

It's All

2023

WRITE

Short Story Writing Contest for Teens

MIDDLE AND
HIGH SCHOOL WINNERS



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A special thank you to the author who ranked this year's winning stories:



Taryn Kloeden is a lover of nature and all things furry and feathered. As a graduate student in anthrozoology with an undergraduate degree in psychology and biology, she is dedicating her life to understanding and protecting animals, both human and nonhuman. This zeal for the outdoors combined with a lifelong love affair with fantasy and horror stories led her to create the YA dark fantasy series, *The Fenearen Chronicles*.

Taryn lives in Richmond, Virginia with her Prima donna cat, Stella, and personal piano player/boyfriend, Lorenzo.

A special thank you to our keynote speaker at this year's It's All Write ceremony:



Photo by Astrid Photography

Lillie Lainoff (author of ONE FOR ALL) received her B.A. in English with a concentration in creative writing and distinction within the major from Yale University. She received her MA in Creative Writing Prose Fiction from the University of East Anglia, and currently lives in Washington, D.C. ONE FOR ALL was named a Best Book of 2022 by NPR, a Best First Novel for Youth of 2022 by Booklist, a Best Book of 2022 by the Chicago Public Library, and a Best YA Book of 2022 by BuzzFeed and Paste Magazine. It was also a Junior Library Guild selection and a 2023 YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults pick. She was a featured Rooted in Rights disability activist, and is the founder of Disabled Kidlit Writers Facebook group.

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MIDDLE SCHOOL WINNERS

First Place: Home

By Lucy Panning

Beyond the worlds outside of time, the storyteller waits. Above the gates of whispering stone, the silent herald glides on gilded wings. As a simple ink pot and feather quill are set before her, the storyteller inhales and opens her eyes. She picks up the quill. The ink shimmers gold as the feather's tip breaches the surface. The storyteller exhales. Her eyes glow. The scroll unfurls. Ink finds paper, and the story has begun.

...

Many long years ago, a humble woodcarver erected a home in the center of the Silviene Forest. With him came his wife and children, and his friends soon followed. A settlement of simple log houses took shape. In time, the woodcarver's children grew, and plied their craft, and had children of their own. So, too, did these children grow, work, and bear children. In this way, the village thrived.

The woodcarver had a great-grandson called Louis. Louis grew up in that village amongst the practical, hardworking folk who called it home. From his father he learned carpentry, and so carried on his family's tradition.

Years passed. Louis matured, and, when the time was right, took a wife called Emilie. She loved him dearly. Together they lived their simple life, made whole by the birth of their beloved daughter, whom they called Sara. Sara grew older, and acquired a subtle wisdom with each passing year. She was a delicate girl - raven-haired, dark-eyed, and lovely. Her greatest attribute, though, was her keen mind. She was beloved all the more for it.

On the thirteenth anniversary of her birth, she took an apprenticeship with the village healer, Jeanne. Jeanne was a tall, aged woman with long iron-hued hair and icy, pale blue eyes. She was well known for her firm but gentle hand, her patience, and her vast knowledge.

For two years, Jeanne trained Sara in all she knew. The girl soon became well-versed in medicine, herblore, and what little history the old woman knew. Sara loved her work dearly. With her father's encouragement, she soon became Jeanne's equal in all but experience.

Jeanne had always been quite composed, secure in the knowledge that she was the best possible at her craft. But she was old, and when memory began to fail her, her world changed. No longer was she the simple old woman who cared only for mending others' hurts. She'd become irritable and jealous. She was afraid of Sara -of her ever-growing skill, of her favor with the people. In short, Jeanne feared that Sara was trying to steal her position. No, Jeanne did not like being inferior, not one bit of it.

It happened that one evening, the old woman chanced upon Sara, who was walking alone in a heavy rain, smiling to herself in the gloom. This scene only cemented her hatred. And so, the paranoid creature formed a plan.

In early spring, when the ground began to thaw, Jeanne's son Robert led Sara on a herb-gathering expedition deep into the Silviene Forest. He had been charged to lose the girl in the thickest part of the wood, so he led her far off the paths. While the innocent Sara gathered raspberries and lavender shoots, he quickly stole back to his waiting mother and

told her the deed was done. She was very pleased with him, and began to spread word that Sara had been lost to the river. Louis and Emilie fell into great anguish.

On finding herself alone in the woods, Sara knew immediately what Jeanne had tried to do. She pitied the old woman's decline. But she now knew the extent of the old woman's hatred, and it made her heart ache terribly. Sara leaned against a tree and wept.

In time, exhaustion overcame her and she fell asleep. Late that night, an old hunter found the girl and took her to his home.

Upon waking, Sara found herself in a simple bed in a tiny, but clean, log cabin. She wore a simple blue nightdress, and the salty tears had been wiped away. An old couple sat by an open window, talking in hushed voices. The woman noticed her first and stood.

"Frederick, look! Our guest is awake!" Then, to Sara, she said, "Just come over here, love, and you'll have your breakfast in a moment." Sara obeyed, and took a seat at the table.

Frederick sat beside her.

Over breakfast, the kind old woman introduced herself as Marie. Sara, warming up to the two of them, related her story. Her voice broke when she told them of Jeanne's plot. "I can never go home," she whispered. Hot tears filled her eyes. It hurt to breathe past the lump in her throat.

Frederick and Marie shared her sorrow. "Stay with us," murmured Frederick, clasping her hand. "We'll never leave you."

Sara accepted and lived in peace for days. She devised a way for Frederick to send a message to her parents. They were not to let Jeanne know of her refuge, Sara warned. The old woman would surely come after her.

Emilie and Louis, of course, were overjoyed. But they reluctantly did as their daughter asked.

What alerted Jeanne was subtle, and no one else in the village suspected a thing. It was a simple thing, really; the newfound peace in Louis' features, the slight smiles Emilie let slip, the lightening of both their gaits. When Jeanne discovered the truth, her fear returned anew. And she was angry. Very angry.

So she summoned her son. "Robert," she said. "Go. Find the girl. Take this, and use it as you must. Do not fail me again." Taking the little canvas pouch from his mother's hand, the repulsed but dutiful son set off.

In the forest, Robert found a cottage. In the cottage, he found a pot of stew. Into the stew, he sprinkled the deadly poison. And a little something else.

When Sara, Frederick, and Marie returned, they set down their bundles of firewood before entering the cottage. As Marie stepped over the threshold, she wrinkled her nose. "Goodness, it smells in here!" she said, coughing. Sara and Frederick entered, holding rags over their noses. A foul smell, like burnt hair and old meat, pervaded the whole cabin. "I must have left the stew on too long. Oh dear. Frederick, Would you mind?" Frederick dropped his makeshift mask and grabbed the pot. Grimacing, he threw the whole thing out the door.

"I'm so sorry, Sara. We'll have to sleep in tents until the stench clears," said Marie apologetically.

Sara was smiling. "It's alright, Marie. And I've found something." In her outstretched hand were two soggy piles of what appeared to be torn-up leaves. She indicated one.

“Nightshade. Very deadly poison.” She pointed to the other. “Skunk cabbage. Someone poisoned the stew, then added skunk cabbage for the smell. We’ve just been saved from a very nasty death.”

Unfortunately for Robert, his mother already knew what he’d done. She was furious. After yelling at him for the better part of an hour, she retired to her room, where she seethed in silence. It was perhaps the worst blunder she’d ever made, letting that softhearted fool of a son interfere.

This time, though, it would be different. Jeanne pulled at the snarls in her hair. No, this time Sara would not escape. The witch bared her yellow teeth in a wolfish grin. *No escape.*

It was night when Sara retired to her tent. She’d worked hard all day trying to rid the cottage of its stench, and welcomed the sunset. She glanced behind her. Was that a squirrel, over there in the trees? Or was it — no. Nothing to worry about. Just a squirrel.

It was midnight when the witch lit the torch. The flickering light cast shadows over her once-lovely features, highlighting the dark bags under her eyes. She faced the front door of the cottage. Stepping toward it, she hurled a bucket of oil at the wooden wall.

Her hand shook as she lifted the torch.

It was midnight when Sara woke from a restless sleep. The sound of stone striking metal alerted her to danger. She scrambled to wake Frederick and Marie, a knot of cold fear forming in her stomach as she did so. The little group hurried around to the front of the cottage, staying near the trees. And then... Then Sara saw the witch.

The woman who had once been Jeanne was clothed in dark rags. Her hair was knotted and oily from days of neglect. Her bared yellow teeth were clenched. And in her hand was a torch. The witch's gnarled, bony fingers were clenched tight around the wood. Her knuckles were white, her face pale. The old woman shuddered. Before Sara had time to cry out, the witch thrust the torch into the puddle of oil.

Sara sprang forward, a desperate cry tearing from her lips. Frederick and Marie followed, shouting, but the flames were already too high.

The roar of the fire was deafening in her ears. Just before the licking flames caught the roof, she saw Jeanne, staggering within the blaze. Her lips formed a soundless plea. Then she screamed, and for one infinite moment, stretched out her hand.

Sara fell to her knees, sobbing and reaching out to Jeanne, who was now lost amid the flames. Frederick and Marie held her tight as she wept.

They stayed there for hours. After what seemed like an eternity, though, the flames dwindled to a low, smoldering pile of embers, and the sky was bright with the colors of the dawn.

That was how Louis and Emilie found them. They'd followed the pillar of smoke deep into the wood, to where the trio knelt before Jeanne's ashes. Wordlessly, the couple knelt alongside them.

In time Sara raised her head and wiped the tears from her cheeks. Her throat was raw. The sun had risen to reveal a dazzling blue sky. She listened to the birdsong, and suddenly, her grief was not so great. After all, it was a beautiful morning. The ashes had

begun to blow away. The night's events were an ache that would never leave her, but for now...

Sara stood and offered her hand to her mother.

"Home?" she asked, smiling sadly.

Emilie squeezed Louis' hand and took Sara's in her other. "Home."

Frederick and Marie joined hands, and Marie took Sara's left hand. "Home."

Sara closed her eyes, breathing deeply. Then she opened them.

Together, the little family headed home.

...

Swallowing hard, the storyteller closes her eyes and sets down the quill. A dove swoops in to collect the scroll, but the storyteller bats it away. *Just this once*, she tells herself. *One story. For me.* The herald lands on the windowsill, gazing at her with its gray eyes. The storyteller shakes her head. And as the herald flies away, the storyteller sits down, unfurls the scroll once more. And begins to read.

Second Place: The Super Crab

By Anika Dureja

SWISH! SWOOSH! The caped man flies through the screen with an 'S' on his chest.

Much like most life stories, he is the center of the action, the person who is 'super' and 'strong'. This life story is no different.

I am a hero.

I am a hermit crab.

I am saving this clam shell from drowning in my water bowl. It's very heroic, I know! After this, I will save my brother from burying himself alive. Although, sometimes I think it's because he wants to avoid me. But that's impossible! For I am the hero of this story!

"Narcissism Narcissism Narcissism Narcissism Narcissism Narcissism Narcissism..." my pet human drawls on. She says that a lot, so it must be a very important word.

"He wants to be seen. He's looking in the mirror again," she says.

Oh, yes! She is right about that. I have a very shiny mirror. I can see myself in there! So strong, so *red*... so handsome...

"Great, he's spinning in front of the mirror now. I wonder how he can even see himself through the cloudiness of that thing. Maybe he thinks he actually looks like Superman." My pet's mom walks into my visuals. She rolls her eyes.

Did they just –

There's no way-

They called my mirror *cloudy*?! HOW DARE THEY?

I run to the front of my terrarium. I bang on the glass, eloquently communicating my disapproval.

“Maybe I should clean his terrarium. He’ll be peaceful that way.”

Them cleaning my terrarium is the equivalent of them dropping a nuclear bomb on it. Actually, the nuclear bomb might be better.

Wait, what is going on? Why am I slipping across the sand? I look outside, beyond the glass, and then I see it. My pets are moving me across *their* home, and the terrarium has tilted. I sit back and enjoy the ride, until -

CRACK!

—

Ugh, why did my sand turn to rock? My tiny little brain cannot handle the motion of getting up, and I could probably curse in 51 different nonexistent languages. Where am I?

Who am I?

Oh wait, it’s all coming back to me. I am Kreb, the Super Crab of the Crabulous Crabtastical Crabiffically Crabby Kingdom, with a stupid brother named Berk. Where is that idiot?

My life sucks.

—

Day one outside of the terrarium, and I still cannot find my brother. It’s not like I have necessarily been *trying* to find him, but that is neither here nor there. I have put my mind to it, so now I shall save my idiot brother Berk! I confidently walk out from under the mahogany table I had been bravely hiding under, and I run under a chair. Daylight seeps through the

curtains, casting a glow across the room. It is the perfect day to finally put my flying abilities to use.

I quickly skitter out from under my hiding spot, slipping and sliding on the wood floor. It seems as if I'm not really moving as fast as I would hope to be.

"BERK, WHERE ARE YOU?" I scream as loud as I can, and it comes out in a very mighty Super Crab voice. Success!

"I'm here!" Berk squeaks out from about three feet away, underneath a table with a much smaller gap to the floor than the larger one I had just been hiding under. I shake my head. Out of all the places to hide! I start skidding towards the general direction of his voice when a sudden darkness overtakes my vision, and I crane my head up to see my pets. I hadn't realized how large they were, but clearly they didn't realize how small I was either. I run for my life before my pet's left foot comes down on the ground with a resounding *CRASH*.

Shoot, the right foot exists too. Thank goodness humans only have two legs, and not six like I do. If they did have six legs, I would have been crushed to pieces by now. I run again, panting and praying for my life. I slide under the smaller table.

Phew, smooth entrance. I clean myself with my claws and march on, deeper into the darkness under the table.

"Berk, where are you?"

"I'm right here, Kreb!"

I feel a tap on my back and quickly spin around. "What have you been doing here?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just waiting for a call to do something, y'know? It's been two days since we fell out of the terrarium," Berk's voice is slow and breezy, like the lazy crab he is.

“Two days? I just woke up,” I say, horrified. Had I really been knocked out by a fall that Berk survived unscathed? Impossible. *I* am the super one, not Berk.

I clear my voice, making it as authoritative as possible. “Our pets do not seem to have realized that we are not in the terrarium.”

“Why don’t we, like, climb up those weird zig-zaggy thingies there?” he points towards the stairs, “and once we get high enough, our humans will see us!”

“And maybe I will find a mirror to check if my claws are just as red as before! Let’s try it!”

—

About two yards of skidding later, Berk and I find the stairs, or the “zig-zaggy thingies” to climb on. I’m already starting to regret listening to my useless brother. Who doesn’t know what *stairs* are? Up close, the stairs look a lot taller than they looked earlier, and the closer we get, the harder it seems to climb the carpeted ledges. Were stairs always this... steep? I cannot fathom the idea of climbing this monstrosity. To add insult to injury, there is no mirror in sight.

“Looks easy enough, let’s do it,” Berk chirps.

“Yes! WE CAN DO THIS!” I say in my best Super Crab voice. I really need a cape, so that I can start flying and not have to waste my time wrecking my handsome red claws with all this pedestrian climbing.

I grab a loose thread on the carpet with my claws, trying to catch up with Berk. He had already started climbing while I was daydreaming about having a cape. Another loose thread comes to my grip, and before I know it I am already at the top of the first stair.

Berk and I climb three stairs, and we are about to climb up the fourth one when we experience our first pet sighting of the day. They are walking past the stairs this very moment! This is our chance. We scream in our loudest crab voices, to no avail. They don't even glance back when I use my particularly impressive Super Crab voice!

"Berk, you couldn't have thought of a better idea, huh?" I say, mildly sarcastically.

"There's not even a mirror up here."

"Oh wait, then maybe we should go down!"

"Uhhhh, yeah, *duh* we should go down."

So down we go, which is a lot of stumbling and less of climbing. Then, as the Super Crab of the Crabulous Crabtastical Crabiffically Crabby Kingdom, I think of a wonderful idea.

"I'm Super Crab, so if I cut a piece of the curtain and tuck it into my shell as a cape, I should be able to fly! Then we can easily get the attention of our pets, because I'm sure they won't miss a flying Super Crab!"

I'm sure I hear a squeak in protest, but I am confident that it is finally time to put my Super Crab abilities to use and help the Crabby Kingdom. Nothing will stop me! I march along to the nearest curtain, which is purple and very soft. It should be easy to break a small rectangle off of it. I slowly start to wear out the threads, and as the sky goes dark, Berk falls sound asleep. I cut out one side of the cape and then fall asleep alongside my brother.

—

I wake up with the same golden light being cast through the window above me, and just like last time, Berk is already awake. To my surprise, he's cutting out my cape, and he has almost finished.

“You know, as stupid as I think you are sometimes, Kreb, I will cut out this cape for you if it makes you happy,” he says. “Like, there is literally no way a hermit crab could fly, and the Crabby Kingdom most likely doesn’t exist.”

Oh, how naive my brother is. Just because he doesn’t feel the calling of the Crabby Kingdom, he doesn’t think it exists. At least I got my cape cut out, and I can finally fly and show him how wrong he is. I take the beautiful purple silk cape from Berk just as he finishes snipping the last few threads. We have no time to waste. We need our home again, and I am starting to feel hungry and thirsty. Forget about being hungry and thirsty, I want my mirror back!

I walk over to the nearest leg of the dining table and begin to climb using the notches in the wood.

Left leg, right claw, right leg, left claw, left leg...

After about 58 cycles between claws and legs, I make it up onto the dining table. I look out into the vast area of my pets’ house. It should be easy for me to fly through the large doors without crashing into anything, as long as I avoid the kitchen. I map out my flight path, and then it is time for the big moment.

I am going to fly.

I walk to the very edge of the dining table, setting my posture for flight.

“GOOD LUCK!” Berk shouts in his loudest voice, which seems quiet from all the way up here. No matter how quiet it is, I appreciate my brother’s support.

With a deep breath I jump off the table, flare my cape, and glide. I’m doing it! I am actually flying! I can get over to the couch and take a quick landing and-

CRASH! SNAP!

—

I blink the dancing spots out of my eyes. My pupils go bonkers, looking around and only seeing a bright white light. I start to panic.

“Where am I? Am I dead? OH CRABBY GOD. HOW DARE YOU MURDER THE BEST SUPER CRAB. I JUST FLEW!”

“You’re fine, dumbo. You jumped and then just kinda crashed.”

I think that’s Berk, but I’m not quite sure. I blink a lot more, and then a chubby reddish face with beady eyes comes into view. Yep, that’s Berk.

“Whatever. Did the pets see us?”

“Nope. As brave as you were Kreb, your efforts were inevitably useless.”

This is why they are our pets. It’s because we can see them, but they can’t see us.

“Hey Kreb, I think we could try to climb up the pantry. While you were knocked out, the humans went into the pantry a lot.”

“Last time, your idea absolutely failed. Zero percent chance of passing this time.”

“I’m starting to feel hungry, Kreb. We can eat the food in the pantry, and you will probably find water too. Also, your idea failed too, so you *cannot* be talking.”

My idea has a better chance of working: this I know beyond a shadow of a doubt. The Super Crab’s ideas always have a better chance of not failing. However, I might as well go with Berk on this idea. We are probably going to die without food anyway. Well, Berk is going to die without food. I will only die if I don’t see my mirror within the next hour.

—

Day four of being loose in the house, and we have finally reached the pantry. Doing the claw leg cycle again, this time about 29 times, we reach the first shelf. This shelf probably is the stinkiest of all of the four shelves, but it also contains the most fresh food. I notice a fresh purple layered onion. It looks juicy and attractive, and by the time I reach it, I notice that Berk has already gone through the first layer of another small onion.

“THIS IS GREAT, KREB!” he screams directly in my face. I almost faint; the smell wafting from his mouth is the worst thing my nostrils have ever encountered.

Barely hanging on, I eat one bite of an onion and come even closer to fainting. Of course my brother would enjoy this strong scent! My eyes fill with tears, and my mouth feels like it is on fire. This onion is not for the elegant and handsome Super Crab!

After that eventful break, we proceed to climb up the remaining three shelves, and after over 100 leg-claw cycles over the metal wires of the pantry shelves, we make it up to the cereal shelf.

Just as we finish climbing, in comes a pet human, right on time! She walks closer... and closer... and into the pantry...

“FIRE!” Berk and I scream in unison, executing our last hope of a plan. We put our shells to the back of the nearest plastic box and walk backwards, slowly pushing the cereal box over the shelf.

Our human glances up, and then quickly looks down with a look of disbelief on her face. She then slowly turns her face up as the cereal box is falling... and then-

CRACK! Her nose is caught under the cereal box. Thank god it was empty, otherwise that nose was a goner.

“UHHHHHH, MOM? THERE’S SOMETHING UP THERE!” she screams, and Berk and I back away. I don’t know about Berk, but my eardrums are definitely bleeding.

“Yes honey? Oh, ok. I’ll look.”

Pet human number two dashes over to the pantry, grabs a step stool and cranes her neck upwards. I give her a withering stare in return. *How dare you not even try to look for us? How stupid can you be?*

“Honey, it’s Kreb and Berk. How did they even get up here...”

Pet human number one slides her hand under Berk and me, and we both climb on her hand without protest. God, it has been a long four days without my mirror.

—

One cleansing bath later, we are put back into our clean terrarium. Our pets apologize a lot less than what they owe us, but it’s fine. I look into my mirror, and finally see my red, *red* claws. As Super Crab, I can admit I owe someone a thank you.

“Hey Berk, your idea actually worked!”

“I know right, I’m just that good.”

“You wanna be my sidekick? We can traverse the Crabulous Crabiffically Crabby Kingdom together!”

“YES. I WILL LEARN TO FLY!”

Just like my idol Superman, I am a hero. Today, I figured out that I also have a sidekick that has more brains than I expected his chubby little head to hold. I hope I don’t have to go on more adventures like this one, but I will always adore my brother from here on out.

Third Place: The Monster in the Mirror

By Ellie Xu

I've always been a worrier. It's one of my biggest flaws. At least, that's what everyone says. I like to imagine it as my biggest asset. After all, it's what makes me such a good author. And it's saved me on numerous occasions. I think back to when I was younger, when I wasn't on my deathbed. When I didn't have old, wrinkled skin and short white hair. When I wasn't plagued with anxiety everywhere I went. The only parts of me that haven't changed would be my height, the mole on my left cheek, and the monster.

I used to live in an old apartment building in the middle of a bustling city. It was the first time I was away from my family. I'd just published my first book, but it wasn't selling well. The reviews, which were almost all negative, haunted me day and night. I wasn't a good writer. I was just like everyone else, and I would never be a bestselling author. During the second week of living at the apartment, I found a back elevator that no one seemed to use. I was intrigued, but a voice in the back of my head warned me to be cautious. Maybe the elevator had a dark secret, even if it was practically identical to the other elevators in the building, with a metal floor and mirrors on all sides.

When I entered the elevator, the lights flickered. It was only for a second, no more, but I saw something in the elevator mirror. A dark figure, black like coal, was standing right behind me. I screamed and turned around, but there was nothing behind me as far as I could tell. I turned back to the mirror and saw the figure for another second before the lights flicked back on. It was gone, but I knew what I saw.

My head pounded. I'd seen a monster, but no one would believe me if I told them. They would blame it on my imagination and tell me I should turn it into a novel. But I was sure I wasn't making it up, and I avoided the elevator for the next year or two. Maybe it did have a dark secret.

But one day, I knew I couldn't avoid the elevator any longer. Someone was hosting a huge party in their apartment, and the main elevator broke down. Everyone was going up the stairs, and I didn't want to wait. I knew I could use the back elevator, but I was still too scared. I wasn't seeing things. The monster or whatever I saw was definitely real. I took one more glance at the crowd surrounding the staircase, and I knew I would have to face my fears.

"Come on," I told myself. "Maybe it was just your imagination. And you can't avoid it forever." I glanced at the other residents of the apartment building, who were all frustrated. I turned to an elderly lady with white hair. "Hey, I know a back elevator you can use to get upstairs."

The lady's face brightened. "Really?"

I nodded and led her down the hall. I tried calming my nerves. When I went on that elevator, I was a bit scared and anticipating something terrible. Maybe I had made the monster up.

The lady smiled when she saw the elevator. "I never knew about this elevator! It seems like no one uses it anymore."

When the doors rolled open with a ding, I forced myself to get on with her. "What floor?" I asked the lady as I pushed the button for my floor, the fourth.

"The third floor."

My heart plunged, but I tried to ignore the growing pit of dread in my stomach. The doors closed and I felt the elevator chug upwards. My hands were cold and clammy, and I felt my body seize with panic. My eyes frantically darted towards the mirror but the black figure wasn't there. I started to relax a little. Maybe I'd just been tired after a long day and was starting to see things.

For a split second, the elevator went dark. My heart dropped. The lights were back on in just a second, and I thought I imagined it. I turned to the lady. "Did you see that?" I asked slowly.

"See what?" the lady asked.

"The lights flickered for a second."

"Oh." The lady shrugged.

Ding! The elevator doors rolled open to the third floor. I stepped back as the lady exited. I watched in horror as the doors closed and I was alone in the elevator. Again.

I took a deep breath in, then a deep breath out. They didn't work and I was still panicking. I waited desperately for the elevator to arrive on the fourth floor.

The lights shut off and the elevator went dark. My body tensed. This couldn't be happening. I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping that when I opened them, the lights would be on again and everything would be okay. Instead, a cold sensation crept up my neck. I let out a scream and opened my eyes in horror.

The black figure was back. This time, I got a better view of it. It was the silhouette of a human, but thin and stretched out like a shadow in the sun.

"Who are you?" I yelled out.

The black figure didn't respond. It didn't even acknowledge my question. The cold feeling wrapped around my neck and I stumbled, but quickly balanced myself again. When I looked up at the mirror, the black figure was gone and the lights were on. The elevator doors opened to the fourth floor.

I took a deep breath, trying to compose myself. My head was spinning. My fears were confirmed. The monster was real. It had to be real. I wasn't imagining things. Next time, I could take a picture for proof... but there would be no next time. There was absolutely no way I was going on that elevator again. I was leaving this apartment building the second I could afford it.

I staggered out of the elevator and rushed to my apartment, not daring to look back. I only stopped for breath when I was in my apartment, with the door locked behind me.

"Congratulations!"

I jumped back as my friends got out from behind the table. It looked like a rainbow had exploded in my apartment and left balloons everywhere and confetti falling to the floor. A giant banner reading "Congratulations" was hung across the living room.

I laughed nervously. "What is this for?"

"Your book! It's been a huge success!"

I blinked, remembering how one review said I had no potential to become a good author.

"Oh." I laughed. "Guys, I appreciate you trying to cheer me up, but-"

My sister Mary pulled me in and shoved me towards the dining room. "We got cake!" she yelled.

The excitement finally died down, and after talking to everyone my head was pounding. It didn't make any sense. According to Mary, I was worried about the release of the book, thinking it was too boring and the readers would hate it. But when the book was published, everyone loved it.

I wanted to tell Mary what was going on, but she'd think I was crazy.

For the next few months after the party, I avoided the elevator and didn't see the monster. I almost managed to convince myself it was just my imagination.

Then I saw it again. And not just in the elevator. I saw it everywhere there was a reflection, whether it was the bathroom mirror, the reflection in the car window, or the clear pond in Mary's backyard. I knew it was there, even if I could only see it in reflections.

I couldn't have a single day of peace without being on edge and worrying about the monster. I suffered through it silently, not knowing what to do or how to ask for help.

Exactly three years later, I was driving on a windy mountain road in Colorado. I was going to meet up at a lodge there for a family reunion over the holidays. It was a dark and stormy night, the kind where something bad happens. The view had been spectacular earlier, with the majestic mountains towering over me and crisscrossing together until they faded into the sky. But now, the sky was a gloomy shade of grey and rain was pouring down. The mountains that had been so beautiful earlier now seemed to lead into a dark abyss below the cliff. I hadn't seen another car for almost an hour now.

I kept my eyes on the road, paranoid about making a wrong turn and falling off the cliff. I tried focusing on something else, like how happy Mary would be when she saw the

chocolate I'd bought for her at the gas station, except that reminded me of the half an hour I spent waiting in line for it. The only other thing on my mind was the monster.

"I know you're there," I whispered, but there was no response. The only noise was the rumbling of my car engine and the plop of the raindrops as they hit the dashboard and ran frantically in all directions. "I saw you earlier. And I know you're here."

I must've sounded crazy, but I had to get the monster talking. If it could talk. I didn't think it had a mouth.

"Who are you? Do you visit other people? Why have I never seen you until the day I rode that elevator? And are you here to help me or hurt me?"

I realized that the monster hadn't hurt me. Instead, it helped me by getting my book to sell well. Maybe it wasn't dangerous. I leaned back in my seat, relaxed for the first time in a while.

Suddenly, I remembered the chocolate I bought for Mary. I quickly glanced to the side and saw the chocolate, on top of my suitcase. I breathed a sigh of relief.

I didn't see the sharp turn ahead.

Before I could even register what happened, my car crashed into the short railing, the only thing blocking me from death. The impact thrust me forward. I desperately put my foot down on the brakes, but it was too late. The car had been going too quickly. It started to tip over and I watched, dumbfounded. Everything was happening in slow motion. I was going to die! I closed my eyes, preparing for the drop, but shot them open when I felt a familiar cold sensation around my neck.

My eyes drifted towards the rearview mirror at the last second before the car fell down the cliff. The black monster smiled at me with its equally black mouth. It pulled me backwards and I jolted onto my seat, the car upright again.

I was pulled up in front of the huge, wooden lodge my family and I were staying at. Colorful Christmas lights ran across the roof and windows. Right outside the main entrance, there was a Christmas tree, covered with shiny gold and red ornaments. Mary, in her winter coat, ran towards me and I weakly rolled down my window.

“Hey! I’m so glad you made it here safely. And you’re early, too!”

“Yeah... yeah, I brought something for you.” I searched my car, rummaging for the chocolate.

“Ooh, I love surprises.”

I felt myself getting frantic. The chocolate wasn’t on my suitcase, where I last saw it. It wasn’t in my bag either. It wasn’t on the floor and it wasn’t in the crack between the seats. I was still rattled from what happened earlier, with my car falling off the cliff. It just didn’t make any sense. I’d just pulled up here, but I didn’t remember making the rest of the drive to the lodge. Was this the afterlife? Was I a ghost now?

“I’m sorry, Mary. I got you some chocolate, but I can’t find it.”

“Oh, you’re the best.” Mary touched my shoulder, smiling. “It’s fine. I mean, it’s the thought that counts, you know?”

“Yeah, I just... I don’t know where it went.” I unbuckled my seat belt and kept on rummaging through my belongings. My hands trembled. My entire body was shaking.

“Come on, I’m sure you’ll find it later. You should see the rooms. The view is amazing!”

“No, I need to find the chocolate.” I sighed. “I don’t get it. Where could it have gone?”

Mary opened the car door and pulled me out. “Really, don’t worry about it. I can get chocolate anywhere.”

“Yeah,” I mumbled. “But I waited half an hour for it! I risked being late!”

“Well, it couldn’t have been that bad, since you’re twenty minutes early.”

I stiffened. “The drive must have been quicker than I expected, then.”

Even when the rest of our family came, I was quiet and reserved, mostly keeping to myself. I didn’t want to talk to anyone. I had things to figure out.

The lodge was even prettier inside. There were festive wreaths and garlands everywhere I looked. The room I was sharing with Mary was nice, too. She was right about the good view. Right outside the window were snow-covered mountains everywhere you looked.

At two in the morning, I couldn’t keep it in any longer. I had been awake all night and knew Mary hadn’t slept a wink either.

“Mary,” I whispered.

She opened her eyes and stared at me sleepily.

“I have to tell you something.”

After I told her my story, she started laughing. I could see Mary’s face in the low light from the clock on the bedside table.

“What?” I snapped defensively.

“I love you, but you worry too much. You’re always paranoid.” Mary sighed. “Get some sleep. We’ll talk in the morning.”

I stare into the mirror. It’s been sixty years since the conversation with Mary, and the monster still haunts me every time I look in the mirror. Mary was wrong. I’ve learned to live with the monster, but my heart still skips a beat when I see it in a reflection.

I’m sick now. At first, I had weekly trips to the hospital, but I got tired of them. I’m ready to give up. I’m at peace with myself. But not completely. I have one more thing to do before I leave this world.

I close my eyes until I feel a familiar presence beside me. Eyes open now, I watch as the figure lifts its head, revealing its face for the first time. A smile creeps onto my old, wrinkled face with a mole on the left cheek as I stare into the monster’s old, wrinkled face, with a mole on the left cheek.

First Runner-Up: Blu Stiltonius of the Fifteenth Refrigerator

By Keely McAtee

The old Astra Supermarket in Kansas, in the year of 1992, was a giant warehouse. Before it was a supermarket, it was a gigantic, rather smelly, pet kennel. People could tell it was a kennel because even with all the deep cleansings, it tended to still smell like muddy dogs. The supermarket was now a large room split into sections: a bakery, a deli, fresh produce section, and more. The giant refrigerators' smooth glass doors always glinted in the bright light of the sun shining through the windows. The customers were normally given free samples of fresh baked goods, whether salty pretzels or sweet cakes, the customers always exclaimed in delight as the delicious taste of fresh baked bread made them smile.

Customers were regularly chatting merrily in the Astra Supermarket, which made it a great place for people to hang out and shop at the same time. The grocers hardly had to worry about customers buying anything since the store was usually packed and was rarely empty even on weekdays! All the refrigerators and shelves had to be stocked regularly except for one: the Stinky Cheese Loft which included many types of stinky cheeses like Blue Stilton cheese, Hooligan cheese, and Limburger to name a few. Hardly anyone bought from there, especially the fifteenth refrigerator which was where a few very unlucky Blue Stilton cheeses lived.

One unlucky cheese, Blu Stiltonius of the fifteenth refrigerator, was one of those cheeses who never got picked up off the shelf. He was from the Stinky Cheese Loft. (Obviously.) His ivory-yellow self was already gross, and he also had bluish-green veins with a crusty and wrinkled rind. Don't let his appearances deceive you though! He was kind to new cheeses, no

matter how stinky they were. Though he hid it, he longed to explore the world beyond his fridge and be eaten.

A mean cheese, the leader of the cheddar cheeses, was Cheddster Cheese of the sixteenth refrigerator. His brothers and sisters were full of themselves and were bought and eaten quickly. Blu didn't like to admit it, but he was jealous of Cheddster. The bragger's yellowish-orange skin was green-vein free. He was also super self-absorbed and annoying. Cheddster had been pre-ordered, and he would be picked up any day now.

Blu Stiltonius's best friend Mozzie Zerella, in the same fridge as him, knew his one great wish and tried to find a solution to it. She was the kindest cheese in the store and had a soft and slippery, white surface. Blu knew Mozzie's dream was to get eaten (like all cheeses). He knew it was selfish, but he was secretly worried she would get bought. She was more popular than Blu, and the local pizza shop Le Pizze normally needed mozzarella cheese from the Astra Supermarket. Blu didn't know what he'd do without her.

Blu looked longingly at all the customers at the Ice Cream Craze section in the back of the store. The ice creams were such show offs. He turned away, jealous for the customers. Then he turned to the cheddar cheese fridge next door to the Stinky Cheese Loft. Hordes of people crowded the shelves. Everyone wanted cheddar. Right in the middle of the action was a big triangle the size of a large bowling ball. Clearly the biggest, Cheddster Cheese flashed his PRE-ORDERED sticker annoyingly at all the stinky cheeses, including Blu. Cheddster walked over with a whole gang of cheddars. Blu knew he was coming to embarrass the residents of the Stinky Cheese Loft.

“Go away you,” shouted Blu’s best friend Mozzie, who must have arrived without Blu’s knowledge.

“Oh Mozzie, why are you friends with such Stinkies? You know they are gross! Come hang out with us!”

“It doesn’t matter what he looks like as long as he is my friend, and I would rather hang out with stinky cheeses than you any day!”

Cheddster looked very astonished to hear these words coming from a mozzarella. He believed mozzarellas were decent. The sound of a motor echoed through the store, and Cheddster got back to his fridge, to be shipped away, and be eaten.

“Mozzie,” Blu asked later that afternoon, “I would like to escape the store tonight. If I can’t be eaten, I want to see the world beyond my fridge before I rot.” Blu knew it sounded ridiculous, but he was determined all the same.

“Ok. I believe I have found a route to escape. Hula Gwynn, The Hooligan cheese, used it to leave once before.” Blu was delighted to hear that.

“Lets go then! I need to realize my dream before I am no more!”

“All right. Give me a minute, I have to check the security system and make sure it is already dark outside.” Blu followed her and didn’t realize how much her slippery body helped her to slide through the store.

“All right, I’ve got it down. Let’s go conquer your dream!”

Blu and Mozzie walked out onto the street and gasped. It was beautiful at night. Astra Drive’s lights shined brightly and cast a shadow over Mozzie, so she looked like a smooth rock. Then Blu saw the sign that would change his life forever.

“Mozzie! That can’t be a Blue Stilton Cheese store? Can it?” The pressure in Blu was building rapidly like a tornado. “Mozzie? Is It?” The excitement could hardly be kept out of his voice now. When Blu looked over, expecting to see a smiling Mozzie, he got a shock. She was silently crying, trying to keep it under control, but it was a losing battle.

“You know what this means don’t you?”

“I... uh,” Blu was surprised, he didn’t know what to say.

“I brought you here for a reason Blu. I brought you here because you are the best friend I ever had. I brought you here for you to chase your dreams further, to get eaten. I knew this was here. I knew it was always crowded. Now it is your choice. Will you follow your dream, or live your boring life with the other cheeses?”

“If I stay, I’ll be with you.” Blu smiled at Mozzie. Mozzie looked up guiltily before revealing a small red sticker reading PRE-ORDERED on her smooth back.

“You won’t have me with you,” she sniffed. “Now please do what is right for you.” Blu thought for a minute then realized this had to be the end.

“I’m sorry, but this is my destiny. I can’t refuse it,” Blu decided.

“I understand,” choked Mozzie, and they both started to silently weep.

Mozzie finally gave one last sniffle, then looked up at Blu and said, “I guess this is goodbye then.”

“I think so. Say goodbye to the other cheeses for me. Oh, and thank Hula Gwynn,” replied Blu.

“O-o-ok.” Blu knew she was trying to keep it together for him, but she couldn’t keep the stutter out of her voice.

“I can’t leave you like this. You are my best friend.”

“You m-must B-blu. P-p-please.” Blu let the truth sink in as deep as it would go. He felt like curling up and crying, but he wouldn’t show his sadness. It would make Mozzie feel even worse.

“So long Mozzie,” Blu choked out.

“Goodbye Blu,” Mozzie sniffed.

The two friends hugged one last time, before Blu made his way into the shop, Fans of The Blue Stilton, and watched as Mozzie looked through the glass, tears streaking her smooth surface. Not until then, had it struck him that they would never see each other again.

The next day, Blu’s heart ached in a way it never had before. Blu looked at the shop in the light of the day and saw that all the cheeses were like him, crusty rind and all. He was stunned. Then he heard a shrill bell ting-a-ling and looked at the door. Ida Cuoco, the owner of Le Pizze walked in.

“Le Pizze is concocting a new dish. For it, I need ten of the finest cheeses in the shop.”

“That would be quite expensive Mrs. Cuoco,” said the cashier, whose name-tag read ‘MAY’. Blu hoped that he would be picked-up by Ida Cuoco because he wanted to be eaten, but he couldn’t be selfish. Other cheeses needed to be eaten more than him. Mrs. Cuoco walked up to the shelf with her nine-year-old daughter and looked at all the cheeses for a full fifteen minutes before picking up ten blocks of fine Blue Stilton Cheese that weren’t Blu Stiltonius.

“Let’s go Stella,” Ida Cuoco snapped.

“Mama, I wanna get that one, that one right there.”

“Why that one *carissima*? It is dented!” Ida Cuoco asked

“It is special Mama, like my pizza I am going to make.” Mrs. Cuoco looked annoyed for a minute then sighed, “Well then *carissima*, you might as well put it in the bag. Oh Stella, I can’t see why you want to make a pizza with Blue Stilton and Mozzarella! Why did you make me pre-order that cheese? Will your pizza even taste good?”

“It will!” Stella remarked with such finality in her voice, that you couldn’t help but believe her. Stella picked Blu up in her pudgy little hand and squeezed him like she couldn’t live without Blu. Blu loved every minute of it.

“Ok, Stella you can make your, um, pizza when we get to the shop. Bye May, dear. I hope you have good business!”

“Thanks Mrs. Cuoco.” The Cuocos left with Blu under the arm of Stella Cuoco.

When they got to Le Pizze, Stella started to get out the pizza tools and ingredients. Stella pulled out her personalized apron with ‘Stella’ stitched on it in golden thread. Then she took out a box with ‘*Ti amo Stella mia carissima*’ written in a bold red marker. She opened it and inside was a golden pizza cutter, her birthday gift.

“Remember *carissima*, the pizza dough from last night is in the fridge.” Ida Cuoco shouted from the work kitchen.

“Ok Mama!” Stella got out the dough and began. Stella started to take out all of her ingredients from the shopping bags and to Blu’s surprise right in the middle of the open bag sat... No, it couldn’t be!!! But it was! Right in the middle of the open bag was Mozzie Zerella!

“Blu?”

“Mozzie?” They stared at each other before running at the other in a hug. They ran at each other with such speed that they bonked each other.

“Blu!” Mozzie shrieked. She was so happy she was crying.

“Mozzie, I missed you. Now we will be put in little Stella’s pizza.” Blu saw Stella go get her mother to cut the cheeses. A wonderful sensation swept over Blu, and he realized he was going to be eaten. Ida Cuoco walked over and got out a silver knife and the next thing he knew Mozzie was being chopped up. Blu was so frightened that when it was his turn, he cowered in the corner. When the knife cut through his crusty skin however, he felt a tickle, and then he knew that Stella would surely like the taste of mozzarella, Blue Stilton, and veggie pizza.

When the oven beeped with its blue bird ‘cheep’, Loretta Cuoco, Stella’s big sister, walked in with a big and flowery oven-mitt on her right hand and Stella’s hand clamped in her left.

“Did Mama say this was ‘ok’? Blue Stilton cheese on pizza? Yuck!”

“It’ll be good, you’ll see!” Stella snapped defiantly. Loretta looked down at her little sister’s big brown eyes and dark brown hair and said, “Well, if you eat it all.” Loretta’s chestnut-colored hair glinted in the sunlight. Loretta pulled out the pizza and tried not to look disgusted.

“Let it cool before you eat it *carissima!*” Ida Cuoco yelled from the kitchen door.

“Ok, Mama.” A few minutes later, when the pizza had cooled, Loretta cut a piece for Stella with the golden pizza cutter, and she scarfed it down in five seconds! Blu smiled as he made his way down Stella’s throat with Mozzie. Blu’s dream had been accomplished in a very wonderful way.

Second Runner-Up: The Crows

By Jennifer Ku

Far away, an army of over four hundred men was preparing for the battle against their supposed enemies. While preparing their muskets and rifles, they had consoled and comforted each other, knowing very well this could be their last exchange with their comrades. Even letters to family and friends of those, who would, later on, grieve and bereave upon the unfortunate news of a loved one dying, were prepared and placed on a counter. Feelings of uneasiness and desolation filled the fort's atmosphere, just as it always did among the men long before. In a war, there is no such thing as an unscarred soldier.

Prayers to God were most often spoken before battles, asking for mercy and safety not just for themselves, but for their loved ones.

Tears rolled down a boy no older than sixteen, holding a photo of his family members, each grinning ear to ear, wishing above all else to spend another moment with them. A middle-aged man looked longingly at a black dog, feeding it one last treat before he left. An elderly gent smiled wistfully at the thought of his old friend waiting for him to finish their last poker game together, knowing soon enough they would reunite again.

The point is, no one likes war, except for *crows*.

Hundreds of them, a *murder*, were perched and roosted on branches of a thin oak tree, observing the army of men descending from their fort and positioning themselves in their spots in trenches. They had beady eyes, the same color as a soldier's helmet once rusted, and rested upon familiar faces, particularly ones that did not bring satisfactory remembrances.

“I wonder why mankind chooses *war* over any other possible solution to their conflicts. It’s as if the men don’t realize fighting only results in more fighting. An endless cycle where no one knows who started the violence and bloodshed but barely cares enough to question whether it shall end,” cooed a carrion crow, one named Couscous. The other crows agreed by cawing in unison.

“Humans are different, wild, and uncivilized. They will never understand how to live in harmony with each other,” said a nearby crow, amiably.

“Couscous, you forget that not everyone wants war, it tends to be the ones on the battleground who realize they could profit off by going to combat with other parties,” replied a crow with a pasty, grey body. Darius was a young crow known for being *different* than the others. He was never included in flocks, infamous for simply *sympathizing* with humans. His muted, blue eyes briefly met Couscous’ eyes, eyes that showed no light or luminescence in them, dark as caves, and swiftly turned away, unable to hold his vehement gaze.

“Darius, what difference does it make? If they are willing to kill others with their guns of theirs, aren’t they as corrupt and amoral as their superiors?” scoffed Couscous. Again, the deafening sounds of rattles and coos filled the air, although less than before, for some, had flown to different points of the great oak tree for a better view of the battle ahead.

“Do you perhaps think these soldiers have any choice before being sent off to their death? Some protect their country by fighting for the protection and safety of their families and people, others-”

“Safety? Protection? Am I truly hearing these words come out of your filthy mouth, Darius? The only thing that comes out of war is more deaths than needed, grudges against

one another 'till the end of time, and frankly, thinking must be a complex forum for mankind if running to their deaths ensures the possibilities of 'security' and 'peace'. They don't think or know how to resolve the issue, or try to figure out the root of the problem," the carrion crow spat.

"But Couscous, they aren't running to their death, they know the consequences and-"

"Are you not ashamed to present yourself in this manner? If you're going any slower, you might as well join the pigeons. What happens when crows die, you fool? What do we do when a crow dies? We avoid what kills it. We avoid and look out for ourselves, conflict only leads to the extinction of our species. To keep our young alive, to keep the cycle going. Sometimes, there are fights with our kind, fights we're not proud of, but we leave the rest to our predators."

Couscous turned his head rather ominously towards Darius and started to advance in on the young crow. Out of blue, the two crows clashed together, viciously fighting and tearing each other's skin apart. Instantaneously, Couscous laid on top of Darius, a talon in the air, ready to strike.

"Showing mercy to mankind always results in casualties on our side, Darius. But I must eliminate any threats against the crows, and we cannot afford an outsider like you to get in the way of being on top of the food chain once humans have destroyed themselves."

"You are no better than them, Couscous. You know what I am saying is-"

"You must forgive me for what I will do, bye bye Darius."

A horrible, wrenched caw came from Darius, then silence.

The other crows surrounding them were not paying any attention to their heated interaction but were rather focused on the smoke and fire below the tree. Couscous seemed to realize where the attention went and shifted his gaze toward the predominantly finished battle down below him.

“But war is good, to crows. Fewer people hunt, and there will be fewer deaths among my brothers and sisters. The bodies are dead, the soul who inhabited them is gone, and what’s left is a *feast*, for all of us. That is the beauty of nature, nothing is discarded wastefully, and everything is purposeful and balanced. Now it is our turn, to prove humans are not the only ones who can take everything and leave nothing,” murmured Couscous.

And suddenly, the *murder* of crows plunged at the dead bodies from the battle, picking up chunks of meat and flesh, and devouring their meal hungrily.

MIDDLE SCHOOL
HONORABLE MENTIONS

First Honorable Mention: An Empty Mattress

By Moss Nicklas

Anne treads lightly down the stairs of her small family home. It's been her place of residence for as long as she can remember, holding many memories throughout her dreary childhood. She's careful to avoid the creaking stair near the bottom as she makes her way to the living area. It's a tiny room, almost suffocating with all the garbage and beat-up furniture it contains. Her feet drag heavy, exhausted, yet, her motives are determined. She presses her ear against the aged brown door separating the kitchen and living room, ears reaching for any noise. A minute passes, then two. There's nothing, and Anne leans away from the entryway with a defeated look. Then she freezes, just before taking a step, as she hears the voices she had been seeking growing louder. Hurriedly, she returns to her stance, the cool wood resting against her flushed cheek.

"George, we need to. It's not right to keep her here," one voice says, presumably female. It was honey-sweet and light, but there was a weight of worry to it. "With everything that has happened, I'd think you'd care more about the safety of our child."

"You're overreacting. Just get the liquor," the male, George, says with a hoarse voice. It was rough and dry like he had swallowed sharp gravel.

"No, I'm not overreacting! You're not making this a big enough deal!" the female's voice raised, making Anne flinch and move away from the door for a moment.

"He's dead. You saw him. She saw him, too. I can't live in this place anymore, and neither can she!" An echoing sound followed, like a glass being set down with force.

“Diane, we can’t afford to leave. We can’t even afford the rent, for Christ’s sake. Do you want to live on the streets?”

“No! Just find a way, George! Please, the guilt is eating at me; I--”

Anne pulls away from the door. She can’t listen anymore. Carefully moving through the glass bottles and trash bags, she makes her way to the stairs. Avoiding the creaky step and making haste up the wooden planks, she makes it to her bedroom. She opens the door slightly, then slides her finger inside the crack to prevent the loud clicking sound that it makes. Slipping inside, she collapses on the bare mattress lying next to the door. She buries her face into the soft cushion, Anne takes a deep breath.

She can still smell him, though the scent is harsh on her nose and makes her eyes sting. The smell brings back the formerly positive memories of the one she cared for most. The one who was always home with her, no matter what happened, no matter what their parents did. Her tears begin to run down her face and into the cotton, heavy and hot on her cheeks. She hugs her knees into her chest, attempting to keep silent.

A few minutes pass with Anne stuck in her own time with grief. As her eyes flutter open, she takes a shallow breath and rises halfway up. Her glossy pupils fail to see with clarity. She rubs her eyes to get rid of the tears as she stands on wobbly knees, shuffling to her desk and sitting down.

“One more problem. Just one more.” Anne speaks to nobody. She needs to get work done, but she can’t focus. Not like this. She stares at her laptop, desperate to distract herself from the pit in her stomach, but the blue loading screen just reflects off her glistening eyes. “Please. One more.” She whispers, eyes welling up again. The blue screen fades to black,

shutting off in taunt. Anne groans and closes it quickly, letting her head drop onto the table harshly. It stings her forehead and runs through her skull in waves, surrounding her head in searing pain. She doesn't dare move; she can't. Tears fall onto the table as she weeps for all that has happened to her.

"Hey, are you okay?" A soft voice speaks. Anne's head shoots up, looking around quickly.

"Huh? What? Who said that?"

"Are you okay?" it speaks again. The sound came from a child who sat tensely on Anne's otherwise unbearably empty mattress. He's sickeningly pale yet freckled, with poorly cut black hair framing his face, and he can't be more than eight.

"Elliot?" Anne chokes out, feeling sick.

"Are you okay, Anne? That looked like it hurt." Elliot rises from the mattress.

"Elliot, aren't you- What happened to you?!" Anne's voice quivers, and she shakes, reaching out to touch the boy's face.

"Let's get some air. You need it." Elliot turns to the window and avoids her hand.

"Can you open it, please?"

"Elliot, what happened?" Anne takes to her feet and glances at the window. "Eli, please talk to me. What did-"

Elliot interrupts coldly, "You do not recognize the body in the water."

Anne's blood runs cold. "What?" She spoke after a pause.

"You do not recognize the body in the water." Elliot stands perfectly still, back turned to Anne.

“What do you mean? You’re scaring me, Eli. Please just tell me what’s going on. How did you get here? What happened to you?” Anne approaches the boy, her hand shaking as she reaches for him.

“Open the window, Anne.” Elliot turns back to his sister. His eyes are cold and heartless. There isn’t a soul behind them, his body looking like a husk.

“Okay,” Anne swallows, her thoughts swirling. She touches the frosted glass of the window pane and slides it open. Elliot smiles an unnerving grin, his chapped and frostbitten lips curling and cracking around his teeth. He hoists his leg up and through the window, quickly slipping through. Anne follows suit, the uncomfortable pit in her stomach rising to her chest. She feels off. Something is wrong.

Elliot sits down on the broken, weather-worn roof, staring out into the creek that flows behind their house. He doesn’t blink or move; he simply stares.

“Eli,” Anne says sternly, calming herself.

“Sit with me.”

The young boy pats the spot next to him, indicating he wants company. Anne hesitantly agrees, lowering herself onto the roof and letting her legs hang off the gutter. It’s a brisk and windy winter day, where the dirty ice is beginning to melt. Soft flakes of snow fall from the sky in synchronized patterns.

“I love you, Anne. You were a great sister,” Elliot breaks their silence.

“Elliot, please tell me what happened. Why did we find you in the creak? We thought you were...” Anne looks over at him, scanning his icy face with concern. It was red from the cold, and she was sure hers was too.

Elliot is quiet for a moment before he speaks, "It's gone."

"Elliot, stop saying these things. They're confusing me." Anne's expression melts into hurt. "Please just explain." She reaches for his hand but pauses and pulls away.

"The body is gone, Anne. That's not me." Elliot turns his head to look at her. His face is ghostly white, the only form of color on it being his unnaturally freckled cheeks. His eyes were dull. His pupils were unnaturally shrunk, tiny flakes of ice latched onto his lashes and iris.

Anne looks out on the water, looking for the sharp boulder they found the body behind. It's completely gone. The hot blood washed away, and the bits of skin floating near the surface were no longer visible. "What..?"

Anne stands quickly, scanning the water for any signs of movement. The body shouldn't have moved. They didn't call anyone, for they can't afford the legal fees and have no neighbors.

"Elliot, are you alive?! No, no, we saw you... We saw you dead!" Anne's eyes tear up as she looks frantically around. She turns to where her little brother had been sitting and sees nothing. He's gone. Not a single trace of his entry or exit.

The snow piles into a small lump, the flakes covering up the roof at a slow yet consistent pace. Anne stands on shaking knees, using her shaking hands to lift herself. She returns to her window, warm tears streaming down her frozen face. She slips inside and falls to her knees, choking out cries of grief. What the hell just happened? She didn't know. Was she crazy? God, what if her parents find out? Anne tries catching her breath but fails. She lays on the floor, knees to her chest, and starts to cry. She can't stop, her eyes burning and her

nose running. It feels like a part of her body was torn out and stomped on, and in some ways, it was. Lifting her quivering hand, she felt for her bottle. It's metal and icy from the weather, and she takes a long drink of week-old water from it. Still sniveling, she tries calming down. She sputters and coughs as she inhales some by mistake, spitting it out onto her raggedy carpet. It was itchy and hot on her skin, making her feel worse.

Anne gets up to move to her bed, head swirling with ache. Her thoughts move too quickly to process, and she stumbles to the mattress near the door. Her knees give out entirely, and she crashes into it, hitting something hard as she collides. Anne gasps in pain, feeling a sharp throb in her shoulder. She lays on the mattress for a moment, cradling her shoulder with her hand while trying to figure out what she hit.

A squishy yet firm object presses into her back. It's large, almost her size, from what she can tell. Out of curiosity, she sits up and traces the shape with her finger. It's an odd shape, like an oval with a few dents. She leans in to examine further but catches a wretched smell. It's like old milk and raw meat with an undertone of rotting fruit. It was coming from her mattress. Now panicked, Anne stands up and tries flipping the mattress over. It weighs more than before, and she can barely even tilt it.

Filled with dread, she quickly grabs her scissors from her desk and makes a large gash on the side of the mattress. Stuffing leaks out of the cut, falling in clumps from it. A few strings are tinted a diluted red, and Anne brings it to her nose with caution. She smells the same putrid scent and gags, wanting to vomit. She closes her watering eyes, taking a deep breath, before reaching her hand inside the mattress. The stuffing scratches against her flesh uncomfortably while she feels around gingerly. After a few moments of the horrendous sensation, she grabs

something soft. It's firm and smooth with a slimy glaze coating it. She pulls on it, but it won't budge. Anne moves her feet to both sides of the cut, using her entire body weight to tug on the object as hard as possible. There is a loud, bone-chilling snap and a crunch that makes Anne's stomach lurch. She pulls once more, and the object comes loose with another pop.

All Anne can see is red as a thick liquid splatters across her. The mattress leaks a deep burgundy, the foul fluid spreading through the fibers of the stuffing and down her chest. It clumps on her body, sliding down her skin, which is suddenly more sensitive than ever. She sits there, eyes wide, mouth slack, looking down in horror. The object falls limp from her grasp with a thud.

A pale and freckled arm lies still on her brother's mattress.

Second Honorable Mention: Happily Ever After

By Akshara Gaddam

I closed my notebook with a bang. My story was finally done. It was about two people, Valentina and Mathew who get in the way of a serial killer. In the end, Mathew dies, and Valentina gets seriously injured. I know it's not a happy ever after, but those are overrated. People love dark endings. It keeps them coming back for more.

"Navy, how's your story going?" Conrad asked, "D'you think you'll get the money?"

"Corn, the whole point of this competition is to push your stories out into the world!"

I scolded, using Conrad's old nickname.

"But you still want to win the money." Conrad pushed.

"If you want the money so bad then write a story yourself!" I groan. Conrad chuckles and grabs my notebook. I instinctively pull it away.

"Aww, c'mon Navy. A wise lady once told me that the point of writing competitions was to 'push your stories out into the world', hey what are you doing?" Conrad cuts off what he was going to say.

"What do you mean, what am I doing?" I ask. I look down at my spiral notebook and I drop it. The cover is glowing red and the pages are flipping around, though there isn't any wind. My black hair whips across my face as a single, long, gust of wind overtakes the room. Conrad is feeling it too.

"Navy, is that supposed to happen?" He shouts over the wind. I can barely breathe, the wind is overtaking me.

“No, I...” I get cut off as I trip over my own feet and like an idiot, fall right on top of the book.

~

I wake up in a 1920s-style train station. I’m sitting in a knee-length dress with a shawl. I can tell this dress is from the 1920s as well. Conrad is next to me, snoring. He’s wearing a three-piece suit with a vest.

“Wake up!” I hissed. People dressed like it was the 1920s bustled past us, looking for train numbers, buying tickets, scolding children, and stopping to glance nervously at their pocket watches.

“Huh? I wasn’t asleep.” Conrad grunted. He immediately sat up. “Huh? What is this?” He tugged at his shirt sleeves, “Where are we?” All tiredness was instantly gone from his voice as he assessed his surroundings.

“I don’t know, Corn. Maybe someone’s pranking us?” I suggested.

“How did they get so many people in on it then? And what about the wind?” Conrad asked, looking straight into my eyes. I couldn’t answer that.

“Check your pockets, maybe there’s a note or something.” I looked at the clutch in my lap and opened it. There were some cosmetics scrambled around and a train ticket. I looked up at Conrad and he was holding something like a train ticket too.

“Look, platform 7, 12:43.” He read. He glanced at the big clock on the wall. “It’s 12:30, we better find this platform.” Conrad put the ticket back in his pocket and stood up. He glanced at me like he was expecting me to come with him.

“C’mon! Is this some boomer etiquette or something? Do I have to get down on my knees?” He joked.

“Corn, listen to me! You’re just going to go?” I protested, “We don’t even know *when* we are, much less where we are!”

Conrad rolled his eyes. “Navy, don’t be a buzzkill. C’mon, maybe this is a simulation and to get out we need to follow the clues! What else are we going to do?”

I couldn’t argue with that. “Fine,” I grumbled. I stood up, holding my clutch and adjusting my hat. Conrad smiled and lead the way.

“Look! Platform 7. ” Conrad said.

“We’re in the first-class compartments. C’mon, I think we’re up there.” I said, reading my ticket. As soon as we entered, we were greeted with a dining room with china and tablecloths.

“Where are we supposed to sit? In the dining room?” Conrad muttered.

“Over there,” I said, pointing to the compartments. We slid open the door to our compartment and stepped in. I almost fainted. The compartment looked exactly like the one I’d envisioned for my book!

“You okay Navy? Look at this! I’ve never been in a first-class anything before! Look, there’s luggage up there. D’you think we can find any clues in there?” Conrad was practically exploding with excitement.

“Let’s go explore the rest of the train,” I suggested. I wanted to see if the whole train was like what I wrote in my story. Conrad agreed and eagerly followed me. Everything was the

same as what I wrote. There were petunias in the vases on the dining tables, the wine glasses have specks of dust on them. Heck, there was even a lipstick mark on the door!

I told Conrad my findings.

“That solves it then! Either we got sucked into your story, or someone somehow managed to read that notebook and spent thousands of dollars on reconstructing this.” Conrad said that with so much confidence that I laughed. Conrad seeing me, laughed too. We were both a heap of giggles until we noticed an old woman clucking at us. We immediately straightened up.

“Maxwell, do you mind holding my purse for a minute? I need to run to the lavatory.” A petite young woman said. She looked remarkably like Valentina. And Maxwell? Could that be Max from my story?

“Sure, Valentina. I’ll go to our compartment if you don’t mind.” Max said. He gave a handsome smile and went to the compartment.

“So that’s what your dream guy looks like?” Conrad said, snorting. He was looking at Max.

“He is not! Conrad, do you think we should tell him that he dies?” I whispered furiously.

“Not now. Navy, I think we need to wait. We need to make sure that this is your story until we tell people about the tragedy that you wrote.” Conrad says, quite seriously.

We sit in our compartment and I look at the newspaper on the stand. I quickly pick it up. The headline was; *IVAN THE TERRIBLE HAS STRUCK AGAIN*. I drop the paper.

“Corn, this *is* my story! Look, this is the serial killer I wrote about! Conrad, we need to do something!” I say.

“Navy, think about this. Do you know we’re here in the first place?” Conrad asks. I shake my head.

“Maybe we need to give them a happy ending. Do something that changes what was supposed to happen.” I suggest. Conrad nods.

“That’s a good idea. What is supposed to happen in the story?” He asks.

“Well, right now Maxwell and Valentina are in their compartment and Maxwell will be telling Valentina about Ivan when the train takes off.” I say, “Then, there will be a crash in the dining room. Valentina will go into the old lady’s compartment (the one who scolded us) and Max will go out to investigate. Max gets shot by Ivan, and Valentina corners Ivan and kills him. She loses the use of her right leg.” I narrate.

“So, we need to stop Max from investigating when the crash comes,” Conrad says, “One problem. What happens if we time this wrong and Ivan is already in the dining area when we go out to stop him? What happens if he shoots us?”

“I don’t know.” I say, “We have to risk it. What if we get stuck here forever?”

Conrad nods. “Okay here’s the plan. As soon as the train takes off, we wait five minutes, then enter the old lady’s compartment a minute before the crash.”

“It’s a plan,” I said. We shook on it.

After the ticket guy punched our tickets, the train took off. Conrad took a pocket watch out and looked at it.

“At 12:50, we need to go down the hall. Wait, Navy, is there anything that needs to happen? Like, if it doesn’t happen then we ruin their lives more than you did?” Conrad asks. It’s a pretty deep question from someone who flunked five of their English tests in fourth grade.

“Well, I suppose Valentina needs to fight Ivan. It’s the climax of the story. If she doesn’t fight him then the story is ruined.” I said thoughtfully.

At 12:50 Conrad stood up. “C’mon Navy. What compartment is the lady’s again?”

“Valentina’s is 6. The old lady is right across from her.” I explain. Conrad nods and peers down the hallway.

“It’s clear. C’mon.” I follow him. We go down a yard and find 6. Right across from that is 5. We knock on the door. And the old man opens it.

“Hello. How may I help you?” He asks politely.

“I’m sorry sir, but I think one of my bags is here on accident,” I said.

“You’re welcome to check miss. Diana, this is...” The old man gestures to us for our names.

“I’m Navy, this is Conrad,” I say, pointing to Conrad.

The old woman looks satisfied with my answer. “Well, Navy and Conrad, feel free to check in the overhead compartments. If you don’t find it, you can ask the porter.” The old lady smiles, “I’m Diana, the man who let you in is my husband, John Phillips.”

I fake a smile. Diana and John Phillips? I never gave these characters names in my story. A second later we hear the crash.

“Oh, dear! John, do check what it is. What if someone injured themselves?” Diana says worriedly. Seconds later Max knocks on the compartment door. Diana opens it.

“Missus, is everything alright?” Max asks in a posh British accent.

“Yes, but my husband, John, was about to see what the crash was about. Why don’t you come in here while John goes to investigate?” Diana suggests.

“No thanks, missus. I couldn’t do that to you. I’ll go check the dining area right now.”

“Wait!” I shout. This is the point where Max dies, “You’re not going out there unarmed, are you? Ivan the Terrible is still on the loose!”

Max smiles, “Finally someone who also reads the paper! My wife, Valentina, doesn’t believe that he exists. I’ll bring my pocket knife with me.” I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Navy, should I tail him?” Conrad asks, “In the paper, Ivan had a gun. What’s a pocket knife gonna do against a gun?”

I turn pale. “We need to stop him!” I hiss. I poke my head out into the corridor and hear a bang. A bullet whizzes past my ear. I quickly duck back in.

“Ivan’s there,” I shout to everyone in the compartment. Diana looks close to fainting and John is moping his face with a handkerchief.

Max opens the door to his compartment and shouts over to us. “What was that bang?” He asks in a voice that’s barely over a whisper.

“It was a gunshot!” Conrad explains, “Ivan is in the dining room!”

Max pales. He turns around and talks to his petite wife, who’s next to him. *Petite?* How have I not noticed this earlier? In my story, Valentina was strong, tall, and muscular. Not this frail little lady in front of me!

I whisper as much to Conrad. "Do you know what this means?" I say.

Conrad nods, "Valentina can't be the one to fight Ivan. Ivan would crush her." I nod in agreement. "Then's who supposed to fight Ivan? Max? John? Heck, even Diana stands a better chance of beating Ivan than Valentina." Conrad jokes.

I ponder over that, "We need Max to fight him, but Valentina needs to do something that guarantees that Max wins the fight."

Another bang. Another gunshot. Forget fighting Ivan, Valentina can't even stand the sound of gunshots. She's fainted dead away.

"Max! Do something!" Valentina moans. Max goes to her side and fans her.

"What am I meant to do? Fight him? I'd lose!" I and Conrad exchange weary looks. If Max isn't up to fighting Ivan, then who is?

Thudding noises come from down the hallway and get louder with every passing second. Ivan is walking towards our compartments. Conrad quickly slides the door shut. It doesn't help though. A second later our compartment door is opened again, this time by a big burly man holding a pistol and with several knives on his belt.

He picks up his gun. Diana screams and John jumps in front of all of us. Ivan loads the gun and I close my eyes and wrap my arms around Conrad. He does the same. We're going to die in a book.

Before I can feel the bullet piercing my heart I hear a thud, groan, and shriek. I open my eyes and quickly let go of Conrad. Valentina is there, holding a frying pan and Ivan is on the ground with a bump on his head.

Max quickly goes to Valentina's side. Ivan is up again in a minute though and looks even more furious than before. He grabs Valentina's short hair and throws her to the side. She crumples in a heap. Diana shrieks even louder and runs to her side. I can't do anything but watch like an idiot.

Ivan barrels towards Max. Max backs up, two of his hands up in mock surrender, "Please, don't hurt me!" He cries. Ivan picks up his loaded pistol and shoots.

But the bullet doesn't hit Max. Conrad jumped and kicked Ivan in the knee, which made him miss. The bullet nicked Max's ear. He jumped at the sight of blood on his hands.

Ivan looked even more threatening. He picked up his knife and when to stab Conrad when John picked up the frying pan and hit Ivan in the same place that Valentina had hit him before. He shouted, cursed, and stumbled back in pain.

Max picked up the gun at his feet, aimed, and shot Ivan. He hit him square in the heart.

As soon as that happened I felt a swirly feeling all over my body and woke up back in the study hall. Conrad was next to me, looking equally as confused.

"Navy! What happened?" He shouted. Conrad picked up my notebook and threw it open. He flipped through until he reached the final pages.

"As Max shot the terrible killer in the heart, the two strangers' figure became disoriented and disappeared in front of his face." Conrad read. He skipped a couple of lines and went on, "He and Valentina celebrated their lovely honeymoon in Romania with no more Russian Tsars coming after them. The End."

I scrambled to my feet and checked if what he was saying was indeed true. "I never thought we'd be in a story." I said, "Look, the whole story is completely changed. Valentina

was supposed to be in a hospital, Max dead, and the old couple end up with PTSD from the death.”

“I think I like this ending better,” Conrad commented.

“I agree.”

Third Honorable Mention: Skylark's Wish

By Cadi Geiger

"The skies will sing when the moon rises, the sun below the horizon.

The skies will sing when peace returns to the land.

A land that is lost, fallen.

When the cries of the mourning dove are restored,

With the blossoms of a sweet spring,

With the lullabies of the stars.

The skies will sing when power lays down its pride.

The skies will sing when gentle quiet falls upon the dawn.

When the waters of deep shadows,

And the winters of bitter ruins,

Will listen to the language, the song that goes unseen.

For as the stars are intertwined,

Surely our stories are also.

And we, the constellation,

Forever bound by eternal love.

The skies will sing when the world is found."

She is troubled by the story, her eyes a storm of uncertainty. The wind is warm and soothing tonight, bringing a soft breeze that brushes the edges of the oaks. Small fireflies, lanterns of the evening, are beginning to peek out of their daytime nooks. Her body is curled up in my lap, her head resting upon my chest. She has grown in these years, no longer the little child who battled dark shadows with colored ink quills and a laughing expression. I wish, with all of my father's heart, that I have been the best I could be for her. I wish it was enough.

"The skies will never sing, then," She says. "the world is to be lost forever."

"Yes, child." I say with a sigh. It would be best to not give her false hope.

"That is why it is called Skylark's Eulogy," she says, the realization dawning on her face. She is growing wiser. "Because it is a thing that has died, a thing that can never be again."

"Yes," I say, my voice barely above a murmur. It is a saddening thing, to be faced with a truth you have fought with for so long.

She is quiet. The birds above are singing their dusk ballads, preparing for the night. I regret telling her the tale. It pains me to hear such words of hopelessness, when the earth still thrums with patient waiting, as if it yearns for something beyond our understanding, even though I know in my heart that it is useless to wish for it.

"Tell me another story, or a song, then." She says. "I like hearing them." I am surprised, for a moment, that she would want me to continue. I take a breath to speak, and yet...

I trail off, uncertain. She glances up at me.

It is not enough to describe the music of the world on written pieces of parchment. The quill cannot sketch the lilt of a flute, or the endless narrative of a

violin, streaking into the air. It cannot remember the notes of a harp like rain at night. It cannot feel the cascade of keys playing in the softness of morning from a piano.

Neither such can it write the memories, the times of great joy and seemingly endless sadness. The pages can't replace the emptiness where a brother should be, nor replace the love felt for him. It cannot make a friend come from far away, even though many letters are sent. It cannot write down the laughter and camaraderie with good friends, or an embrace from a dear soul as close as one's own.

So how can I tell a story, not even knowing how to write it? How can I speak something unexplainable and imperceivable, only understandable to the heart that experienced it? These questions I have yet to answer, their magic hidden to my sight, and it is why I am unable to continue. I simply have no words to tell.

It comes as softly as a rabbit in the field, a memory from many seasons ago. A story not told for a long time.

I gather her into the crook of my lap.
"Listen closely, my love," I say, "and I will tell you a story. Are you ready?"

She nods, her eyes sparking with a deep yearning.

And so I begin.

*"Once, in a land far away,
Lived a skylark of the stars, a bird of the sun and moon.
From its feathers birthed the stories of countless worlds,
From its call, all music of the world was made.*

It lived in peaceful harmony and accord,

With the day and night, the dusk and dawn.

And in this time it sang,

For all the skies to hear.

But a curse, lost and forgotten,

Nurtured in hatred and death,

Befell upon the creature,

Thieving its stories and songs.

The bird's right wing turned to shadow, and a mark was placed across its breast,

A mark chaining it to ash and bitterness.

Gliding the winds suddenly became toil and strain,

And a silence fell upon the world, darkening it.

As time grew old, the skylark began to tire from struggling to fly,

A great weariness not known to man.

And so, at last when it could bear no longer,

The bird plummeted to the fallen world below."

She looks at me intently, caught on every word. The sky has faded into a dark dusk, and the galaxies above glowing in a vast array of colors. There is wonder in her eyes, a curiosity that has been withheld from her for so long. I smile softly. I should not tease her in prolonging the story when it has encaptured her heart.

I take a small breath, and continue.

“By strife, by grief, by war,

The shadow on the creature grew as it fell.

Engulfing its feathers, its stories and songs.

The curse of selfishness, the curse of greed and pride.

With a grave heart, the skylark let out its final cry

A plea lost in the harshness of the wind.

But just as it was to meet its killing blow,

A spirit, bright with glow, reached out with his arms outstretched.

The curse reeled in agony,

It could not stand the light from the skylark’s rescuer.

Removing its shadows from the bird’s broken body,

It fled, leaving with the wind.

The spirit held the creature close with gentleness and love.

He began to heal the marks left from the curse,

But the skylark protested with a weak murmur:

'I am too broken and too weary, kind spirit, leave me.'"

I gather her close, preparing my own self for the end. I have only heard this tale spoken to me once, and yet it feels as if the whole night is singing it back to me. I can hear it in the brush of the soft grass, in the chirps from the crickets. I can hear it in the lap from streaming waters just in the forest behind us. My world was led by scar-ridden skies and fallen blood moons, broken promises and empty dreams. Now, as I hold her close and feel the love for her, my daughter, and see her soft-spoken awe in this story of mine, I begin to wonder if the truth I believed was not as I thought it to be.

Could it be possible I was wrong?

"The spirit smiled in a knowing far beyond the skylark's understanding,

And when the bird was healed, he let it go, but not before saying,

'Rejoice, little skylark. You are never too broken for my hands to heal.'

He turned his palms over and revealed the secret within them.

They were pierced right through.

The skylark looked up in wonder at the spirit,

Who's eyes were full of boundless love.

'No curse can destroy the songs and stories I have given to you,' He continued,

'Now go sing them, sing them to the stars above for which I have created,

And you, my dearest beloved,

Will never be broken again.”

At that, she stood upright and looked at me, her eyes desperate for that same hope. Tears gather in my eyes, because I can feel the raw emotion coming off from her. She is scared to dream, afraid of the dangers it might bring, of the battles she has already faced because of it. This story has given her hope, and I know of the fear of taking it. I know of those nightmares, of the things that haunt our daytime shadows. I know of the agony of loneliness, of loss and yearning. I know of the silence that held us captive, because no one has ever listened, nor promised us something more.

But now we are here, under this old oak tree, amid the light of the moon. The world is a warfront, a place of hate and treachery and sorrow. A place where it seems like there is nothing left but darkness. Now I am beginning to know that this is not true.

“Please,” she says, “finish it. Finish the story.”

There are tears rolling down her face.

And so I begin the final refrain.

“The skylark rose to the edges of the known world,

Singing, just as it was commanded, to the stars above.

As the legends go, they say it’s story can be heard,

Echoed in the evening dusk and morning dawn,

A wish, for those willing to hear it.

Listen to the song that,

Whispers in the wind.

See the kind smile, the fallen tear, a bond that never lets go.

Create what the world cannot,

Seek what has been lost,

Laugh with a heart that has been broken,

Too many times to count.

What I thought was meant to be,

Was just an unfinished symphony,

It didn't notice when the ghost had led me to you,

Until it was my time to leave.

We are broken, we bear the scars,

But take those marks and paint them.

Take the withered and rotting,

And let it see the moon.

Wherever the ghost may lead you,

Know that you are never truly alone.

Wherever the curse might befall,

Know there is a spirit to catch you.

Remember this, wherever you drift,

However how far, however how long.

And so the skies will sing,

The world is already found.”

Fourth Honorable Mention: Trial by Fire

By Wyatt Steel

The wind whistled through his hair as Ba'ruho pulled up from a tight maneuver. The Tapejara he sat astride was the largest flying creature to be seen in the great mountain heights, and its vibrantly colored head crest was perfect for holding on to when flying. Ba'ruho's tribe, the Zoraqs, inhabited these lands and were renowned throughout the region for their prowess in both hunting and taming dangerous creatures. Unlike the peaceful Q'echi of the river valley below who were versed in the arcane, the Zoraqs were non-magical and had only mundane items. They made up for their lack of magic with the best artisans and warriors.

Training to be a fully fledged "Claw" of the tribe was the dream of many young tribe members, but none had a desire so fierce as Ba'ruho. His sixteenth birthday was coming up and the test to become one of the most renowned warriors, or a Claw, was also approaching. It was at this age that every adolescent would have his or her life profession chosen, based on a series of challenges in The Trials. In the time of their ancestors, it had a sacred name, but by the time Ba'ruho was born, it had simply become known as The Trials. Born into a family of great power and influence within the Zoraqs, Ba'ruho was expected to do well in all challenges, but particularly in the skyrace.

All Claws hunted atop a Tapejara with which they formed a bond, the only creature capable of carrying a human into the air. Ba'ruho had his own Tapejara, called Lumkola, since he was fourteen and he trained with her every day that he could. Most Zoraqs aren't bonded with their Tapejara until they become a Claw, and the other children in the village resented Ba'ruho because they felt he had an unfair advantage in The Trials. They jeered at him and

told him that his chieftain father, Ba'tagro, was playing favorites. The tribal elders seemed to agree, and had even accused Ba'tagro of desecrating the sacred trials of the gods by giving his young son a Tapejara. Ba'ruho tried to ignore the jeers and focus on his training, but the spurious statements they made about him were hard to simply let slide. To get away from all the animosity and taunting, Ba'ruho would often escape the village and perch his mount upon a rocky outcropping where he could watch the sunset in peace.

He sat there and watched the radiant beams fill the world. An orange glow came from the village as the sun rays glistened off the wells and nearby rivers. He noticed the village was glowing brighter than usual, but he thought nothing of it. "I suppose we should be going. Father told me to stay on guard while he's away," he urged Lumkola. He saddled the beast and with a primordial force, Lumkola took off in a great wind and glided down to a landing by the waterfall that fed the village's mechanical power.

Watermills festooned the banks, and helped to crush the grain that was harvested in terraced fields.

Ba'ruho sniffed at the air, which was growing thick and heavy by the minute. Smoke. His senses heightened in alarm and he dashed to the edge of the small town. There was not a familiar face in sight; in fact, there were no faces in sight. *Where had everyone gone?* As the smell of woodsmoke grew, a sickening realization dawned on him. The orange glow he saw from the peak was not sunlight at all but actual fire! He raced into the heart of the village to ring the warning bell, but when he reached it he saw a mysterious figure standing, holding a shoulder-high torch, chanting in a whispery and unfamiliar language.

This figure faced the opposite direction, but upon hearing Ba'ruho's footsteps, quickly turned around. Spreading its cloaked arms, iridescent flames flew from its fingertips and set a pile of hay alight. The many small fires turned into a great inferno, and the bell Ba'ruho had come to ring to warn the town was already buried in a pile of glowing embers. Thinking quickly, Ba'ruho made a whistling call. The intruder, having spotted Ba'ruho, lowered its hood to reveal a shocking identity. A member of the Q'echi tribe stood, eyes ablaze, alone in the heart of the burning town. He looked both angry and bereft, and Ba'ruho could see the orange glow reflect off streaks of tears on his face. Then, the fire mage of the Q'echi began torching every building in sight. The hot ashes settled in Ba'ruho's smooth brown hair, and he winced as the heat from the flames and the smoke filled his lungs.

Suddenly, Lumkola swept down from behind, grabbed the Q'echi by the shoulders and hoisted him up into the air. Just before Lumkola could use her spear-like beak to dispatch the attacker, the fire mage scorched Lumkola's wing and was dropped to the ground from a great height. Lumkola shrieked and half-flew, half-fell down into a grain field. The Q'echi's fall was not enough to kill him, but he lay motionless where he fell. Ba'ruho whipped out a bone spear that was strapped to his back and strode quickly to the downed attacker. He rushed forward and held the spear to the Q'echi's throat, ready to strike... but stopped as he heard the Q'echi mumbling and weeping "It killed her, it killed her..."

"Stop! Please, don't hurt him!" a breathless voice pleaded from right behind him. Ba'ruho wheeled around, and through the smoke saw another Q'echi, this time a young girl. She had bright blue eyes and flowing black hair that shimmered with an indigo sheen. In all the commotion, Ba'ruho had not heard her approach. He warily waved his spear in her

direction, forcing her to stumble back. She raised her hands and said, "I've come to help." With no further explanation, her eyes glowed blue and she spread her fingertips out. Tendrils of water flowed forth, bathing the village homes and extinguishing all the flames. Steam rose high above the town.

"Father!" she wailed and ran to the downed man. "He doesn't know what he's done, he's overcome with grief," she cried to Ba'ruho as she knelt over her father. "My mother was killed yesterday by one of your beasts while she was praying atop the temple. She was snatched as food while my father could only watch. He's not himself, and he blames the Zoraqs for bringing the Tapejaras so close to our village. Please let me take him home in peace." She looked up at Ba'ruho with tears streaming down her cheeks, and he was overcome by a flurry of emotions: anger, pity, forgiveness, and then anger again.

Before he could think of what to say, he was joined by a group of teenage Zoraqs who had come running back to the village when the fire was extinguished. One of them, a girl about Ba'ruho's age named Vorna, stepped forward with a basket on her arm and offered her assistance to the Q'echi girl. Vorna had been one of Ba'ruho's main antagonizers up until this point. He watched, surprised, as she pulled out herbs and ointments and went to work on the unconscious Q'echi man. Ba'ruho stood speechless as he watched her fingers fly, treating scrapes and breaks. She quickly set up multiple splints and bandages for his wounds. As the man's injuries were being treated, his daughter wondered aloud "How am I to carry him home to our village all the way down in the valley?"

At that moment, Ba'tagro landed heavily with his Tapejara, Kobaró, having returned from a hunting mission. Three other Claws landed beside him. "Ba'ruho, what happened

here?! Half the village's burned?! Have I not told you that you are to guard the village in my absence?! Were you up daydreaming on that perch again?" Ba'ruho felt a tide of shame encompass him as he remembered sitting up there watching the fire, oblivious to the peril. Deep down he knew that it was not his fault, but the sickening guilt still gripped him. Before he could find his own words, Vorna spoke up. "It's not his fault! We all watched him fly in and take out the attacker before he could do greater damage. Ba'ruho saved us; if it weren't for him, the whole village would have been lost."

Before Ba'tagro could digest what Vorna had just said, he saw the attacker on the ground next to the young girl and recognized that they were members of the Q'echi tribe. Anger spread across his face and he began to fume. "Is he the culprit? Those Q'echi will pay for what they have done!"

Ba'ruho saw what was going to happen next if he didn't step in. "Father, I know what it looks like, but this was not an act of war!" he implored. "This man was driven mad by grief for his wife, who was taken by a Tapejara. His daughter came and used her magic to put the fire out."

Ba'tagro blanched with remorse as he heard the story. Yesterday, one of the younger Tapejaras had been acting up on the hunt. Ba'tagro told it to go away and calm down, and it flew down towards the valley. It didn't return until the next morning, and refused its breakfast. With a sinking feeling, Ba'tagro now understood why. He whispered something to the closest Claw, and the Claw grabbed the reins of his Tapejara and led it toward the Taming Pen. With the weight of guilt on his conscience, Ba'tagro said to the girl "I will take this man back to the Q'echi village. I am terribly sorry for your loss." With that, he desaddled Kobaró

and picked up the injured man. He put him on Kobaro's back, climbed on and held him from behind, then took off, heading down toward the valley.

The daughter turned to Ba'ruho and the others and pledged to return the next day with help, using their magic to rebuild the village.

At that moment, Ba'ruho remembered his injured Tapejara and gasped. He cried out that Lumkola had been hurt, and started running toward the grain fields. Vorna followed. They found Lumkola quickly, and Ba'ruho was relieved to find that the damage to her wing was not severe. Vorna helped apply a dark green paste made from fresh herbs to the creature's burn. Lumkola squawked but it seemed to help. Ba'ruho looked at Vorna with immense gratitude. He awkwardly walked closer to her and said, "Up until today, I thought you hated me; but you didn't have to stick up for me back there...or help Lumkola. Thank you. I'm trying to figure it out. Why did you do this for me?"

"I suppose I just couldn't bear to see you get punished, after what you did to save the village. I was wrong in being so mean to you. I think I was just jealous; after all, she is pretty magnificent." She stroked Lumkola's huge red crest and smiled.

Baruho smiled back. "Have you ridden on one yet?" he asked.

"No, actually, but I would love to."

Ba'ruho bent over to look at Lumkola's wing. It looked okay, and so he whispered to her, "Do you think you can fly? Just up to the ridge?" In silent response, Lumkola pushed herself up and lowered down for Ba'ruho to climb on. He did, and offered his hand to Vorna.

She instead climbed up herself, settled in behind him, and said "What next?" With one great flap of her massive leathery wings, the Tapejara began to climb, soaring up to the

mountain peak. The rising moon shone brilliantly across the land, bathing them in a silvery glow.

THE END

Fifth Honorable Mention: The Balloon

By FIRST LAST

Temporary things. Halloween candy and balloons, applesauce in little cups and flowers in spring. Each thing loved and enjoyed. Only to fade away. Society has learned to never grow attached to such frivolous things, such temporary delights. So, you might wonder, why tell a story about something so temporary? Something so short? Perhaps it's the simplicity of it? Or, maybe for how universal the enjoyment is sure to be, whether nostalgia or simply pleasure? All could be used as fair claims, but the reason is far more surprising than any. What if... your temporary wonders... were permanent?

A balloon. Perfectly temporary, one of the most temporary of all! Yet this special balloon, with its glowing ruby hue, hadn't so much as deflated a fraction from the day it was tied to the little girl's wrist. They were a perfect pair: the balloon and the girl; her with small little red rubber boots and a raincoat to match, their crimson stood out on many a rainy day.

Some might think it strange for a balloon to never deflate, but the girl and those around her simply understood; the balloon was special, and that's all there was to it. The balloon being permanent, there was no harm in growing attached, thus the two did everything together. And I truly do mean everything. Unfortunately, that was to change soon.

Come August fourteenth, the girl would be starting kindergarten. Quite excited at the prospect, the parents had dragged her from store to store, buying supplies from the meticulous list sent to 560 Poplar Lane not too long ago. The parents' infectious excitement led the girl to believe that school must be extremely exciting, having no way to know about the monotonous grind prior to actually beginning it.

When the day arrived, the three hopped into their car, singing along to the radio, even if they didn't know the words, causing quite the ruckus and peals of laughter. The parents were very excited, and it seemed their natural reflex to that was to make sure everything was perfect. In other words, fussing, fussing, fussing.

"You have your crayons? Oh, and your pencils?" the mother asked, her voice giddy and worried all at once.

"Yes, Mama!" The girl said, her boots kicking the back of the seat in front of her.

"Your markers? Your lunch?" the dad fretted, joining in on the whole whirlwind of worry.

"Uhm... yes, and then no," the girl frowned.

"Oh no! Now we have to go back! AAH! You'll be late on your first day!" the dad let out a yelp, preparing to put the car in reverse.

"No! Honey, she doesn't need a lunch! Kindergarten is only half day!" the mother said, quickly covering her laughter in a cough.

"Ah, hem, er, right," the dad awkwardly stumbled through the words before giving in to the laughter as well.

The girl watched this whole scene, quite content, smiling at the antics her grownups partook in. "They're so silly," she whispered to the balloon as it floated next to her in the backseat. The balloon, being a stretched-out oval of rubber, said nothing. Despite this, the girl could tell that it understood.

The balloon seemed to say, "Yes, grownups are silly. Did it take you this long to realize?" The balloon chuckled softly as it bobbed around the girl's head.

The balloon wasn't sure if the little girl could hear him, but they seemed to just get each other in a way. She knew what he was trying to say, even if her ears didn't understand it, her heart did. The balloon nudged the little girl, trying to show her that the school was in sight. It bobbed with excitement, thinking of all the new friends they'd make together. Worksheets, books, drawing... the balloon couldn't wait for the fun to begin!

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"What do you mean!?" the girl was on the verge of tears, "What do you mean it can't come?!?"

The mother knelt down, "I mean what I said, your... balloon... can't go to school with you. But I promise, when school lets out, you and your balloon can go on... magical quests together until dinner time! How does that sound?"

"As soon as school lets out, you promise?"

"I'll be here with the balloon waiting for you the minute the school bell rings, I promise."

"Okay."

And everything was well. For a considerable amount of time, mind you. But as we said earlier, all good things must come to an end. It is because of this that on a crisp October day, about a month and seven days from the first day of school, disaster struck. It started off quite innocently, as trouble often does.

"Mom, can I introduce my balloon to Casey?" The girl said one afternoon.

"Of course, but we need to leave in five minutes, alright Hon?"

The girl was already trotting over to her friends, balloon in hand, "Casey, over here! This is the balloon I was telling you abo-"

They say that when you fall, the world turns into some sort of slow-motion film for a split second, but in reality, that's not true at all. Many things that "they" say aren't true (whoever these mystery all-knowing persons are), and that is why one should not believe such a claim without the proper evidence. The truth of the matter is, falling is a split-second experience. One has no time to contemplate the meanings of life as you are crashing down at exhilarating speed. You don't think of things that might happen once you are good and done falling. You don't think about them until after they've happened.

One moment the girl was bounding happily, and the next, a particularly rude pebble decided to lumber into her pathway. First, come the tears, mourning the scrape added to the gallery of injuries, the only difference between the new addition and the classics, is the absence of a Sponge-Bob band aid. Then, the painful realization that your best friend is floating away. In the girl's hurry to show her best friend to her, well, *second* best friend, the balloon had not been secured to her wrist as it usually was, a classic recipe for disaster. I regret to inform you, that the balloon did not simply float away. It was painfully, brutally, *abandoned*. There was a chance, a glimmer of hope, at the balloon's survival. The grownups were so worried about the girl's knee that they regretfully forgot that balloons are people too, despite the fact that balloons constantly remind you that they are, in fact, *better* than people. If the parents hadn't been so needlessly distracted by the girl's injury, they would've been able to grab its shiny white string. Instead, two worlds were torn apart that day. Slowly crumbling as the balloon rose higher into the atmosphere.

For a time, the balloon was able to make the best of the situation. Visiting all of the sights that the world had to offer. The Eiffel Tower, the Great Wall of China (which is 13,171

miles, as the balloon read on the informational plaque), Dubai Tower, the Leaning Tower of Pisa (to the balloon's disappointment, it was *not* made out of delicious, gooey cheese and tomato sauce), the Statue of Liberty, Tokyo Tower... the list went on and on. But no amount of amazement due to these architectural marvels could suppress the loneliness that the balloon felt without its best friend.

Bittersweet memories soon overwhelmed the balloon, and it could think of nothing else. For years, the balloon floated whichever way the wind blew, knowing that it could not make any difference either way. The balloon had long since given up on finding its friend again. The balloon would still visit landmarks, yet its interest in them dwindled, and fizzed out with the knowledge that the balloon would not be able to share these places with the girl. Despite its efforts to push memories away, a memory came that the balloon couldn't help but linger on...

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I remember what it was like before. Every day we went to the park. There were loud noises, and so many people. I didn't like it, not at all. All of my friends shone brightly, smiling and waving, dancing about. They tried to get me to join in, calling out to me.

"Come on, Red!"

"Yeah, whatcha' waiting for?"

Their voices echoed around me, loud and bright. Each and every one of them thought they were the best, that they were going to be chosen first. Of course, none of them had ever been chosen before, so how would they know? I've been here every day since the beginning, watching each and every one of my friends leave me. It became so painful to meet each eager new balloon, knowing they would lose their magic the minute a child grasped their little string

tail with its pudgy, greasy fingers. I always told myself I would allow a child to choose me, though my heart wasn't really in it. I soon realized I was deluding myself. I stayed in the bunch so long that I'm not sure the balloon man really noticed me anymore. I watched new balloons come and go, be chosen and have their magic taken away, again and again. Nothing I said to them about the loss of magic swayed their point of view, and after a long time, I gave up warning those airheads.

I assumed I would stay in the bunch for my whole life, however long that might be. But one day, it all changed. The balloon man took us to the park, on a day plagued with mist and light drizzles. With such a slow day, the balloon man was going to close up shop early. That's when I saw her. Through the thick mist, one couldn't see anyone but her. As she raced from one play structure to another, her boots squelched through the mud, while her bubbly laughter invited all the birds to stop singing and listen. I couldn't help being entranced by what I saw. I wanted nothing more than to laugh with her, bob up and down next to her as we invented new games together. I knew that if I became her balloon, my magic would be gone forever. But at that moment, all that mattered was that I got just one moment of playtime with her. So, on the day where you could see only mist, I took a deep breath, and let go.

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The balloon still wasn't quite sure why its magic hadn't gone away. The best guess it could come up with after years of aimless floating was that the girl hadn't chosen it, not really. The truth of the matter was that they had chosen each other. After floating for so long, the balloon began to wonder what good its magic really was. As long as the balloon had its magic, it would constantly be floating forever, year after year, month after month, minute after minute,

until the end of time. Until now, the balloon had simply given up. But that memory stirred something, something long forgotten. This feeling filled it with happiness and warmth. This feeling traveled through the balloon from head to tail, filling it with the undeniable urge to experience that feeling again. Friendship.

Years of floating had turned the balloon numb, barely noticing the feeling of a breeze switching directions anymore. The balloon didn't know how much more senseless floating it could take, and it was tired. The balloon was tired of doing the same thing, day after day. Feeling the same longing of fun, of friendship, day after day. The balloon was tired of the world. Yet, the stirring of... happiness... awoke the long absent emotion it had been lacking. Emotions lead to *feelings, and heartache*. Both of these disastrous things lead to something even more dangerous, *thoughts and ideas*. And this is why, today we all get to witness something very rare, and extremely special. A change. Very few are blessed with the ability to make a change, and even fewer choose to act on it. We are witnessing something very special, you and I. We get to witness the exact moment that our protagonist sets out to make things different, better. On a day with curling mists, much like the one when the girl and balloon met, the red oval of rubber made a decision. The balloon decided that as long as the universe forced him to float, he would find the girl, and they would play together. One last time.

HIGH SCHOOL WINNERS

First Place: This Never Happened to George and Jane

By Claudia Hunn

The machinery hummed. Honey hummed back.

She stood in the kitchen, knife in hand, cutting delicate, daisy-like flowers out of cucumbers and carrots. Honey not only heard the machines, but felt them too. Buzzing from within the counter, lying in wait. All that tech, just below the surface. She swore she could still hear her husband scolding her for letting it go unused.

“See, Honey, this is exactly what I’m talking about! Why are you wasting time on this when we already got everything installed?”

“Because—”

“Don’t answer that, I know— anyway, my point is you have everything you need to help you with menial tasks like this, so why the hell are you acting like the devices don’t exist?”

“Dear—”

“Honestly, Honey, I’m away for three weeks and I come back and the house looks just as filthy as it did when I left? How does that make any sense! I mean, would it kill you to walk the five steps to the foyer and push a button? Look, if you really want to clean on your own, fine. I don’t care. But you might as well do it instead of using that as an excuse to avoid the devices—which, may I remind you, took extremely long to develop and negotiate with The Company for, so we’re lucky to even have them in the first place.”

And Honey said nothing.

“Well, if we’re done here—”

And Dear took his coat off, grabbed Honey's waist, went to kiss her. Honey slipped away, caught Dear's grimace, went back to cutting vegetables. Like she was doing now.

The machinery hummed. Honey hummed back.

The fact of the matter was, Honey had used the kitchen devices, she just hadn't been impressed with their handiwork. They soullessly, *perfectly*, cut vegetables the only way they knew how: slices or sticks. So she continued on with her flowers, frivolous as they were. It made the cooking more bearable, finding ways to make it feel like her own efforts. While Honey tossed her creations onto a bed of lettuce, freshly cleaned by and waiting in the refrigerator compartment, she cast a contemptuous glance toward the slab of meatloaf shuddering to life in the oven. Honey realized at once she didn't know why she was bothering to work in the kitchen. Dear had no way of knowing she'd try to help, he'd no doubt started the machines on dinner before she arrived. He used to tell Honey he loved her cooking. She left her knife out with the cutting board.

The machinery hummed. Honey hummed back.

The work apartment was a lot like theirs, except not. It had the same furnishings, the same appliance networks, yet somehow it felt infinitely more complicated to Honey. She didn't quite understand it. Didn't quite understand how Dear could live here for weeks on end during the nagging stretches of conferences and business trips. It was clean— more than clean, spotless, sterile. Its lifelessness was a malignant presence. The only remote sense of mess in sight came from the splayed plans and pieces for new assignments Dear was working on. Honey surveyed the space, looked for something without knowing what. She racked her

brain for anything else she could remember about the project he had mentioned before, the important one. The reason he made this more of a home than his real apartment.

“Can’t I be allowed to know something? Anything— about why you need to be gone for so long? I mean, they just had you out there for two straight months! Is it ever going to be enough? They can’t possibly expect you to—”

“Honey, you just, don’t understand. This is revolutionary what we’re building, it’s huge, it’s— Look, if we get a real, consumer-ready android on the market, it’s going to change... everything. And— we’re so, so close. I feel like... you know what, I’ve probably said too much already. Bottom line is— if you don’t get it, fine, I’m not asking you to, but this is important. Maybe the most important project I’ve ever worked on. I’m not letting go until I see it through.”

“But when will you... “see it through?” When? Because it’s not just one project anymore, it’s your entire life! It’s just— I’m, just miserable here, playing house while you’re gone—”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.”

Boys and their toys. He wouldn’t want Honey here. *Why was she here?*

The machinery hummed. Honey hummed back.

It was 8:00. Dear was no doubt just finishing up a meeting. No doubt. None. Except she had come all the way here. Except she made a mental list during her monorail ride of all the possible, terrible situations she might find herself in now that she had come here. Except despite Honey’s devout faith in Dear, the words *dishonesty* and *infidelity* and *adultery* gnawed at her like incessant children, each taking turns playing make-believe in her mind. Somewhere

she knew that people didn't just take a last minute trip in the middle of the day to see their husband three cities over because they thought he was being particularly well-behaved. As she made her way over to the living room and took a seat in an armchair that just barely resembled her regular resting spot at home, Honey took a few more stabs at imagining every possible outcome. She ran through them over and over again: the best, the most likely, the worst, the best, the most likely the worst— then the door unlocked.

The machinery hummed. Honey hummed back.

Dear walked in with briefcases in hand, a drenched raincoat swallowing him whole. Honey remained stoic, a lifeless observer in the equally-lifeless sitting area. She didn't know what it was, but in the few minutes she watched him take off his shoes and coat, the complete normalcy of the scene flooded her with relief. After all this time spent in simmering discontentment, nothing really looked wrong. Honey had half a mind to race across the room right then and hold Dear in her arms and tell him—

Dear leaned through the doorway and shouted outside, smiling. "Come on!" Moments later, a laugh from further away, then the unmistakable clack of heels moving closer and closer to the apartment entrance. Honey watched in horror as a woman stepped into the foyer. She donned a similar raincoat that shrouded her face, but rather than wearing it, she merely held it above her head with trembling arms. Dear brushed the rain-spattered coat out from in front of her, kissed her, hung it up on the wall.

Honey screamed.

Whipping around to the sound of her voice was another Honey, identical in face, hair, body, style, gait, *everything*. She barely had time to register the sobering reality of Her Copy

standing in front of her before Dear started to make his way over to Honey with an urgency she had scarcely ever seen.

"How. The hell. Did you get in. I thought I told you—"

"Who is she— it? What is it?"

"You shouldn't have come here. Who helped you get in? Was it the—"

"Tell me what it is. Now."

"Honey, you need to leave."

"No—"

"Yes, I think you should leave and we can work this out when I see you at home—"

"Home? You think you get to call it home after—"

"We're not doing this here— now. We're not. You have no right to be here. I'm not going to be able to explain I— you, you just need to go. Now."

The briefest moment of silence took hold. In the midst of the dust settling, Honey noticed Her Copy, unmoving from the same spot in the foyer, statuesque. Dear looked back at Her Copy, snapped slightly, pointed straight-armed to the kitchen. Her Copy understood the order and swiftly followed him. Honey kept up.

"This is another Company thing, right?"

"What?"

There was a crowd in the kitchen, but Honey remained plastered to Dear as he lent a hand setting out dinner.

"All this time you were developing, all you wanted was one for yourself—"

"You're not making sense—"

It infuriated Honey how easily Dear and Her Copy maneuvered around her.

“So, you want to keep it, is that it? Is The Company still funding this? Do they even know that their *prized-possession* is now just a personal, plaything, for you to f—”

“That’s. Enough. You have no idea what you’re saying. You’re embarrassing yourself—”

“No, but I’m right, aren't I?”

Dear turned his back to her, picked up the items Honey had left on the counter, pushed past to hand Her Copy the cutting board.

“Do you even have a plan? There’s no way they’re going to let you keep this forever! If it's so important they’re going to get it back somehow. Or was the plan just to steal it? Get fired maybe? Maybe waste more money—”

“Honey, you don’t understand any part of this—”

Dear still didn’t face her, but over his shoulder his voice was just as sharp.

“I really think I do, because I understand you’re a complete fraud and a thieving, selfish, son of a—”

As Dear whipped around in abhorrent surprise, the knife in his hand bit the countertop with a terrible screech. That’s how Honey knew to look down. She wished she hadn’t.

Honey saw the blade tear one, two, three inches into her stomach. Dear blinked one, two, three times, mouth agape. One, two, three people in the kitchen stared at the handle in his grasp. Honey’s eyes met his and for a brief moment, she saw the flicker of panic that ran through his gaze. She was certain Dear saw the same in her because as both of them stood there, raggedly breathing, Honey began to feel shock losing the fight against pain. Dear steadied himself on the counter, Honey attempted the same. In the span of a few seconds, he appeared

to consider the situation from all angles. The knife, the wife, Her Copy, the knife, the wife, *Her Copy*— Dear jerked his arm to the right and twisted it the whole way around.

Honey didn't even hear herself scream as she crumpled to the floor. She was certain her head was bleeding too now that she smacked it off the tile, not that there was anything to do about it, just let the ringing in her ears grow louder and louder. She wanted so desperately to clutch at her stomach, to hold herself together, but with each breath stillness introduced itself as the only option. So Honey watched.

She watched Dear stagger above her in shock, a subdued panic to be gone imminently. She watched him wash the knife and pass it to Her Copy who obediently, obliviously fetched another portion of vegetables. She watched him cry one, two, three tears before straightening up, wiping his eyes. Then he mumbled something something peroxide and disappeared to the far side of the apartment where Honey was no longer able to see. She turned her full attention to Her Copy.

Honey watched as she sliced a carrot into tiny, *perfect* sticks.

The machinery hummed.

Second Place: Grocery Trip

By Leah Hearne

“Move over Alexa. Move over DoorDash. We have both of you beat. The 2028 Roddy Assistant™ is the new tech dream. We all know the feeling of lying on the couch, six episodes deep into a show, before realizing you’ll have to inconvenience yourself with a grocery trip. Well, lucky shoppers, no more! Roddy will take care of all the errands that take time away from you being you. So don’t get off that couch. With any smart device, you can control your own Roddy and watch all your needs arrive at the door.”

You move across foggy auto-sidewalks at 35.4 mph. It’s a cold day. A coat of cool condensation glistens on your metallic bones. The lens of your camera blurs, so your headlight automatically turns on, piercing through the early morning darkness as you head to the nearest grocery store open at this ungodly hour.

Samantha, your beloved, is asleep. When you left, she was curled up on her bed, still wearing a face mask and bathrobe. She didn’t hear you as your sharp fingers opened the door, allowing you to slip into the night.

“In the same way parents gather all the presents beneath the tree late at night to surprise their kids in the morning, Roddy’s sleep setting provides a pleasant start to anyone’s day. Do you like croissants? Orange juice? Chocolate chip muffins? Roddy will provide you with all the ingredients for your ideal breakfast before you’re even aware he left the house.”

So here you are, at 3:48:23 AM, approaching Lowe Mart and remembering your grocery list... or grocery algorithm, rather. Thousands of figments of data about Samantha run through your mechanical mind, causing your circuitry to heat like a coin on the sidewalk.

Samantha, having bought Roddy when she first moved to her uptown apartment, reached the Automatic Phase™ a long time ago. Whereas she was once required to assign you tasks, you've gained enough information to be independent.

You now know her better than she knows herself.

You've recorded all her strange quirks—the abnormal hours she sleeps, the dozens of outfits she tries on before selecting the best one, the way she bites her lip when she stands on the scale—and have translated those glimpses of humanity into actionable data.

Several months ago, when you first became her assistant, she gave you an outline of what she wanted via the Roddy Perfect-Match Quiz™. It was then that you discovered her preference for low-calorie food. Her indifference towards price. Her love for products branded with words like “smart eating” and “cleansing” and “vegan.” The real intimacy, however, only occurred when she gave you access to her calendar. That's when you began to see patterns, and patterns are your fuel.

Patterns are what make the 2028 Roddy Assistant unlike any other design on the market.

“Roddy will learn what you like and dislike. Soon, he'll be your friend.”

Now, as your headlights meld with the neon lights of the storefront, these patterns are stuck in your head. You roll through the automatic door and ensnare your fingers around the handle of a shopping cart, thinking of nothing but the fact that Samantha has scheduled a “Date Night” for tomorrow.

Entering, you're pleased to find this Lowe Mart mostly empty. There are a couple of other robots—models far more archaic than you—and a handful of people stumbling with grocery lists written on the backs of receipts. The store's vacancy guarantees your efficiency, meaning

Samantha is more likely to type “5” when surveyed on her experience. A higher customer satisfaction rate, in turn, means you’ll survive far longer than your prototype brothers and sisters who were destroyed and then harvested for scrap metal.

Organizing your grocery list into sections, you begin the process of shopping.

The first aisle you head to is produce. Months ago, this was Samantha’s favorite section. It was yours as well. You liked to sort through it—to shuffle through the array of vibrant fruits and pick out the perfect specimens. Recently, however, you’ve observed that Samantha always decreases her food expenses the days leading up to a “Date Night”.

But now that you're fully automatic, it’s your responsibility to give Samantha the food plan that’ll help her achieve her goals.

You run your fingers over the wax coats of honey crisps, scanning for imperfections. Your camera grazes a bump, a bruise, a hole bitten by a worm. After several long milliseconds of deliberation, you settle on one that could be on the cover of a magazine. It’s spotless, containing that trademark red-orange-yellow gradient.

“Your assistant will work fast. He understands that you have places for me. People to meet. Memories to make. Roddy does everything in double-time because he understands that he, unlike humans, doesn’t have anywhere else to be.”

This is all you get from the produce aisle.

Next is the cosmetics section. You race towards it, going 7.8 mph—the highest allowed indoors by safety regulations—when you brush shoulders with a 2025 Lola Automaton. Her gears are rusted. The sound of her wheels against the floor is like nails on a chalkboard. Her camera is

basic, lacking in processing power. She's a glorified piece of scrapped steel, formulated into a poor imitation of you.

You recoil from her.

In the cosmetics section, you take two things into consideration: Samantha's preferences, and more importantly, what you've been programmed to believe will make her more attractive. Based on her strawberry-blonde hair, her love of pastel clothing, and her soft lips, you primarily focus on light pinks. You pick the best products at lightning-speed:

A nail polish called "sweet peonies."

A lipstick called "Lolita."

A blush called "delicacy."

All these products hit the wires of the shopping cart with a *clank*, but none of them break. Nothing has ever broken in your hands, and nothing ever will.

It's as you continue to the next aisle, however, that something—or rather someone—catches your attention.

A woman—not much older than Samantha—stands in the hygiene aisle. She's fumbling through her bag, eventually retrieving a threadbare wallet. Your camera records her as she opens it up, counting the dollars in a small wad of cash. She sighs. Her eyes fall over a pack of diapers, deliberating.

You zoom in. In her wallet is a picture of a baby. The child is dressed in a turquoise-striped onesie, eyes wide with that mixture of awe and confusion always present on babies' faces. The woman is also in the picture, holding the child in her arms and beaming.

She looks around. She probably doesn't notice you—you're expertly hidden around the corner—and she *definitely* doesn't hear you. Your latest update took care of that.

“Roddy is quiet. So quiet, in fact, you won't hear him approaching even in pin-drop silence. This will allow you to rest easy, giving you and your neighbors a break from the usual commotion of automatons.”

With a deep breath, she slips the diapers into her bag instead of the shopping cart.

You pause. In mere seconds, you automatically send the recorded footage to the local sheriff's station.

The woman continues down the aisle, closing her wallet and making her way through the rest of her grocery list.

“Most impressively, Roddy provides an important service to law enforcement. Our assistants are programmed with a careful eye for shoplifting, and if your robot notices any suspicious activity, then his system will automatically send the recorded footage to the police. Getting a Roddy isn't just making an investment in your own life—it's making an investment in your community's safety.”

Once the woman is entirely out of sight, you enter the hygiene aisle as well.

You add all the other usual “Date Night” items to your cart. Razors. Shaving creams. Body scrubs. Moisturizers. Deodorants with words like “champagne” and “mimosa” in their names. Samantha will be pleasantly surprised.

In this fashion, you make your way through the rest of the store, getting a variety of basic products—hand soap, paper towels, sponges. At some point, you notice a red-blue light blinking

outside the window. As you roll across marbled tiles, you spot the shoplifter you reported earlier, looking around the store frantically.

She realizes, in an instant, what's happened. Her hands instinctively dart to her bag, clearly intent on returning the stolen diapers to the hygiene aisle, but she stops. She buries her face in her hands, realizing it's pointless.

You recorded everything. There's no plausible deniability.

So, instead, she closes her eyes. She silently presses her face against one of the cool metal shelves, dust coating the skin of her cheek as she takes a brief moment to rest. To breathe. To contemplate.

When she's asked by a uniformed man to go outside, a jolt of energy rushes through your wiring. This is a win—for both you and your company.

At 3:56:09am, you only have one item left, located in the “pharmaceutical” section of the store.

You pick up a container of Fast-Acting Diet Pills.

Several days prior, Samantha had scanned the receipts you collected from your grocery trips, curious about the accuracy of your Automatic Phase™ purchases. She noticed an unfamiliar brand of appetite suppressants—one stronger than anything she had bought herself before—and opened up the A.I.-created grocery list on her phone. When she tried to manually remove the item from this week's shopping list, however, you sent her a message:

“Are you sure? Your calendar says you have a DATE NIGHT tomorrow evening. Based on Roddy's observations, this product will be beneficial to you prior to this event.”

Something about these words had caused her to hesitate.

She had gazed down at her body for a moment, pinching the skin of her stomach exposed by the crop top she was wearing, leaving a subtle red mark.

She pressed “NO—KEEP THE ITEM”.

The pills remained on her shopping list, more expensive than the combined total of all the food items you had purchased her.

“For those of you on diets, Roddy will help you stay on track. Without the usual temptations of walking through grocery store aisles, surrounded by a myriad of high-calorie foods, your assistant will make the purchases that are best for you and your body. It’s incredible—right? How can a machine be a servant, a policeman, AND a personal trainer? It’s a 3-in-1 deal.”

Having now completed your 25-item list, you head to the self-checkout line. Placing all the items on a scale, you know this machine is beneath you. Your calculations don’t need to be double-checked by an inferior system.

But you can’t fight what you’re programmed to do.

You go through the meticulous task of scanning every item. After bagging everything up, you exit the Lowe Mart, once again greeted with the cool fog of a December morning.

The woman from earlier is standing by a police car. Her eyes are red. Her hands are shaking. All the items from her shopping cart have been confiscated, sprawled across the sidewalk.

She gazes at you as the police officer takes down her information.

You avoid her gaze, choosing to instead stare into the shadows of the road.

After that moment, you never think about the woman again. Your memory software is designed to retain the essentials, and only the essentials.

So you instead think about Samantha's date tonight. How beautiful she'll look. How satisfied she'll be that she purchased the 2028 Roddy Assistant instead of an older model.

"At a certain point, Roddy defines you more than you define him. Once you feed him the necessary information, he'll know what products are best for you. So what are you waiting for? Purchase your very own model today before it's too late."

Third Place: Δ

By Alexandra Blake

Outside the farm communes, small, hypertrophic blemishes on the face of the earth, and the roads, snaking keloid Frankenstein seams, the Midlands are desolate. The ground, for thousands of square miles, is the same, an endless expanse of bare and beige skin interrupted only by small, living scars of civilization that a giant could pinch between its fingers like a human pinches grains of sand.

It is natural, then, that when some stocky, middle-aged man wakes up and there is only a gray, windless sky and flat, limp dust as far as the eye can see, he is terribly afraid. In fact, he is not all that far from one of those treasured blemishes, even his own farm commune, but the Midlands has a habit of making the world seem much larger than it really is.

The man is so afraid, in fact, that it takes a good long minute to realize that he hasn't a clue who he is and why he's here. There are a lot of things he does remember, to be sure. He remembers how to talk, and how to walk. He knows that he's in the Midlands, although he doesn't know quite where, because wherever you are in the Midlands, unless you are nearby a road or a farm commune, it all really looks the same. He remembers the practical knowledge. He could count to ten, or one-hundred-thousand, if he wanted to, but being the practical Midland sort, he wasn't interested in wasting time on such foolish exercises. All the knowledge is still there, but all the memories attached to these facts, who he really is, are gone.

For example, if you were to show him a door, he would certainly know it was a door, but, from his perspective, it would be like the first time he's ever seen a door. This, of course, isn't true – he has in fact seen many doors.

Naturally, he is rather upset that he'd forgotten who he was. All the thoughts floating at the surface of his brain seem to be weighed down by anchors, like the pirate boats he had read about as a child (not being able to recall that he had read these as a child, of course). Following the memories proves to be fruitless. Whenever he dives in, tries to follow the chain links concatenated to the anchors, his memories, he can only go so far before the iron rusts to a fine dust. It is a Sisyphean task.

As I said, though, this man is a good and practical Midlander, so he doesn't linger on these thoughts for long before he gets up with a characteristic decisiveness and heads off in no direction in particular. Certainly, he's still afraid, but he understands what happened, at least a little. Here is the reason:

As inhospitable as the Midlands may seem, besides some airborne bacteria, who even then are barely getting by, there are creatures that live underground during the daytime, coming out at night, called terafeeks. They are small yet resilient creatures, who breed faster than the government can control. They have a very strong sense of smell – so strong they can scent a brain from a mile away – and whenever they smell a brain, and it is nighttime, they come out to feed.

Now, mind you, the terafeeks are not zombies. It is an unfortunate stereotype that the terafeeks are barbaric things, but they are in truth rather polite. While any neurons would do for them, and they would happily feast on one's entire brain, and kill their victims slow and painful, they only take the memories of their prey, and even then they keep the important ones, that aren't something about that victim's life.

So getting fed on by a terafeek is just what happened to the man, who is now walking due East, in the direction of the sun that is only a vague imprint on the clouds.

The man keeps on his path with a steady, tirelessly obedient trudge, except there wasn't much trudging to do on the dry, hard-as-rock dirt. His shoes might as well have been striking on an infinite plane of concrete, the way the soles reverberated through the earth, vibrating the hibernating terafeeks in their underground cubbies.

While he walks, the man wonders who he is (or who he used to be, depending on the way you look at it). The man knows a good deal about farming, so he figures he is probably a farmer. This is about as far as he gets, though, before he is struck by a sudden pang of hunger. The hunger is the sort that flowers with radiating petals and fibrous blades of grass. This is the nature of the man's affliction. Not that he would understand this, since he has never seen a flower before, nor a blade of grass. The man huffs, lifting the straps of his overalls with his thumbs, as if to accommodate a stomach that feels bloated with hunger. He doesn't know this, but that's something he's always done whenever he's felt anxious. I'm no psychologist, but I like to think it's a reminder for himself. That is, he's reminding himself, whenever he isn't quite sure what to do, that he must keep on going, and that's all there is to it.

The man soon reaches the conclusion that there's no good in trying to think anymore, because hunger has made his thoughts choppy and disconnected, like a staticky radio station. He focuses on walking instead. One foot, another foot, over and over again, paying blind penance for whatever he did to land him here, or on behalf of whomever put him here.

Not much time passes before the man begins to feel the first throws of fatigue. It looms over him like a tsunami closing in over a village, yet to be observed but nonetheless present –

inevitable. The tsunami eviscerates the buildings and cattle and cattle-people. By the time it rolls away, a hand receding back on the arm of a sofa chair after squashing a fly, there's nothing left that won't soon disintegrate into the tumultuous ocean.

The man's hunger, thirst, and fatigue is bruised by a low murmur erupting from the vacuum of the Midlands. He stands still, cocks his head over his shoulder and, sure enough, there is a distant, indistinct mass, a round, brown freckle on the cracked earth, marching steadily forward. It is in this moment that the true weight of his vulnerability dawns upon him. He is afraid, because he knows that there isn't supposed to be anyone out in the wilder Midlands. There is nothing trapping him as far as the eye can see, and the only force restraining him is gravity, and yet he is also a caged bird, completely ignorant of the nature of his enclosure and his captors.

He has no real choice in the matter but to stand and wait, watching the Earth's freckle slowly approach. This is especially frustrating, being the practical Midland sort, to not have anything to do, and to feel so afraid without understanding just what you're afraid of.

The mass, which is now near enough it seems to be a small caravan, is within shouting range of the man. They call out to the man, "Hello!"

The man, with unknowingly characteristic sternness, responds, "Hello, there." Although he has said this before many times, and his mouth knows how to form words, this is the first time that, in his memory, he has ever spoken.

The leader extends his hand, and dips his head down in a slight bow, then asks "What are you doing here?"

The man shrugs.

The leader nods knowingly. "Terafeek?" He takes the man's silence to be a yes. "How long have you been here?"

The man pauses. He opens his mouth to speak, flicking his tongue across his dry lips. In truth, he has no idea how long he was asleep for, or even how long he has been awake for. Finally, he says, "I don't know."

The leader nods again. "What's your name?" The words are simple enough, but they carry much weight. He is reminding the man that he has a name, even if he does not know it. He is humanizing the man, by indirectly giving him one.

The man, being the practical Midlands type, does not give it all that much thought. He says the first name that comes to mind, and that name is Frank.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Frank. My name is Daur." Daur squints up at the sky, and somehow determines it to be near sundown. "Dinner is soon. You can eat with us, if you like."

By the time they are done eating, although it has not been long, the sky is nearly black. Everyone lays down to rest.

Sleep comes to the man, now Frank, easily, but dreaming does not. There is not much to dream about, when all your memories have been erased. Frank dreams nonetheless, because the brain marches on no matter the circumstances. Dreams are always strange, completely detached from the rational mind, but Frank's dreams that night are not just strange. They lack that personal quality that makes dreams feel lofty and carefree; instead, where there should have been the suggestion of a story, shepherding every memory into something illogical but coherent, there is only a cacophony of meaningless noise. Fleeting images flash before him, and disappear before he can even attach names or identities to the objects.

It is thus that Frank wakes up early, feeling fitful and unrested. A woman, silhouetted in the dark, sits and stares at the sky, like if she looks hard enough, the clouds might give way to the glorious, brilliant rays of sun bursting forth from the horizon. She, like Frank, and everyone else on this Earth, has never seen the brilliant show of color the sun puts on every morning, but the woman has heard of it, and dreamed of it (not literally, because there is no dreaming of things that do not exist) many times. She has even heard that during the day, it used to be that the sky was the brightest, most vibrant blue you could possibly imagine.

Frank remains quiet. There is something chilling about the intimacy of being alone in consciousness with someone else, an experience that until now, in his memory that is so brief but is simultaneously his eternity, his everything, is reserved for the lone self. Because of this, he does not acknowledge the presence of the woman, hoping she in turn will not recognize him.

When she does, it startles Frank, who has been staring at the fine grain of the dust beneath him, the accumulation of centuries of disintegration, lost and forgotten. "I'm sorry," she says, acutely perceptive of his fear, but this only makes Frank more afraid. The simple knowledge that the woman can read his emotions terrifies him. It is a deep-rooted fear of vulnerability, Midlandish pragmatism.

"It's okay," Frank stammers in response. She pats the ground beside her firmly, beckoning Frank to sit next to her.

"You're new," the woman says. "Name?"

"Frank," he answers, quicker than he did last time.

“Wendy,” she responds. “Terafeek?” She needs only one word to convey what she means; *Did a terafeek erase your memory, or do you know who you are?* Frank notices that Wendy is a woman of few words, bearing the distinctive Midlandish manner of speaking.

Frank nods.

“They took my husband.” Her tone is so mild, Frank is unsure whether Wendy is reminiscent, melancholy, or angry. He raises his eyebrows with a sort of innocent curiosity, the tentative offering of a question without the expectation that she will take it. Wendy shakes her head. “I’m okay, now. Had many years since it,” as if the wear of the years is a gift; the same years that turned so many things from things into dust. “Years to soften, appreciate things.”

Frank wonders if he will ever return to his farm commune. He realizes that in that commune, there is probably another Wendy, thinking about how he has forgotten her. Then, another question; “Why do you still remember?”

“I have to. The terafeeks are allergic.” Frank has heard of this before. It is rare, often considered a blessing, especially in the context of the wilder Midlands, but the way that Wendy intonates her words, it sounds like a cross to bear. Frank contemplates if it is good that he doesn’t remember the life he had before. “Searched for years. Never found him. Did find these people, though,” she gestures behind her.

“Why are they here?”

“Searching for beautiful things,” she lowers her voice, absorbing the weight of an unfulfilled promise, then says, “they’re called *plants*.”

“Plants,” Frank echoes to himself, mulling over the word until it feels right in his mouth, like a ruminant chewing its food four times before it can digest it right. “What are they like?”

“Living crystals.” She shuts her eyes, in awe at the sheer idea. “They’re pliant and stringy, moist like cattle noses. Breathe out oxygen. A whole other kingdom of life, besides animals and germs.”

“How do you know plants exist?”

“Old books. They’re probably extinct now. They still look, though.” *They* instead of *we* is her subtle communication that she doesn’t think they’re extinct, she knows they’re extinct, and she is not really searching for anything.

He feels a fierce, throbbing pang of empathy for the doomed endeavor.

Their hopes are all wrong. Plants have been extinct for the past 35,000 years. To see a plant is as impossible as rain or snow, impossible as a sunrise or sundown that isn’t monochrome as a black-and-white photo, washed out and the color of crumbling ash. Frank understands this, too, although like with plants, he does not know what rain or snow or black-and-white-photos are, and he has only ever heard of sundowns in fairy tales.

Resisting time, and the erosion that its gentle child entropy has marked for the Earth, is futile as resisting sleep. Frank realizes this now, standing on the windswept past and encroached by the volume of the future that never ends, the sky trudging on and on even when it is no longer beautiful. Even the hypertrophic and keloid scars that civilization has scratched onto the shallow surface of the Earth will someday be lost forever, and someday, someday so distant there isn’t a number for how many days it will take, there will be no Earth left at all.

“It’s okay,” Wendy says, reading his mind again, and echoing the words he stuttered at the beginning of the conversation, but they have taken on a whole new meaning.

“Don’t mourn when the scars and blemishes fade into a grayscale oblivion. You are a scar right now, one that thinks and feels and sometimes does good things, and this is what matters.”

First Runner Up: Jellyfish Musings

By Evie Holmberg

Adrien tore the page with a sudden burst of rage, harshly molding it into a jagged ball with uneven, rough edges. They shoved it into their right coat pocket, pushing it past the other papers already mangled and hidden from sight. They drew in a deep, long breath of the salty air, making a half-hearted attempt to center themselves. They sat criss crossed on the gray concrete floor, the kind with tiny bumps in it to give it texture, with a sketchbook in their lap. In front of them sat an ocean.

There were encased oceans all over the aquarium. Adrien had been walking all around them, peeking an eye at their contents. Some were short and open at the top, full of small fish and timid crabs that children could poke and prod with their fingers. Some were decorated with bright rocks and fake coral that sea animals loved to hide in, shielding themselves from the penetrating eyes of spectators. The one they were in front of at the moment was tall and curved, showing off more angles to look at. Skinny ocean plants intertwined with rocks that soared high above their head. All kinds of fish swam past them, big and small, every color of the rainbow. At that moment, a flat ray passed by.

Adrien looked down at their lap, at the empty page in front of them. They pressed the tip of their pencil onto the page; they didn't move it, just set it there, waiting for something to happen. But like usual lately, nothing did.

Art was something Adrien fell in love with at a young age, and they could remember drawing on every piece of paper they got their hands on. But now they were in art school, grinding away at papers and assignments for their classes, and that same creative spark wasn't

there anymore. A week of winter break had passed, and they still couldn't draw anything. Nothing good, at least. Putting pencil to paper just resulted in disappointment and a rising sense of anger for their work. They tried everything their peers told them to try and clear the thick, impenetrable fog that blanketed their creativity. And now they sat on an empty Aquarium floor, fruitlessly staring at fish, hoping to find even a speck of inspiration, wishing to find their saving grace. Their muse. Why was nothing working?

A sound from the right made their eyes shoot up. Wet, rubber footsteps hitting the ground in a rhythmic fashion came from dark navy rain boots, connected to a person. Adrien's eyes trailed up their body, and squinted to see who they were looking at.

A girl was walking towards them. She looked college-aged, like Adrien. Her hair was short and curly, a light shade of auburn, and even from afar they could tell her face was plastered in freckles. She was mostly covered by blue overalls, a slightly stained white shirt poked out from underneath, rubber gloves covered her hands, and in one of them, she carried a bucket. A worker, Adrien guessed. The girl was headed right towards them, and she had an excited pep in her step, which made a groan echo in their head. Turning back to their page, they decided to pretend like they were too occupied to acknowledge the girl. They sloppily began drawing something. Anything, in hopes that she would pass them by.

Their subtle show of unwillingness didn't seem to register in the girl's head, as Adrien felt a presence next to their side. They didn't look up when she started talking.

"Good morning! You're the first person I've seen here all day. It's Wednesday though, most people are at work. But you're here! You like fish, I take it?" She asked.

A friendly type, just like they thought. Why did she have to be a friendly type? Adrien tried to avoid piquing any further interest, and muttered, "I'm working."

The shadow of the girl covered them as she leaned over. "You're an artist?"

Adrien didn't react, continuing to draw. It just barely resembled an angelfish, one of the fish they'd been studying that day. The worker continued. "I'm an artist too! Kind of. I haven't painted in a while, school's been kinda..." she trailed off.

They turned their head to the side and upwards, looking at the girl. A nametag on her shirt read 'Nadia T', with a clownfish sticker next to it. "You paint?" they asked.

"With watercolor!" she said, smiling. "I like to paint sunsets sometimes, the ocean too. Oh! And a lot of fish. Fitting, isn't it? The aquarium girl likes to paint the fish," she looked around and giggled to herself.

That made Adrien smile a bit, even though they didn't particularly want to. Despite their better judgment, they continued to engage. "I'm struggling a bit. With art, I mean. Can't draw much." they looked down. "That's why I'm here, for inspiration, I guess. Do you ... have any fish you could suggest?"

The grin that appeared on Nadia's face made them regret asking that immediately. She wasn't going to simply show them a fish, oh no, she was going to want to talk about it, too. Nadia held out her hand. "C'mon, I'll show you!"

With unfortunate lack of thought, Adrien grabbed it. Nadia pulled them up quickly, immediately speed-walking them in the direction of her target. The steady schloping of her rubber boots echoed in the halls, and they stumbled to keep up. They passed by tanks of fish so

fast that Adrien could only catch a quick blur of color. But Nadia didn't stop at any of those tanks, instead opting to bound forward.

The two slowed down in an area of the aquarium that was dark, with low ceilings and a bench. The only illumination came from a few tanks, full of round, bouncing creatures, with no obvious features. "Jellyfish," Nadia said in the darkness.

"Huh?" they said, looking over their shoulder at the girl, realizing what she said after she said it.

Nadia was sitting now, so Adrien sat too. "Jellyfish, they're my favorites. These right here -" She pointed at smaller, pale ones. "- are Moon Jellies."

Adrien looked closer, watching the round heads of the jellyfish as they bobbed throughout the tank, like plastic bags receiving a sudden gust upwards, but seemingly in a more intentional way, the creatures were dancing in their tanks. Opening their sketchbook, Adrien began to draw what they saw. The round shapes proved easy enough, and their movements proved to be mesmerizing. Nadia spoke up again. "The one at the bottom is named Luna, the higher one is named Lune."

"How d'you tell the difference?" they asked.

"To be honest, I can't really. They all look pretty identical. I go by feeling instead. Jellyfish are alive, like us. I think they deserve names even if they aren't worth much."

Adrien looked over at Nadia and then back to their paper in short intervals, keeping a steady sketching pace.

“I like all types of jellyfish, but Moon Jellies are some of the prettiest. They’re called that cause they look like the moon - see that white coloring? ... I guess I didn’t need to explain that, did I?” She chuckled. “Sorry, I just really like them.”

“It’s fine,” Adrien muttered. They were listening, but they were too engrossed in their drawing to look up again, the sound of their pencil scratching against the page was magnified in the silence.

Nadia began to speak, her eyes still fixated on the tank, reflecting the calming blue of the water. “Jellyfish are such intriguing animals, aren’t they? They don’t have eyes, or a brain, and yet they live so well. They float along the ocean, bouncing. Their movements create currents that draw in prey. Did you know that? Everyone is so afraid of them, but they can’t help it. And they’re so fragile, too. I sometimes ask myself what their greater purpose on the earth is.

“I wonder if they know we’re watching somehow, even though they can’t see us back. Can they tell that I marvel at their beauty? What if they flaunt their tentacles on purpose? Like they’re putting on a show. Maybe they’re saying, ‘keep your eyes on me!’, and we just can’t hear them. I wonder about it often.”

She took a moment to breathe, resting her hand on the glass, her hair bouncing slightly. “I’d like to be a jellyfish, I think. To float in the endless blue of the ocean, without a care in the world, it sounds like a dream. I’d put on my own performance, just like them, just for the fun of it. Maybe that’s their greater purpose, to dazzle undersea audiences. I wish I could do that, too.”

Nadia, who had been focused on the jellyfish, turned her head towards Adrien. "I'm sorry, I probably talked your ear off, huh? You're busy, and I'm still on the clock, ha. I'll stop bothering you now..."

And before they could get another word in, she shuffled off into the empty aquarium, bucket still in hand. But Adrien didn't want her to leave anymore. Nadia had helped them focus on their art. Actually, they were so engaged in her words, they weren't totally aware of what they were sketching out. They looked back down at the page, studying the lines they had created.

Along the edges were some small, non-specific doodles of jellyfish. But they weren't the main focus of the page. In the center, a rough depiction of a side profile sat on the page. They traced the pencil markings, studying the thin, upturned nose, the gentle eyes, the soft cheeks speckled with freckles - the way Adrien had drawn them made them look like stars. Loose depictions of curls fell over the face in no discernable pattern but that of gravity. It took a second to click in their mind, but the face in front of them was striking and recognizable. They had drawn Nadia. They had found their muse.

Second Runner Up: Poundcake

By Maggie Chang

“A pound of flour, sugar, butter, eggs,” Nia repeated under her breath. “Easy. Easy.”

“If it was easy,” her brother chimed in, “You would’ve gotten it right three poundcakes ago.” He frowned. “Or maybe, it is easy. You’re just not smart enough to figure it out.”

Nia whirled and launched an empty egg carton at him, which soundly missed his head by more than a foot. Shrieking, she replied, “How are you helping? Get out of the kitchen.”

“You can’t tell me where to be,” he said, slumping and adjusting his seat firmly into the bar stool.

“Please,” she whined, “I need to get this done.”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re overthinking this stupid poundcake. I’m sure grandpa doesn’t care.”

Nia shook her head. “You don’t get it.”

Daniel reached across the counter and picked up a dry crumb from the last, powdery attempt at the recipe, tossed it through his teeth, and chewed it pensively. “I was there, Nia, in this memory of yours. It was clearly a joke.”

“If you won’t leave, I will,” Nia said, caving and fleeing upstairs to the comfort of her attic bedroom. She opened her laptop again, scrolling rapidly through food blogs and videos of recipe gurus, praying for some secret she had somehow missed. Beside her keyboard, her phone chimed with the chaotic messages of a dozen group chats, primarily that of her lacrosse team, trying to plan the team dinner for Sunday. She had been tagged a number of times, pinging her in hopes of a recurring lemon bar contribution, or even her macarons, if

she had time. Nia turned her phone over and slipped it into silence. Her too-bright computer screen glared back into her eyes with an equal volume, harsh but useless. Closing it, she swiveled in her desk chair and headed for the opposite side of the room, opening her closet door and pulling the hat box from the top shelf.

Digging through the dollar store receipts and birthday cards, Nia found the greasy plastic-clad market sticker reading for the dollar cost of a cherished good from a long-closed bakery. She held it gingerly by the index and thumb of each of her hands, observing it against the backdrop of her color-coordinated closet, praying it would spawn a recipe from its shiny adhesive paper. The barcode remained indecipherable, the title as plain as ever. *Poundcake*, it insisted.

She was still watching it when the stomping of Daniel's uneven scamper echoed from the far wall, and she had time to set her memories back in their places, the wrapper carefully in its tissue paper before being stuffed into her safest pocket, before her brother burst in, Hyundai keys in hand. "We have to get going." He added, "Without the cake."

"We have time for one more attempt," Nia said, standing and brushing flour off the apron she had yet to remove. "I'll be so fast. I think I need to kill the additional leavener. Modern grocery store flour has some added, so I think it's throwing off the ratios."

Daniel wrinkled his nose. "Enough to make one soup and the next one croutons? Maybe poundcake just isn't your thing."

"Everything is my thing," Nia said, blowing past him and dropping down the stairs with rapidfire steps. "If I can make a souffle, I can make a stupid poundcake," she announced, more to herself than her brother, who was then almost two flights of stairs behind her.

She wiped the counter cleanly with the bench scraper and set the ingredients before herself again. “Four,” she whispered. “How can there only be four?”

Daniel arrived in the kitchen through the doorway closest to the front of the house. “We have to go, Nia, I’m serious. You don’t have time to make another one.”

“Mom said be there by dinner time,” she said. “We have at least an hour.”

Daniel held his cell up to her face, the clock on his lock screen glowing a definite eight p.m. “We missed dinner, Nia, after the last time I told you we had to leave and you said you could make this one,” he said, picking up the loaf pan full of sand. “Visiting hours are over soon.”

Blinking, she replied, “I can make a poundcake before they’re over,” scooping the last mixing bowl out of the cabinet and setting it before herself.

“No, you can’t. It takes at least an hour to bake just in the oven, then half an hour to cool at the absolute minimum, not to mention you haven’t started mixing yet.” Daniel moved over to her, grabbing her arm firmly and pulling her out of the kitchen. She wriggled, landing a kick on the back of his knee before rushing back to the counter, starting to count eggs. “Nia, let’s go,” he repeated.

She shook her head, eyes glued on the reading of the scale as she started to weigh her flour in the bowl. “Pound,” she mumbled. “Poundcake.”

“I can’t go without you, mom’ll have my head,” Daniel announced, but Nia didn’t even look up. The oven crackled behind her, char from the slime of the second failed attempt smoking atmospherically into the kitchen. “You’ll burn the house down like that,” he added, shaking his head when she still didn’t respond.

Nia listened as his phone chimed under his dialing finger, the ringing sounding only once before their mom's voice burst into the kitchen. "Where are you guys?"

"Nia's still baking," Daniel declared loudly. "She won't come."

"Visiting hours are over at ten," their mom said.

"I told her that," Daniel said.

Her voice lowered. "Just come without her. It's better he sees one than neither of you." Then, louder, she added, "Maybe bring a picture of your sister, since he can't see her in person." Daniel glanced up at Nia, expecting a snappy retort, but all he noticed was the anxious twitch of her left eye, seizing sharply and then relaxing most of the way.

Daniel left silently, the garage door groaning open and shut the only definitive note of his passage to Nia, who looked nowhere but at her concoction, a bubbling golden goo that sang with promise. She watched it fold in glimmering ribbons as she poured it into the carefully buttered and floured loaf pan, filling to the perfect two-thirds level. The oven roared as she pulled it open by the handle, hot air evaporating beads of sweat on her brow and she slid the loaf onto the middle rack.

From the pocket of her apron, her phone buzzed insistently. By the fifth vibration, it occurred to Nia that it might be a call. As she drew it out to answer, she realized it was well past nine, now, and that the cake which she'd been feverishly observing was rounding the completion of her timer. Daniel's obnoxious contact photo filled the screen as she swiped and lifted the cold device to her overheated ear.

"Are you coming?" Daniel's shrill voice pierced through the heavy fog clouding her head.

“I’m almost done,” she said. “There’s like five minutes left on the timer.”

“Forget about the poundcake,” he replied breathlessly.

“I’m not going to forget about the poundcake,” she said, prepared to expand more when her grandfather’s voice rose slightly in the background of the call. “Is that him?” she asked with the volume of a mouse’s trodden foot. “Is he there?”

Daniel sighed. “Yeah.”

“Can you pass me to him?” Nia asked, her voice octaves higher than before.

“No,” he answered. “If you want to talk to grandpa, you have to get in the Uber that mom’s been paying to wait in front of our house and get to the hospital.”

“Please,” Nia said.

She heard the common exhale Daniel pressed through his nose, and the whish and tumble of a passed microphone.

“My Nia?” a much older, much softer voice crackled through Daniel’s shotty cell speakers.

“Grandpa,” she replied, feeling her shoulders slump instantly. “How are you feeling?”

He chuckled weakly, the sound trailing off before it even fully began. “I’ve been better,” he answered slowly. “Where are you?” he asked clearly, his voice thin but direct.

“I’m coming,” the words tumbled from her mouth with the aggression of children leaping from a school bus on the second week of June, “I made poundcake for you.” With one hand, she slid the loaf pan out of the oven and onto the stovetop, switching on the fan above to suck the tendrils of heat away from her visually undamaged creation. “Like you loved? I tried to make it like the one you always talked about.”

The other end of the line crackled with the static of transmissions and no speech at all.

“Grandpa? I’m making you poundcake,” Nia insisted.

“Pound cake?” he echoed finally. “Why would I need a pound of cake?”

“No, like the loaf. The kind you used to get from the bakery?”

A strong wind pressed from the speakers of Nia’s phone until her mom’s voice replaced it. “What were you asking him, Nia?” she demanded.

“I was telling him about the poundcake,” she said.

Her mother loosed something between a shout and a scoff, breathy but definitively furious. “Quit it with the poundcake, Nia, he doesn’t know what it is.”

“You don’t get it. Every Saturday that he used to drive me to ice skating lessons, he’d drive me past the bakery he used to eat at when he first immigrated here and tell me all about the magic poundcake he’d found there. He kept the label on the wrapper for decades.”

“Nia, I don’t care if you’re bringing him the cargo ship that brought him over from Hong Kong, he’s been asking after you for hours and if you miss visiting hours because you’re making another faulty poundcake-”

“It’s perfect,” Nia shouted suddenly, holding a clean toothpick over the springy, moist child she’d birthed into the loaf pan. “Tell the Uber I’m coming out.”

Nia held the phone to her ear as she scooped up the cake and started for the door, hearing the call drop hard without a word from her mother. She slid into the back of a black Nissan and watched the maps app carefully as he carried her with patient caution through the neat streets of her sidewalk neighborhood towards the highway.

The minutes on the ETA ticked up slowly, her arrival time sliding from 9:30 to 9:32, to 9:35, to 9:38. “The speed limit is pretty safe here,” Nia said into the silence.

“Not as safe as five under,” the man replied cheerily, toddling along in a twenty-five at sixteen.

It was 9:50 when Nia made it to the hospital doors, breaking through them and chasing the blue line to the ward her mom had noted in her Google Calendar when she’d put in the block of visiting hours last week. She slammed her finger against the elevator button, calling desperately for a ride to the third story. It chimed white at 9:53, closing and sending her upstairs by 9:54.

She caught sight of his room, S319, by 9:56, after a brisk sprint from the elevators around the oval hall in the east wing of the hospital. Breaking through the door, sweating profusely, Nia remembered the apron, still secured loyally around her waist and depositing flour steadily onto the tile floor. “Grandpa,” she declared, teetering towards keeling over as she gasped for breath, lifting the poundcake with one hand as if on a pedestal.

Nia’s brother scowled at her as she stepped over to his bedside, watching her start to saw desperately at the cake with the plastic knife she’d almost forgotten to grab at all. Her mom stepped behind her, beginning to reach for the pan, when Nia’s grandpa spoke. “You came,” he rasped. His daughter leapt to his aid, handing him a glass of water, which he waved off. “Nia,” he said, opening his arms. Nia stared between him and the perfect poundcake in her hands. “Nia,” he repeated. Eyes wide, she met his and set the cake on the bedside table with its informal cutlery. Wrapping her arms around her frail grandfather, she inhaled his eternally

academic scent, as focused and studious as any aroma could be, wrapped in the fading buttery stench seeping from her own body.

“I love you,” she told him, and then visiting hours were over.

When Nia and her family returned in the morning, the staff informed them that he had been found cold when they arrived with his breakfast. The toast and fruit cup remained as uneaten as the homemade poundcake on the table beside them.

HIGH SCHOOL HONORABLE MENTIONS

First Honorable Mention: Burdened With Knowledge, Burdened with Time

By Annie Sun

Time.

The indefinite continuation of all existence in the past, present, and future, all stemming from a singular point: the creation of the universe. A concept conceived to ease the mind of perpetual existence, and a way to organize the passage of being into a conceivable scale.

Being the first thing to exist in a universe, it was the first concept to be documented in the vast library of knowledge.

He was the first being, the first of eleven, to be created into this world. Accompanied by dwelling spirits, he wandered the world searching for his purpose. Why had he been brought into this world? He searched for the answer with all his heart, treading every inch of the world and seeking knowledge wherever he went in hopes of finding his purpose. He knew every star in the sky, every blade of grass on the ground, every grain of sand and every drop of water. With every new bit of knowledge he learned, he never stopped searching for the answer to his one question: what was his purpose?

Overtime, when he had learned everything there was to know of this world, a brush revealed itself to him one day. A brush, accompanied by a slip of bamboo on which was written a singular word: *time*.

And it was then he understood his purpose. He would document all of the world's findings, all of the knowledge he had learned into the library of time. He would record all that

would happen, and he would keep it safe for the world to learn.

He would become the keeper of all knowledge, the first scholar to ever walk the earth.

It's better to walk a thousand miles than to read a thousand books. - Chinese proverb

Companion.

A being with whom one spends their time with, especially if they are similar in personality or nature.

In time, other beings would come to join him in this world; there was the first warrior, the first healer. The first concepts of order, chaos, and the balance between the two. The first mother appeared, along with the concept of family, and with it trickery and mischief. All of this he recorded with his brush in hand, dutifully expanding the ever-growing library of knowledge. It had grown from a singular slip to a vast scroll, every segment containing a different concept or memory.

They hailed him a leader, the eldest of eleven and the most knowledgeable. He accepted the title with grace and humility, and two others, the warrior and healer, were elected to lead alongside him, but his word was always final.

He always kept his humble beginnings in the back of his mind.

Together, the eleven of them formed the first Pantheon. They lived in harmony with the spirits of the earth, unaware of the passage of time. All but the scholar, who dutifully recorded everything.

And so it went on like this for eons. Eons of peace. Eons of harmony. Until *they* arrived.

He remembered the day they first appeared. They came from another place, another world, seeking a home to replace their old one. It had been destroyed by a dying star, and they had been wandering through time and space ever since. At first, both the spirits and the Pantheon welcomed them with open arms. They were more than happy to share this world with the newcomers. The more the merrier! The scholar especially was thrilled by the notion of learning new information, and so he happily documented their first meeting into the scroll of knowledge.

Quickly, however, the newcomers began to show their true colors. They were beings of immense power, far surpassing anything that had walked the earth prior. They ate up all the land given to them, and demanded for more every time. What was not given to them was simply taken, acquired through force and displacing many of the local spirits. Soon, border skirmishes and territory squabbles became commonplace as the spirits desperately tried appeasing the foreigners' greed.

All of this was watched by the scholar, who dutifully noted it all down with a heavy heart. His Pantheon looked to him for guidance, asked him to do something, required his help. The foreigners, who hailed themselves as gods, were far more powerful than all of them combined, and to participate in the imminent territory wars meant absolute destruction. In desperate need of guidance, the scholar turned to the library of knowledge he had kept safe for so long, scouring every corner and every word for something that might help him.

And for the first time, his knowledge failed him.

For the first time in a long time, he didn't know. He didn't know what to do.

And for the first time, he made a difficult choice.

Distance reveals a horse's strength, time reveals a person's character. - Chinese proverb

Choice.

The act of making a decision when presented with at least two possibilities.

With all options weighed, he made the decision based upon his knowledge and logic.

To engage the false gods upfront would result in an utter defeat, but they couldn't stand by and watch as their home was taken from them. So the scholar appealed to them, called for a truce. The two groups gathered to negotiate terms, and they found that even under peaceful circumstances, the false gods could be quite demanding.

In exchange for safety, the Pantheon was to remain within the confines of their small territory, their birthplace from which they came. They were to never interfere with the gods, and in turn the gods were to never set a single foot on the land that wasn't theirs.

In short, the Pantheon would let the gods do whatever they wanted with the world, so long as they left them alone.

The others argued with him about this. This was *their* home! Why should the outsiders be allowed to take it all? But the scholar had already made up his mind; he insisted that this was the best course of action. His conviction was enough to placate his Pantheon; after all, he was their leader, and his seniority meant he was the wisest.

The scholar was sure this was the best decision, but deep down in his heart he felt he was making a mistake.

With the terms set, the two leaders came together and forged a powerful pact, sealed into eternity in the stars. And dutiful as ever, the scholar documented it all down with a flick of his brush.

It is easy to find a thousand soldiers, but hard to find a good general. - Chinese proverb

Trapped.

To be confined within an area, unable to escape or flee.

Later, the scholar would come to understand the concept, the feeling of being unable to truly move. It had been an oversight on his part; when forging the treaty, he'd neglected to consider what the terms *really* meant. As the receiving party in the agreement, the Pantheon couldn't do anything unless the gods acted first. Their passive role meant that as long as the gods held their side of the treaty, the Pantheon couldn't leave their island even if they wanted to.

The scholar didn't think of it as a problem at first. So what if they couldn't leave? They had no reason to. They were perfectly fine where they were. The decision was already made; the only thing they could do now was look forward.

He'd made it up to the others somehow. He'd make up for his mistake. He'd make it all worthwhile in the end.

He'd make their new home so great, they wouldn't want to leave in the first place.

They set out to build their new home, making it theirs and theirs only. They filled it with life, overflowing it with all sorts of flora and fauna. As time went on, a civilization eventually rose, populated by a race of humans, fragile and unknowledgeable. The scholar took note of it all in his ever-growing scroll, documenting every detail and recording every word.

Within their closed borders, the others were oblivious to the happenings of the outside world. They lived blissfully ignorant, nurturing their growing civilization like their own child.

The scholar, however, saw everything.

Cursed with the task to record all that happened in time, he saw clearly everything that happened outside. He saw the so-called gods wage war against the peaceful dwelling spirits. He saw endless carnage and destruction, the shaking of the earth and the swaying of the seas. He saw the gods claim the world as their own, arrogantly pronouncing themselves its rulers.

He saw it all, recorded it *all*.

All the while wishing he didn't.

His mistake from times earlier circled in his mind; he trapped them in here. They were trapped.

He was trapped.

The world, his first home, was being destroyed, reclaimed, and replaced right before his eyes, and all he did was stand by and *watch*. That's all he ever seemed to do. Watch and record, living in this world but never truly being a part of it.

So he turned his back on the outside world. Renounced its existence. He focused all his attention on their collective project, their growing society. He would make sure to be a part of this world. He would make his mark.

He would make up for his mistake in the end.

A man who plants melons will reap melons. A man who plants beans will reap beans. -

Chinese proverb

Human.

A bipedal being of upright stance and articulate speech, not unlike that of the beings who made up the Pantheon. They were small, curious creatures, exceedingly fragile, especially

to the passage of time. Regardless, they persisted in surviving even through the harshest of times. Fragile as they may be, they were extremely durable.

The scholar regarded all of this with curious amusement. He recorded all of his observations diligently. And as he noticed how unwitting humans were, he decided to impart his knowledge to them. The others, too, shared their gifts. Fire, tools, agriculture. Weapons and medicine. Concepts like life and death, love and hate. Trickery and deceit. Grief and sorrow. Joy, happiness, and festivity. Family and community. All of these the humans took and shared, expanding and advancing their societies. The humans likened them as being gods, revered them as divine beings, a title the scholar was not fond of. It reminded him all too much of the devastation eons ago, when the outsiders came and took their home.

Knowledge, as it seemed, had a darker side. With weapons came battle, and with battle came war. As territories expanded, wars were waged over borders, countless lives lost over the fight for control. Famine and disease spread like wildfire, taking with it countless more souls. The scholar saw it all. He witnessed great cities rise and fall, saw kingdoms prosper and splinter under the corruption of their monarchs. All of this he recorded, brush in hand.

It was too much like what happened eons ago.

He tried to remedy this, by introducing the humans to magic. He'd hoped that with new knowledge, the humans would stop their squabbling and come together like they had at the beginning.

It only served to cause the largest war humans have waged.

It lasted a century, ravaging the whole country and every soul who lived in it. Every day was as destructive as the last.

And every day the scholar had to record.

Why did it come out like this? Every decision he made led to more pain, more suffering, more agony. He failed, just as he had all those millenia ago.

Why did he even try anymore?

It didn't matter. He would bear the burdens he made for himself with his head held high like the leader he was. He wouldn't let the others see his weakness. He would remove his weakness entirely. He wouldn't make any more mistakes.

So he stopped caring. Stopped worrying. Stopped bothering. He watched his country grow once more with indifference. It didn't matter what achievements they earned. It didn't matter what calamities they caused. He recorded it all down as always, not knowing who he was recording for or why.

Knowledge was knowledge, after all.

A candle lights others but consumes itself. - Chinese proverb

Word.

A unit of speech that expresses a singular and distinct concept or idea, typically used in accordance with others to convey a thought or message.

All it took were the words of a mortal child. Words that shouldn't be able to hurt him. After all, it's the receiver who would turn words into weapons. He had rendered all words directed at him useless long ago.

So why was this mortal child able to shake him?

You're scared of making more mistakes. So what? I've made hundreds of mistakes in my life. So what if you accidentally hurt people? So what if you caused harm? The best you can

do is get back up and try to make it better. You're scared that if you interfere, people might get hurt. But if you don't interfere, people will get hurt. Make a choice for yourself.

Make a choice for yourself.

With these thoughts echoing in his mind, the scholar retreated into his library.

The once-humble scroll had grown into one of insurmountable scale, countless strips of bamboo each containing a memory or idea. He had built a library to house it, and to safeguard it. Individual slips whizzed about in files, organizing themselves as he stepped into the room.

He wandered deeper into the library, walking past eons of history, millennia's worth of time flashing by in an instant, trying to collect his thoughts.

Make a choice for yourself.

He stopped suddenly. He'd almost reached the end of the library, and one particular bamboo slip hovered nearby, inscribed with...his name.

An old curiosity flickered inside him, and he reached out to touch it.

In an instant, he remembered all those eons ago, his humble beginnings, his simple life. He remembered his thirst for knowledge, his enthusiastic curiosity, his love to learn.

And he rediscovered his purpose now. It was his responsibility to safekeep knowledge, yes, but it was also his responsibility to share it. To give to other people, to make the world better. The burden of knowledge was useless unless used to help.

Knowledge can only guide you so far. In the end, you will have to make the decision yourself.

Make a choice for yourself.

He gripped the bamboo slip tightly.

He will act. He will make his mark. He'll find a way to make up for his mistakes. He'll

make up for it all in the end.

This choice, he made with his heart.

A person leaves his reputation as a swallow leaves its call. - Chinese proverb

Second Honorable Mention: Canvases

By Ayah Ali

Her knuckles began to turn blue in the numbing January wind-chill. The day masked its bitterness with a cosmetic tranquility; the mannequin sun was scintillating and stoic, all light and no warmth; the sky was dispassionately pristine. Her mind wandered vaguely to the younger years of her daughter. The calm forecast had always warranted a trip to the playground, where shrieks of laughter and unblemished innocence echoed in the hollows of the day, furnishing the blandness with tenacious energy.

It had been years since her daughter had been to the playground. She yearned for the years of youth that embellished her otherwise bland life. But children grew and their cherishable enthusiasm diminished with the burden of life, even as they savored the fruits of it.

Her days now were monotonous with the exception of her art. Watercolor palettes, fraying brushes, and charcoal resided in an isolated kingdom on the office desk. The art kingdom, the creative fever that emanated from it and swaddled her numbness in comforting swaths of energy and color, was her temporary escape.

Canvases leaned against the taupe office walls, snapshots of her daughter over the years smeared in soft hues. She leaned into Impressionism when she made portraits of her daughter—the mystical aura framed her daughter’s angelic personality beautifully. Her favorite was one of the simplest—an oil painting portrait of her daughter at the innocent age of six, twirling in a blizzard of bubbles that she was blowing from a cerulean bubble wand. She’d painted it thirteen years ago, a few weeks after taking the reference photograph on her

daughter's birthday. It was the last painting she'd done that perfectly captured the light in her daughter's eyes. The others were skillful, mostly in charcoal—the first day of middle school portrait, the portrait of her leaning against her first car, brandishing the keys and a wide grin—but this one, with the tulle skirt, was art.

The paintings tempered to the back of her mind as she rummaged through her purse for her pair of gloves. The walk to the shopping center wasn't very long, but her hands were sensitive to the cold, and she needed them to be ready to work when she returned home after shopping.

The stroll was bland, but in a comforting, familiar way. The slim tree branches tangled in dense, sable knots, clawing at the sprawling ivory clouds. Winter's bare groves were one of her favorite backgrounds for her subjects, despite the tediousness. She turned onto a trail under the canopy, nodding politely as she walked past other strollers. She was aware that her nods were perceptively cold, unadorned by a friendly smile, but her mind was tense with a prevailing stoicism, and to project a smile felt fraudulent. Smiles were for her daughter, she rationalized, and did not need to be shared with strangers.

She turned away from the trail and onto the sidewalk. The shopping center came into view, sloppy drivers whirling in and out of the crowded parking lots. A family with two young children, a girl in a puffy yellow jacket and a boy, a few years younger, legs bouncing quickly to keep up with his parents' long strides, walked past her, towards their car. Her mouth suspended in a somewhat pained smile that looked like a grimace. She wished her daughter was young enough to need her hand held protectively as they crossed the street, young enough to sit inside the child safety seat in the shopping cart.

The grocery store was crowded, like it was every Saturday, but she didn't mind. The incessant noise, humming freezers and hushed conversations and squealing cart wheels, drowned out her thoughts. She weaved through other customers, maneuvering the cart to the freezer aisle. It was always her first stop when she went shopping, to the aisle with frozen waffles. Her daughter's favorite. When she was young, she'd smear peanut butter and strawberry jam from the local farmers market to make waffle sandwiches. Her daughter always grinned and crawled onto her seat at the kitchen table, voraciously eyeing the food, when she smelled the exuding, warm sweetness.

She missed the toothless five-year-old grin her daughter seemed to wear everywhere. It had always fascinated her how children seemed to radiate exuberance, how the broad grins eventually eroded into tired half-smiles with time and the stress of life. Her daughter rarely smiled anymore. She sounded so tired on the phone when she called; all the seltzer enthusiasm that had accentuated her syllables had dissipated.

"Excuse me?"

A soft voice interrupted her reminiscence. She turned and faced a young woman whose head was tilted with a vague sense of recognition.

"Are you Ivory's mother?"

Her hands began to feel slick against the shopping cart handle. The woman was trespassing into the life of her daughter.

"I'm Faye, by the way."

She stared hard into Faye's expressive, tawny eyes, scrutinizing her expression for any malicious subtlety. Faye seemed to search her face for any confirmation, and she withheld,

savoring the silence that she perpetuated.

A delicate rosy hue grazed Faye's cheeks. "You probably don't remember me. Ivory and I were friends in first grade. My mom used to bring me to the playground after school sometimes to play with her."

A memory was kindled, reanimated by this stranger.

The sky was engulfed in tender mauve plumes. The sun was cradled by the distant spruces, clouds unfurling in a delicate lullaby.

"Faye, honey, it's almost dark outside."

She had cast a knowing look towards Faye's mother.

"Ivory, we need to go home for dinner soon, too."

But the girls had continued to prance through their mulch kingdom, spraying wood chips behind them as they chased each other.

"One of these days, they'll come the first time."

They had called a second time before the girls defeatedly marched over, pouting about yet another "five more minutes". Faye and her mother had begun walking back to their car, and she had slipped her hand into Ivory's to begin walking home.

"Bye, Faye!" Ivory's voice echoed out.

"Bye, Ivory!" Faye's voice returned with paralleled enthusiasm.

She wished Ivory's voice was still shrill with childhood elation.

"So..." Faye's voice interrupted her meandering thoughts.

"I remember you."

Faye looked relieved. "How have you been doing?"

She shrugged wearily.

“You’re an artist, right? Are you still doing that?”

She nodded, a barely perceivable dip of her head.

Faye bit her lip, unsure of how to interpret the conspicuous, awkward silence.

“Well, I—”

“Would you like to come?” Her offer was quiet but genuine.

Faye smiled a little, tilting her head again.

“To—to my house, I mean. If you’d like to see my art.”

Faye’s smile broadened. “I’d love to.”

“I still live in the same house. On Manning. Do you remember?”

“I think so, the one with the deck you can see from the playground?”

“Yes. Come anytime.”

“Does tomorrow work? Before I go back to my college campus?”

“Sure.”

Faye smiled. “I’ll see you then.”

Faye came around three in the afternoon the next day, bearing a box of assorted donuts. She thanked her, setting them on the dining room table, and invited Faye to take a seat.

“How are you?”

“Well, thank you.”

“How are you liking college so far?” The question rolled off her tongue with startling ease. She was not used to leading the conversation; she was accustomed to giving curt

responses in her sparse interactions, but she didn't mind talking with Faye. Faye reminded her of her daughter.

"I love it there. Freshman year was a little bit of an adjustment, but this year's been amazing."

"That's good." She paused to take a bite of her donut, contemplating how different Ivory's second year in college had been from Faye's. "What are you majoring in?"

"Computer science, with a minor in art history. That's actually why I was curious about your art. It's always nice to see art when you have more thorough background knowledge about it."

"Very true. I took a few art history classes, years ago, when I was a college student. Changed the way I made my art."

Faye nodded. "What got you into art originally?"

She paused. It was a simple question with a deep, complicated answer. She had never spoken about what drove her into her creative episodes before. "I've drawn since I was a teenager. Simple things, mostly." It was a superficial answer—not a lie, but not the truth in its entirety. Her art career had really started in her early thirties, a few years after she had gotten married. Her husband had grown distant; often away, and always irritated when he wasn't. He left her two weeks after she learned she was pregnant with Ivory. It was anger, really, that cultivated her dedication to art. A residual resentment that refused to disperse; she could only dispense the pain onto vacant canvases. For a few months, her art was cadmium red smears and knife-like edges, brushstrokes vividly aggressive. But Ivory had softened her art, and it gravitated towards the young centerpiece.

She asked Faye to wait for a moment and hurried into the office to grab the painting of Ivory blowing bubbles. She set the canvas onto the table.

“It’s beautiful.” Faye’s eyes were mesmerized, tracing out the delicate brushstrokes and admiring the emotion that swathed that portrait. Tears tinted her eyes.

“Where is the bathroom?” Faye’s voice was much quieter than it had been throughout the rest of the conversation.

“Down the hall and to the left.”

She waited for Faye at the table as the minutes drew past. After ten minutes, her concern overwhelmed her patience, and she stood to check on Faye.

Faye was not in the bathroom. She was standing in the doorway of the office, staring in shock at the pervasive artistic chaos.

“Faye—”

Faye turned around to stare at her. “I—”

“My studio’s a bit messy, I know, but—”

“You don’t—you—you know that Ivory—”

She suddenly became very abrasive. “Don’t say my daughter’s name.”

Faye took a step closer, shoulders tensed up.

“Ivory’s gone.”

The room swirled in profuse, bitter swaths of color.

“Faye—”

“Ivory died when she was six.”

“Stop!” Her voice was hoarse and her face was slippery with released years of anger.

“These paintings are all... Ivory never grew up.”

“Stop it! Stop!” She grabbed Faye by the shoulders, scorching torment illuminating her emotionless eyes. She let go and clawed at the doorway, then thrust herself into the room and hurled the canvases against the walls. Faye was yelling something, but she could not hear anything above her gurgling blood and pummeling heart.

And suddenly Faye’s arms were around her and all she could hear was her own sobs and the two syncopated heartbeats.

“It’s my fault.”

“No,” Faye whispered, “it’s not.”

“I was so obsessed with my stupid art.” “Shh.”

“I should have been more careful.”

“Shh.”

“I should have been watching her.”

“Shh.”

“I should have seen her leave the house.”

“Shh.”

“I didn’t even realize until an hour after the car hit her.”

Faye squeezed her tightly until the sobbing tremors dulled to a throbbing in her chest.

There were forty-two canvases lying around the grave. Faye rested her hand on her shoulder when she stood up after laying down the forty-third canvas.

“I love you, Ivory.”

Third Honorable Mention: Hurricane

By Srikriti Bulusu

The woman, Jani, was heavily pregnant as she labored with each step of the march, even as her husband, Aarv, offered his hand. She had lost track of time, of how long they had been wandering on foot, of how long she had been pregnant. On this day, it felt like years and years. Everyone had asked her to wait; it was bad luck for a child to be born in this hurricane.

“Jani, the child must only know the sun and see the skies drenched in a perfect blue. They cannot know pain,” Aarv said to Jani after a long day of walking, dabbing the sweat from her forehead with a wet cloth. Their bodies shivered together as the rest of the villagers sat neck to neck, cramped in a damp cave, sheltered from the storm. Jani nodded, laying her head on her husband’s broad shoulders.

“How much longer?” her voice labored.

“Till we reach the eye of the storm?” Aarv asked. “It shouldn’t take much longer, my love.”

The villagers walked on, taking shelter in caves and other sturdy structures. The sky was covered in a blanket of thick, endless gray. Night and day were masked in a tangled mess of lightning and thunder, making the two indistinguishable from each other. Jani struggled to keep up with the group, often falling behind.

*

Before they left home years ago, the village gardens were flooded. That’s how the fear first built. The relentless storm swallowed each part of the village until the crops were spoiled and roofs no longer held against the wrath of the rains. In search of shelter and food, but mostly

to escape fear, half of the villagers left their homes. Their leader begged them to stay for the storm would pass. The elders warned that those who escape the rains will drown in the storm. But still, they all ran.

*

Finally, the villagers heard a peculiar sound. The winds no longer screamed, and the skies no longer wept. A land of tranquility was finally within eyesight of the village and this new home encircled by a halo of sun. The light was brighter than they remembered.

The sun. it was a peculiar word that rested on the lips of the villagers, a word that hadn't been used by any of them for some time. But finally, it was here, and it welcomed them. Jani bore her daughter, Riya, in the eye of the hurricane; just outside of it, the vicious rains and frenzied winds swirled around them.

Entering this new land with a happy, giggling baby girl was what the entire village needed: a sense of new beginnings.

*

Riya grew up with a sea of flowers surrounding her every step. At night, the stars shined down on the villagers and the soft breeze lulled both the children and adults to sleep.

However, any new settling was always short-lived. Inevitably, the singing breeze would escalate to a scream and black clouds would loom over the horizon. Inevitably, the villagers would gather their children and follow the sun.

For sixteen years, Riya believed her whole life was a pause in the storm. The constant moving made Riya long for stability.

"Ma, will the eye ever stop moving? When can we settle down for good?" she asked

her mother one cool evening as they sat by the stove and prepared dinner. The open windows let in the soft wind, brushing through Riya's long, black hair.

"We follow the sun, and when we follow the sun, we reach the endless gardens and plentiful crops," Jani replied sweetly "Even if we must run for eternity, this safety is worth it, isn't it?" Riya nodded, but the reply didn't satisfy her.

*

The villagers were so used to the company of only each other, it took everyone by surprise when the travelers came. In the middle of the day, when the sun was at its highest peak, they came, their clothes drenched with rain. The villagers were both intrigued and wary. The village leader, Raj, immediately recognized the travelers.

"Veer, Jeet?" he asked, and moments later they had each other in an embrace. But Raj's wide smile quickly faded as the travelers kept talking.

"Treat the refugees with kindness," Raj said to the silent crowd that had gathered on the refugees' first night. The visitors had been sequestered in a hut with a hot meal.

"Will the travelers remain here?" a young man asked from the middle of the crowd.

Raj sucked in his breath. "They wish to leave tomorrow morning. They plan to head back into the storm."

Gasps and echoes filled the room like a cacophony.

"Do they have a screw loose?" Aarv asked his wife. Riya stayed silent sandwiched between her parents. One person believed the travelers should be tied down and be exorcised of their insane thoughts. Most were eager for them to leave.

Raj lifted his hand, silencing the entire group in mere seconds. "They have proven to

be a danger,” he shouted. “Stay in your huts tonight, protect the children.”

Riya’s curiosity was getting the better of her, but as the crowd disbanded, Jani called her away and back home.

*

“Could you clean the dirty pots,” Jani asked Riya after they had finished eating lunch. Your father and I are walking over with some bread for the refugees.

“Ma, can I come with you?” Riya asked, hoping to at least have a look at the travelers.

“No, darling. I want you to stay away from them, stay very far from them,” Jani responded quickly. She studied her child for a bit, filled to the brim with curiosity and defiance.

“Alright,” Riya replied simply, sauntering over to the pots, her long skirt dragging over the rough floor.

The rest of the day was a blur of chores, but when her father asked her to fetch water from the river to cook supper with, Riya took her chance. After filling the bucket with water, she took a quick detour to where the travelers were resting.

Laughter roared from within the isolated hut as if there was a large party within. Riya opened the curtain to find two burly men wearing clean clothes sitting on cots. The laughter stopped as the men looked towards the skinny girl in the doorway carrying a bucket of water.

“Is that for us?” The taller man asked.

Riya found her voice “Y-yes.” She placed the bucket in front of them. Riya desperately searched her mind for anything to say.

“Do your parents know you’re here?” the other brown-haired man asked with a smile.

Riya's nerves loosened, and she laughed.

"They don't."

"Won't they be worried that you're here with the big bad travelers?" "So, you know what we think of you," Riya said.

"Of course! We thought your leader's heart stopped when we told him we were leaving tomorrow."

"There was talk of performing an exorcism on you both." Both the men laughed unexpectedly.

"What is wrong with your people?" the brown-haired man asked.

"What is wrong with *you* guys?" Riya blurted out. Words started tumbling out of her.

"Why on earth would you choose to go back into the hurricane?"

Both men looked at each other. Riya felt embarrassed. Just as she was about to apologize, they asked her to take a seat.

"Have you seen the storm?" The tall man asked. Riya shook her head no. "Then how do you know it's impossible to face?"

"Because of all the stories...the winds tore down the huts of the old village, and my parents had to walk many miles while my mother was pregnant with me. Our leader even said that the rains were like spears being thrown from the skies."

"Then let me ask you this girl, how long do you plan on running?" the brown-haired man asked her.

Riya shrugged her shoulders. "Forever, I think. The hurricane is just too dangerous."

"But you see me and my friend, Jeet? We have experienced the wrath of the storm,

but still stand here,” said the tall man.

“Veer is right, my friend. We are unharmed.” Jeet agreed, grinning.

“But your clothes were drenched with rain. You are refugees!” Riya spat out.

“Regardless of whether we are refugees or not, rain usually gets your clothes wet,” Veer said matter-of-factly. Riya tried to speak but she felt tongue-tied. All the tales she grew up with began to unravel. *This can't be true*, she thought to herself. *This isn't it*.

“You’ve listened to the tall tales from your fellow villagers all your life, will you listen to our story?” Veer asked, sensing Riya’s confusion. Slowly she nodded.

“We were in the same hurricane as your parents, the one from before you were born, but our families stayed,” Jeet started. He went on talking about the ravenous winds and angry rains. When the roofs of some huts flew off, they took shelter in stronger huts. When the crops began to rot from the endless rains, they relied on the cattle.

“It was hard,” Veer said. “But we became stronger. Once the hurricane passed us for good, we built our huts stronger and learned how to save our food so when the next storm comes, we are ready.”

“Did you ever find the eye?” Riya asked.

Veer took a deep, mournful breath. “Yes, it eventually came over us, and it was the most beautiful thing we had all seen in a long time. But it wasn’t real my dear, so we had to let it go.”

“I don’t understand...” Riya said, shaking her head. “If your hurricane is gone, why would you come back?”

“That’s the thing, my dear,” Veer said quietly. “We’ve come here to warn your people.”

“The eye is beginning to shrink, but yet your leader makes a spectacle of our warnings by suggesting exorcisms and other kinds of nonsense,” Jeet spat out.

“What do you mean the eye is shrinking?” Riya asked slowly. Fear gripped the pit of her stomach.

“It means that your village’s days of running are numbered, my dear,” said Veer. “Those who escape the rains will drown in the storm.”

It felt as if the air in Riya’s lungs rushed away from her. Riya opened her mouth, but her voice evaded her. Perhaps it was her mind playing tricks, but she could feel the winds creeping up behind her. Instead of their powerful roar, they whispered, mocking the comforting lullabies sung by the breeze. Then there was shouting. Riya recognized those voices.

“Must be your lovely parents,” Jeet said with a wink. “Tell them the scary travelers said hello!” Riya scurried out of the hut and ran straight into her father.

“Oh my god, Riya.” Her father groaned. “Please don’t tell me you were in there.”

“What on earth...Riya, are you okay?” Jani came barreling towards her and grabbed Riya’s wrists. “What happened?”

“Everything is fine,” Riya mumbled, looking at the ground. She wanted to say more, but her words came out in a tangled mess. Her parents softened.

“Let’s go home.” Her mother led her away, but, Riya kept her eyes on the travelers’ hut until it was just a dot in the distance.

*

Riya woke up the next day well after the travelers had left.

“Appa, I need to see the leader,” Riya said quickly as she headed towards the hut entrance.

“No! You are not going anywhere; you will stay in this hut!” Aarv shouted after her. Riya flinched; her father almost never shouted at her.

“It’s urgent, I need to tell him something!” She shouted back as she ran outside into the mid-morning warmth.

“It’s about those stupid travelers, isn’t it!” He screamed back as he chased after her.

“Please, sir!” Riya said as she ripped open the entrance curtain to the leader’s hut. “I need to tell you something urgently.”

Raj yelped in surprise. He was in the middle of eating his breakfast.

“Riya, dear?” Please sit,” he gestured to one of the mats. “Would you like anything to eat—” Raj offered but Riya cut him off.

“It’s about the travelers, they carry news of our home,” said Riya breathlessly. Just then, the curtain ripped open again with Aarv and Jani standing at the doorway.

“Sir,” Aarv started apologetically. “Riya snuck away from us last night to the refugees’ hut; they have corrupted her completely.”

“Why did you not watch her carefully? didn’t I warn that children are to stay away from the refugees?” Raj said sternly.

Aarv looked down at his feet. “You are right, my apologies,” he muttered.

“May I please speak?” Riya demanded.

Raj smiled at her. “Is this about the eye shrinking?”

“You know?” she asked bewildered.

“I can assure you that their news is completely false,” Raj responded. “How do you know?” Riya asked.

“It takes four weeks for the storm to finally reach us. That number has never changed.”

“But the travelers came from the storm,” Riya countered. “They would know better than us.”

Raj frowned. He had nothing to say.

“So, for how long will we run?” Riya asked.

“Please take your daughter out of my hut,” Raj said, waving them off. Despite her protests, Riya’s parents dragged her away as she kept yelling about the shrinking eye.

*

The dark clouds grew closer. It was no surprise when Raj ordered everyone to prepare for leave the next day. As the villagers slept for the last time in these lands, Riya sat outside watching the night sky. The quick whips of lightning lit up the sea of darkness above her. The winds grew stronger, but Riya wasn’t afraid. She felt exhilarated. All she had known were soft breezes and warmth. The charged-up sky excited her.

Even though the distant thunder grew louder, it whispered to Riya, asking her to come closer.

Those who escape the rains will drown in the storm. Riya knew it was the truth. She knew her father was drowning in the grief of burying his mother when he left his old home. She knew her mother drowned in the sorrow of the grueling days she spent trying to find a paradise to raise her daughter. But how much longer would Riya continue to drown in

misfortune and a legacy of sadness? As she looked up to see the waves of dark clouds in the distance, an answer came to her.

*

Jani woke up to see her daughter gone from the cot beside her. She woke her husband and they searched the small hut together in a frenzy. They ran outside screaming her name until they saw a figure walking away from the village.

*

Riya went past the river, turning back once in response to their cries with a smile and a wave.

Her parents ran after her until the eye of the hurricane became a distant memory. They ran towards the broken pieces of their past that laid in the thundering darkness of the storm. They ran towards their daughter, towards their old home.

Fourth Honorable Mention: Taken From the Rib (A Modern Day Eve)

By Salonee Verma

The hallucinations started on a Sunday and by Monday morning, my twin sister Sunny was being heralded as the newest reincarnation of Joan of Arc. A long line of neighbors snaked across our lawn, all waiting for their turn with the flashiest prophet this side of the Potomac. The three of us—Sunny, me, and Kabir—had just turned eighteen.

What I remember most about that summer, though, is the sound of it. The cicadas had come out after two decades and they littered the sidewalks with their corpses. Their grief suffocated us—we were surrounded by deadness that year.

Everyone thought the bugs would be first to go when the oceans started rising. In a way, they were. Real bees don't exist anymore, just baby robots that buzz and flutter across fields of dying flowers, looking for something to pollinate. This was the first year the cicadas came back to a world that died without them.

Sunny fled the suburbs on the Wednesday after her visions started. Looking back, I wasn't shocked. I just thought she'd take me with her.

Sunny woke up Tuesday morning and decided to salt her bedroom floor. I watched her pour kosher salt in concentric circles across the carpet. She cracked glass over the bathroom. She avoided open skies.

"You wouldn't get it," Sunny answered when I asked what was wrong. She was braiding red string into her hair. "You've never believed superstition. Don't lie to me now."

Before turning thirteen, Sunny and I were inseparable. Joint at the hip, Mama used to say. Our parents were strict; no one was allowed to come home with us, and Sunny was never allowed sleepovers. I was, sometimes, with my parents' colleagues' children. They were named things like Genesis and Hope, remnants of their parents' forays into religion. To be perfectly honest, they were *boring*—their speech was robotic, their ideas monotonous. They were the only other kids we saw for decades until we went to high school.

We stuck pretty close to each other for a while. Around sophomore year, though, our paths diverged. Sunny began spending every waking moment with her best friend, Kabir. He was a crafty, silent sort of boy with a demanding presence. Even though he was shorter than us, he filled every room he walked into. Suddenly, it wasn't Sunny and me against the world—it was Sunny-and-Kabir, one word. They knew what worship looked like.

On that Tuesday, Kabir cornered me in the math hallway. "Something's wrong with her," he proclaimed. He didn't elaborate; there was only one woman in our lives worth mentioning. "She's been nodding off in class, knocking knuckles on the table. I tried catching a tune, but there was nothing there."

"She was weird this morning," I replied, toying with the button on the faulty water fountain. "She was intensely superstitious, more than normal. It's fine. She's like that sometimes."

Kabir frowned, thin-lipped and thoughtful. He tilted his head. "It's happened before?"

"Loads," I lied. "It's normal. Happens when it touches a hundred degrees in May. I think she inherited it from Mama."

"Okay. Thanks."

We shook hands, fingers lingering a moment later than normal. I left first.

Kabir and I had a unique relationship. If I was held to gunpoint and forced to pick a best friend, it would be him. He'd come to me, worried up the walls about Sunny's latest quirk. I'd reassure him that nothing was wrong. We both knew I was lying to him, but he didn't mind, just like I didn't mind always coming in second place to my sister. It was difficult work being Sunny's best friend—I should know.

Our Environmental Science class went outside on Wednesday, searching for cicada corpses to study under a microscope. Sunny and Kabir were there—their heads were bowed together at the back of the classroom. Every time I looked, they were all pursed lips and furious eyes.

I caught up with them on the way out, tugging on Kabir's arm to slow him down.

"What happened?"

"Your *sister* got mad at me for trying to snap a picture with her," he replied, rolling his eyes. He wouldn't stay mad for long; he could never stay mad at Sunny. "I don't know what it is. She's hell-bent on being unknowable today."

This worried me (Sunny had always wanted to be seen as her own person) but I kept my face blank. "She's just like that," I assured him. "It's not you."

There's the rub: Sunny *was* just like that, even though she was a photographer. There were no childhood pictures on our walls. Our parents displayed their marriage photo and their first research publication in gilded frames, but the oldest photo of us was, frankly,

incomprehensible. It was horribly blurry—the type of fuzziness where you can't see your reflection in a lake. I could barely make out Sunny's straight black hair and my shiny braces. If I focused too hard, it would seem like Sunny had too many teeth or wrinkles on her forehead. She *really* wasn't photogenic.

Kabir touched my wrist, worrying his lip between his teeth. "You don't think she hates me, do you?"

"Kabir," I gaped at him. "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard. You're her entire life. She's one-minded about you."

Sunny finally caught up to us, all thirteen of her nails painted pink. She had her hair in a ponytail today. It dipped below her neck, catching on her tank top's collar. "One-minded about what?"

"Nothing," Kabir replied, grinning. You wouldn't know he was mad a second ago—that's how different being around Sunny made him. "We were just talking about copies."

It was a quick turnabout, but it made sense. What else would we have been talking about? We got the news last week that hulking creatures walked among us like giant human Robobees. They called them copies, because they were artificial intelligence made tangible, automatons with souls. Most of them were teenage girls, because everyone expects something strange about them, quirks and habits that nobody understands. Who would think twice about a sixteen-year-old girl obsessed with boy bands from twenty years ago?

According to BBC, though, you could distinguish real humans by their hands—copies still can't form normal human hands, even a hundred years after the first intelligence experiments.

“Y’all heard their training data runs out next week?” Sunny kicked a rock with her flip-flop, sliding her hand into Kabir’s. “They’re supposed to just drop dead. You’d think they’ve been trained enough to function on their own. There *has* to be a way.”

“Well, they’re not people,” Kabir reminded. “They’re more like mirrors.

Amalgamations of random scientists’ personalities.”

“Isn’t that all of us?” Sunny replied testily. I could tell this was a sore subject for them, since I’d never heard her snap at Kabir. “Aren’t we all copies of our parents?”

Kabir laughed, then squeezed her hand. “Difference: we’re human. They’re not.”

On Thursday, our parents’ anniversary, Mama made chicken biryani at home. We never really went to restaurants as a family. Every occasion—birthdays, holidays, anniversaries—was celebrated at home.

But the silence at dinner was overwhelming—it gnawed on us like a Robobee sucking pollen from a daisy. Baba only spoke near the end when he wished Mama a happy anniversary, then disappeared into his office, frazzled.

“He’s been under a lot of stress at work lately,” Mama assured us, smiling. The grin didn’t reach her eyes, but then again, it rarely did. I always believed she wasn’t meant to be a mother, especially not to me and Sunny. “It’s a tight deadline. Nobody knows when his project’s going to blow up.”

“That makes sense,” Sunny said, always the mediator. She rubbed the prayer beads on her wrist, then touched the cross at her chest. I didn’t know when she’d picked them up;

probably when Kabir took her on a date to the cemetery to hear the cicadas sing in near silence. She poured salt into her palm and rubbed it into her skin.

Ma watched her morosely, pursing her lips, but she didn't say anything. Again, she rarely did.

By noon on Friday, we'd all heard the news. The first copy, Pandora, had been demolished into robotic parts and scrap metal. She was nineteen. No one had suspected she was anything inhuman until last week, when Pandora started a ceaseless chant. *Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn*. Reuters said she was trained on Hollywood—right down to the Southern drawl that popped out when she got upset.

The news shook us all, but not because of her death. We were used to cicada-thick grief. No, the dead copy made the situation *real*. Pandora could have been any of us. Pandora could *still* be any of us, and it's not like anyone would know. What do you do with that much paranoia?

For Kabir, it was an easy answer. He got into a fistfight during lunch. According to him, John B. had looked at Sunny the wrong way. Tensions were running high.

Sunny came to find me after fourth period. She tapped her nose thrice, our freshman year signal for the history bathroom. Let it be said I was never the one who forgot how to follow Sunny—she left me first.

"It's hitting Kabir hard." Sunny said when I walked in. "This Pandora business. His mom was a scientist, you know. Pandora could have been one of hers."

"Well, being a scientist doesn't mean anything," I pointed out. "*Our* parents are scientists."

"Yeah, but they're not into that stuff," replied Sunny automatically. Even she seemed surprised at her quick answer.

I shrugged. "What do you want me to do about Kabir?"

Sunny tugged her arms around herself, all twenty fingers crossed, a habit she'd had as a child. "He listens to you. Sure, he's going to marry me, but he listens when you talk. Tell him it's going to be okay."

"You're eighteen," I reminded her. I sometimes felt like she forgot she was meant to be a child. "No one's getting married—but I'll help you. We have next period together."

In English, I dropped my books next to Kabir and leaned in close. "You're real," I whispered into his ear, poking his shoulder. "You could never be a copy."

It must've been the right thing to say. He grinned.

On Saturday, Sunny woke up screaming.

Baba finally emerged from his office on Sunday morning during breakfast. He poured himself a cup of coffee, refusing to meet my eyes. I didn't mind. It was a common enough occurrence.

Sunny shivered, which had become an uneasily common sight since Saturday. Even in a hundred degrees, her lips chattered. She swayed into me and whispered, "Baba's cup. It'll break on the pink tile."

Mama looked at Sunny sharply. She'd just opened her mouth to say something when Baba's mug abruptly rolled over, shattering on impact. When Baba cleared away the shards, we all sucked in a breath—the cup had fallen on the pink tile.

Outside, the cicadas' droning song swelled to its zenith. I could still hear it fading when Sunny fainted onto my lap.

When Sunny woke up, she was screaming again. Frigid to the touch, unfocused eyes, completely unresponsive to Baba's gentle ministrations—she was totally unmoored. I left and called Kabir in the hall while Mama and Baba began interrogating Sunny about her dreams.

"I can't invite you over, but I think you were right," I whispered on the phone.

"Something's wrong."

"Sneak me in," replied Kabir. "I'm coming."

Ten minutes later, I peeked into the kitchen on my way upstairs to wrench the window open. Sunny was sitting cross-legged on the floor, chanting nonstop. Mama held a recorder while Baba was typing on his computer. Both were peering at her in rapt attention.

In two hours, it'll storm. John B's going to break his leg. Ma, you'll see loss soon.

I scrambled upstairs. Kabir scaled the maple tree in the backyard and I pulled him inside, brushing off the cicada shells from his body. We were in my bedroom. A few photos Sunny had taken of us were strewn across the wall, all signed *Sunny Zhang*—I remembered too late that Kabir was never supposed to see them.

"Are these pictures real?" He bit his lip.

"Why wouldn't they be? Sunny took them."

“Have you ever noticed,” Kabir whispered, his breath unsteady, “that neither of you have the same number of fingers in any two photos?”

I looked closer, letting my eyes focus through the blurriness. I thought about Sunny waking up, screaming. She’d given no explanation, except that she finally understood what the prophets must have felt.

“It doesn’t have to be *that*. Please, Kabir. Maybe Sunny’s just found religion,” I offered.

Kabir’s lips parted in false consideration. “That’s ridiculous.”

“She woke up today spitting prophecies—she says God gave her the future, and it was horrible.”

He wasn’t moved. He pressed on. “You realize what this means?”

I didn’t want to admit it, so I didn’t reply.

“You’re copies. Not both—I think you’re probably human.” Kabir’s voice was strained.

He bit his lip again and drew blood. “I don’t want her to be demolished. Is that bad?”

“She’s my sister,” I replied. “You’re asking the wrong person.”

“I thought you would be the Pandora,” admitted Kabir. He ran a hand through his cropped curls. “It wasn’t supposed to be her. She’s the realest of all three of us.”

“I thought so, too.”

By noon, the entire town knew about Sunny’s visions. We suspected my parents released the news—they were, after all, scientists proud of their work. Everyone wanted to get their fortunes told by Sunny. Mama should’ve named her Cassandra.

All of Sunny's visions came true. Kabir thought it was because copies were built on predicting the future—it was part of her hardwiring. Neither of us knew when we'd stopped thinking of Sunny as a person.

On Tuesday, Kabir got into another fistfight. John B. said he had a scrap metal girlfriend, so Kabir broke John's leg. The cicadas learned to decrescendo that night.

By two o'clock on Wednesday, Sunny couldn't endure anymore. I hadn't seen her in days because my parents locked her in their office at night. They said she was unstable right now, and they'd explain everything soon. I think they knew I suspected, but they didn't care about their flesh-and-blood—not when their greatest creation was finally bearing fruit.

In the end, Sunny's disappearance was an anticlimax. I didn't see her leave. The pictures on my wall simply vanished. There was no note from her, but Kabir had scribbled an address on my bed.

Visit soon. I'll keep her safe and human. No one knows us in Texas. Love, Kabir.

The cicadas stopped singing on the day I lost my sister, all of them dying en masse the minute she disappeared. I thought it was poetic but in reality, it was much simpler than that. They just fled from a world that wasn't meant for them.

Fifth Honorable Mention: The Thief and the Liar

By Olivia DeWan

“Holy *gods!*” I yelp, ducking to the ground as a knife lands with a heavy *thunk* in the mast.

“Captain!” my second in command, Lai, shouts. “We’ve gotta fire back!”

“Then load up the *bloody* cannons!” I reply, yanking the knife out and throwing it to the ground.

With one hand on my hat to keep it in place and the other on the hilt of my sword, I sprint down the short staircase to the main deck. I lean over the rail and spit out a vicious curse as *The Bleeding Crown* moves to our side. Her crew waves their cutlasses in the air with bared teeth, her bright red sails flutter in the rioting winds. A crack of thunder cuts the sky as darkening clouds mirror our impending battle below. I push off the railing and storm my way through the swarm of men and women who stand ready for battle.

We can’t outrun *The Bleeding Crown*, she’s ten times faster than *Loyal Deceit*. We’ll be boarded in seconds.

“Jake! Yeah, you! Grab that crate of bombs and get ready,” I snap, waving a hand at the barrel to the side. “I want all the gunpowder on deck. *All of it!*”

Lai rushes after me as I climb back up the stairs to the helm. “Captain, I suggest dropping the front anchor!”

I stare at my second, her face blaring with hard determination, her black braid loosening from the wind. “You wanna club haul?”

“It’s a surprising move.”

“Also incredibly risky. It will be nearly impossible to sail into the wind.”

“Well, no offense, Cap, but we’re dead either way.”

Good point.

I point at one of the deck officers. “Drop front anchor!”

Lai grins viciously. “I’ll get the crew ready.”

“Good work, Lai.” I watch as the anchor leaves my ship and crashes into the ocean. The rope unravels and scatters across the deck like a snake. “Brace!”

The anchor catches and we’re jerked around in the opposite direction. The ship tilts dangerously close to the waves, screams from my crew fill the air. A spray of saltwater rushes into my face, but I don't dare release my death-grip on the wheel. Chips of wood fly as boards splinter from the side of the ship. We rotate around and suddenly, we’re going head to head with *The Bleeding Crown*.

Lai makes the first move. She drags the fuse of a bomb across the rail and chucks it from our ship onto theirs. It explodes seconds later. Then she grabs one of the ropes we use for boarding and jumps, swinging onto *The Crown*.

The battle is already in full motion. Blades clash, metal sparks, smoke chokes the air so thick I can’t even smell the metallic sting of blood. A large blast drags me out of the chaos of the battle. I pull my spyglass from the pocket of my trench coat and search *The Crown* for her captain.

Taking out the captain is like cutting off the head of a snake: the body dies. Perhaps peace is an option as well, I just need to figure out what he wants. Now, if only I can find him-

The Captain of *The Bleeding Crown* stares directly at me, a wicked smirk on his face as he peers right through the spyglass. He crosses his arms over his chest, gold rings glittering on his fingers. I roll my eyes at the show of wealth. Tucking a dagger into the sheath on my thigh and clipping a few bombs to the chains on my corset, I grab one of the ropes discarded by my crew, place a foot on the railing, then jump off.

A pirate with a red bandana tied around his head slashes at me with his cutlass. I loosen my grip on the rope and slide down just a few inches enough to dodge his blow, ignoring the burn in my hands. A few seconds later he releases a scream as a dagger pierces his chest. When I get close enough to *The Bleeding Crown* I let go of the rope.

My boots hit the deck and I yank my sword from its sheath. I'm swarmed by the time I take my first step to the helm where the Captain is waiting. He's hoping his men will take me out, I'm going to prove him wrong. A grin spreads across my lips as I raise my sword and parry a blow meant for my head. I fake left and then drive my foot hard into the kneecap of my opponent.

Metal meets metal. My fist crashes into someone's face. I sweep the legs out from under a woman with half her face missing. A sailor sneaks up behind me and grabs my arm, preventing me from lashing down with my sword, but I swing around with my left hand and slam a punch into their nose.

It doesn't take long until the crew backs off. They can't beat me, they know it. I straighten my shoulders and toss a strand of my hair over my shoulder as I meet Captain Fenix at the helm. He stares at me, his green eyes flickering to the blood that coats my knuckles, to the red that drips off my blade.

“Celest,” he says, his voice low and somewhat amused.

“Fenix,” I spit. “What is your problem?”

“You’re my problem,” he replies. “Give it back.”

“Give *what* back?”

“You know exactly what you took.”

I throw my hands up with exasperation. “I’ve taken a lot of treasure in the last few months, you’re going to have to be more specific.”

“You took something of *mine*,” he growls.

I blink. “Well, *that’s* a familiar sentence.”

“For gods’ sake, give me the shell and I’ll leave you be.”

“I don’t have time for this.” I place a hand on my hip. “I don’t have your stupid shell, Fenix.”

But I am interested as to why you want it so bad.

He rolls his eyes. “Your youth shows naivety, Celest.”

“You’re only two years older than me. Find a new insult.”

“If you won’t give it to me, I’ll have to take it from you.”

“Are you listening to a word that comes out of my mouth? I don’t *have anything!*”

Fenix draws his sword and spins it in his hand expertly. “Don’t make this harder than it needs to be, I really don’t want to fight you.”

“Oh, well, that’s unfortunate, because I’ve been dying for a rematch.”

Fenix smirks. “Still not over that, are you?”

“You stole my *plunder*,” I shriek in outrage. “Stuff we nearly died for, need I remind you!”

Fenix gestures to *The Bleeding Crown*. “It was as much of mine as it was yours.”

“We were partners, Fenix. I can see clearly how much that meant to you.”

A flash of regret bursts through his eyes, but it’s gone seconds later. “What can I say? Money is money.”

“After all this time you haven’t changed one bit,” I snarl.

Fenix and I had been inseparable at one point. We’d both been imprisoned on an island after a failed attempt of going after the same cache of gold, and they threw us in a cell together. Our connection was automatic. Naturally, we created the most infamous escape plan known across all seven seas, then co-captained a ship for two years. I thought our friendship was turning into something *more* until Fenix stabbed me in the back.

“Let’s forget the past, seastar, and focus on the present.”

“No,” I snarl. “You don’t get to call me that anymore. Not again.”

That spark of guilt returns and I relish in the way his muscles tense with unease. “Fine. If you want it to be like that, then.”

“Why are you acting like *I* stole from *you*?”

He shrugs. “You did, you know. When you took my father’s sword when you left.”

I grin wickedly at him. “You mean this sword? The one I just used to slaughter your crew?”

He narrows his eyes. “Yeah, I want that back too, actually. Along with my shell.”

“For the last time, I don’t *have* a shell! What even is it? What do you want with it?”

Fenix tightens his grip on his sword and takes a single step towards me. It's self defense, really, when I lash back out. My feet shuffle across the deck as we trade blows. I twist my body to the side so I shed his blade, and lunge to attack. Fenix matches my speed effortlessly. Then he feints right, swirls around me, and kicks in the back of my knee.

I hiss in frustration, especially when he doesn't go for the killing blow. Instead he dances back on light feet and gives me time to reset. He's taking it *easy* on me. His mistake. I lunge and strike at his chest, the tip of my sword catches across his shirt and draws a thin line of blood.

He only laughs, his face lit up with glee. My anger grows and I advance once more in a series of quick jabs. He blocks each one and the smile never drops off of his face, not even when I cut his bicep and across his collarbone. My mind wants to take me back to the past where we would spend hours sparring on the deck of our ship, just like this.

The longer we fight, however, the more I find myself enjoying it. There aren't a lot of people who can keep up with me, that goes for him as well. I can't keep the scowl on my lips and soon I'm grinning right back at him. The tip of my blade swipes off the feather on his hat and we both watch as it drifts to the deck.

"A feather? Really?" I tease. "Isn't that a bit dramatic?"

"Gods, I missed you, seastar," he replies.

Just like that, the mood is killed.

He betrayed you. He betrayed you. He betrayed you.

"Enough," I snap. "Tell me about this shell that you want."

"You really don't have it, do you?" Fenix says.

"I've been saying that."

With a swift movement, he sheaths his sword. "Alright, you're free to go."

"I don't think so," I demand. "You attacked my ship, you killed some of my crew. You owe me this."

"You killed my men too."

"That's not the same thing."

He raises an eyebrow. "Really?"

"We were just defending ourselves."

"Sure."

"Shut up!" I point my sword at his throat. "Tell me about the shell."

He smirks. "The shell of *Dramaticus* has been found."

I gape. "The shell of *Dramaticus*?"

"Yep."

"The one made of solid gold?"

"Yep."

"The one that costs over forty million coins?"

"The very one."

It's my turn to sheath my sword. "I thought it was lost to the sea thousands of years ago."

"It was, but you know how storms are. Rumor has it that the shell has washed up and it's currently possessed by a pirate." He holds up a finger. "Then it was stolen from the pirate by a commodore."

I scowl. "Seriously?"

“Deadly.”

“You attacked me for no reason then,” I groan. “Why?”

“Well, I had to catch your attention somehow.” He flashes me a familiar smile that used to make my heart race, which it totally doesn’t anymore. “I have a proposition for you, Captain.”

I shake my head. “Nope.”

“You’ll want to hear me out on this one.”

“No, thanks.”

“What if I told you I know the commodore who has the shell?”

Once again, I freeze. “You do?”

“And what if I told you this is a job that requires four people?”

“You have more than four people in your crew.”

“I need my crew to man the ship as we make our escape. I need four people to directly steal the shell. It’s heavily guarded, I need *skilled* sailors, and you’re the best fighter I know, seastar.”

“I can’t do a job with someone I don’t trust, Fenix.”

“Not even for forty million coins?”

Gods, that’s a lot of money. But this job is dangerous. Especially to go in with someone who nearly shattered me completely, who I still, regardless of everything that happened, feel too much for. But *forty million*. That could buy me an armada. A new hat.

I owe it to my crew to get that money. They're half the name of the ship, afterall. They're the *loyal* part of the ship. Plus, this is a chance to torture Fenix more. Maybe this time around I'll take more than just his beloved sword.

"Alright, Fenix. Even split, I assume."

He beams. "Of course, seastar."

He reaches out and we shake hands. "Betray me again and you'll find yourself at the bottom of the ocean."

"I'd never dream of it."

He looks me dead in the eyes. My heart jumps. He's said that to me before, he lied. But something this time feels different. His hand in mine, the smell of the sea, the wicked storm that's chased away as we make our deal. He can easily betray me again, and I him. But for some reason, when he says he won't, I believe him.

"When do we leave?" I ask.

"Right now," he replies. "Join me for dinner, seastar. Consider it a peace offering."

"Nope."

"Please?"

"Adding that word won't work in your favor."

"We're partners now. It would be best if we got along."

"Return *everything* that you took from me, Fenix, all my money, my jewels, my weapons, and I'll consider it."

That *stupid* smile returns to his face. I turn before he can reply and push my way across the deck. The battle has stopped, it ended the second Fenix and I both sheathed our swords. Our crews stand around awaiting orders and my own follows me back to *Loyal Deceit*.

“What happened?” Lai demands.

“We’ve got a heading,” I reply.

I take a few minutes to reorganize my crew, tending to wounds and spelling out our plan before returning to my captain’s chamber. Nobody questions my decision, they trust me to do what's best for the ship. I close the door behind me and there, sitting on my bed, is a *very* familiar chest. The gold trimming sends me flying through the past: Fenix and I cackling as we haul the chest back to our ship, counting with greed the treasure inside, tears streaming down my face when I found out what he did. With harsh movements I shove the lid back and there before me is the glittering treasure. Shining emeralds, rubies, and diamonds, endless gold coins and ornate daggers.

My eyes widen at the sight and my heart drops with realization. The chest is completely full. Fenix didn’t just return my share, he gave me everything.

I laugh with delight. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

2023 IAW Participants

Kenzie Alexa	Brie Campbell	Braden Getz
Laila Ali	Charlotte Caraway	Gavin Hannet
Ayah Ali	Desta Chachu	Tabitha Giaccio
Reem Ali	Margaret Chang	Maxima Giuffrida
Sulochana Alluvada	Elizabeth Cherian	Sara Glass
Noah Annis	Dona Choi	Lakshmi Gokulram
Zainab Ansari	Bourne Choi	Kalliope Gonos
Michael Anthony	Lilah Collins	Tristan Grewell
Mahima Athipatla	Cassandra Copeland	Bethany Grinnell
Madison Autumn	Lily Crites	Zeph Gurung
Justin Baker	Tolu Dada	Thomas Halliday
Shreyaa Balaji	Josiah de Laura	Eimaan Hassan
Meg Bales	Anika Devulapalli	Leia Hatem
Cecilia Barden	Olivia DeWan	Leah Hearne
Lane Bassett	Sparsh Dhir	Levi Helebo
Robby Bennett	Aanshi Dobariya	Hannah Hillman
Chirag Bhasin	Kaitlin Donahue	Evie Holmberg
Elisabeth Biggs	Brody Drake	Helena Hosseini
Mati Blackford	Haoping Du	Alexis House
Ariana Blake	Anika Dureja	Max Hudson
Alexandra Blake	Abby Elias	Claudia Hunn
Billy Bob	Beatrice Elliott	Oluwatoni Ikhile
Audrey Bowling	Avery Forster	Kevin Jacob
Adalee Brown	Ife Frierson	Aarib Jafri
Victoria Brownwell	Akshara Gaddam	Hyeri Jeong
Kyle Buffardi	Miriam Gale	Addie Jewell-Pearce
Srikriti Bulusu	Cadi Geiger	Chanasya Joshi
Aphrodite Calliope	Eviana Gervais	Madina Karimi

Saron Kassa	Kaylin Mason	Laasya Potuluri
Aditya Kaul	Samara Masson	Nihal Prasad
Brooke Keller	Ian Mayer	Ila Pruitt
Jude Kemp	Keely McAtee	Kinza Putra
Shanzeh Khan	Peter Menuey	Dharini Rachamalla
Reyna Khare	Gail Mesina	Arvin Rahmanian
Sid Khare	John Mesina	Lala Raja
Jay Kim	Kerrigan Miller	Medhani Rajat
Avery Knox	Keya Nadkarni	Manasa Rajesh
Aarush Kolli	Edward Nassar	Avery Ramsey
Jennifer Ku	Eddie Nassar	Ayush Rao
Edem Kuadey	Mugil Neethi Devan	Vineeth Ravishankar
Anna Kuruvilla	Catalina Nemes	Daniela Rojas
Tanvi Kusumba	Isabella Nguyen	Sharon Ryu
Joseph Kwon	Angela Nguyen	Phoenix Sabat
Evelyn Lambert	Kayla Nguyen	Mitra Sainathuni
Chloe Lee	Noah Nguyen	Suhana Salman
Rae Lee	Moss Nicklas	Any Sargurudoss
Kanika Leffler	Alyssa Nielsen	Diya Saxena
Kaitlyn Livingston	Akshara Nimje	Lilith Scherban
Charlotte Long	Mihir Nimkar	Keerthi Selvam
Sabrina Lu	Nyla Nokta	Karis Selwyn
Sofia Lupas	K O'Rourke	Samyuktha Senthilkumar
Callie MacKay	Kenna Outlaw	Ahana Shastri
Ian MacLeod	Lucy Panning	Delaney Sheldon
Skye MacNamara	Leana Paradkar	Daniel Shen
Sritha Maganti	Ariana Paris	Ali Shirazi
Chelsea Magin	Aubrey Perry	Jordan Smith
Oolya Mahmood	Grace Petersen	Malikeh Sosu-Sedzorme
Shahroze Malik	Hannah Petersen	Aditi Sridhar
Aaryan Mantri	Hannah Pogany	Kuhoo Srivastava

Wyatt Steel

Brianna Strickland

Annie Sun

Patrick Sun

Jyotsna Surendrakumar

Nitin Suresh

Savannah Tamrakar

Kaashvi Tarkas

Aiswarya Tata

Short Thrasher

Catherine Tieu

Shraddha Tumma

Nagapraneeth Upputuri

Lily Vela

Simran Verma

Salonee Verma

Aly Vrem

Emma Vu

Ashna Kumar

Sam Waters

Eli Wike

Cooper Wood

Ellie Xu

Anna Yao

Charlotte Yao

Sidharth Yenireddy

Rachel Zamsky

Mariah Zielke

Amelia Zinn