what I had

knocked over; my parents' prom picture. I immediately crawled over to the photo lying on top of the mess of geometry papers.

My arms clutched the frame after seeing that it remained intact. I just couldn't handle having another broken picture frame. After my mother started taking those pills, she would go on rampages. Throwing photos, dropping plates, punching walls, ripping pillows, all ending in her drowning in her own tears, listening to Trace Adkins. I hated those nights. I did everything I could to prevent those nights.

I placed my frame neatly back on the shelf and admired it. My mother's flowing, blue dress glistened in the sunlight. Her dainty, youthful hand rested on my father's matching silk vest. Her hazel eyes stared into the camera, filled with glee. His eyes, though, stared down at her, filled with love. From stories I've heard, they had a perfect prom. From pictures I've seen, they had a perfect relationship. From experiences I've lived, they had a perfect marriage. I would have loved to see them grow old together. That was one of my biggest dreams; to have grandma and grandpa teach my children what true love looks like. But thanks to a plastered ignoramus, that dream died. As so did my dream of my brother consulting my future boyfriend. As so did my dream of my father walking me down the aisle. As so did my brother and father.

Out of the complete silence, I heard a plate crash to the ground and a loud wail came from the kitchen. My legs twisted around as I fumbled to stand up. I was half way down the hallway of our tiny apartment, when I figured it was just another outburst caused by the antidepressants. My dash slowed down as I quietly peered into the kitchen to see my mother slumped on the counter. The bitterness I had formed since she started taking the medicine suddenly faded as I realized my mother was sobbing out of sadness, not anger. "Mom," My voice trembled, as so did my legs. She quickly stood up from her puppet strings and frantically searched the kitchen. I dropped to the floor in fear that she was looking for another plate to throw. "Emmaline!" She screamed my name, which might have scared me more than a plate's crash. I scurried under our poor dinner table to hide from her wrath. "Emmaline come here, now!" I watched as my once loving mother turned toward the knife rack, "I'm just gonna kill myself. That'll fix everything, right?" She muttered under her breath, but just loud enough so I could hear it.

"Mom?" My voice shook as I crawled out from underneath

the table. She whipped around to face me with the knife held to her neck. I didn't dare to move any more. And she didn't dare to move either. As if one motion could release a tragic explosion. I took this time to examine my mother. She was so different now compared to her prom photo. Her rosy red cheeks had fallen to a gray, which matched the circles under her eyes. The gorgeous blonde hair, which I used to envy, was thrown into a sloppy pony tail. Every piece of clothing she owned was stained and ripped and they fit loosely on her gaunt figure. After the death of my father and brother, she truly fell apart. It was difficult to look at her any longer. "Go to your room." She muttered, rescuing us from the staring contest.

"But you called for me."

"I said go to your room!"

"Mom, stop it!" I yelled back at her as I started towards her.

"I am the adult, you are the child! I said go to your room!"

She kept her hand up to her neck and backed away from me.

"Give me the knife." I demanded.

"I am the adult-"

"But you're acting like a child, give me the knife!"

"I can't."

"Why do you do this to me?" My words were filled with hatred. No longer was I just bitter towards my mother; I hated her. "Every night you do this! You ruined my things, you ruined my life! I hate you!" I gripped her wrist in attempt to yank the knife from her grasp. She kept firm, but as I stared into her eyes I fell apart. Her once glee filled eyes were swallowed by despair, insecurity, shame, and anxiety. "Do you honestly think I want all of this? Do you really believe that I'm trying to hurt you?" Two tears raced down her deflated face and fell off her chin.

"If you could just get over it-"

"Get over it? You want me to get over it? Like a dead dog right? Yeah, I'll get over it." Her hand dropped and released the knife to let it fall to the floor.

"Mom, not like-"

"We're getting over it! We're done! It's all peachy now!" My mother suddenly perked up and twirled around in the kitchen. I stood still as I watched her dance towards our family album. I knew it was fake.

"Mom, stop!" I raced over to her as she began tearing family photos out and throwing them into the air. I wrestled with her over the book until we both fell onto the floor. She released after

a few moments and lay on her side, facing away from me. I hurriedly wiped my tears away so my mother wouldn't know. Her body lay, lifeless, but moved every now and then from her sobbing. My heart ached from seeing her pain. But my brain reminded me of how she had caused my pain. Sleepless nights, ruined photographs, faded memories. Every night I would lie in bed and wonder if tonight would be the night that she would break. And I was finally sick of it. Maybe she grieves differently than I do, but if I can keep my grieving to myself, so can she.

"You don't know," Her whimpering voice interrupted my thoughts, "You don't know what it's like to lose a husband and son."

I took a deep breath before replying seriously, "No. But I know what it's like to lose a father and brother." I believe in that moment, I finally saw something besides self-pity coming from my mother. I saw guilt. The water works came again as she crawled over and wrapped her arms around me. My body stiffened at her touch. It wasn't used to this kind of embrace. Arms restraining me, yes. Hugging, no.

"I'm sorry," She whispered into my ear as she stroked my hair, "I'm sorry." My dry eyes began to moisten and I did my best to blink them away. I couldn't do it. I couldn't cry in front of her. That's what she wants me to do. She wants me to cry and accept the weak apology. But I can't do it. I can't give her that pleasure. I can't just forgive her that easily for everything she's done to me. I just can't. "Emmaline, I truly am sorry. I'm sorry that I put you through this. And I will do whatever I can to fix it. It's gone on long enough. It's time to fix it." She brushed her tears with one hand, while holding my arm with the other. It was a soft touch, not a strong one as usual.

"What even started it tonight?" I questioned, avoiding eye contact.

"I lost my wedding ring." She quietly replied while sniffing. I looked back into her wet eyes. With everything else she had destroyed, her wedding ring was the one thing she loved most. She hadn't dared to take it off since they got married. "How?" I whispered.

"I was taking out the trash and I guess while I was pushing it down into the bag, it slipped off." It seemed to make sense to me, considering she had lost so much weight that her fingers were just twigs.

“Well, if I help you find it then will you promise to get help?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll do anything.” I had never seen my mother be so desperate. Then again, I had seen many sides of my mother tonight that I hadn’t seen before.

I stood up and abandoned my mother to sit on the floor as I went into the kitchen. I wondered where the trash bag could have been until I saw it tipped over in front of the door. As soon as I ripped open the plastic bag, the stench of rotten bananas and moldy coffee grounds slapped my face. The starch white bill papers were now stained yellow from apple juice. The coupon booklets covered the small pizza box, which still housed pizza slices, according to my nose. I couldn’t believe that we could create this much trash in just one week. I took a deep breath before sticking my hand down into the collection of rotten apple cores and melted ice cream. I could sense my dinner, lunch, and breakfast coming up as I rummaged in the mound of used tissues. Finally, my fingers reached something hard like metal. I quickly pulled my arm out to see what I had found.

“I got it!” I yelled as if I had discovered a gold deposit. I jumped over to the sink and rinsed off the circle to see if it was what I thought it was. My insides screamed as the collection of diamonds shone into my eyes. “You found it?” My mother’s hands gripped my shoulders after she ran into the kitchen.

“Yes.” I spun around and grinned at the gorgeous ring in my between my fingers.

“Oh, thank you!” My mother threw her arms over my shoulders and began to sob, again, on me, “I love you so much, Emmaline!” I grinned at the thought that this tiny ring was a symbol of my father’s love for my mother, and of my mother’s love for me.

“I love you too, Mom.”

Camille Morris  
High School Short Story



## Sadie

Perched against the window frame Sadie appeared just as lethal and vicious as her ancestry promised. Her lightly muscled body tightly wrapped in a leather pinch waist jacket and striking red eyes made Sadie appear to be more of a serpent than any sort of guardian. Lying on his bed in the shadowy room, Nickolas had to remind himself that the frightening silhouette back - dropped by a starlit night was his protector and not some insidious figure patiently waiting for his slumber. After two minutes of darting his eyes around the already memorized room, he let out a defeated sigh accepting that he would not be getting any sleep- not after the morning he'd experienced. Images of blood tinged swords and claws shredding through flesh flashed in his mind like rapid gunshots. Nickolas clamped his eyes shut, flinching from the memories. He had to do something- anything - to not remember.

“So why are you alone, don't you have a partner or something?” the question spills from his mouth before he can process it. He'd noticed Sadie earlier solo in a crowd of other warriors who seemed to be glued by the side to someone else and the question had been sitting silent in the back of his mind since. Believing, at first, he'd asked in a whisper too quiet for even Sadie to hear Nickolas was a little shocked to see her piercing gaze focus on him. A long, heavy, friction filled moment.

“I'm better off working alone as it is anyway.” Sadie's answer was dry and direct.

“Oh come on, you have got to have one friend-Hell one person, you'd be willing to save and even die for.” The idea of being alone while facing a supernatural battleground everyday seemed ridiculous.



“I highly doubt I come to mind when anyone else thinks of people they could save so why would I feel that way about anyone else. No one cares for me so why care.” If the first answer was meant to end further conversation than the tone of this one threatened against it. Nickolas could feel the menace ooze through her words but on the fringes was the faint trace of anxiety; resistance to push further was futile.

“If you ask me you sound like you’re just being guarded, loosen up a bit. Stop being so scared of-well whatever it is you're afraid of...” Her eyes squinted blisteringly at the comment.

“I'm not scared; I'm being safe.” The words were a defensive hiss and she snapped her head away from him. Her gaze turned back to the night sky, directed at the wide pearl colored moon suspended in black; Nickolas stared too, fascinated by the large white rock in the sky for a moment. He debated whether to continue or leave not so well enough alone, there isn't much a human can do to win against an otherworldly soldier. Still, he couldn't let go.

“You could at least try to make some sort of bond.”

“I have.”

The statement hung in the air, slicing through the intensity of their argument but still held a sort of vulnerability, like old painful memories glazed over with time and distance. Nickolas turned to her again but he felt, for the first time, like he really saw her-not just the shell she put up. Sadie resembled less of the impatient, uncouth, feral demigod and showed a new, more humanistic side; a side to herself clearly hurt and betrayed before. Nickolas' heart actually ached for Sadie, he longed to reach out and hug her; wanted to make her feel better. Instead he went for what he hoped would be a comfort.

“You saved me; I'd do the same for you. So there now you have one friendship.” Nickolas watched close for her reaction but the only change he caught was a tensing of her muscles. Inferring that Sadie ended the conversation Nickolas let out a defeated sigh and laid his head down on the pillow. He gave Sadie one last look before closing his eyes just missing Sadie peek toward him, a soft red that appeared lighter than usual.

## Blue Boy

“Katie, hurry up! Your grandfather will be here any minute!” This was it. Katie was about to meet her past, and she didn’t know if she would like it. Katie Jones was a girl of age fourteen. Recently, she learned of her past. She was born and raised on a ranch in Tennessee, but because of financial troubles, her parents decided to move to the big city of New York for a job opening. She hadn’t been on the ranch since she was five. Now her grandfather was coming to take her back to the ranch.

Katie finished packing and set her bags by the front door. Her parents were heartbroken. They couldn’t afford to keep their daughter with them, so she had to go back to Tennessee to live with her grandparents.

“Katie, I hope you realize that your mother and I are very heartbroken about this. We don’t want you to be uncomfortable, but unfortunately, this is how it has to be;” her father spoke, almost in tears. Her mother, already sobbing, tried to calm herself down, “Katie, we are really, really sorry.” Katie knew that she had to be strong. “I’ll be okay,” but deep down, she knew that it would never be okay. There was a knock on the door. Her grandfather was here. Here to take her away from her fashionista home of New York, to muddy, rainy Tennessee. She said her last goodbyes and double-checked her bedroom. She was off to the ranch.

The first few minutes in the car were silent. Her grandfather broke the silence. “I think you’ll like the ranch, Katie. Your grandmother stayed home to make your bed and cook supper.” This seemed very kind to Katie. “I’ll make sure to thank her.” Her voice was small. “We’ve got horses, a cow, a few chickens...” He trailed off into some story about a hen, which made Katie laugh.

Time passed quickly as they pulled into the driveway. In front of Katie's eyes stood a house. It wasn't very big, but it was cozy looking. Behind it was a barn, painted red and white. She could hear the quiet sounds of sleeping animals. She met her grandmother on the porch. There was a grin on her grandmother's face from ear to ear. "Katie, it's so good to see you again!" She was trapped in a bear hug. "Let me show you around!" She was led around the house and finally into her room. It was painted blue (her favorite color) and had a nice daybed near the wall. There was also a mirror and dresser for her to put her clothes into. Then she saw on the bed, a sleek, black cowboy hat. "That's your hat, Katie;" said her grandfather. "Wear it with pride."

The next day, Katie's alarm clock went off at six o'clock in the morning. She aroused from her sleep and got dressed. Katie pulled on a soft white T-shirt, a pair of jeans, and then her hat. She figured she knew why she had to get up early, so she put on a pair of mucking boots.

In the kitchen was her grandfather, dressed and ready to go to the barn. "Good morning Katie." He said softly. "Sleep well?" She replied with a yawn, "Yes, it was really comfortable." This made him smile, "Good, because I've got a present for you." He led her down to the barn and opened the door. Katie followed him to a stall toward the back of the barn. In it was a foal. He was a black Arab stallion.

"Oh my goodness, he's adorable!" This made her grandfather really happy. "I'm glad you think so Katie, because he's yours!" "Mine?!", she stood in awe then hugged the foal. Katie thought to herself, maybe this won't be so bad after all! Then she asked her grandfather, "What's his name?" He replied with a chuckle, "He hasn't got one, it's your choice." Katie looked at the foal. He had really big, blue eyes. "I think I'll call him... Blue Boy."

From that day forward, Katie played with and cared for Blue Boy. They had a strong bond and won many competitions. She even sent her winnings to her parents to help with funds. Katie had never been so happy.

## Behind Closed Doors

Darkness falls. The door opens and slams shut. Priscilla Woods tensed as she heard the thundering of his heavy biker boots on the spiral staircase. She jumped off her bed and collided with the door trying to lock it.

“Priscilla?” he called out, his speech slurred. Priscilla willed herself not to breathe or make another loud noise. Maybe he’d think he heard something she thought hopefully. “I know you’re in here. I just heard you.” He chuckled bitterly. For once Priscilla wished her mother didn’t stay at work all the time. She did not want to be in house alone when her dad was being like this. Clump. Clump. Clump. His footsteps spelled out her doom in a taunting way. I’m coming for you. Suddenly all was silent and Priscilla breathed a small sigh of relief. All too soon her moment was over as her father pounded on her old wood creaky door. It groaned under the pressure.

Priscilla began to sob silently as her dad kept up the act. “Priscilla! Why do you always do this to me?!” he screamed. Priscilla put all her weight on the door so her dad couldn’t try to pry it open but that was no use. Her dad weighed at least 200lbs and could break her in two if he wanted. CRACK! The wood on her door splintered, scraping her face. Priscilla stifled back a scream and watched as the blood dripped on the old worn carpet. She wished she were the blood. At least they could get away.

CRACK! More splintered wood attacked her face so she couldn’t see and stumbled backward giving her dad full access to break her door. She scrambled to get under her bed. There was a loud BOOM as the door crashed to the floor. She saw the tips of his hiker boots and the end of his dark blue jeans covering the top of his boots. The boots moved towards her dresser. He jerked open one of the top drawers and looked around. “Where are you Priscilla?” he sang and threw her garments on the carpet.

Priscilla clamped a hand over her mouth. All his moving around ceased and she saw his hands lift up his pants legs and bend down. His knees were so close. His hands plopped down

next. Her heart pounded and blood rushed to her ears as she saw her father's head. "There's my little pumpkin. Say what are you doing under the bed?" he asked with a smile as if they were casual friends.

Priscilla didn't answer and just pulled herself more tightly together. She backed away from him. His eyes changed from happy to sad. "What did I do pumpkin?" he said. "Just take my hand." He held it out to her and for a second Priscilla almost grabbed it but then she remembered. It was just a ploy to get her from underneath the bed. She tried to block the mean thoughts in her head telling her to just kick her dad until he couldn't move anymore.

Her dad reached his huge bear like hand up to her and she tried to back up against the off white wall but she couldn't. She was already as far on it as she could get. Tears streamed down her face as her dad grabbed one of her legs and squeezed as he yanked her from under the bed. "NOOOO!" She screamed and frantically grabbed one of the wooden ledges holding her bed down. He kept yanking and she kept holding on tightly. Dear God please help me she prayed. She was sweating and her fingers were slipping. It was getting really hot under there. Finally she just let go and regretted it.

Her head slammed on the carpet. She screamed from the impact and her dad shouted, "Shut up! You're not allowed to scream!" When she was from under the bed, he grabbed her by her neck and stood her upright. "I do so much for you and you run and hide from me?" He said the words slowly and Priscilla shook her head and tried to pry her father's fingers from her throat. He squeezed harder. Priscilla felt her throat tighten and her brain scream for oxygen. Priscilla's brown eyes searched frantically for something anything to get this monster off of her. His dark brown eyes bored into hers as he leaned in close to her.

"You disgust me." Spit flew from his mouth onto hers. Priscilla fought the urge to wipe it off and a few seconds later he flung her to the ground, his hands still around her throat. Priscilla felt dizzy and light headed as her brain suffered yet another blow to the head. "You ever do that again and you will never see the light of day again." He growled. Then he let her go and dusted off his hands as if she were trash he didn't like but would never bother to pick up. Priscilla gasped for breath as the blood started flowing through her body again. She placed a hand on her heart and felt that it was still beating. She heard the clinking of glasses downstairs and fell back on the floor. There was no doubt in her mind that her father was drinking.

Kieara Peery  
Middle School Short Story

## Symphony

### Prologue

I was running. I didn't know what I was running from though. It seemed like the more I ran, the more I never wanted to stop. I just kept running until my heart felt like it was going to stop then and there. I ran just because sometimes, and others when I was being chased, which was very often. I did things people would say is "criminal" and "unjust". I had to do wrong things every once in a while only because my mother died five years ago and my father left six years ago so I was all alone. I used to live with my grandparents but two months ago they both suffered severely from cancer and then died. I then went to an orphanage and the people there were very nice to me. They told me to go and get some bread for myself, but when I came back, the orphanage was in ashes. Now I walk the streets alone and miserable. I often enjoy the company of mice who come along to visit me when I have just received some cake or bread that they wanted me to share with them. They always left though, everyone I met left and never came back until three months ago when I met this girl who left but was always with me.

### Month One

I was roaming the streets as I typically did every Saturday, in search of food because I was out. I was hoping to find a nice piece of cake because it was my seventh birthday after all, or at least I thought I was seven because I might have been turning eight. Anyways, when I did find some cake, another hand was reaching out to grab it at the exact same time that I did. I was no Einstein or anything and still am not, but I didn't need brains to tell me that wasn't my twin or reflection, but another person. I ferociously hissed and was trying to sound tough because I really wanted that piece of cake, but the other person was not afraid of me, but just measly stared and looked at me with pure curiosity. I guessed she was new to the program. When I was done hissing and spitting at her, I asked as politely as I possibly could, "Are you new to the program?" She said sounding ever so polite, "I don't mean to sound so clueless but, what is this program you speak of?" I felt bad for her because I could tell from the sound

of her voice that she was trying to hide pain and shield it with confusion. I then responded, "The program of your on your own until you find someone else to be with." She tilted her head ever so slightly while trying to maintain posture just enough to indicate she was as confused as I was when someone told me that once. I took the cake and indicated for her to follow me to a place I knew that is now my "home" if you shall say. As we walked, I slowly explained everything to her until she understood it one hundred percent. When we arrived I could tell that she probably was from a royal family or a very rich one because she looked at the little old house in a way that I cannot explain but you must see yourself. When I introduced her to the little pink house, her expression suddenly changed, because now she looked eternally grateful. I showed her around the house and the rooms. I was happy that there were three bedrooms because if there were only one, I do not think I would be able to take her in. Once she got familiar with the house and surroundings and also knew her way around if she ever got confused, I asked her, "What is your name if you have one?" She just smiled, and after a few moments' hesitation, she answered, "My name is Symphony, and why would you include the phrase 'if you have one' when everyone has a name?" I sighed and took a deep breath before I answered her question. "Everyone except for me." She stood there not knowing how to respond and I could tell by the way she was looking at me that she felt sorry for even asking, so I quickly added, "I had a name but I was still too young to remember it so I just did not go by a name anymore." I could hear a faint moan because she was still sorry for even asking. Then, getting over feeling sorry for herself, she said surprisingly bold, "We have got to give you a name then." I nodded my head in appreciation, excepting the idea of a name. She then asked, "What do you remember getting called?" I said, "I do not quite remember but I think I heard my mother saying Harm...but that is all I can remember. I am sorry." She nodded her head in acceptance of the apology and then there was silence that indicated that she was thinking very hard. She then exclaimed after two minutes of pure heartbeats, that she remembered her father saying something about leaving Kelly and Harm something being my sister. Then she added, "But that couldn't possibly mean anything because you do not know anyone named Kelly, do you?" I thought really hard because I really wanted to be helpful. Then it popped inside of me. I did know someone named Kelly and I told her, "My mom was named Kelly! My dad left my mom Kelly and said he was still going to mention Harm something to his child which would be my sister right?" She nodded enthusiastically like she instantly regained hope after what I just had said. Then I put in, "How old were you when this happened." She

carefully placed the numbers in her thoughts and then said loud enough for me to hear, "He left us six years ago and I am nine. Nine minus six is three. I was three when this happened.", she said a little louder. It was my turn to exclaim because if I was doing my math correctly, six years ago my dad left us. I am seven now, so I was one then and about two years later he called my mom saying that he has a beautiful five year old daughter and that he wants both his daughters to meet but my mom would not agree to the terms so I was about three when this conversation happened, but any ways if Symphony is two years older than me and she mentioned her father saying Harm something and my mom said Harm something and both occurrences of us meeting and the mention of this name is two years apart and Symphony and I are two years apart then could we be the sisters her father was talking about? I asked her, "Today is my birthday so I am seven correct?" She said, "Yes, why? I said, "What was your father's name? She responded, "Jacob" looking a bit unsure. I said as happy as can be, "We are sisters because we are two years apart, **my** father Jacob said I had a sister two years older than me, and we both heard our parents say Harm something so it makes perfect since." She stared at me in total disbelief then slowly circled around me as if she was trying to read my thoughts. After a moments' too long hesitation she exclaimed, "Oh my we **are** sisters!" We jumped up and down because we could not contain our excitement. Symphony then ended our fun when she said, "We have to find birth records if we can truly be sisters though." Now it was time for us to get serious.

### Month Two

We went to a place she knew this time at 7:30am, which personally was way too early. I begged and pleaded for an extra hour of sleep, but she would not budge. She took me to a public library where we could do some investigation about our parents. We figured out we were born at Torrance Memorial Hospital. We got the address and we were on our way. When we finally arrived after thirty minutes of walking, we found out that the nurse and doctor who delivered us were married and lived in the fanciest neighborhood ...Maine Monroe Boulevard. Thanks to Symphony's grace and elegance, instead of walking, we got to ride the bus for free. After about an hour on the bus we arrived to the man's house or I think it was because I could not read words or numbers. After seeing me struggle to comprehend the writing, Symphony said, "839 Maine Monroe Boulevard. We are at the right place!" We knocked on the huge double door and who appeared was a lady ever so beautiful, even Symphony stared! She had golden hair to match her round chestnut eyes, and her skin ever so flawless. She wore a silk



gown that was a violet-lavender that was knee high with matching glass heels. "Come in! Come in!" said the unusually tall lady. "We are here to ask about our birth." said Symphony calmly. The lady called out to someone named Ken Davis. Once he came down the stairs he looked as if he immediately recognized us which was good I guess. "You kids again. I swore that when I found you...." He stopped there. I guess debating on whether he should finish the sentence or not. "Get out of my presence!" So there we were, leaving probably the best chance of us learning if we were sisters or not, because of what, our past? It still remains a mystery.

### Month Three

We were back to square one with the luck of finding the truth because we completely given up after that unpleasant meeting last month with the doctor. That is when it happened. Symphony had just told me to go to the store with the money she had just given me to buy more food with, and when I came back I heard her screaming really loud. I was frightened and worried that Symphony might get hurt in the process of the struggle. I did not know what to do so I followed the sound of her voice slowly down the hall so I would not get caught. That was when I heard it, the sound that had me horror stricken. I did not know whether Symphony was okay or not so I broke out into a full out sprint shouting her name not caring anymore if I was caught. I wanted to stop running so badly because I was frightened, but she drove me on. Her love for me and the love I had for her kept me running until I reached the room that she was located in. I peered in just to see the man, which seemed to look like that Ken fellow, leave out the back door. I fell to my knees at the sight of Symphony's helpless body with scarlet red blood oozing from her head where she was struck and a note besides her reading, **"I Love You! Continue our search for me, please!"** Even at the end of her life she maintained her elegance and grammar. I sat there for what seemed like forever mourning for my lost sister even if it could not be proven. Then I realized I had to move on and do what my sister would want me to do!

### Present

"Is that all you remember Miss Harmony?" said the detective. I nodded a simple yes. "Do not worry about anything." For the first time in twelve years I looked up. I had this feeling that reminded me painfully of Symphony and I now longed for her presence, instead I shut the door and smiled.

## See You In My Dreams

It's been fifteen years. Fifteen years since I've heard her voice, since I've seen her smile. Quite frankly, it's been fifteen years too long. I had to find her. Even with everyone telling me that I'm crazy and I need help couldn't stop me from pursuing this. My mind was set. I, James Costa, will find my ray of sun again. And in the process, I will say her name like a broken record so she can hear me. Molly Greene will be the name across my lips that have missed her dearly.

Six in the morning is when my plane landed in a city by the name of Elgin. The city where the people look angry, and have a type of walk that make them seem to be in a rush. How does Molly survive here? They're nothing like her. She has a pronounced pep to her walk. And oh boy, when she's out and about, that's when the sun shines bright. Her grin from ear to ear makes the surrounding people break their necks in order to catch a longer glimpse of her. I guess opposites attract.

I haven't been back since she's been gone. Honestly, I shouldn't have even come by myself. Though, it needed to be done. All of these faces that I see on this luminescent day do not compare to Molly's face. I don't even want to look at them anymore.

Come 6:45 in the morning, the taxi dropped me off at the small, quiet neighborhood which is where I needed to be. I walked a, what seems to be, endless road, searching for the house with the dark blue door and the strongly scented roses growing up the broken trellis.

At last, I see it staring at me, whispering in my ear to come in. In a split second, I catch a gander of her in the upstairs window before she disappears again. Running full-speed to see those big, blue eyes and those sparse freckles on her soft, round face that I adore, I approached the bedroom.

Breathless, I take a step inside. Alas, there she is. That's Molly Greene. That's my Molly Greene. Oh, how I missed her. My beautiful wife was finally with me again. As I got closer, she turned around and said, "James... I've been waiting for you."

The tears rolled down my face as I grasped her tightly and hugged her. My arms were slowly submerging into my own, lonely body. Soon, it felt as if I was hugging myself. I opened my eyes to see only nothing. No cozy bedroom, no quiet, little neighborhood, no Elgin, and worst of all, no Molly.

All I could see were the plain, cream-colored walls that surrounded me in this unforgiving mental institution in Dallas. For the five thousand four hundred seventy-fifth day in a row, I had dreamt about my lost love. I had committed a terrible, heinous crime fifteen years ago that I cannot take back. It took her life, and it's slowly taking mine.



## Not This Time

Bored out of his mind, David laid on his bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. It was during moments like these that he always thought about his life. He thought about how his father left when he was only five years old, leaving him with his mother. A scowl took over David's face as he thought of his mother, how she was controlling, and strict, how she never let him go to parties with his friends. He was a teenager, not some pet. In David's eyes, he believed that teenagers should go party and do stupid stuff.

As if on cue, his mother called for him to come downstairs. With a growl, David lifted himself from the bed, trudging down the stairs, to the kitchen, where his mom was located. "What do you want?" he asked, sounding as if he was a king speaking to a lowly peasant.

Flinching slightly at her son's tone, she pointed to the sink. She gave him a stern look, "Why aren't the dishes done?"

"Maybe because I don't have to listen to you, and do everything you say! I'm not a slave!" He yelled. His patients had worn thin and he couldn't handle it anymore. He sent her an angry glare before turning and leaving the house. David heard his mother yelling for him, but he paid no attention to her and kept walking. His legs brought him to the small patch of woods near his house. He kept walking, feeling a pang of guilt, but he shook it off. Night began to fall, but he made no effort to turn back home. A scream broke the silence of the wood around him, causing him to freeze, not daring to take a breath. "It's probably just some kids." He whispered to himself, forcing his legs forward, and his fear causing him to walk at a faster pace.

After what felt like endless hours of walking, David

emerged from the woods, catching sight of a small roadside diner not far off. Opening the door, the bell making a dull “ding”, he noticed hardly anyone was there. He chose a seat at a booth, ordering water when the waitress arrived. He began to watch the television playing in the corner, but it was suddenly interrupted by a breaking news report. “As of lately, there have been multiple murders in the northern Charleston area. From the current information the police has given us, we have concluded that most victims were indeed female...” David stopped listening to the rest. He lived in the northern Charleston area with his mom. His blood froze, what if that scream was his mom who went to look for him. He shot up from his seat, placed ten dollars on the table to pay for the water and left the diner. He ran through the woods, which were now dark, only illuminated slightly by the moon. Fear forced his legs to go faster, he needed to know if his mom was all right. Tears fell down his cheek as he thought that he might be the cause of his mother’s death. David realized how much he her, how much he needed her to be alive when he returned home. He has lost one parent already; he couldn’t lose both.

Finally reaching his house, he paused in the doorway to catch his breath, and then call for his mom. His fear and sadness only increased when she didn’t call back. “No, she has to be here.” He whispered, beginning to search the house for his mother. Tears fell down his face as he reached for the door handle to the master bedroom. “She has to be in here.” He reassured himself, slowly opening the door. His heart dropped, she wasn’t in there. Falling to his knees, David sobbed into his hands. If only he listened to her and none this would have happened.

“David, is that you?” was heard from downstairs. David’s eyes shot open as he heard his mother’s voice. Quickly, he ran down the stairs, his eyes being blessed with the sight of his mom emerged from the basement door, unharmed.

“Mom!” He called, relief flooding through him. Running to her, he suddenly embraced her, crying out of joy and relief. His mom’s eyes widened as her son hugged her. She hugged him back slowly, a smile finding its way onto her lips as she heard him whisper “I’m sorry, Mom.”



*Essay*

the essayists

Daniela Calderon  
Natasha Culbreth  
Antonia Librizzi  
Jet Kaftan  
Rien Townsend

Daniela Calderon  
High School Essay



## Cancer

There is a chemical war fought within the entirety of my flesh and bones. There is an infestation of evil clogging the veins that web through my fingers and the pores that tunnel through my flesh. This evil does not cower despite the faintest dot of existence it occupies among the sky and its stars, and it does not realize that one life is insignificant, that there are seven billion others with plum-stained collars and sticky hands. When cancer looks for a mate it does not bother with calloused palms or aching bones, but rather solicits merry drunks with cliché punch lines and awkwardly placed teeth, because we are young and we are new and, most times, cancer solicits an empty canvas.

Cancer kills approximately 7.6 million people a year, but for that day I was awake. There is a constellation of bruises that line the surface of my stomach and the bones of my hips, and they've settled like carved initials on the stump of a tree. Streaks of light would melt onto the sheets of my bed and across my carcass, with the sockets of my eyes inhabited by butterflies. I had become an empty vase, and I was too fragile to touch. Cancer is pain and it ripples through your body like a stone flung across a lake, and when your knees bend to touch the tile of the bathroom floor and your hands grip the edge the toilet seat, it is cancer that thunders through your body. Similarly, it is the reason for the absence of your hair and the color of your lips and cheeks, because cancer is a jealous one, and it can't have you looking pretty for others. Hair would pool at the bottom of my bathtub like snakes in swamps or ink draining through water, and all I could picture was my hand poking at the tenderness of my scalp and the hair that would string through my fingers. I had grown accustomed to the

splatters of blood that would resurface on the bathroom counter in the morning, dry and peeling, and its taste along the gums of my mouth and the inner of my cheeks.

What does cancer feel like? Cancer is an anchor, and it tears through your body from the inside out. Cancer is a flame, and I was being burned alive.

Cancer kills approximately 7.6 million people a year, and for that day I was awake despite what I had hoped for. I yearned for a raw death, a death in which my mind would slow to a halt and disappear, like hazy clouds obscuring the moon or the blurriness of the world that surrounds you as your glasses leave the crook of your nose. I was a ghost, an enchantment, a being capable of disappearing like a flight across the Pacific, undetected. For hours at a time I longed to rent out my mind, to leave it in a pile of broken eggshells and drown my sorrows in the stinging of icy wind. Cancer whispers in your ear in choppy dialects, in phrases misunderstood and fragments of six-word stories. Through this you realize that you are the empty space in between knuckles and the faint drop of water collected at the tip of the faucet. Cancer etches thoughts onto your tongue and the roof of your mouth, and it carves into your flesh like snaps of a rubber band. It captures thoughts in glass jars and settles them on empty bookcases, like bouquets of fruit for 12 weeks, 84 days, and 2016 hours, but by then, most of the fruit has soured.

Approximately 55 million people die every year, but today I am not one of them. The depths of my mind had been invaded by the subtle wish of death, of extinction. I would break through the glass of my skin and my knuckles would bleed and I would take an extinguisher to the flames that lined the pores of my skin. I hemmed the flesh of my body, hid the bruises along my collarbones, because I was not the white of my gums or the cuts on the corners of my lips. Today I am an assortment of clumsy Korean phrases and embarrassing voicemails, the lines of thought on a dedication page, and at the end of this year, 130 million people will have been born.



Natasha Culbreth  
High School Essay

## A Few Grains Of Sand: A Memoir

The audience waited silently in the warm California sun. Their cameras and phones, held high into the air, collectively fought for space. These objects conjointly reflected the sunlight, creating a sea of glare. Although growing impatient, the crowd, with eyes focused on a intricate sand painting in the center of the courtyard, stood a respectful distance away from the main attraction. Crimson and gold robed monks stood at attention; they were its creators and guardians. A lowthroaty hum started, filled the packed area, and then the bellow and chime of primitive horns and bells echoed off the walls. Multicolored prayer flags, strung across the quad, trembled in a sudden gust of soft wind. Many people in the crowd pressed to get closer, concertedly avoiding the koi ponds and the oriental sculptures that randomly punctuated the sea of bodies. As the tension intensified, every inch of available space was filled with an attentive spectator. A chill ran its cold fingers down my back as the hum reverberated.

While I watched this spectacle safely from a perch high above the crowd, I marveled at the beauty and the intricacy of the mandala. Brilliant hues of blue, green, yellow, red, and white swirled and danced in the work, creating a vibrant geometry in this delicate transient creation. The humming in the background was drawn out and haunting. There was something otherworldly and frightening, yet at the same time, captivating about it. Movement on the stone fence in front of me caught my eye and broke my reverie. Slowly, a large roach revealed itself. Its glistening body rested in close proximity to me. I regarded it silently, as the humming continued. A pigeon, then, took roost atop the slanted roof to my left, its gaze fixed on the demonstration. Soon, a wasp joined the duo, dancing unnoticed above the heads of the crowd. The continuous vibration of the drone had awakened the creatures who inhabit this concrete edifice. As I stared mesmerized at the trio, a sudden wind strummed the roach's antenna.

My attention shifted to one of the monks who had stepped forward, lowering his head as he ran his hand through the sand, which shifted like water. The colors and shapes warped. We were witnesses to the destruction of a world. This arbiter tossed the sand, rendering the labors of the monks' work a mass of gray. Delving into the swarm of bodies that were jostling for the now murky colored remnants of the painting, I descended from my safe haven. In the midst of the brouhaha, the monks graciously and calmly distributed their sacred relics. The wind caused the colorful lung ta to flutter once more. Suddenly, rising over the blissful murmur of the spectators, came the harsh cry of a man.

“Do not take this dangerous sand into your homes, it will attract the evil eye! You will DIE!”

His message struck me as absurd. The Tibetan monks, who relied heavily on their translator, were unaware of the context of the intrusion and continued to diligently tend to the multitude.

The disorderly line continued to snake its way towards the relics. When I reached the repository, I was greeted by a pious monk, who cordially offered me a packet of the “cursed” sand. Outside of the museum, an officer was questioning witnesses, as a helicopter spun nosily overhead. Meandering along the street, we eventually made our way to our vehicle. Having satisfied our spiritual needs, we sought to edify our physical cravings. The dry heat made us yearn for Mediterranean fare. Visions of freshly cut shawarma, and thick slices of honey coated baklava propelled us to a local Greek festival.

As we entered the festivity, our olfactory senses were assaulted by the aroma of herb roasted lamb. Once again, our eyes feasted on color. However, mysticism was replaced by all-out saturnalia. From Delphi blue and white striped tents, vendors hawked a variety of Greek themed products. Some offered wine tastings, others purveyed olive oil and goat cheese. Under another canopy, we inched our way through a dinner queue and were rewarded with heaping piles of fragrant Moussaka. We dined alfresco. By the time we exited the gala, the moonless night was black, a sharp contrast to the vibrancy of the multi-hued kinetics of the day.

However, even in the pitch darkness, the sensory overload continued, as we were startled by a strange apparition and an eerie glow in one corner of the vast asphalt parking lot. Like a scene from a dystopian film, multiple welders were creating sparks as they worked manically on top of steel freight

containers. In the abyss, we struggled to discern the identity of nebulous shapes on the edge of the property. Focused our headlights on the mysterious objects, we discerned vintage train cars. The illumination attracted the attention of a security guard, who swiftly approached.

“You can't park here! The exit is the other way! If you—”

“What are they filming?” I interrupted, eagerly leaning from my window.

“The Lone Ranger.”

I masked my amazement with a grin, what a grand coincidence that we would happen upon the set of a Johnny Depp movie.

“You can come tomorrow to watch the filming if you like, they'll be here all day.”

As we drove away, excitement swelled in me; I gleefully contemplated my chances of seeing my favorite actor in person. It was truly an extraordinary, once in a lifetime, opportunity!

We arrived home in excellent spirits after our marathon of activity. My aunt, who had decided to make a surprise visit, was waiting for us. The remnants of the long hot day were palpable, it was stifling; we flung open all the doors and windows in a mad frenzy. My mother stopped in her tracks as she opened the French doors leading to the back terrace. We all gazed in that direction. Something in the picturesque scene was missing. The curious emptiness clawed at me until I heard my mother say,

“Where did the patio umbrella go?”

The soft wind rustled the bushes below the porch as I looked up in disbelief. The sky was bare above me, cold stars twinkled in the umbrella's stead.

“It has to be somewhere, maybe you took it down and forgot?” offered my aunt.

“Maybe someone decided to borrow it,” my aunt conjectured.

“We usually leave a lot of things laying about and no one ever touches them,” my mother mused.

“The neighbor's getting their roof redone, perhaps it was the workers,” I volunteered.

“The porch is not hard to climb—” my aunt ventured. “Wait, what's this?”

My aunt knelt down and revealed a circular piece of plastic, the apparatus that contained the solar panel for the umbrella.

“It must have fallen off as they carried the umbrella away,” my mother stated, moving towards the phone.

Half an hour later, two black clad police officers made their way into our tiny dining room, their stature seemed to dwarf the miniscule house. We wearily showed them the scene of the crime, explaining our predicament. They peered around the porch and one of them nonchalantly picked up the plastic rig, obviously unconcerned about contaminating “forensic evidence.”

“It may seem odd to steal a patio umbrella, but this one was a bit unusual,” my mother reported to them.

“What about your kids? Do you think they may have done something with it?” one of the officers questioned.

“They were with me all day.”

“What about their friends?” The officer pointed the beam of his heavy flashlight towards two eyes, that peered through a slit in the adjoining door. My brother slid backwards, an expression of guilt pained his face. We shrugged in response.

One of the officers inscribed all the pertinent details of the case onto a form attached to a clipboard. They were not optimistic that there would be a satisfactory resolution. However, they thought the petty nature of the crime was indicative that it was one of opportunity, and the guilty parties probably would not be back. Nevertheless, my mother was not consoled. We felt violated. Someone had destroyed our sense of security.

In the bright sunlight of the morning, the world appeared to return to normal. My harried aunt departed. My twin brother, who at times can have a very active imagination, and was fearful that the arrival police was associated with a library book about the FBI, that he had squirreled in his room, decided it was now safe to come out. My mother, however, was missing. I ventured outside and discovered her rummaging through storage containers in the garage.

“What are you looking for?”

“The safe. I thought your father had a small safe stored down here. I still can't believe that someone would go through all that trouble for a patio umbrella...”

Feeling that I had no way to genuinely assist her in the search, I started back towards the house. As I was climbing the stairway, something drew my attention to the roof. To my astonishment the umbrella lay upended on a flat portion of it. I studied the spectacle silently, puzzled by the sight.

“How on earth did it get up there? There was not a lot of wind yesterday, and it doesn't have wings,” my mother laughed.

"I'll help you get the ladder," I sighed.

We balanced the ladder against a wall. The two of us stood there, trying to determine what our next move would be.

Although the roof was flat, and easy to walk on, there was a problem with the height. My father, who was out of town, often goes up there, however neither of us felt comfortable with the prospect of that kind of elevation. The irony of our situation was not lost on us. We could call the roofers. They would not be intimidated by the elevation. But we felt we were not deserving of their assistance, after our unsubstantiated accusations. The heat had definitely altered our perceptions the previous evening, we had no right to make such judgments. Therefore justice was served - one of us would have to suffer the consequences. My mother, with a blanched face, gingerly started to mount the ladder. As she approached the final two steps, acrophobia took over - she could go no further. I returned with the hooked rod of a tree pruner, which she used to slowly pull the umbrella towards the edge. With clenched teeth, I watched the inverted parasol skid off the roof and land with a crash on the concrete patio floor, narrowly missing the two of us.

"It's a little banged up." My mother noted, dolefully picking up the mass of misshapen metal and canvas.

"Nothing a little duct tape won't fix... I guess that solves the case of the missing umbrella, though I am still curious how it managed to get on the roof." As I spoke a sudden wind caressed my cheek and the lace curtains hanging by the patio entrance fluttered.

"Maybe it was the wind."

Later that day I noticed a sizable bite mark upon my leg. This was curious to me, as I did not recall having been in contact with any sort of creature that would have produced such an impression. Once again, I felt the whisper of a breeze. It eerily ran down my neck, causing me to wonder. Was this the work of the Santa Anas, winds that are notorious for creating conditions during which, as Raymond Chandler famously stated in the opening of his crime story, *Red Wind*, "anything can happen?" On the other hand, perhaps, the warning at the mandala ceremony had some credence in an oblique way. In any case, I ruminated that life had certainly been unusual since I had acquired a few grains of sand.

Jet Kaftan

Middle School Essay

## Nature

Pill bugs are like rollie pollies and they run really fast. These two insects have a very big part in life, they fertilize soil for trees in rain forest, gardens, or farms. When I was young I noticed that trees in the yard where I lived started dying off so I thought why is it at my grandmas why her trees would survive longer than ours.

So I got lots of pill bugs and rollie pollies and put them in my back yard and front yard, then my dad and I put fertilizer throughout the yard. When I looked the next day when I woke up I noticed that both of the bugs were eating the soil and moving it underneath the ground, I was very amazed of what was happening.

Now since I'm older I write down about every insect I collect and put them in 10 gallon containers and 1 gallon containers. Every spring I let go more rollie pollies and pill bugs so they can have a new life in the open to do the purpose of what they do in life and they do the best keeping every plant that they see where they have water alive for a longer time so earth can have a better environment staying green.

Lots of people are afraid of little insects like this but they won't do any harm to humans they help us in so many ways and not that many people know about that because when you see a yard with many trees and grass these bugs are underneath the dirt keeping your plants healthy as possible. Next time when you see some type of insect just think of what they do for us in nature.

Antonia Librizzi  
Middle School Essay



## Why We Should Read Books

Whether you're a sci-fi fan or a lover of non-fiction, books make the world go round. With books like Harry Potter and The Hunger Games on the shelves, kids have a way to entertain themselves without any kind of equipment other than the book itself. I personally love to read; it's one of my favorite things to do and I can't imagine a world without books. One day, while I was in class, a kid said to me, "Why do you like reading? I'd rather be outside doing stuff rather than reading about someone else doing it." When he said this, my immediate thought was: Well, what about when read fictional books? Take The Hunger Games for example, we don't live in a dystopian society that has a terrible government. Therefore, there's nothing I could do to "improve" this fantasy world. And this applies to many, many books. Now, when you're reading a textbook, and it's talking about certain issues that America's having, then you might have the ability to stop these issues. But, seeing as I'm only 13 years old, it's not like I can go outside and somehow stop a war or do something along the lines of that. Now, I could be looking at this all wrong, perhaps he meant, "Why read about an adventure when you could go outside and have your own." In this case, some people could go out and have some crazy adventure, but as I mentioned before, I'm not old enough to go out and have a real adventure like the ones I've read about in books. Now, back to the point, books are simply amazing, the novels I read almost never disappoint me. In fact, most books inspire me and influence my decisions every day.

One of my absolute favorite book series is, you guessed it, Harry Potter! Now, let me get one thing straight, my love of Harry Potter isn't due to the book's popularity. When I was younger, I wasn't very interested in reading about wizards because (and I'm ashamed to admit this) I had already seen the movies and thought that they were most likely fairly accurate compared to the book. However, since I have many other fandoms, I was constantly seeing stuff on tumbler about Harry Potter and I got tired of not understanding all of these references. So, I read the books and instantly fell in love with the story. Let me just say this: J.K. Rowling you are the goddess of writing. Throughout the series, Harry grows so much as a character and Harry, Ron, and Hermione go from this awkward group of wizards

to the golden trio that almost single handedly destroyed Voldemort, the world's greatest villain, once and for all. It's incredibly hard to explain my love for these books, but I will say this, my life wouldn't be the same without Harry Potter. Another one of the most amazing book series' in the world is Percy Jackson. I can't thank Rick Riordan enough for deciding to write down this story and publishing it for everyone to read. The Lightning Thief (The first book in the Percy Jackson series) kick started my love of reading. I began this series in 4th grade when my writing teacher read it to us and ever since then, I had a thirst to read. Let me start by giving some background knowledge on the author, these books started as a bedtime story for Riordan's son. I think that this is so inspiring, he was a regular person teaching history to middle-schoolers in Texas and without even trying to, he wrote the first book of a bestselling series that has a prequel series. These books inspire me every day in so many ways. I can't even begin to imagine my life without Percy Jackson, these books really grasp life. And one of the many things I love about these books is that, it's not always a happy ending. Bad things happen to great people and these books don't shy away when it comes to the "awkward" things in life. These book don't ignore real themes in life. I love them for that.

The Fault in Our Stars is also a favorite novel of mine. It is indescribably amazing. The Fault in Our Stars doesn't even try to shield the reader form the cruelties of life, and in this case that's a good thing, no, a necessary thing for the author, John Green, too do. Near the end of the book (Spoiler alert), Augustus dies. If you've read the book, admit it, you cried (I know I did, at least). This novel is the first one to ever bring me to tears, and that's saying something because many people die in fantasy books, and that's my favorite genre. It's so hard to describe the rollercoaster of emotions that I felt while reading The Fault in Our Stars.

Reading is an adventure that I get to go on every time I pick up a book. I couldn't mention all the books I love because there are so many, but I can't forget about The Hunger Games, The Selection, and so many more. I wouldn't be the person I am today without the help of these amazing authors and I can't thank them enough for the impact they've had on my life. Its books like these that help kids like me to get through tough days and to have for when they're bored. Quoting J.K. Rowling herself, "If you don't like to read, you haven't found the right book." I can't even begin to imagine how kids who don't read feel. In fact, I pity them, for having "better things to do" (These things would probably include watching TV or playing video games, just saying). So if you're like that kid who said that he doesn't understand why I like to read, I say, "I read because I think books are beautiful and are so much more important and fun than any phone or video game."



Rein Townsend  
Middle School Essay



## Blaming Teachers

Is it really fair that teachers get blamed for the academics and test scores? Teachers are perceived due to teacher's success and doing their job, because that a lot of teachers are not looked up to. Could politics play a part of why teachers receive less respect? There have been many promises from politicians for raises in teachers pay.

Parent's attitude has changed toward teachers over the years. If you got in trouble at school not only you were disciplined through the teachers you were disciplined at home. Parents were the first educator but now some kids are never getting the first education. For many reasons such as language barrier, dysfunctional family, drug and alcohol abuse in the home. Some kids are even homeless and move home to home. All of these play a factor in the classroom.

Being in a classroom with over crowding and kids that don't want to learn makes it hard on the teacher. There are any distractions all the kids have cell phones but me. My mom thinks it will make me appreciate life and be more humble. There are always that kid that drums on the desk all the time. We all know how annoying that is. Those are the distractions that come with the job.

As a teacher they have many roles a counselor, a nurse, or a doctor when a student gets hurt. They have to have a sense of humor. Someday I will be an inspiring P.E. coach like my coach Ms Goldstein she went to a few of my base ball games and she made me think I could do anything.



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