

Ann Arbor District Library  
presents

# “It’s All Write!” Teen Short Story Contest

2014

## Winning Stories



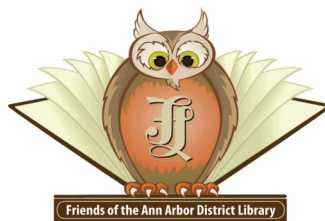


2014

Ann Arbor District Library

“It’s All Write!” Teen Short Story Contest  
For Students in Grades 6-12

Congratulations to the winners of the 22nd annual teen short story contest whose stories appear in this booklet! The Library wishes to commend all participating writers for their creativity and fortitude. The awards and this publication were made possible by the continued support of the Friends of the Ann Arbor District Library.



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## Teen Short Story Contest | Judges

### Grades 6-8

**Jeff Hirsch** graduated from the University of California, San Diego for playwriting. Hirsch is well known for his first novel, *The Eleventh Plague*. He recently published *The Darkest Path*, and will release *Black River* in 2015.

**James Kennedy** has pioneered the 90-second Newberry Film Festival, and is best-known for *The Order of Odd-Fish*, which was named a Smithsonian Notable Book for Children in 2008.

**Roland Smith** recently published *I,Q: The Alamo* in July 2013. He is well-known for his novel *Peak*, which won the National Outdoor Book Award in 2007, several state awards, and was listed on ALA's 2008 Best Books for Young Adults.

**Sandra Neil Wallace** is best-known for her recent teen novel, *Muckers*, which was named a Booklist "Bookends" Best Book of 2013. She also just released *Babe Conquers the World*.

### Grades 9-10

**Rebecca Donovan** wrote the bestselling *Reason to Breathe*. She continues to be among the top 15 teen authors on Amazon.com.

**Ben Stroud** recently published his first book, *Byzantium*, in 2013. He is best-known for writing literary short stories, as featured in several anthologies, *Harper's Magazine*, *Boston Review*, and *The Literary Review*.

**Siobhan Vivian** teaches Children's Literature at the University of Pittsburgh. YALSA listed three of her books in their annual Best Books for Young Adults: *The List* (2013), *Not That Kind of Girl* (2011), and *Same Difference* (2010).

### Grades 11-12

**Catherine Knutsson** published her first novel, *Shadows Cast by Stars*, in 2012. It was a finalist for both the Monica Hughes Award for Science Fiction and Fantasy and the Burt Award for First Nations, Métis and Inuit Literature.

**Bill Konigsberg** debuted as a teen author with *Out of the Pocket* in 2008. His newest novel, *Openly Straight*, was listed on YALSA's 2014 Best Fiction for Young Adults list and was recently awarded the Sid Fleischman Award for Humor.

**Carrie Ryan** is the bestselling author of the *Forest of Hands and Teeth* series. She also writes short stories and has contributed to several anthologies.

**Douglas Trevor**'s short stories have appeared in several publications, including *Fugue*, *The Michigan Quarterly Review*, and the *Paris Review*. He is best-known for his work of short stories, *A Thin Tear in the Fabric of Space*, which received the Iowa Short Fiction Award. He recently published *Girls I Know*, his first novel.



## 2014 Awards Ceremony

### Guest Speaker

#### Author K.A. Barson

**K.A. Barson** received an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts for Creative Writing. She debuted as a teen author in 2013 with *45 Pounds (More or Less)*, which received a nomination for the 2015 Magnolia Award from the University of Southern Mississippi. *45 Pounds* also appears on the 2013 list of "Perfect Ten" books by VOYA, and has

been attributed with "a wry, realistic voice" and "cinematic humor" by *School Library Journal*. Barson currently lives in Michigan with her family and teaches writing at Spring Arbor University.

## **Teen Short Story Contest | Screeners & Library Staff**

### **Contest Screeners**

Christopher Ankney | 826 Michigan Volunteer

Vicki Browne | Retired AADL Teen Librarian and Former Contest Coordinator

Nancy Cz | 826 Michigan Volunteer

Sarah Cramer | AADL Public Library Associate

Mike DiMuzio | AADL Information Desk Clerk

Shelby Hallenbeck | 826 Michigan Volunteer

Jessica Hesselgrave | Adult Services Librarian

Rachael Jackson | 826 Michigan Volunteer

Allison Jones | AADL Information Desk Clerk

Becca Lowenstein | 826 Michigan Volunteer

Caroline Mossing | Teen Services Librarian

Rebecca Shook | Special Needs Resources Librarian

Dereck Tober | ESL Teacher

Nicole Williams | AADL Public Library Associate

### **AADL Staff**

Kayla Pennoyer | Contest Coordinator

Shirley Coleman | Contest Assistant

Nikki Brugger-Dethmers | Contest Assistant

Tom Smith | Photographer







2014

“It’s All Write!” Teen  
Short Story Contest



Winning Stories





Grades 6-8

First Place | Jumping for the Young and Rash | Zoe Lubetkin

The car door makes a satisfying thump as I slam it. Some aquamarine paint chips off of the Jeep; it's old. I open the door again to softly flick the plastic hula girl on the dashboard, to make her sway. Cara does it also, from the passenger seat. We do it for luck; it's a cliff jumping tradition.

The other bright car pulls in blasting "Australia," by The Shins. Spilling out of it are Connor, Leilani, and Bex. They look, are, happy. I'm sure we all do.

We meet up at the bottom the path. We're all barefooted, our rough feet buried in the sand. Since it's early in the day, we'll have the path, the flat stone at the top, and the cool water below to ourselves. A great day for recklessness. We start up the trail.

It's a humid day, around 100 degrees Fahrenheit, perfect for cliff jumping because the water will be warmer than most days. The sky is a cool pale blue and the sun has most of us wearing our overpriced sunglasses. The day is like a tropical ad from a glossy magazine, one with models lounging around in bathing suits, wearing oversized sunglasses and drinking from crystal glasses full of exotic colors. Beautiful.

*Anna would have loved this.* The thought hits me, and I stop walking abruptly. There is no way that she could see this, but I know that she'd have the same passion for it as I do. Anna, who was the only person who would jump the cliff at dawn with me, despite the shocking temperature of the water. The girl who wasn't afraid to deep-water solo after the waves left the cliff slick and wet. The person who ultimately died doing the things that she loved.

When I heard about her death, it was pure agony. I heard it from my father, who stood there, clutching the plastic phone tightly, with both hands. I think it was Anna's mother on the other end. They had just found the body, and I didn't know it yet. I looked up at him curiously from where I was sprawled across our faded couch, filled with sand from when Anna and I watched movies after coming in from the beach. He mouthed, *Anna*. I knew something was wrong then. She was always a reckless person, but she had never imagined the consequences when it went wrong. I hadn't either.

As I look around with my blue eyes, I see Anna all around me. I see her in the way that Bex wears her sunglasses on top of her head. I see her when Connor pushes his sun-bleached hair away from his forehead as he walks along the edge of the path. I see her in the bright green of Cara's eyes. I sink down; wondering if I can continue going up the path, where in the end we all have to jump.

“Whoa, stop!” Connor, who is crouched beside me, looks at me intently. “Are you okay, Gabe?”

I raise my head to look at him. “Anna,” I choke out.

The rest of our group, who are all clustered around Connor and me, nod and look down. We all were struck at the news of her death. It’s been almost a year, and I still haven’t gotten over it. She and I were the closest, though; since we were the most careless, wild, we tended to stick together, doing the things the others wouldn’t.

“We couldn’t have helped.” It is Leilani who speaks up, looking around the unintentional circle we’ve made. “She went to the jump alone.”

Her death action wasn’t a suicide; it was one careless daredevil act. To jump the cliffs at night is one of the hardest things to survive, even if the cliffs aren’t that high. The water is deeper, which is better for jumping, and it’s a short distance from where you enter the water to land. The cold temperature is what killed her. Anna made it to the beach, but exhausted her energy. Made it to land, but did not survive.

Yet we still jump. The honorable reason would be to honor her memory; the truth is we do for the feelings. The feeling of adrenaline. The fear. The fun that comes with being rash.

“I know,” I say. “Let’s just go.” I stand up and start walking, looking up into the hot sun and blinking the tears out of my eyes. With a bit of hesitation, they join me.

It’s the first time I’ve jumped since her death. I thought, since it’s been over a year, that I could cliff jump, and yet here I am. I’ve already had a breakdown. It’s pathetic.

As I tentatively hike up the path, my bare feet pounding the dry sand, the chorus to Anna’s favorite song is going through my head. *Just so you know/it’s impossible/to die from an overdose/of anything that feels this good.* It relates specifically to us cliff jumpers. While dangerous, it’s the feeling that you could die at any moment that makes it perfect.

Thoughts are racing through my head as I walk. Maybe she wanted to die, which is irrational, I know. Or maybe, she just wasn’t thinking. God. I’m trying to make excuses for my dead best friend for why she jumped off a cliff and died.

Suddenly I’m angry, my steps hard on the ground. Why didn’t she think?!? Anna knew it was dangerous, and yet she did it. She wasn’t thinking when she DIED and left all of us, her family, her best friend, sentenced to a world without her. I can’t come up with reasons why she did it when she obviously didn’t have any herself.

My head is hunched down, and I'm staring at my bare feet. Now I'm blaming Anna for leaving, for dying without a goodbye. It's stupid. I hate myself instantly. It wasn't her fault; it was a foolish act, but it didn't kill her. *It was not her fault.*

Bex sees me straighten up. "Let's sing, guys!" she says enthusiastically. "We're young, free, and it's summer!" We all laugh, but end up belting out the chorus to one of summer's hit songs, Connor's and my deep voices overpowering the girls'.

"We're so out of tune," Leilani remarks. She looks pointedly at Cara, who shrugs. "Yeah, I'm not in tune, but that's why I'm here with you guys. We're being reckless cliff jumpers who don't want to grow up." Cara throws her arm around Leilani.

I look up at the cloudless sky. It's a blue like the color of a balloon you get as a child, a tiny bit bright but still good in your little mind.

"Remember when we were in fifth grade, and we saw those high schoolers skipping class? You were fearless, Gabe, and walked up to them; you asked them where they were going." Bex laughs and looks at me.

I remember that. They answered, "jumping." I didn't know what it meant at the time, though that word means so much to me now; has so many emotions tangled with it. Fear. Grief. Yearning. Fascination. Belonging. Desire. Happiness. And infatuation, with a thing that could kill me, and everyone who did it.

I smile. "I only looked fearless. I was so scared that they'd laugh at me."

Connor glances at me. "You, scared? Please."

Yes. I haven't admitted it to anyone, but I'm mildly afraid of heights. I have a fear that my friends will abandon me after I jump. I just try to work around them. It's hard. But it gives me something to work for; a goal that someday I will overcome them.

The sun comes out from behind the one cloud in the sky and I pull my sunglasses out from the pocket of my swim trunks. The aviators have amber lenses and make everything look vintage. Anna got them for me for my 17th birthday last year. I grin, remembering. She was my best friend.

Our relationship was an abnormal one. We clicked when she moved from the sandy coast of Australia, being daredevils in the first year of high school. We thought too highly of ourselves, pondering how far we could go, what the human breaking point is. We were adrenaline junkies in every way.

There was this one conversation we had, a few months before her death. We were lying on a blanket on the beach, staring at the sky. I picked up a handful of sand, running it through my fingers, before I glanced at her and spoke.

“Do you think we could make it to the sky?” Anna was beside me, gazing up. She looked at me before answering.

“Maybe,” she had said softly. “But Gabe, I wouldn’t want to leave.”

It is those things I remember most about her. Little facts, things she said. The way her chestnut hair curled after swimming in saltwater. How easily her tanned fingers made a peace sign. Her favorite song, which she listened to non-stop last summer; it was stuck in our heads and the lyrics were memorized. How when she tilted her head back to look at you, smiling, you felt like the most important person in the world.

I push my blond hair back, absentmindedly fingering the small tattoo of a bird in flight I have, usually covered by hair behind my ear. We, Anna and I, got them together on her 16th birthday. It wasn’t legal, but I don’t think the man giving us them cared. It reminds me that life is short. But so, so sweet.

The feeling of the wind that only feels like this when I’m high up, the hot sun, the saturated colors that surround me. It’s like a dream that I never have to wake up from. Like a varied idea of perfect.

The path narrows, and then we’re at the top of the cliff. “Look at the color!” Cara shouts. She’s right. The sea is a vibrant, beautiful turquoise. I frown at first, remembering that she could never see it. But it is still exquisite; I grin.

I’m going first. I knew it as soon as I saw the top of the cliff, and the gorgeous color of the water. I pull off my shirt and toss it on the dry ground, along with my sunglasses. I’ll get them later. “I’m jumping!” I say to the others. They nod and back away. I leap out over the water.

I scream with glee on the way down. The adrenaline and nerves combine with happiness to make a feeling that is the bright color of the ocean. Truly, this is my paradise.

The water is closer now. I hit it with a yell, entering it in a line. The water is cold and unforgiving. It is definitely a shock. I love it.

I start swimming toward the shore. A few younger people saw me enter the water and now look at me with a bit of awe. I’ve gotten this reaction before; cliff jumping is a widely acknowledged activity. I laugh to myself and get a mouthful of salty seawater.

As I reach the shallow water, where I can stand, I look across the ocean. You can see the silhouette of a girl, probably Cara, as she jumps, headed into the water where the white ripples I made haven't quite faded and washed away. I smile, then look up the beach.

There isn't a crowd yet; it's too early in the day for that. There are a few people, tan beings lying around on multicolored towels under bright beach umbrellas. A few of them are listening a scratched vintage-style boom box. I can hear the strong beats of her favorite song playing through it, ending of the second verse. "Little Voices," by Scott and Brendo.

I once saw this diagram, showing where you feel these different emotions. You feel happiness all over your body. I don't know where Anna is, I don't know how she got there, but I hope that wherever she is, she feels it all over, like I do.





Grades 6-8

Second Place | The Elevator | Elena Bernier

The elevator needs work. It was probably nice once, with new, shiny metal walls. With no smudges decorating the walls, and scratches from one too many umbrellas scraping against it as people bustled in.

And it might've had a door that slid smoothly open. A door that didn't lurch and creak and groan. It even might have had a new railing too. Maybe it wasn't always so dull and rusted from all those people grabbing on to it with white knuckles as the elevator lurched from stop to stop. It could have had air conditioning too.

But that must have been long, long ago.....

Now, in the summer people slump against the walls as sweat trickles down their face, breathing in the muggy air that catches in their throats.

But it's not summer, no it's winter, and winter seems to bring out the worst in everything, including this elevator. Slush coats the tiled floor like a wet, melting carpet, the fluorescent light shining half heartedly, flickering on and off; illuminating the state of the elevator.

The buttons are worse, with their numbers rubbed off, but by now most people don't need to see the number. Like robots, they press their floor number without thinking, just waiting for the elevator to screech to a start. Moving up with a small drone and a whoosh of air in the elevator shaft. All they're hearing is the faint ding as they reach their floor and the impatient tap, tap, tap of their foot while they wait for the doors to slowly creak open, depositing them to their small, but livable apartment.

This is why when Harry Fells stepped onto the elevator that morning he did not notice anything out of the ordinary. Only the usual heave-ings, hummings, creekings, groanings, slush coated floor, rubbed of buttons and smudged walls and flickering lights. Nothing out of the ordinary.

You could say that Harry Fells was nothing out of the ordinary either. Little extra fat here and there. Small, slightly downward tilted brown eyes and a flat, large nose with thin lips that gives him a permanently confused expression. A mop of feathery brown hair hangs over his forehead, hastily combed to the side. Calluses dot his palms, his weathered face stares impassively at the ceiling.

There are quite a lot more Fells all squished into apartment B17. He worries often about them. This chilly apartment building is no place to raise a family.

He tries to get more money. Always striving to give his children the best. Trying to make their childhood as enjoyable as possible, unlike his own bleak one.

He had big dreams once, but like old memories brushed away into dark corners to slowly disappear, his dreams slowly became, well, just dreams. He often wonders if things could've been different. Maybe if he had gone to college, maybe gotten a job at a nice office. Worn expensive suits instead of the same old threadbare coveralls with stains and frayed edges and the City Snow Plow insignia on the pocket. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

But Harry isn't one to wonder about the if's and maybe's. The snow plowing pays the rent so his family will have a roof over their head, no matter how shabby it is.

He often marvels at how if he had gone to college he would have never met his beautiful wife, Macy. And have never have had his children; his beautiful, perfect children. So maybe this is how it's meant to be. But no matter if it was meant to be or not, here Harry is, and there's nothing he can do about it.

The elevator rumbles and heaves and creaks to a stop. With a ding the doors screech open.

Enter Mr. Johnson with a shuffling of dull black dress shoes that tiredly step into the elevator. Harry nods politely at him; if Mr. Johnson sees this he does not acknowledge it, just leans against the wall impassively.

Mr. Johnson. He hates that name. Johnson. It reeks of well, him. And who is he exactly? A nobody. A nobody who works in some anonymous corporate building. He doesn't even know what the company does.

A nobody that sits in his drab little cubicle filing papers for who knows what. His only joy there is the doughnuts and coffee and the occasional spotting of the beautiful Matilda Rodgers.

Matilda Rodgers. Maybe another nobody like him, maybe some well-known businesswoman. He doesn't know a thing about her. Just her name: Matilda Rodgers. And he hangs on to that name, savors every last syllable. Who knew a name could say so much.

He smooths down his 20-or-something dollar suit. His only suit. Where had his life gone? Why had he ended up here? In a 20-or-something dollar suit that is frayed and stained and torn.

He often sits at a bar staring into his empty glass, mulling over this. His friends tell him to lighten up. At least you have a job Robby, they say. At least you're not the garbage man or the snow plow guy. At least, at least, at least.

Mr. Johnson doesn't like to look at the "at leasts." He brushes them aside. No one needs "at leasts" in his opinion. He prefers to dwell on the why's and how's. The simple, bitter questions.

The elevator rumbles to a stop again. Exasperated, Mr. Johnson lets out a loud sigh. They open with a half hearted ding.

"In we go Fiona," a sharp voice says hurriedly. In steps Mrs. Hemsworth, hauling her huge body through the doors, bringing with her Fiona. Mrs. Hemsworth glares at the other passengers with squinty eyes.

"Well move over," she says glowering at the two men. The men shuffle to the back of the elevator, leaning against the railing.

The elevator seems to have gotten smaller. But then again Mrs. Hemsworth makes everything smaller. Her rolls of fat hang over her short chubby legs. Her squinty eyes stare out from a droopy, round face. The starting of jowls hang from where her cheeks should be. She lifts a large arm and scratches her forehead, tiredly. She's quite out of breath.

Standing slightly behind her is Fiona. Fragile, timid Fiona. She looks like the slightest breeze could snap her in half. A network of wrinkles seem to be etched into her pale, porcelain skin. A wisp of snow white hair is covered by a hat, a kid's hat that keeps dropping over her eyes. She looks constantly worried, pale blue eyes darting around. She was beautiful once, it's not hard to tell. She looks up at her sister, Mrs. Hemsworth, with a sigh.

It's hard to tell that they're related. Maybe once as kids they could have been spitting images of each other. But that must've been quite a long time ago.

Mrs. Hemsworth used to be pretty, too. But then came her husband and her kids. She didn't seem to have time for herself anymore. With the big house to look after and the raising of her brood she was constantly busy. She thinks of that house often as she sits in her little apartment. Of the wrap-around porch and the large, sweeping doorways. She loved that house. She loved the crickets and the silent whoosh of the trees at night. The sunny fields and gardens. Her kids running through the kitchen door with mud streaking their faces, making a pitter-patter that echoed through the vast rooms.

That house was her life. It's where her children were born, where she married her husband, where everything was perfect and blissful. It's the last thing her all-grown-up children saw as they waved goodbye with wavering mouths, going on their way to some big college.

It was the last thing her husband saw as he took his last breath. Mrs. Hemsworth never got over her husband's stroke. She always thinks of him. His voice, his laughter, forever haunting her. Living in

that house didn't help. Everything reminded her of him. Every nook and cranny whispered his name. Every floorboard and crack in the ceiling echoed of memories. The house wasn't blissful anymore, just cold and big - way too big.

So with that, she packed up her bags and sold the house. Her children had begged her not too, reasoned with her. But she just shook her head, gave most of her money to her kids and bought a small apartment with the money she had left. Of course she couldn't go long without someone to care for. She had cared for her kids for more than 18 years. After they left she cared for her husband. Now she had no one. She itched to be needed. So she sent for her sister. Her frail, old sister who deeply needed someone too. And so they had found each other in their vast loneliness. Although Mrs. Hemsworth would never admit this, maybe she needed Fiona as much as Fiona needed her.

It's uncomfortable in our little elevator. Every breath seems too loud, every shuffle of boots seems to be rude. Mr. Johnson, exasperated, checks his watch. He might be late. He lets out a long breath, the elevator seems to be going slower than usual. It starts to slow down, and then it creaks to a stop.

In steps a woman, dragging along behind her a small boy, about the age of five. She settles herself against the wall, resting her hand protectively on the boy's shoulder. The boy's name is Zachary Andrews, though he prefers Zach.

He rubs the big bruise on his arm. That's where Jonah got him pretty bad. It's purple and green, all puffed up too, but it's covered by his coat, hidden from his mother's anxious eyes. He doesn't want to worry her anymore. Just says he started that fight and finished it. He doesn't mention Jonah's teases and punches. He doesn't mention that Jonah had in fact started it, doesn't mention that Jonah left that fight untouched.

He can feel the tenseness in her hand gripping his bony shoulder. He's seen her, in the middle of the night passed out at the kitchen table, her head resting against the piles of paperwork and bills.

His mom always tries to hide it from him, all her tiredness. A smile is always on her face in the morning, brought up from inside of her with all the effort she has left. Always a laugh, a snort, a kiss. She tries not to show her despair, her anger. Anger at this cruel world. Anger at that stranger of a man who changed right before her eyes.

There was always a reassuring word when he was wakened in the night to the sound of his parents fighting. But, that only lasted for a little. Just as soon as the fighting came, it left, along with his dad.

“No more of him. It’s just me and you, kiddo,” she would say, ruffling his hair lovingly, “ just me and you and the piles of paperwork.”

With that she would laugh, take a sip of coffee, and begin her never-ending wrestle with her job . Her friends say she works too hard.

“Get out of the house,” they would say, “and no don’t bring Zach. Just you. Go have fun.” But she would just shake her head, too tired, too much work, got to take care of Zach. Her friends sigh at this. They try changing tactics, try sending her on blind dates. But she doesn’t have the space or time for another person, it’s only Zach, and he takes up enough of her heart.

He’s the reason she gets out of bed in the morning and hauls herself to work. He’s the reason she doesn’t give up. She needs Zachary more than he knows.

And then just as the doors are about to close in squeezes Finn, smoothly darting between the doors and leaning against the wall in one fluid motion.

Who is Finn? He’s a drifter, the kind of person that everything works out for and everyone falls in love with. But Finn has his own story, locked behind the charming smiles and handsome face. A story that everyone looks over as they stare at him in awe.

Now it’s uncomfortably cozy. A kind of cozy that makes you wish for the extensive flights of stairs that you had chosen not to take. The elevator creaked slowly to a start, almost as if it’s waiting for another person to slip on. The doors rattle shut and again the elevator begins its trek to the ground floor.

They stare into space, trying to ignore that awkward silence that seems to press up against them. Mr. Johnson checks his watch again, now he will be most definitely late. Why can’t this elevator go any faster?

But then, it stops.

Everyone looks around, confused.

“Are we at another floor?” asks Mr. Johnson.

Nobody answers. They wait for the door to open, but it doesn’t. Their breaths seem to meld together. In, out, in, out, in, ou-

“Are we stuck?” Zach asks the unsaid question that seemed to be lurking in all their minds. His voice comes out high pitched, his mom tightens her grip on his shoulder.

“I don’t know honey,” she says, her voice is pinched. “We can’t be,” she mutters to no one in particular.

“Oh god, oh god, oh god,” Mr. Johnson mutters. The walls seem to be moving in on him, “oh god, oh god, oh god,” he says a little louder, pressing against the wall.

Everyone stares at him, not moving.

“Well are we all just going to stand here like a bunch of idiots?” Mrs. Hemsworth snaps, glaring at her company. “You,” she says pointing at Finn, “press the god forsaken help button you idiot.”

“Er- me?” Finn says, looking around as if snapped out of a trance.

“Yes you, who else would I be pointing to, you’re blocking the bloody thing anyway,” she snaps, exasperated.

Fin puts a trembling hand on the help button. It’s the only one that isn’t rubbed off, it almost glows against all the smudges, practically untouched. He presses down on it. A short shrill ring goes out, then it’s quiet.

“Well, that’s it?” Harry asks nervously wringing his hands. Sweat glistens on his forehead.

“Anyone have a phone?” Mrs. Hemsworth says sharply.

“I-I do,” Zach’s mom says with a slight waver in her voice. She digs around in her purse and pulls out a cell phone.

“Call 911,” Mrs. Hemsworth orders, “and someone shut him up,” she gestures toward Mr. Johnson who all this time has been muttering to himself over and over again. He seems to be crumpling, his forehead is damp with sweat, his eyes dart around frantically. No one makes a move. Then, suddenly, Fiona seems to materialize from the wall. They had forgotten she was there. She reaches out a shaking arm, letting it rest lightly on Mr. Johnson’s shoulder. His head snaps up, and his breathing steadies.

Zach’s mom finally finds her phone under the lipsticks and checkbooks and sticky notes that seems to have accumulated there. The numbers seem so bright on her screen that she blinks. She gets a shaky feeling, remembering when those numbers showed up on her screen before. She shakes it away, she must be strong.

It dials and rings. She can hear her breaths through the phone, short and quick. The voice on the other end is calm, an unsettling type of calm that reminds you of a robot, not a person. It tells her the usual things, keep calm, help is on the way. Harry timidly asks her to ask how long the wait will be. The robotic voice says they can’t be sure..

Upon hearing this Harry groans, resting his head on the wall, “This is bad.”

“Humph, you’re not the only one who has somewhere to be,” Mr. Johnson snarls.

Harry looks at him, passively, “I know, but if I don’t get out of here soon you’ll be even more late because the roads won’t be plowed on time.”

This shuts Mr. Johnson up for a while at least. There’s nothing to do but wait. And so they do, they wait and wait and wait.

Zach sits in the corner behind his mom, playing with some crayons she managed to dig out of her purse. He studies them, scraping their wrappers off with his fingernails. Mrs. Hemsworth watches him. He reminds her of a memory, way back a long time ago. He looks so much like her son, the same dusty brown hair and soppy eyes. Her heart twists.

She slowly bends down, her fat seems to adjust itself as she moves.

“Here, even Picasso couldn’t draw without some paper” she says and hands him a small stack of sticky notes that was buried under the mountainous stash of caramels and pens *in her purse*. Zach takes it thankfully.

“What do you say Zach?” Zach’s mom says half-heartedly, barely paying attention.

“Thank you Miz,” he says with a toothy grin.

Mrs. Hemsworth laughs, “Aren’t you the polite type?”

Mrs. Hemsworth laughs again. She looks back at Zach’s mother, “I used to have a kid just like him, when I was younger that is.”

Zach’s mom snorts, “Well lord help you then.”

Mrs. Hemsworth chuckles, “Cherish it while you can, cherish it while you can.” She rummages around in her purse some more. “Caramel?”

Zach’s mom blinks again, “Oh, um, thanks,” she stutters.

Harry is pacing now, worriedly checking his watch. Mrs. Hemsworth watches him, her eyes following him back and forth, back and forth. “Oh would you stop, you’re making my head hurt,” she snaps, glaring at him through squinty eyes.

He stops, anxiously turning back to Zach’s mom.

“When did they say we would be out?”

“They can’t be sur-”

The elevator is moving. It jerks. Up or down they can't tell. A creaking fills the elevator. An awful, awful creaking. Zach cries out, Alyss wraps him in her arms protectively.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god," Mr. Johnson almost shouts.

"What's happening?" Finn says loudly over the noise.

No one answers. Harry sits down, his head in his hands. "No, no, no."

"What are you saying?" Mrs. Hemsworth snaps at him.

He looks up at her earnestly. "If I die in this wretched elevator, I'll have been nothing more than a snow plow driver. How can I come at peace with that?"

"We all have things we can't come to peace at," Alyss says harshly, still comforting Zach.

The elevator screeches. A slight tremor goes through the floor.

"Oh really? Are you a snow plow driver?" Harry asks brokenheartedly.

"No, but my life is pretty screwed up too," Alyss yells at him.

"Shut it!" Mrs. Hemsworth screams. "You're scaring the poor kid, not to mention that we're not going to die. Sobbing over your life's tragedy isn't going to matter in the end." Mrs. Hemsworth takes a deep breathe. "Now if we can all just stay calm that would be deeply appreciated."

The elevator takes one last heave....And then they're falling. The world stops. Everything seems to have gone silent. Outside mechanics yell. Everything stops breathing. In those few awful seconds they are hurtling towards the ground, plunging into darkness. Those few awful seconds seem to stretch on for decades.

With a loud bang the car stops moving. The elevator sits perfectly still. They shakily look around. The light comes back on. They clutch each other, they're breathing fast. It's over, it's over, it's over. Tears stream down their faces as they sit in that elevator.

All seven people swear they could have died that day. And they could have. But they didn't. All seven of those people walked out those elevator doors alive. Shaken, white as ghosts, but alive.

And then there are tears and laughs and hugs. Thank you's breathed and prayers sent upwards. Paramedics, smothering them, comforting them with their questions and blankets. They cling to the sound of other human breathing, of their voices, of normal life happening outside. They take the day off, reconnecting with loved ones, cherishing the smallest things. .

But life goes on.



They would probably never see each other again, maybe pass each other in the halls, nod, but they all choose to try to pretend it never happened, even if some of them flinch when they see that wretched elevator.

It is a cruel world, best forget about all those bad things. Cause if you hold on to all those little pieces, it'll start to drag you down and drown you.



Grades 6-8

Third Place | The Gryphon Trainer | Mary Collins

In the summer the heat rolled across the plains unrelentingly. The very water in the river grew warmer and we groomed the gryphons twice a day to remove any excess fur. They hated the heat quite as much as we did, and they relieved it by plunging into the river whenever we let them out of their spacious pen. We were kept busy filling their water trough, only to have them knock it over again and again when they were shut in between the fences, desperate to cool down. Then they would retreat to the shade of their stables.

Mayi ground herbs in water and made us cooling compounds which, when wrapped in cloth and held to our foreheads, helped to lower our temperatures. Similar herbs were rubbed onto the bottom of the gryphon's troughs, and Tomar often said that he didn't know how they had survived the past summers without her. I wondered as well. I'd never experienced quite such a violently hot summer, never having lived on the plains before. Back in Evrin, though it was no more than a day's ride away, there was abundant shade from the forest's broad-leaved trees.

Still, some nights clouds gathered and soaked the earth with rain, and I would wake in the early morning before the sun rose to a cool and airy world. One such morning I paused in front of my small square window and looked out at the gryphon pen for a few moments. All was still and peaceful as the first gryphons awoke and left the stables beneath our rooms. It reminded me of morning at home, which always seemed to be peaceful and grey. As I turned to dress, I remembered something I had not thought of for months, since I arrived here for my apprenticeship.

It was still there, lying in the bottom of my rucksack, a roughly-made necklace of coarse, heavy rope. It contained on it, in sharp contrast to the rope itself, a bright silver pendant in the shape of a leaf. It had been pressed into my hands by my younger brother before I left that one last morning. He was one of the few of my family who did not bid me farewell with disappointed, somewhat angry stares. I had stuffed the necklace into my rucksack and entirely put it out of my mind as I climbed with Mayi into her father's pony cart.

Now I fastened the necklace around my neck for the first time. It was the only reminder of home over my flannel shirt and breeches, which I had long exchanged for my old dresses. It felt rather out of place,

somehow. I straightened the necklace and glanced at my face in the mirror, to see my dark eyes staring rather reproachfully back at me. I set off down the stairs and out of the stables for the gazebo where we ate our meals. Today I was one of the first few arrivals. I greeted Tomar and Idri and sat down.

“We’ve a few more offers today,” said Tomar. I saw that he was holding a letter with a bright yellow seal.

I took a piece of fruit. The faint promise of the sunrise was brewing in the pale grey sky; this was my favorite time of the day.

“Are we taking them?” I asked.

“Well, one wants a baby,” said Tomar. “But I’m not giving up one so young as they asked for, so I sent a letter back with the pidgeon.”

I nodded. One of the first things I’d learned as an apprentice was that gryphons shouldn’t be sold until they were over a year old. I bit into the pale blue of the perinn fruit, and my mouth filled with a burst of sour-sweet.

“Then, the Birae want another full-grown,” he continued, “for simple deliveries.”

Messengers and their organizations all over the land wanted gryphons to ride. They were our most frequent customers.

“Who are we sending, then?” I asked. I took a bowl of goat milk and sipped at it.

“Attri, probably,” he replied, cutting off a slice of bread. “It’s about time we sent her off.”

I felt a brief pang of sadness as I always did when we decided to sell gryphons. Attri was a three year old brown, with dark feathers. I would miss her in our stables, but then, there would be no business if we didn’t sell the animals. Sighing softly, I took my mouth from the bowl of milk and my eyes rested on the seal of the letter Tomar was still holding. I frowned. Somehow it looked familiar—

“Tomar!” I gasped, dropping my bowl of milk. “Who’s that letter from?”

“The royal family,” said Idri with a smile, sounding proud.

“But— haven’t we been aiming for a request from the royal stables for ages?” I said excitedly.

Mayi was walking up to the gazebo, her ever-present bag of supplies slung over her shoulder. She heard me and quickened her pace.

“What’s this about royal stables?” she said, hastening to take a chair.

“It’s not the royal stables,” said Tomar, smiling. “It’s the royal family, which is a bit of a different matter. The crown prince is in need of a gryphon, and he wants us to supply it.”

“The prince! Isn’t that even better?” I exclaimed.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” said Tomar. “He shan’t take it if it doesn’t meet his expectations. He requires a two-year-old with bright coloring and good speed, and he requires that I deliver it personally.”

I thought for a moment, picking up the bowl of milk again while I was at it.

“Illor,” I said, picturing the gryphons in my mind, “or Pira.”

“Right you are,” said Tomar. “Which do you prefer for the job?”

“You want me to decide?”

“I want your advice.”

“Then I say, we should ride them before we decide.”

The sun rose and we finished our breakfast. I forgot to ask Tomar if there was mail from home. After all, they never wrote. When Tomar offered me the job as a gryphon trainer, my family had scoffed at the very idea. When I took it, they all but disowned me.

\* \* \*

I could tell that Illor was eager to be flown, but he stood patiently as I brushed his gold-and-red fur and tied on his saddle. Into the saddlebags I put a flask of water, just in case. Then I gave him a pat and walked him outside. I pulled at the reins and we were off into the relentless midmorning sun.

Illor charged forward running, then extended his vast gold wings and gave them one, two, three great flaps, pulling us up into the air. The sensation of flying never quite got old; I grinned into the wind as we took off. Soon we were away from the pen, flying in the general direction of the woods from the plains.

Illor was such a joy to ride. I was sure that he was quite suited to be the prince's gryphon. I would, of course, have to test his speed. I leaned forward.

"Onward," I whispered quickly into his ear.

He leaned forward with me and within moments he was flying at top speed, smooth and even and faster than any other means of transportation. And I knew now that I was riding a high quality gryphon, one of *the* highest quality gryphons, and I felt pride in it as much as an artist would in a great painting or a musician in a beautiful song, because I knew that I had helped to turn this gryphon into what it was for ten months. The grin that came from first taking off did not leave my face and we continued on towards the trees.

Soon we were flying over leaves and the grin fell off my face. How had I let us fly so far? We were too far away and had been gone too long. I tried to turn Illor around. He turned at my will as I pulled the reins, but as he did, his talons caught in the tree, and he screeched briefly and flapped his wings in place. Ordinarily this would not have been a problem, but as I waited for him to untangle himself I heard a scream from the tree below. A familiar scream that sent my blood racing.

"Lyra?" I gasped, nearly toppling off of the saddle.

"Lithell?" screamed the voice again.

How was it Lyra? How was she this far from home? This was not a simple walk away from Evrin; this was likely five hours on a fast gryphon from right here.

"Why are you here?" I yelled down at Lyra. She was one of my younger sisters, only nine, and I certainly couldn't picture her walking all the way here on her own.

"I ran away," she called up, sounding rather scared.

"You ran--how? On foot?"

"No, I snuck onto Mr. Weln's cart, an' I hopped out when he turned on the fork towards the city, 'cause I was tired of home."

"Oh Lyra. Listen," I said, smiling slightly at her rashness, "we need to get you home. Hold on. Down," I said into Illor's ear.

He plunged through the canopy of trees, which were not close enough together to prevent us from landing on the ground. Here the woods were patchy and the trees were far apart. I looked up at the nearest tree to see Lyra perched near the top. The familiar sight of her small, bright face and perky red-brown curls was enough to bring tears to my eyes. I hadn't seen her in so long.

"Can you get down?" I called.

"Of course I can get down," she said, appearing insulted. She climbed down a few feet and then jumped to the ground.

Within moments I had jumped off of Illor and was running to hug her. I spun her around and then we stopped and she stared at Illor.

"Is that one of your gryphons?" she said with wide eyes, taking a step back.

"Well, he's not *mine*," I said. "But we've bred him, and trained him, and now we're going to sell him."

I didn't mention the prince. Tomar had impressed upon me the importance of keeping our clients anonymous, especially if they were important or wealthy people. Still, Lyra looked suitably impressed.

"Now, before I take you home—" I stopped for a minute. This meant that I would have to go home. I

wasn't welcome there. I swallowed hard.

Lyra looked up at me.

"Do I *have* to go home?" she said.

Suddenly, she reminded me of myself, because she had run away, and so had I, in a way. I would never regret the choice to become a gryphon trainer, but still, I had never returned home. I had run from the task of reconciling with my family.

"Yes," I said, reaching down and squeezing her hand. "Yes, we both have to go home. It'll be okay. But first, we need to fly back to the gryphon ranch."

I paused and she gave me a hopeful look.

"Have you ever flown a gryphon?" I asked, smiling.

\* \* \*

Lyra's arm went limp and a piece of bread tumbled down to the meadow below. I thought I saw it hit the grass in the scorching sun.

"It's not far now," I told her, imaging our little village beneath the tree branches, "it's not far. Look, we can see the forest now." The familiar sight of the tall trees gave my heart a jolt.

She nodded in response. Long distance rides were never easy, not even for me. Still, I did not let my grip on the reins slacken or my body grow limp. I had to get her home. I had to get myself home.

Finally, finally, I pointed Illor towards the ground. He was not all that tired; he shouldn't be, as he would be the prince's gryphon. Tomar had been more than happy for me to take him. He said that Illor needed frequent exercise now that we had decided on him as the prince's gryphon, and a long ride was perfect for that.

We landed on the path to the village and I slowed Illor to a walk. The shade and shadow of the forest enveloped us and as I gazed along the old, familiar path, I felt a sense of peace that I had long been lacking. But I was nervous. The last words I'd spoken to either of my parents had been spoken in a fight,



yelling and debating. I sighed and nudged Lyra so that she woke up as we walked through the cluster of houses and buildings we called a village.

Somehow I'd acquired tears in my eyes somewhere along the walk. I blinked them away impatiently as we walked up in front of our house. I hopped off of Illor, landing on the springy grass, and helped Lyra down. Holding on to Illor's reins, I knocked on the door and waited for it to open.

"Oh my--oh my stars," exclaimed my mother when she saw my face. "Lyra, baby!"

She grabbed Lyra from my arms and hugged her close, and I felt a sinking sensation in my stomach. Had she gotten to the point where she wouldn't acknowledge my presence? I cleared my throat slightly. Mother turned back to me and was silent for several very long moments.

"I see they've got you wearing men's clothes."

I felt my face crumple in disappointment at the harshness of her tone. Then a small figure came running out and I recognized my younger brother, Ebri, and a smile broke briefly across my face.

"The charm worked!" he said in a triumphant voice. "I knew it would! That necklace you're wearing," he continued before I could ask, giving me a big hug. "It's a charm, an' I bought it an' I gave it to you, and it's meant to bring you back home when you wear it."

My mouth fell open in surprise, but it did make sense. I had put on the charm for the first time that day, and that day, for the first time at months, I had returned home.

"Well," said Mother. She gave me another bitter stare, and I stared back with sad eyes.

"I'm never going to stop being a gryphon trainer, mum," I said quietly. "It's what I love."

I turned slightly, still holding Illor's reins, wanting nothing more than to leave and be done with this—to give up. I held back my tears by biting my lip.

But then the bitter stare mother had fixed on melted, and she set Lyra down and hugged me tight, and I knew, at long last, that things would turn out alright.



## Grades 9-10

### First Place | Saint Simone Against the Fear | Avis Zane

Our night began, as it always did, with a party.

“Catch us the foxes, the little foxes,” I would say, to no one, to everyone, desperate to be the cynosure of our adolescence stage, a stage in which everything we touched was destroyed, turned rancid in our thoughtless hands like juicy apples, swarming with rotten heat. But that wasn’t enough. Nothing was enough for us. Gratified by our destruction, we would talk about it, prattle ourselves into circles. We quoted significant events by the party that had occurred the night before, slapping dates to our shambling history, the house and the drinks and the guys that made us cry. (*“Catch us the foxes, foxes that ruin the vineyards – for our vineyards are in blossom.”*)

I can still see Beth, crouched before our half-open window, the moonlight transfiguring a vibrancy about her, glowing skin and golden hair; opal eyes besotted waterfalls. She was begging me to join her, I recall, “You have to come, Simone! It won’t be the same without you!” But this isn’t right. This must be where my recollections take a hallucagenic turn – I know it was me who implored her for an invitation, me who wanted desperately to return to the past summer, the discordant age of innocence. She must have complied – I remember us climbing out that window, slipping and sliding on the shingled roof with our sandals high above our heads.

It was a humid summer night, and we could feel it in the swell of our tongues, slick against our exposed skin. Skittering down the forest path, we were convinced that there were murderers and ghosts on our tails, still unaware that the biggest threats lay uncovered, like fish camouflaged against the seafloor, within us.

The harsh trail led us out to the beach, the treacherous ocean. To be put into our generation’s terms, it was The Night of the Bonfire, and serpentine flames flickered up to Him, asking for his forgiveness, but giving nothing in return. We converged on the shoreline, polluting the sky with smoke and the crystalline waves with ash.

Beth ran off to play beach volleyball, but I wasn’t invited. I was never invited. I stayed on the edge of the party, dangling on the cusp of social identity, heat and smoke writhing into my hair and watering my eyes.

A cooler lay close by, along with a sprawling blanket trashed with chips and dip and pretzels and grocery store cupcakes, stupid trash like sticky glazed donuts and a small collection of liquor. I

bypassed sugar, ignored fat; choosing rather to linger in the gaze of intoxicating treasures, gaze into their depths. The bottles shimmered like jewels – red rubies, white gold pearls, glittering diamonds. Food has an expiration date, stales over time, but alcohol only ripens. Each day isn't an end; it's the culmination of taste, value; it doesn't bloom instantly, like that high school kid that hasn't shown her merit until she's older. Like the one that's always overlooked, crazy, they say, drunk in the corner of a party with smoke in her eyes. I strangled a massive bottle of vodka by its swan-like neck. My reflection wasn't visible through its jewel-like tone, opaque, like opals; I couldn't see myself through the dimpling waves of the ocean; I couldn't watch myself through the flickering flames; I couldn't find myself in the misty bottle; there was nothing to watch. I was invisible, non-existent.

Around me, people were tearing off their shirts, streaking into the ocean. Each laugh was a canon-blast; music was blasting, pounding against the shore. Everything was made of lights, but I couldn't feel it.

A bullet-hole of depression bled from my head to my toes, making it difficult to keep breathing, afraid each inhale was too loud, each exhale too obvious.

*(Why was I here?)*

Every gasp was labored, my lungs heaving, coughing like sandbags. It seemed like awhile before I could sit down, plunk myself in the sand, away from the ash-grating wind, away from the eyes that seemed to case me in the dark, wait for me.

The vodka burned on the way down, a bitter taste that clawed coquettishly, and I cried fat tears, forcing myself not to cough too loud.

*(But who was listening?)*

I gasped, alone.

The waves thundered against the shore, forcing the blood in my veins to pulse with the same rhythm. The tide ebbed and flowed, a nauseating rhythm against the sand, the ever-constant tide. My mother's words came back to me as I watched, drinking in the moon's ephemeral shine against the caps of the water. She used to say the Lord made us different for a reason. Made me different. She said that fear was inside us because God was inside me, and he wanted me, me especially, to distract from all fear. That was our covenant, my promise to Him. I was to distance us all from fear, from chaos.

I didn't know how.

"Catch us the foxes," I mumbled, and laughed. Drunkenness was so pathetic. Pathetic, but it was my most natural state; there was something about not being responsible for your actions, your words.

When I was bloated and sick, I stood up, wobbling, and tugged the bottle from the sand. It seemed heavier drained than full, and I stumbled back into the dune. My hair was greased to my forehead. I was sweating. I sweating like a pig.

(*“Then the demons came out of the man and entered the pigs.”*)

I got to my feet just as an overplayed pop song was turned up; it throbbed through my veins, flashing along the ridges of my muscles. My vision was compromised; I heaved a breath, but couldn’t hear it, for the music drowned it out, everything out, like a massive wave. *Chaos*, it was all chaos.

The bottle dangling from my fingertips, I staggered back to the blanket. Scarlet Katz stood with her back to the ocean, the light from the fire smoldering her features; her dark brown hair was radiant, black eyes burning coals. She cased me with concern, disgust, and I raised my bottle to her, or at least tried to. It tumbled through my fingers, rolling closer to the pit.

“Come . . . to me, all who are,” I belched, wrist pressed to my chapped lips. “W . . . weary! Burdened! For I . . . I shall give you rest!”

“Simone?”

“That *if you confess*,” I pointed directly to her heart, my finger a sword. But I couldn’t find her; my vision was stamped in doubles. Floating past in purples, reds, greens; an overlay of gel lights I could distinguish five of every feature. “With your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ Scarlet, you will be saved! If . . . If you believe in your heart that God raised him from the ground, from the dead, you will BE *SAVED!*”

The fire above my hands, flames bursting into the sky, I was so tired. So tired, but the smoke kept pouring upward, burning my eyes and sizzling ash against my skin.

I poured Merlot into the sand, and watched, fascinated, as it turned bloody. I ran my hand through it, pushed each fingertip down one at a time, laughing. I wanted to bury my head in it. I wanted to go home. I got so tired. I was so tired.

*I compare you, my love*, She used to mouth to me, when she thought I was asleep, *to a mare among Pharaoh’s chariots*.

And I didn’t listen.

*Ah, you are beautiful, my love; your eyes are doves*, he’d tell me, insistent, but I didn’t care.

“Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away,” I’d say to them both, when I didn’t know better. The fear was in us all.



## Grades 9-10

### Second Place | Aspartame | Kelsey Towne

On Dylan's first day of second grade, after he asked his teacher why all adults drank the brown liquid that smelled so bitter, after she laughed and said that lots of grown-ups needed it just to wake up and go to work, he resolved to never become an adult.

He could still picture the print of the mug displayed on the teacher's desk as he rode the bus home. It had seemed so generic, even to his young eyes, with its perfectly-shaped apples printed on the sides, and he remembered that his preschool teacher's mug had a similar design. When Dylan went home to the apartment that he and his mother shared, he found her drinking from a blank white mug with teardrops of brown decorating its sides instead of shiny red fruit. She painted with steady hands, giving no indication as to how many cups she had already downed, and startled as she heard the door close.

"Oh, Dylan," she said, running over and stooping down for a hug, "I'm so sorry! I lost track of time. Did you find your way upstairs okay? Was your first day good?"

"Yeah," he said, nuzzling into his mom's shoulder. Her breath smelled heavy somehow, so he pulled away after a moment and pointed to her canvas. "It's pretty."

She smiled slightly before sitting back down and sipping at her drink. Pink packets lay scattered on the table to her left. "Thank you," she said. "It's not done yet, but I think it just might be good enough to exhibit when I finish it. What do you think?"

Dylan nodded, unsure what "exhibit" meant. He could tell it was something good when saw the hopeful wideness of his mom's heavy-lidded eyes, and especially when she smiled at him again and turned back to her work. He watched her fill in small, beautiful details with a small, beautiful brush and wondered why she was so sad if she could make such pretty things.

A few weeks later, after he learned bigger numbers and bigger words, he also learned that not everyone liked his mom's pictures. She said that she could only sell the painting for fifteen dollars, and that was how much a big pizza cost. He didn't think that was fair, that something his mom had worked so hard on was worth as much as food that could be on their table soon after a phone call, but she just smiled when he told her as much and added another pink packet to her coffee.

"What's that?" he asked, temporarily distracted from the injustices of the world.

"It's like sugar," she said. "It just costs less."

“Is it better than sugar?” Before his mom could answer, Dylan picked up a half-full wrapper and dumped some of the crystals onto his tongue. He winced.

His mom giggled, actually giggled in the high pitch of the girls and boys in Dylan’s class, and asked if he wanted some water.

That December, as the infamous Minnesota weather gifted inch upon inch of snow and offered no receipts, returns, or exchanges, Dylan held a warm green mug that, he noticed, was cleaner than his mother’s, and he asked her if she was still painting.

She blew a mushroom cloud into the foam of her drink and gripped her cup as though it was the only source of heat in the room. She said that no, she hadn’t been able to find the time, and, speaking of which, she had to get ready for work soon, so would he keep the door locked when she left?

He said yes and glanced at the easel collecting dust in the kitchen.

On Christmas, his presents included more snow and another mug. Only one came wrapped. His mother apologized, saying that she didn’t have a lot of money to spare, but he hugged her and thanked her before going to watch television specials. She joined him, tapping her brittle nails against the third cup of coffee that morning.

He rarely saw her in the next month. The Christmas card from his dad arrived a week late, the day after New Year’s, and his mom didn’t even look at it before passing it off to who she thought was the true recipient.

Dylan didn’t really want to read it, either, and he doubted that he could. He just looked at the picture of Snoopy in a festive hat and found a picture inside of his dad somewhere sunny and green, his arm around another man. They looked happy. They looked like they didn’t care about how Dylan’s mom was feeling, but he thought differently once he found a bill inside the envelope with two zeros after the number one. He gave it to his mom, and her eyes gleamed red under the dim kitchen light. She sat down, read the card out loud, and started writing a response. She read that out loud, too, when she finished each sentence and once more when the letter was done.

As she searched for an envelope amongst the chaos of each kitchen drawer, Dylan’s mother said, “Do you understand why I’ve been upset with your father?”

Dylan picked up the paper decorated with half a coffee ring and tried to make the letters into words and the words into something with meaning. “Because he left and hasn’t come back to visit yet,” he said. That was why he felt upset, anyway.



His mom laughed to herself. “Well, yes, that’s true, but it’s something bigger than that. He wasn’t able to be true to himself until he already married me, which caused a lot of pain for both of us when he realized something.” She pulled a dog-eared envelope from a pile of stationary, and the drawer shakily rolled shut as she directed her gaze to her son across the room. “That was when I learned that it’s easiest to know what kind of person you are from the start. You won’t hurt the people who really matter that way. Your father is struggling with money right now, too, so he can’t help us as much as he’d like, but he really is a good man, a good person. I shouldn’t be so upset with him anymore.” She walked across the room and handed Dylan the envelope, looking straight into his eyes. “Can you promise me that you’ll always accept who you are, even if some other people might not like it?”

Dylan nodded and took the paper. His mother smiled and showed him how to fold the letter until it fit into the envelope, and they went to the post office together to mail it.

After that day, Dylan had more hope that he and his mom could spend more time together, but she still had two jobs and could only see her son for hours at a time. When they did have time to spend watching television or reading, the second grader continued to notice the constant hum of the coffee maker filling his ears and the way a full pot of the sloshing, brown-black liquid could disappear in a couple hours. He asked one day if she and other grown-ups really did need the coffee just to go to work, if she could be okay without it.

She stirred another packet of bitter crystals into her mug and said, “I used to drink it in college when I stayed up late writing papers, but I only started drinking this much when I started my second job at the bookstore. I don’t know if I could do the work that I need to get us enough money without it.”

Dylan drank in the rings under her eyes, the stains on her teeth, the crack in her voice, and said, “Okay.”

Once he was alone in the house, he set his hot chocolate on the table, dragged a chair to the counter, and stood up on it to open the cupboard that held the mugs. He took one in his already-cold hands and threw it to the tiled floor, where dirt collected between the cracks. The shatter startled him, sounding cacophonous in the silence of the room, but he took another mug, the one that had just been cleaned of jagged brown trails, and threw that, too.

The guilt gripped him tighter than his hands could grip the next glass, but shards continued to pile on the linoleum until there were two mugs left: his mom’s favorite that he decorated for her in art class, and his own given to him for Christmas. Sniffling, he stepped around the mess and went to bed.

He woke up that night as the apartment door slowly squealed open. Dylan hid his head under the covers as he heard a gasp coming from the kitchen, the sound of glass scraping against the floor, the definitive clang of the garbage can lid as it shut. His bedroom door opened, letting in a slit of warm yellow light from the next room.

“Dylan?”

He remained still.

“Dylan, I can see you,” his mother sighed. “Can I talk to you, sweetie? I’m not angry.”

Dylan pulled the covers down until his eyes were just able to see the silhouette in the doorway, which began walking over to sit on his bedside.

As a weight settled by his feet, his mother’s voice said, “Are you upset with me?”

Dylan shook his head and heard his ears brush against the warm fabric of his pillow. The sound drowned out his tense heartbeat for a few seconds.

“Why did you break the mugs, then?”

“I didn’t break *all* of them,” Dylan said, lifting his chin above the blanket.

In the dim light, Dylan could still see his mother’s smile. “Yes, I saw the one you made for me in the cupboard. Why did you break the other ones?”

He thought carefully as he looked to the clean-swept kitchen floor. “Because coffee is bad for you, and if you don’t have as many mugs, you won’t drink as much.”

His mom laughed for reasons he didn’t understand and said, “But couldn’t I just fill the same mug over and over?”

Dylan hadn’t thought of that. “You don’t clean them very much.”

She laughed again. “That’s true. I guess I won’t have as many to clean, then, huh?”

Dylan nodded and retreated under the blanket again.

A sigh sounded from the foot of the bed. “I’m sorry that we haven’t been able to see each other as much. I miss you a lot, but the reason I work so much is because we need money to pay rent. I want you to have somewhere to live, but I know you must get lonely here. I don’t have the money to hire anyone to keep you company, but our neighbors are trustworthy, and you’ve been doing a great job of keeping the door locked while I’m away.” She patted his leg fondly.

“Can’t you just keep painting?” Dylan said, words muffled by the thick-knit fabric. The blanket was pulled from his face to reveal his mother smiling again.

“I would love to,” she whispered, the sad sort of heaviness in her brows dimly lit by the kitchen light. “I’ve always loved painting, but it’s very hard to make enough money by selling my work.”

“Doesn’t it make you happy?” Dylan questioned as he sat up.

“It does.” She nodded more to herself than to her son. “I guess I should do it more, then, huh? And I should be home more. Being with you makes me happy, too.” She bent down for a hug that was quickly returned.

“So you’ll be home more, right?” Dylan asked eagerly.

He could feel his mother nodding again next to his head. “I’ll try to get reduced hours, and it’s going to be hard, but I can try to drink less coffee, too. And wash the mugs more.” She laughed for the third time that night, and Dylan couldn’t remember the last time he had heard such joy coming from her.

He walked home after school a week later to find his mother lying on her side atop their stained couch, one arm splayed across her eyes in a way that drew a humorless parallel to the girls in old movies who would swoon at the drop of a designer hat.

He stepped quietly to the middle of the living room. “Mom?”

She shifted her arm, and he could see the bottoms of her red eyes. “I’m fine,” she said. “I’m fine.”

He said, “Okay,” and lay down beside her.

She quickly wiped a knobby knuckle across each eye and sighed, putting one arm around her son. After too long with the ticks of their clock filling the silence, she smiled. “Hey,” she said, “I think you were right about the pink stuff. It’s no good. My head feels like it’s going to split.”

Dylan clamped a hand to either side of his mom’s skull. “No!”

She chuckled. It wasn’t quite a giggle, but Dylan’s hold slackened a bit. “It’s an expression. It just means that my head really, really hurts. I guess I should buy real sugar next time, huh?”

Dylan nodded, and, as his mother took a glance at his light brown eyes, she clasped the small, shaking hands that were still raised to her head. She hummed in thought and hugged her son, gripping him as though he were the only source of heat in the room. He squirmed but eventually relaxed and smiled when she said, “I quit my job at the bookstore earlier. It didn’t pay that well, anyway.”

“Is that why you’re home?” Dylan asked.

“Yes, I can be home more now.” He squealed with joy as his mother admitted, “I don’t think I’ll need as much coffee from now on, either.”

The next day, Dylan opened the apartment door to find the easel half-filled with dark outlines and bright colors for the first time in months. His mother was listening to something quiet and calming through the static on the radio, and he pulled a chair beside her to watch her paint in the early spring light.

With her son on one side, a glass of water on the other, and a palette in her hands, Dylan’s mother smiled and said that being an adult wasn’t as bad as a second grader might think.

Grades 9-10

Third Place | The Daedalus Network | Jackson Hassell

It had been nine months since the funeral. Shouldn't that be enough time to start moving on? It takes nine months to create a life. Shouldn't that be how long it takes to put one behind you? I could so clearly remember when I walked in and saw her meticulously cutting her own wrists, two days before her sixteenth birthday. We'd bought her a small car.

"Up the river, not across the stream," she joked, giggling to herself. My daughter had a dark sense of humor.

"...John. John! John, wake up!" Darren hissed into my ear.

I jerked up, nearly falling out of the cheap plastic chair. I tried to look attentive. Slowly I began to see more than shadow. Looking around, I saw that the menacing large glob of gray was my boss, Mr. Victoria, doing his rounds. He trusted none of his workers, and we hated him back.

We were still trying to look productive when Darren said, "So..."

"So?" I asked.

"That's the fifth time this month."

"Yeah."

"It seems to be getting more frequent."

"I haven't really noticed."

"Did something happen to your wife?"

"No, Roxanne still spends most of her time in our room."

"Brock?"

"No."

"Give me more than that."

I said nothing for a while, and he started to turn back to his computer.

"I've been thinking more about Tammy than I should. That's it."

He was quiet for a moment. “You need to complete the healing process, which means getting into the routine, which means not getting fired. I can’t cover for you all the time. Besides, you need to consider Roxanne. She’s so fragile as it is.”

He seemed to get embarrassed after this and sort of ducked away, hiding as best he could in a shared cubicle. I wanted to be mad at him – it would be nice to feel something beside... this, but I couldn’t. He was trying to save me and my job. And the thought of Darren, the big tough guy, being scared of my reaction was almost funny enough to make me smile. Almost. “Darren, I’m not mad. Really. Thanks for your advice.”

Darren, regaining a little of his former confidence, said, “Again I suggest the Daedalus Network, and again you’ll refuse. You really would benefit from it. Everyone does.”

I sighed. “I just don’t trust that Daedalus guy. Some anonymous person, who could easily be a thief, publishes a downloadable program on the Internet, for free I might add, and suddenly it’s the must-have thing of the year.”

“Come on, don’t be so stubborn.. He’s been given practically every scientific award possible for creating the first sentient program.”

“Sentient, my ass. How can a machine think and feel?”

“Ok, how about I show you?” He dug his iPhone out of his pocket and handed it to me. I flicked through it until I found an app marked Daedalus and tapped it. The phone went dark suddenly.

I started to exclaim, “Ha! Told you it was a vi-,” when on the phone, what appeared to be a large dome was lighting up. In the middle of this dome a young boy with angel wings was materializing.

“Hello, sir. I am the Daedalus Network. Before we begin, I must know. Was this phone given to you by Mr. Jones?”

I arched my eyebrows at Darren before responding. “Yes, Darren is right here Daedalus... Network?”

“You may call me the Daedalus Network, though that is rather lengthy. Most call me Icarus, which fits, him being the son of Daedalus,” it said.

“Cute,” I said to Darren. “Doubt it’s real though.”

“Of course it’s real,” he said. “Ask it anything.”

“Fine. Network, what is it that you do?”

Darren interjected, “Oh, come on, you know-”

“I can serve a variety of functions. I can set up websites and protect your computer from viruses. I can also serve as a babysitter, as long as the children stay in front of the screen, and can notify you when I cannot see them. I can manage your expenses, taxes, schedule flights, plan vacations, essentially anything on the computer you want.”

“Alright, change Darren’s credit card number and email it to me,” I said, motioning for Darren to stay still.

“I’m sorry, sir. It goes against my programming to reveal that kind of personal information to anyone but Mr. Jones.”

“Well, that’s a good sign. Icarus, set up a website for me that only has pictures of puppies everywhere, and open it.”

Safari opened and showed me a website titled “Puppywuddles” that had puppies, literally, everywhere.

“Impressive. My daughter will love it when....” I trailed off.

After a moment I said to Darren, “It seems convenient enough. I’ll try it.” I closed Icarus, tossed the phone to Darren, and tried to concentrate on my work. Instead, I thought of Tammy, and how she acted her last day.

She was happier, for one thing. In retrospect I think she’d decided on her course of action already and was at peace with it. Still, retrospect counts for so little. I assumed she just woke up on the right side of bed that morning – or maybe I didn’t. I don’t know if I was even thinking. I got dressed and kissed her forehead and just walked right out the door. Did she call, “I love you, Daddy”? No, that’s probably my mind messing with my memory. It’s done that before.

I got home from work relatively early and tip-toed around, hoping not to rouse Roxanne. My wife had been hit by Tammy far worse than I had. They’d been so close. Every time I went home I was afraid that I would find her dead, sprawled on the floor, just like Tammy. In my nightmares they were holding hands in the kitchen as they cut their wrists.

Roxanne was in her room, staring blankly at the TV or reading one of those young children’s books that always have happy ending. Brock, still only three years old, came down the stairs blearily,

rubbing his eyes. Each step he took made a small thunk as Monkey, his teddy bear, hit the stair behind him. “Daddy?” he asked.

“Hey bearcub. Where’s your mother?” I asked.

“Mommy asleep. I want ba-ba. Mommy didn’t get me my ba-ba again.”

Instead of replying, I scooped him up with a grunt, and took him to the kitchen, lifting him up high so that he could choose his bottle. He was very particular. With great deliberation, he selected a green one with stars.

When he was satisfied the ba-ba was filled in exactly the right way, he headed back upstairs, came back downstairs for Monkey, and then went back up - his nightly routine. At least he was relatively unchanged.

I walked to the computer room. I searched my email for the spam that had been sent out to almost every email address in the world, the one that offered the Daedalus Network, and, with a great feeling of dread, opened and downloaded it. A new icon appeared on my desktop – a gray box with a simple D. I clicked on it.

The computer went dark for a moment, like Darren’s phone, then slowly lit up as if I were looking into a great sphere, and someone was going around turning the lights on.

“Hello, Mr. Carper. So nice to see you again.”

I jumped a little. “You’re the same Icarus as the one on Darren’s phone?” As soon as I said it, I realized it was a stupid question to ask. I shook my head in a vain effort to clear it. “Ok, fine. What do we do now?”

Icarus smiled. “I’ve downloaded on your computer a new program called New Eden. New Eden is a place of pure bliss, easily attainable, that you can fully immerse yourself in, so that you can touch, feel, and taste anything you experience there.”

I scoffed, “Not possible. And even if it were, there has to be some sort of drawback.”

Icarus’s grin faded. “Yes, there is a catch. You may visit New Eden for as long as you want and leave, once. Upon the second visit, you will be caught forever in happiness, and never be able to leave.”

I sucked in a little breath of surprise. “That’s horrible!”

Shaking his head, he replied, “No, there are no laws anywhere against voluntary constraints. And everyone in the world will be given this message before they enter New Eden.”



“No one will do it. No one will sacrifice their freedom for anything.”

“That’s their choice. Do you wish to enter New Eden? Nothing will be done to you on this first trip.”

“What? No! How do I know you aren’t lying to me and I’ll just stay inside forever?”

“If I were lying then why would I have told you about the catch?” Icarus answered.

“Um... It doesn’t matter. I’m not going to get hypnotized by my computer screen.”

“I didn’t think of you as the superstitious type, Mr. Carper. It’s perfectly safe.”

My pause was longer now. “What’s the point of going in there in the first place?”

“Why not just try it?”

“Do you always answer my questions with a question?”

“Aren’t you curious?”

I thought about it for a couple of minutes. “You know what? Fine. It doesn’t matter much either way.”

Icarus replied, “Thank you,” and the screen turned black.

In the upper right corner, a patch of daisy-yellow was spreading. When it reached a perfect circle, an irregular patch of green. Same with blue, purple, red, orange, and yellow again. The full rainbow appeared, circulating, increasing in speed. Replacing Icarus were two Greek-looking letters facing each other, pulsing gently in blue. As the colors spun at a frantic pace, the symbols in the middle remained constant, peaceful, grabbing and holding my attention. I reeled back, but it didn’t help.

I was hardly able to think when I stumbled into work the next day, my mind was still trying to understand what had happened in Eden. It was a faint little spark in the back of my mind that, rather than actually giving off any usable light, merely enhanced the shadows that made life bleak.

I collapsed into my cheap plastic chair and stared into the dark of my computer screen, almost wishing the colors would appear as they had at home.

“Not feeling well?” a familiar-sounding voice asked behind me.

I turned around, and rotund Mr. Victoria was leaning on the doorway of my cubicle.

“Is there something you want, sir?”

“I just wanted to see if you were feeling alright,” he said in that same, oddly sing-songy voice.

“I’m very well.”

“Well, if you say so.” He walked away.

Soon after, I heard the door to his office close, though it wasn’t slammed, unlike the usual.

“Darren, what that was about?” I asked without turning around.

“He just seemed happy. It’s unlike you to criminalize happiness, John.”

“I’m not, it’s just... Forget it. Maybe he’s gotten into drugs or something.”

“John, it’s pretty obvious he’s in New Eden.”

“Wha-” I thought about it. Of course everyone had the option to go in. But people actually stayed in there? “How are you sure about that?”

“Oh, the voice, mostly. Also his little half smile. The biggest hint, though, is the person’s head sorta shines with a golden-ish light. It’s kinda hard to notice unless you’re looking for it.”

“How’d you know this?”

“How’d you think?”

I noticed the lilt in his words then, as if he had a children’s cartoon theme song in his head. I didn’t say anything for the rest of the day.

Whenever I got on the computer or even peeked into the Office, I saw that little icon on the desktop. A golden gate, swinging open, inviting all in. Every day I walked past that, and every morning I resolved to not even sit down in that chair to think about clicking that icon. Every afternoon, I sat down in that chair, with the mouse hovering over the little golden gates, struggling. Roxanne was one of those people who never returned from their first trip to New Eden. Even Brock could tell that there was something wrong with Mommy. He hid it, but I think her sudden change into a model mother scared him.

But despite all that, every day my finger came a little closer to clicking on that icon. About three weeks later, Icarus made a shocking announcement. When I logged onto my computer, Icarus gave a speech: “Congratulations on resisting New Eden for so long. While I won’t pretend to understand why you fear to use it the second time, I respect the willpower needed to stay away. But that is not what I am here to talk about. I’m here to discuss the origins of myself and New Eden.

“Let us start with Daedalus. I have no more idea who he is than you, but we all know what he did. He created me, an amazing leap forward in technology, one that no one has been able to replicate. But after what seemed to be the start of an amazing benefit to humanity, Daedalus disappeared. He might have died, he might have gone underground, or any number of things may have happened. In any event he is gone.

“You might see where this is going. Daedalus did not create New Eden. I did. I delved deep within my programming and isolated the coding that created happiness when I completed a task, and adapted it so that I could bestow upon anyone that same happiness. I did this not for my own benefit, but for yours and humanity’s. And it worked. I have solved humanity’s growing depression. I even put it up free in computer stores, schools, and libraries, so that those too poor to buy a cell phone or computer could reach New Eden.

“Now why, you brave, misguided souls, do you resist New Eden? It is not the forbidden apple – it is the key to the locked gate of paradise. While you’re there, I’ll take care of your bodies for you. You will still get paid, and life outside you will go on as normal. There is no reason not to go.” And with that, he turned back into a little angel boy who did whatever you asked.

I sat there stunned. There was one line in there that had made every single one of my nerves ring like a bell, “solved humanity’s growing depression.” Could this New Eden prevent Brock from ever making the same mistake Tammy did? Yes, but was it worth it? No. Yes. Maybe? My voice quavering, I called out, “Hey Brock? Could you come down here please? There’s something I want to show you.”

After I was sure that Brock was within New Eden, I sat there, thinking. Who was I, to make such decisions for someone with such promise? Who was I to choose between liberty and happiness for another? Who was I who was I who was I... I climbed back into the chair in the office and clicked on the little golden gates icon.

I was back, in what felt like a much older body, more like the body of a seventy year old man than a forty-two year old one. I stretched, feeling my joints pop in ways they didn’t before, and realized I was at work, with a lot of other old people I could no longer recognize around me who looked every bit as confused and disoriented as I was.

As my memories trickled back through the molasses of my brain, I said, out loud, “Oh God. Brock?” I got up and looked around, hoping maybe that he would be here, the same way he was when he was five and visiting my office.

A tired and disheartened voice came through the speakers of my computer. "Don't worry. Brock is fine. He is actually on his way back here from Chicago this very moment. Roxanne's at home preparing dinner, before you ask." Turning around, I saw Icarus's avatar, but this time his wings were black and burned nearly to a crisp.

"What happened?" I demanded. "How long has it been?"

Icarus seemed to liven up at these rude words, even get a little happier. "I'll be happy to explain. To put it bluntly, I have pulled all of humanity out of New Eden and have forbidden any further entry. You have been in New Eden about twenty-seven years and six months. I pulled you back... well, it's a long story. Please sit down." I sat down.

"Soon after you left, almost all of humanity followed. Apparently my speech was persuasive. Too persuasive." He sighed. "As the rest of you trickled into New Eden, I realized I became progressively unhappier. There was no one to give me orders, no real tasks to be done, no source of joy. I tried to convince myself that controlling people in my Eden was a worthy task, but it all became so routine. Instead of curing humanity's depression, I had merely switched it over to a new host. Me. I tried to fight it, but it kept on nibbling at my mind. I couldn't commit suicide - " I flinched at this " - because that would kill all of you as well, and I don't really want to die. Eventually I came to realize that the only way out was to bring everyone from Paradise back to life. I knew the pain that it would cause you all, but it was the only way. I'm sorry." Turning around, he faded away.

I put my head in my hands and cried. For Tammy, and Roxanne, and Darren, and all I took from Brock. I cried for Icarus's burned wings.

## Grades 11-12

### First Place | A Lonely Hunter | Eveline Liu

i.

I find the telephone box, the one you can't miss because it's bright red beneath the snow. Because a boy I once adored kissed me there. Because I welcomed a stray kitten there, named him Fitzgerald, fed him fish from a can, and read him *Tender is the Night* when there was enough light in the quaint little box.

Perhaps it is because an elusive thread ties me to this place, tucked between the park and my favorite bakery. A thread ties me anywhere, really. Anywhere that I've lived, if but for a moment, in my life of twenty-two years.

As I reach the kiosk, I catch myself on its glass panes. A splitting headache threatens my balance and slips clumsiness into my steps where grace should have been. I almost laugh. I'd always been praised for the finesse with which I walked. But after ten years of dancing en pointe, it's an inevitable side effect from the days I spent developing strength and technique, training my body to be weightless and sylph-like. I wonder if I can still wear those pointe shoes in my current state. My hands tremble, a quiet, reflexive *of course not*. The ribbons would quake in my hands as I try to criss-cross, criss-cross them.

They don't belong to me anymore. Neither my hands nor the shoes that leap and spin to the melody of my youth. After all, I have long since cut my hair, and it will never be long enough to pull into a ballerina bun.

Pushing thoughts of the hazy past away, I slip into the box and sink to a crouch on my toes. It's a bit warmer here, and I can feel my fingers again. But with the warmth returns a heavy, lulling sensation tugging at me, coaxing me toward sleep.

"Not now," I say, sliding coins of every denomination into the slot. The pennies and quarters and dimes and nickels chatter against metal, as they stutter against everything but the narrow groove. When I've given the payphone enough change, I place a call to the first number I can remember. But whose number is it?

"Tao," I breathe, a cloud of condensation forming before my lips. The dial tone is dull, frustrating.

"Hey babe," he slurs. I wonder who's more intoxicated.

"Hey," I smile, but it's a gesture neither of us can see. I imagine him standing before me, us having just left a wild party to go home. His tie is loosened around his neck, his collar upturned. He's swinging his jacket lazily, his step resembling the tango rather than a walk.

*We used to dance together.*

“Can I get this pretty lady a drink?” There’s a smirk on his side, I know. But that’s as close as we get, on two opposite ends of a call connected by wires and electricity and voices. The thought hurts a little. I imagine where he is really, half a drink away from throwing up or passing out in the usual bar.

“I think I’ve had enough for one night,” I say, trying to steady the quiver in my breathing.

“Aw, come onnn,” he nearly sings. “Let’s daaance then. I’m the best in town.”

“Are you now,” I taunt.

“Of course,” he says. “A girl I care about taught me all the moves I know.”

*She cares about you too.*

“What I would give to slow dance with her one more time,” he sighs. “But she hasn’t stepped foot onto the dance floor in years.”

“I’m sure she’d make an exception for you,” I say, because it’s true.

“Would you?” and his drunken mumble yields to a sharper, keener touch. After all, he never was a lightweight.

“I can’t anymore.” The words hold a grim, gritty reality that I haven’t wholly understood. But they make sense to me, now. I can’t anymore, I repeat to myself until I accept every letter and syllable and word. I turn them over and over, until they become a part of me. But they hurt all the same.

“Can I have a name, at least?” he’s begging now.

I don’t answer at first. “I’m sorry, Tao.”

I click the hook switch until the line goes dead.

ii.

We must have been eight when he became my next-door neighbor. He ruthlessly corrected my pronunciation. “It’s not ZEH-ven, it’s z-VEN. Like oven with a Z. It’s Russian.”

He frightened me when we were little, when he was round and tubby and red-faced with anger. But the years had done him well. As he grew tall and slim, he grew patient and gentle and flushed with knowledge from his beloved books.

As a teenager, I liked to sneak into his backyard on the nights I couldn’t fall asleep and I thought no one would notice. I guess counting sheep didn’t work for him either, and he noticed. He never did object when he caught me on his hammock though. Instead, we lie there together as he taught me the constellations and their legends.

His infatuation with the cosmos grew on me. I fell in love with the universe in its lovely wholeness, disciplined by a beautiful, implicit order. This limitless divine creation we call the night sky became

ours, one constellation at a time. And those sleepless nights became infinitely more bearable, counting stars.

Those were the moments I held close, when life was not quite real but death not either. Scattered between banality and routine are these rare instants that shimmer even at dawn. They catch the budding morning rays at six in the morning when I'm still awake, battling a darkness that I can no longer escape. Instead, the cruelty swallows me whole, crushes my bones with loneliness and cripples my body with inexplicable sadness. I am fighting a losing battle against my demons, against myself.

Perhaps I am living in one such moment. The howling wind curls around the telephone booth, but for now, I am guarded. I watch as snow stays suspended in the air, the flakes growing and changing in their slow, unlit descent. Here, I feel a thousand times removed from reality.

Ironic, huh.

This red box connects me to memories, to people, to the very fibers of reality. And so, I reach to insert more money and dial the next number that comes to mind. As I lean against the wall of the booth, the cold grows in patches against my parka. It is a brief reminder that I can still feel.

Finally, he picks up.

"Hullo?" he drawls. "Is everything alright?"

Unlike what hampers my senses, sleep hides beneath Ziven's sluggish, drowsy words.

"Yeah, I'd say so," I whisper. I sink to the concrete floor before my knees can collapse against my will. Cradling the receiver with two hands, I listen closely.

"Who is this?" he says through a yawn.

"A friend," I say simply.

"A friend should know that I have lectures on Saturday mornings at nine," he laughs. "I like to get my rest."

"Come on, it's not even midnight."

Both of us laugh now, and it's easy. Our hearts connect when our sounds meet. Through the telephone wire, I am embraced by an awareness of safety. It coats my insides in blooming colors where a kingdom of gray reigned with its monotonous wash.

"A friend would also know that you're already working on your Ph.D. Soon I'll be calling you Dr. Ziven," I say. "But when we were kids, nothing was more important than piecing together the night sky with legends."

"N—"

“My favorite is still Lyra,” I interrupt. Detecting a breath of satisfaction from Ziven, I tell him the story he once taught me. “Legend has it, Apollo gave Orpheus a harp.”

I pause to let the sharp pain in my temples subside.

“His music was s-sweeter...” I bite my lip and focus, in hopes that I could articulate. “Than that of any mortal. He could soothe the broken-bodied, bring joy to the weary hearted, change the course of rivers as his fingers danced across the strings of his lyre.

“He married the beautiful Eurydice, but she died soon after their wedding. So stricken with grief, Orpheus ventures into the underworld to win her return. His lovely music convinced Hades to relinquish Eurydice, under one condition—Orpheus must not look back to see if she were following until they had returned to their world. Should he doubt Hades, his beloved would stay in the underworld. Before Orpheus took his final steps into the light, he turned to gaze upon his wife. She fades before him, with only one word: Farewell.” I swallow and mentally count to ten. If I’m not careful, my speech will slip between my fingers like fine sand.

“When he died, Zeus placed his magical harp in the sky... as Lyra.”

A comfortable silence stretches from one phone to the other. He finally finds the words: “You’re a good friend.”

Of course.

*We used to count the stars together.*

“Lyra’s leading light is Vega, only twenty-five light years away,” I add, but I’m only rambling. “It shines pure white.”

He’s quiet for a while. “Hey.”

“Yeah?”

“You’re still my leading light,” he says. “But I’m pretty sure you don’t shine pure white.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“Wait—”

I hang up.

*Farewell.* I let the receiver swing as I wipe away tears with the heels of my hands. My vision blurs again, but it’s not from crying.



I'm not done yet, though. This thought picks me up and I reach for the receiver again. Everything I am and have been shakes as I try to clear my mind one last time. Ten numbers, that's it. I mess up the first time.

"Dammit," I slam a weak fist against the glass of the booth. Reminding myself that my change is limited, I try again.

"I'm sorry, that is not a valid number—"

I punch in ten more numbers, and the dial tone that ensues relaxes me. I sink back to my crouching position and cry. My chest heaves with each deep breath, but they cannot conceal the pants and gasps that hide between. I shouldn't be such a wreck.

"Hi," I say, breathless.

"Hi," she says, as puzzled as I am exhausted.

"I have a confession."

"Go ahead," she offers. Vianne is honest and brave and kind. I will miss her.

"I'm dying," I say quickly, quietly.

"What?"

"I'm..." I savor the words between my lips, "...dying, Vianne."

"How?" her voice is concerned but resolute.

"I overdosed," I say. "I think. Xanax."

Pressing my forehead to the glass, I try to fend off the migraine, but I can no longer escape the pain. "I don't remember how many I took. Sorry."

"Just the pills?"

"No. Whiskey. Lots of it."

"Are you in pain?"

"Yes," I breathe.

Neither of us says anything. I like it better this way, I think. After all, it's getting harder to speak.

"Would you like to hear a story?" she asks, and now the tremble has found her voice too.

"Mhmm," I press my lips together to keep them from shivering.

"I," but all I can hear are the hiccups and sniffles I gave her. "I was eighteen years old and couldn't remember why the sun rose each day. Getting up was a pain, doing something with my day an

impossibility. Things weren't really going the way I wanted them to, so most of the time, I cut class and slept some more and ate far too much junk food. I wasn't helping myself out.

"For every seminar I missed, every lecture I ditched, I shrank further into myself. The first paper I refused to write, the first midterm I couldn't bring myself to take... those were the hardest ones. It got easier though. The guilt that used to catch in my throat became something I could simply swallow. But the anxiety of leaving my room rose like walls around me. I couldn't break them down anymore.

"Even singing couldn't make me smile any longer. A music major who couldn't stand the sound of her own voice. A petty irony, really. It must have been several weeks since I'd seen another person, but she begged me to open the door. I'd seen her several times in our music theory class, but I didn't think she'd notice my absence. She'd collected all the class materials I'd missed, books and CDs and papers.

"She didn't blame me for not showing up all of second quarter. She didn't push me. She told me about herself, and I listened. At the end of our encounter, she smiled and left. She came back and told me stories... about her life on stage in leotards, about the cute waiter at the restaurant two blocks down, about everything. I only listened. She didn't give up on me, though. She came back, sometimes with a drink for me, other times with her favorite novels. I'd read them and laugh at her messy annotations. All this time, she stood by my side until I found my voice and told her my stories.

"One day I sang for her until I was broken by sobs and she hugged me until things felt right and the next day, I went to class. And now, now... I want to pull her up and embrace her and tell her stories the way she told me hers. Am I too late?" she asks.

"No, of course not," I assure. "Vianne."

"Yeah?"

"Sing for me."

She wipes away tears and searches for a song. Her voice starts hesitantly, but she finds strength in each verse, pride in every chorus.

*Go ahead as you waste your days with thinking*

*When you fall everyone stands*

*Another day and you've had your fill of sinking*

*With the life held in your*

*Hands are shaking cold*

*These hands are meant to hold*

*Speak to me, when all you got to keep is strong*

*Move along, move along like I know you do  
And even when your hope is gone  
Move along, move along just to make it through  
Move along  
Move along...*

I feel at ease, her voice rocking me into sleep's open arms.

*So a day when you've lost yourself completely  
Could be a night when your life ends  
Such a heart that will lead you to deceiving  
All the pain held in your  
Hands are shaking cold  
Your hands are meant to hold*

My eyes close, but I am still listening.

*When everything is wrong, we move along  
(go on, go on, go on, go on)  
When everything is wrong, we move along  
along, along, along*

Thank you, Vianne.

*When all you got to keep is strong  
Move along, move along like I know you do  
And even when your hope is gone  
Move along, move along just to make it through*

I love you.

*(Go on, go on, go on, go on)  
Right back what is wrong  
We move along*

"Nyx?"

Drawn-out, cold silence.

“Say something! Nyx, please...” she begs, but a sinking realization breaks her into desperate cries.  
Only she can hear them now. “Nyx!”

*We used to be alive together.*

Grades 11-12

Second Place | The Baby Maker | Annie Gao

The couple stepped up to the counter, holding hands.

Behind it sat the receptionist, a young female humanoid. Mr Sparrow peered at the name tag on her shirt. Marie Lyne. Did the government have to *name* them? Though Mr Sparrow never admitted it, he always felt a slight shiver run down his spine when interacting with these lifelike robots. It was not like they were dangerous or anything. No, any functional abnormalities in the first few prototypes had been regulated. But still. As he reached over and handed the humanoid the documents, his hand contracted at the warm brush of its skin.

'Come along, dear,' said Mrs Sparrow. They walked to the waiting area and sat down.

An attendant walked into the room. 'Mr and Mrs Sparrow, Doctor Kensington will now see you in room A12. Thank you for working with Neonate, where your baby's perfection is our satisfaction.'

They stepped onto the white band and were rushed along the hallways in silence, stopping in front of a nondescript white door. It clicked and swung open.

'Mr and Mrs Sparrow!' Doctor Kensington shook their hands. 'Lovely to meet you, please, please, sit. Now, let's get down to business, shall we? The machine's already scanned the documents and so far, it's been a breeze, you both have done a wonderful job.' He smiled widely at them. 'I understand you would prefer the surgical extraction of the cells from the parent bodies to be carried out today?'

Both husband and wife nodded.

'Excellent. Now, you understand that your child will still turn out unique, for they will be made of the coalition of your cells. Yes, they will have your designated eye and hair colours and so forth, however, they will physically resemble you in numerous ways. Of course, you can also opt for the Visage Package, where you can design the facial features with the aid of a highly skilled graphic artist? He is not allowed to depict any atrocities of course, there are certain regulations, but you could, for example, choose the shape of the eyebrows, the bridge of the nose, that sort of thing.'

Mr and Mrs Sparrow had already discussed this. 'No,' said Mr Sparrow. 'We want him to look like us.'

The doctor smiled. 'Lovely. Alright then, if you could each step into your separate flues, where you'll be taken directly into the surgery department. And I take it that you would like the product to be delivered to your door?'

Mr Sparrow nodded. 'Yes.'

'Very well, thank you *very* much for working with Neonate, Mr and Mrs Sparrow. I wish you good day.'

Mr Sparrow stepped into the blue tube and felt it stretch him as he traveled up the flue, the wind whipping his ears.

It arrived the next day. The delivery man came to their door in the morning. The neighbours were all in

titters, word had got round that Mr and Mrs Sparrow, after two years (two years? Can you imagine waiting that long? I couldn't possibly! ) had bought their very first Baby. Mrs Sparrow had been dreaming a very pleasant dream filled with infant gurgles and the warm, creamy smell of bottled milk. Mr Sparrow, nervous by nature, had been up since five in the morning, pacing back and forth in the living room.

It was he who first heard the bell ring.

'It's here,' he breathed. His glasses fogged up and a grin slowly spread, cracked, across his stiff face. His first thought was to awaken his wife and to greet their new child together, as they had done traditionally in the hospital, back in the Old Days. But wouldn't it be glorious, if he could just have a peep of it before his wife woke up; she was bound to make such a fuss, he wouldn't be able to think straight and savour the whole thing, just to have a little look at the toothy grin and golden curls of his...his son...the words made his heart warm...yes, yes, he would just have a peep, just a glance...

He pulled the door open. Sunlight streamed in.

'Good morning Mr Sparrow. The name's Jim.' The delivery man tipped his hat. Really, Mr Sparrow marveled for what seemed like the thousandth time, he did seem most lifelike. 'Morning,' he replied coldly and made to grab the handle of the pram.

Jim grinned. 'Ho, hold your horses, sir, I need you to sign some papers first. And by the way,' he winked at Mr Sparrow infuriatingly, 'I'm not a humanoid, so there's no need to look at me like that. Got my license embedded here, to prove it, if you want. It's my hair, isn't it?' He laughed. 'Can't blame a man for taking care of himself. You'll need your wife here too, to sign some things.'

Red in the face, Mr Sparrow trooped back inside to drag his wife out of bed.

'Oh!' She rushed to the door. 'Can I see him?'

'Yes, of course, ma'am, just one moment, I'll just have you sign these...and your husband...ah, there we are, all done. Well, I hope you enjoy Neonate's product and come again soon.' He tipped his hat again and left.

Mr Sparrow pulled the pram inside and lifted the bonnet.

And there it lay. Its eyes were blue, its ringlets golden. It was the most beautiful child he had ever seen. But, there was something queer about it, at least, that's what Mr Sparrow felt. He didn't like the child's eyes. They were too blue. His wife must have chosen a bright tint.

'Darling.' Mrs Sparrow lifted the child from the pram, rocking it in her arms. 'Darling. Oh, darling.'

Mr Sparrow pressed his lips tightly together while his wife cuddled the Baby. 'It's too pretty,' he said testily.

'What!' She stroked its hair. It babbled and smiled. 'Too pretty! Too pretty! No, no, he's beautiful. He's perfect. He's perfect.' She kissed its soft, peachy cheek. 'And look! He's got your fine bridge of a nose! What do you think he's got from me, hm?' She lifted the Baby's face next to her own.

'Your ears,' lied Mr Sparrow. 'I'm going to make breakfast.'

'Don't you want to hold him? Let's hold him together, him cradled in the middle, like the perfect, little family,' and Mrs Sparrow cooed and nuzzled the child's cheek.

'What do you want to name him?' Mr Sparrow didn't want to touch the child. He didn't want to touch the child, for a horrible thought had occurred to him. He watched the Cooker slowly crack the eggs, one by one, into the bowl. What if the Baby was a humanoid? What if their child was another manufactured good, made out of metal?

At church the next day, when their little boy was christened Brandon, Mr Sparrow decided the best thing to do was to find out the truth for himself. He needed to settle his mind. It was entirely probable, he thought, gritting his teeth as the hymn began, the mechanical angel adornments suspended from the ceiling clasping silver hands and humming the tune from speakers in their wings. How could a single cell grow into a full-sized Baby overnight? Yes, Neonate said they used a special concentrated formula of growth hormones, but who knew whether it was true or not? Wouldn't it be easier to create a production line of Babies, assembling the bits and bobs in a factory? He imagined a moving conveyor belt upon which Baby-shaped wire structures and metal parts were assembled and little coloured eyeballs sparked as they were put into place. Oh, it was too ghastly to think about!

When his wife was visiting the beauty units on the weekend, he took up for the child for the first time in his arms. It babbled and waved its little hands. 'You can trick me all you want...' he murmured, clicking on the flashlight and shining it into the child's eyes. It squinted, face puckering up. He peered closer, trying to discern if the pupils dilated...why yes, they did, well, well, come to think of it, that wasn't too hard for a cleverly designed humanoid to do, it probably could be programmed. No, Mr Sparrow told himself, that meant nothing.

That night, during supper, Mrs Sparrow asked her husband whether he wanted beans with his steak. She *knew* he wasn't too fond of vegetables but it would be rather healthy for him if he had some for once. She asked him three times, quite clearly, and received no response. She tapped him on the shoulder.

He blinked, jerked his head. 'What?'

'Darling, you've been acting funny lately.'

'What do you mean?'

'Oh, I don't know... you're off in your own thoughts all the time. Ever since we got Brandon. And you've hardly touched him. Don't you like him? Oh, there isn't anything wrong, is there?'

'Nothing! Dear. I like him. Bit stressed out by work, that's all.' He shifted his food around on his plate.

'I've even been giving it check-ups, to see if it's healthy and all.'

'Oh.' Her face softened. 'That's sweet of you. Of course he's healthy, dear. All the Neonate babies never get sick, they put something in their bodies for immunity.'

*Or it could be because it isn't possible for robot babies to get sick at all,* thought Mr Sparrow. Then the thought dawned on him. Of course! How could he have forgotten! Humanoids couldn't bleed. They could eat, they could blink, they could move, breathe, excrete, urinate, but they were entirely without the ruby liquid that pumped through the veins of the living. He was sure to know, then, if the Baby was human.

The next time his wife was out, he took it down to the basement. Taking a hypodermic needle, he gently pricked the infant's hand. It bawled and wailed and thrashed, clear liquid running out of its eyes, but Mr Sparrow held it down grimly to the basement table, and thrust its hand up to the light. And, there, a small well of blood, of redness, was seeping onto the soft pink skin. He roughly handled the child, feeling its skin, joints, bones and muscles. It was remarkably real. Remarkable. And perhaps it was. And for what seemed like the first time in weeks, he felt a weight lift off his chest and he gave the child a quick kiss on the face. As he did so, he could have sworn he heard a soft, metallic click as it moved its head away from his grisly cheek by twisting its neck.

Once the child was back inside its cot, he began to think. What would he do, if he was a manufacturer of humanoid babies? Why, it was obvious, he would design them so ingeniously that it was impossible to tell, impossible to know, whether the baby was a robot or not. Had to cover up their tracks, didn't they? And now that he thought about it, he couldn't help a thrill of admiration, for the inventors were truly brilliant in the way they had created humanoids that could actually *grow*, to develop from babies into children, teenagers and adults, so as to not arouse suspicion. Yes, yes, it was all very, very clever, he thought, with a grim smile, but they could not fool everyone. No, they couldn't fool him.

He picked up the telephone and dialed the number. 'Hello? Is this Doctor Kensington? This is Mr Sparrow. Sorry for calling you. You see, I've got a Fear.'

'A Fear! Why, not when you should be so happy with your bundle of joy? I'll schedule you for an appointment then. Is your wife alright, or does she need a mental check-up as well? These things often happen in twos!'

'No, she's fine.'

There was a pause.

'Alright, you'll come in five minutes. I will see you then, Mr Sparrow.'

Mr Sparrow put the phone down, walked across the living room, out the blue slide doors and onto the transport patio. He stepped into the flue, pressed buttons. It sucked him up with a great whoosh and spat him out, ruffled, before the familiar white door in the hospital.

It swung open.

'Ah, Mr Sparrow, yes. Please, sit.' Dr Kensington motioned towards a chair. 'Now, what is this Fear of yours?'

Mr Sparrow pretended to be in a great deal of agitation. He buried his face in his hands as he sat down. 'It's stupid, it's stupid.'

'Now, now, anything that is causing you distress should not be considered insignificant. The government wishes for all its citizens to be content. It is the reason we run this service, after all. What is it?'

Mr Sparrow lifted his face. 'I have a fear of humanoids.' Seeing Dr Kensington's stern look, he hurried on, 'I mean, I've been reading some science fiction stories lately...I know they're all nonsense but...'

The Doctor palpably relaxed. 'Ah, I see.' He smiled.



'Yes, yes,' replied Mr Sparrow ruefully.

'Well, I'm here if you want to ask any questions about them. Perhaps, that would assure you?'

'Yes, yes, oh it would.'

'Fire away.'

'How you can tell the difference between a human and a humanoid?'

Dr Kensington leaned back comfortably in his chair. 'Didn't they teach you this in science class, Mr Sparrow, back when you attended the institutions?'

'Yes, yes, but my memory's foggy, I'm getting old.'

'Well, a humanoid is not a living thing, only a robotic representation of the human form. They can look and feel and act quite lifelike, one of the greatest marvels of modern technology, however, instead of flesh and skin, it has artificial silicone and rubber. Instead of a brain, it has a fizzing, sparking, tangled coil of wires. Instead of bones, it has great, whirring metallic structures - '

'But, how, exactly, could someone test it?'

Dr Kensington frowned. 'Well, there's the identification system, the chips. And I'm sure you've heard that no humanoid ever bleeds. It wouldn't be practical, creating the tenuous, spidery network of blood vessels, could splatter onto the mechanisms within and cause functional disruptions and rusting.'

'But, supposing a humanoid did have veins?'

'Well, ah, well I suppose, supposing that it did, the only true way to figure out is to break open the body of the humanoid, to reveal the metallic structure and network underneath. They make them awful clever, nowadays, you know.'

'Break it open? How would one go about this?'

'Well, you'd have to make some pretty nifty incisions, it's quite - now, hang on, what is your fascination with all this, then, anyways?'

Mr Sparrow stiffly clasped his hands. 'My Fear, doctor. Some incisions, did you say?'

'Oh, right, right you are. Very well then. Well. Yes, incisions, you'd have to cut into the artificial skin and flesh and break it all apart.'

Mr Sparrow leaned forward. 'Break it all apart?'

'Yes, yes, but really, no matter how ingenious they make them, they can never feel emotions or start a revolution or any of that other poppycock in those silly novels. They are, after all, merely machines we use to make our lives easier, like the Ionised Cleaners or the Cooker. Saves us from doing the manual and repetitive work, in offices and factories and the like. It's all really rather straightforward, nothing to be scared of.'

'Oh, yes, very much so. I can't thank you enough Doctor.' He made his way to leave.

'Hey, hey, hold on there, are you sure you're alright? I've never had so short a session before. Oughtn't you come back for some therapy?'

'Oh, no, I've got my hands full with the Baby.'

'Oh, I see. Well, you come around any time when you need me. I have to say, Mr Sparrow, you're looking a bit under the weather. Make sure you're taking the daily nutrient tubes, get a good night's sleep and don't read anymore of those silly novels. Come back for some Pick-Me-Up pills if you need it, alright? They're free of charge.'

'Yes. Yes. Thank you very much, Dr Kensington. Good day.'

He left, the door shutting behind him.

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'How's Brandon? Where is he?'

Mrs Sparrow took off her scarf as she entered the house. Her voice was thin and her lineaments careworn. 'Why, where is the little fellow? I want to hug him. Oh, I'm so tired. You won't believe the horrid little gossipers I had to deal with all day. Where is he? It's awfully quiet today.'

Mr Sparrow sat by himself at the dinner table. He lifted his face as she came into the kitchen, his blue eyes staring into hers, a fork held in one hand.

'It's sleeping. It's sleeping. I wouldn't disturb it if I were you.'

## Grades 11-12

### Third Place | At the Pond | Nina Shallman

You saw her first, of course. No one ever saw you first. And even if they had, they'd forget that they did: you blended into your surroundings with the manipulatable mutability of oil paint. But you saw her and you loved her the second you did.

She was wearing white. Her hair was coal black and hung limp to her hips, brushing her lap as she sat on the old wooden bench. You thought her lips were as profound as the shifting of clouds, the tremor of red autumn leaves. You sang her name that night as you stripped off your sweaty flannel in the solitude of your dingy apartment.

She was flipping languidly through a thin book, a paperback, in the park by the pond. The pond was filmed over with pale vegetation that had settled on the still water last May and lingered. You'd slipped into the bushes after a moment of staring and waited—for what, you weren't quite sure. To be close to her, maybe, to study her, with and without her. The soil seeped between your splayed fingers and the waxy leaves pressed into the skin of your neck. And you waited.

You watched her mouth each word that she read, child-like in her deliberation. She tapped her foot occasionally to what you imagined were periods and other forms of punctuation. A swivel for a comma, a flex for a question mark. What was she reading? You couldn't tell.

She was delicately bird-boned, this girl, the bones and muscles and delicate sinews dipped in caramel-like skin. You wanted to touch her round forehead, momentarily creased in concentration, and feel the fever you yourself felt. You wanted to press her into your thin frame and envelop her.

In time she sighed and closed the paperback, tucking it beneath her arm and standing up with the easy, thoughtless grace of a doe. She stretched briefly as she rose and you watched the muscles expand and contract beneath the thin membrane of her dusky skin. What was she reading?

She began to walk away, with a slight sway, towards a crosswalk that led to a cluster of white apartment buildings and low houses. Her gait was liquid, lilting. You followed her and caught up quickly.

You walked behind her until the scent of her soap—lavender and honey—made you dizzy and moved you to action. When she reached the crosswalk you tapped her shoulder, outstretched hand trembling.

“The book!”

Surprised at your proximity as she turned around, she nearly gasped.

“Jesus, dude.”

Her words were like hitting cold water in a catastrophic, splashing cannonball. This was real, she was real, this was all real and you had *shouted* at her. You felt yourself wilt. You could have beaten your self with a tree branch. You attempted to amend this with a weak, “Hi.”

“Hi...” She blinked at you—*once, twice*—dark eyes huge. She exhaled slowly and laughed a little. “Okay. Hi. Can I help you?”

You stared at her for a second, acutely aware of the pulse at your neck pounding against skin and the gravity of your poor choice, then down at her thin toes, your chin nearly resting on your chest. Ruined. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m... Shit.”

“You’re... shit?” She smiled slowly, a dimple emerging from the corner of her mouth.

“No! Well. Maybe.”

She laughed again, a good sign.

“What I meant to say was—is—God.” You shook your head. “Your book,” you continued, your eyes closed. “That is... what are you reading?”

She raised her brows. “Oh. Okay. Right. It’s, uh, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*.” She hugged the book to her chest, her eyes flicking around your face.

Dickinson. Of course. The quiet, cloistered angel of words in white. Softly, you asked, “Which?”

“The tenth one? In the *Time and Eternity* set,” she said, furrowing her brows. “‘I died for beauty’... Do you know that one?”

You felt something—a heart? a lung?—crash in your chest. You did.

“I do.” You stared at her, she stared back. You stood there, for a while—the moment rebelled against a set time frame. “What’s your name?”

“M-Mona.”

You moaned a bit inside. Her lips had pressed together under the brief, temporary weight of her teeth when she slid out the warm, pressed “mmm” sound of her given name. She gave you her name without a second thought. She was so young.

“Mona,” you said, and again, smiling to yourself, “Mona. Beautiful name. Beautiful.”

Mona. God, and the angels and their lyres, and devils and their liars, and the pits of cherries and cigarette butts—it all made sense to you now. Mmm... ona. Mmm. Such a full, enclosed consonant, so low and resonant. It warmed your throat and belly like tea when you said it to yourself, again and again and again. You’d waited all your life for it. You wanted her “mmm” and the lips that compressed the sound, wanted them pressed together like that always.

You *wanted* her.

“Thank you.” She smiled and tilted her head, a pretty bird, and asked, “Who are you?”

You felt the smile slip from your face and fall flat onto the concrete. Who were you? You were the physical manifestation of a series of unfortunate circumstances that started with your birth and led slowly, almost begrudgingly, to your biological maturity. You were the negative image of a man, the limp silhouette of masculinity. You were nothing, empty, a cul-de-sac edged by unused houses, cautioning any potential visitors back where they came.

“It doesn’t matter,” you told her, because it didn’t.

She made a *pfft* noise. “Silly answer, and untrue.” She stared at you for a second, “I like your shoes, dude—retro.”

You glanced down. Vision Suede Highs, a faded burnt-orange, the tops hidden beneath jean cuffs. Where did you get them again? A mental catalogue of the second-hand stores you’d been to in the past five years scrolled behind your eyes, but the information didn’t come.

“Oh,” you said finally, ending with a weak, “yes.”

“What’s your name?”

“I—uh—”

“Have I seen you before?”

“No.”

Shyly, “Will I see you again?”

You nodded, afraid to speak.

Beat. “You’re timid, huh? So— so *refreshing* in a boy.”

There was a buzzing sound, somewhere in close proximity. You nearly felt it— you felt zinging, electric, your sensory wiring exposed, the dendrites drawn out and sensitive to distant things.

“Right,” she muttered, pressing the palm of her hand to her small purse, her eyes darting around before meeting yours. “I have to go, okay? It was nice meeting you, though.”

She spun off before you could remember to lift your hand as a farewell.

You stared at the concrete, its web of cracks and strips of rusting water stains. She must have known that you were a man, you hadn’t shaved in a while, but she called you a boy. For her, the world was in terms of boys and girls and adults; in a stunning suspension of belief on her part, she enveloped you and all your twenty-eight years of life into her generation. You knew nothing about her world, idiosyncrasies, inside jokes, television shows. You knew of coffee stains on gray slacks, of demanding managers with lipstick on their teeth, of dated PC’s with fatal black screens, flooded with neon-green statistics. You knew of your apartment, your car, your stained carpet, ten years of your mother’s wallpaper and your father’s screams. But the girl overlooked a decade to look you in the eye and smile.

Why? Why would she? You wondered this as you continued to stare at the ground where her feet had been. You imagined the ghost-flesh of her as you closed your eyes, the indelible imprint of her body on your mind, recreating her in cooler, dimmer tones before you, behind your lids. Mona, sweet Mona.

Your lunch break was over. You floated through the glass doors of your office, between the maze of cubicles— late, elated, transformed.

No one looked up.

\* \* \*

She came back the next day. You were there, of course, having left work early. You doubted that this was allowed, but the wheel would spin with one less spoke. You leaned against a tree by the edge of the still pool. The bark pressed into your palms as you tapped your fingers against the trunk in even sets of three—*tap-tap-tap. beat. tap-tap-tap*— trying not to sweat. You’d spent the night in and out of dreams, thinking of her in the lacunas between sleep.

The more you thought about the afternoon, the more elongated your moments with her felt. You couldn’t conceive of a universe in which she wouldn’t return to the park, to you, though she didn’t seem to be a former of habits. Habits comforted you, they always had—*tap-tap-tap, tap-tap-tap*— but the girl had a charming inconstancy about her, a dim, candle’s flame-like flickering. Still, you knew she would come.

Her hair was up when she arrived, lifted, piled on her head like a Gibson Girl’s. You poked your head further from behind the tree to get a better look. You didn’t know what to call the style— a bun?

No. Too elaborate, too braided. But with her hair lifted from her neck like this she reminded you of the framed picture of a Russian dancer that your mother had had on her dresser. Pavlova, that was it, Anna Pavlova—a tulle-swathed ballerina, with arms like soft, pale V's when she rested her cheek delicately on the backs of her hands, staring heavy-lidded, out of the photo, out of the black and white.

Mona took out her book, but there was a self-consciousness to her actions, the telltale, stiff attempt at naturalism that hints at poor acting— acting for you, perhaps? It endeared her further to you. You imagined that she was waiting for you, that she was acutely aware of your eyes trailing down the back of her neck and in fact wore her hair just like that to inform you, in code, it was alright to approach.

You did.

“Mona?” You loved saying it out aloud, loved that you were allowed to.

She turned around and smiled, her hand smoothing her hair down lightly. “Hello, Mr. Mystery.”

You smiled at the nickname. “I like the way that sounds.”

“Me too.” She waved you over. “Step into my office, sir.”

You shuffled closer and folded your frame into a seating position. “So,” you started after a moment, “What’s on the reading agenda today?”

“National Geographic. It’s an older edition— there’s an article about Mallard ducks, like the ones over there,” she said, pointing out across the pond. You followed her finger to a pair of ducks floating across the water. A green one, a brown one, in tandem.

“Ducks are monogamous, to a degree.” How did you know that? You couldn’t remember the source of the information.

She stared out for a minute before replying. “I believe that. Ducks are simple and beautiful. Done right, monogamy is simple and beautiful.”

*You are simple and beautiful.*

“I’d like to believe we are, too.”

“Beautiful? Yes. Simple? Nope, no, we’re not.”

You’d meant monogamous, but her words made you wonder:

“How old are you?”

“Nearly eighteen.” She paused, before adding, “I’ll be eighteen this month. September 15<sup>th</sup>— I’m a Virgo.”

You nodded. She continued: “I look younger sometimes and older sometimes, depending on the hair day. Up, down, braids— sometimes waiters give me the wine menu, sometimes the kids’ menu. It’s all about context.” She smiled. “Yourself?”

Everything inside you raged about giving definitive answers. “A bit older.”

She raised a brow. “So, Mr. Mystery continues to be mysterious!”

“Well, I, I’m not trying to—I don’t mean to—”

“No, no, no, I dig that, I dig it!” she interrupted, placing a hand on your elbow. It began to tingle. “We all need to be a little mysterious, don’t you think? I’m not. I give too much away, all at once. It’s kind of a problem. At least, my mom thinks so. She got me into Dickenson, actually.” She frowned, and began to study her hands, tracing the crescents of her fingernails with the tip of her index finger. “I’m always outside, following things, and I feel like she wanted to make me, I don’t know, appreciate the kind of art that comes out of solitude. I mean, I’m not the artist.”

*Perhaps not, you’d thought, but you’re certainly the art.*

“She’s a photographer. She’s... quiet.” She splayed her fingers quickly, dropping them to her lap with a grin. “See, there I go.”

“I like listening to you talk,” you told her, worried that her thoughts or concerns would be lost to you for propriety’s sake. “Don’t censor yourself on my behalf, please.”

She smiled at you and you felt an uncoiling in your throat, a slow dissipation of the tension that had plagued you all morning. In fact, you were soaring.

“You’re right. We’re not strangers, not really.”

The sun broke through the tree branches and hit her face at an angle, illuminating her eyes. In the light they were large, wet looking, the color not dissimilar to molasses, or the coffee drops your grandma had had by the front door when you were young. You’d spit them out at dinner, those loud family dinners, and they’d gleam like pennies in your hand, with hints of red in the light. She used her hand to shield the light from her face.

“The water looks unbelievable,” she said.

You looked. It did.



