

**ANN ARBOR DISTRICT LIBRARY**

**PRESENTS**

**2011**

**IT'S ALL WRITE**

**SHORT STORY CONTEST**

**PRIZE-WINNING**

**SHORT STORIES**

**BY**

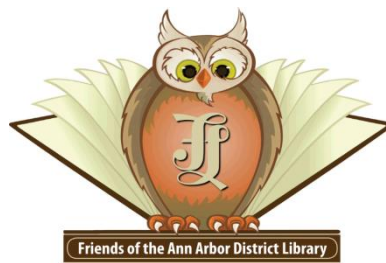
**MIDDLE & HIGH SCHOOL**

**STUDENTS**



**2011**  
**ANN ARBOR DISTRICT LIBRARY**  
**IT'S ALL WRITE**  
**SHORT STORY WRITING CONTEST**  
**FOR MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL**  
**STUDENTS**

Congratulations to the winners of the 19<sup>th</sup> annual teen short story contest whose stories appear in this booklet. The Library recognizes the creativity and courageous efforts of all writers who participated. The awards and this publication were made possible through a grant from the Friends of the Ann Arbor District Library.

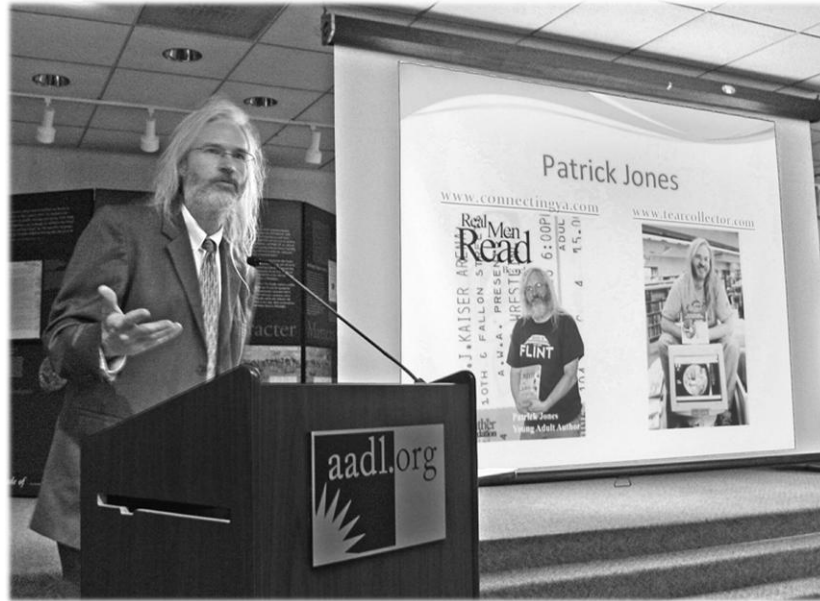


**Friends of the Ann Arbor District Library**



**Ann Arbor District Library**

© 2011



## **PATRICK JONES**

Author and former librarian for teens, **Patrick Jones** announced the winners and discussed the craft of writing at the 2011 Teen Short Story Awards Program. His first novel for teens, *Things Change*, was named by the Young Adult Library Services Association as a best book for reluctant readers. He's currently working on his seventh novel and is a frequent speaker at library conferences, having visited all fifty states.



## Judges

### Cherry Cheva

Cherry's full name is Cherry Chevapravatdumrong. She's originally from Ann Arbor, Michigan. She is the author of two novels, *She's So Money* and *DupliKate*, and she also co-authored, with Alex Borstein, *It Takes a Village Idiot, and I Married One*. Cherry currently serves as a writer/producer on 'Family Guy.' She lives in Los Angeles.

### John C. Ford

With his debut mystery, *The Morgue and Me*, John received an Edgar Honor Award, and a nomination for the Michigan Library Association Teen Services 'Thumbs Up!' Award. With a law degree from the University of Michigan, John has already proven he can write stories in addition to his legal briefs.

### Sugi Ganeshanathan

Sugi teaches at the University of Michigan, where she is the Zell Visiting Professor of Creative Writing. She's a fiction writer and journalist, a graduate from Harvard, the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and the M.A. program at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. Random House published her first novel, *Love Marriage*, in April 2008.

### K. L. Going

Currently a fulltime writer, she's earned the esteemed Printz Honor Award, as well as, Michigan 'Thumbs Up!' Honor, and YALSA Best Books recognitions. Ms. Going has written eight teen novels. In addition, Ms. Going, has published a book about writing and selling the YA Novel.

### Dana Reinhardt

Dana's most recent novel, *The Things A Brother Knows*, was named as one of **the five best teen books of the year by NPR** and one of the ALA Top Ten Best Fiction Books for Teens. Her three other novels, all have received multiple starred reviews, with *The Summer I Learned to Fly* due out July 2011.

**Francisco X. Stork**

Francisco works as an attorney and lives near Boston. *Marcello in the Real World* received honors as a YALSA Top 10 Book Award for Young Adults and a Michigan ‘Thumbs Up!’ Honor book. Most recently, *The Last Summer of the Death Warriors* was released with starred reviews in 2010.

**Joyce Sweeney**

Joyce is the author of 14 novels for teens, as well as having memorable short stories published in various collections. Her first novel, *Center Line* won the ‘First Annual Delacorte Press Prize for an Outstanding Young Adult Novel.’ Many of her other books appear on ALA’s Best Books list and Quick Picks for Reluctant Readers.

**Megan Whalen Turner**

Megan graduated from the University of Chicago with honors in 1987. Her first novel, *The Thief*, was awarded the Newbery Medal Honor and followed up by *The King of Attolia*, which was a 2007 Best Book for Young Adults. In 2010 with *The Conspiracy of Kings*, Ms. Turner received several starred reviews with this title that continues the series.

**Paul Volponi**

Paul is a writer, journalist and teacher. He received his Masters in American Literature from the City College of New York. For the past six years he’s taught teens on Rikers Island to read and write His first book, *Black and White* was a Michigan Thumbs Up Honor book and both *Rooftop* and *Rucker Park Setup* are Junior Literary Guild selections.



## Screeners

### Grade 12

Sarah Fabian, EMU Librarian  
Greg Schutz, MFA U of M Graduate

### Grade 11

Miriam Torres, Teen Representative  
Richard Retyi, 826michigan Volunteer

### Grade 10

Jenny Howard, 826michigan Volunteer  
Kara Krause, Teen Representative

### Grade 9

Shirlinia Coleman, AADL Staff Volunteer  
Gayle Townsend, Barnes & Noble Teen Rep

### Grade 8

Keith Hood, 826michigan Volunteer  
Nazifa Islam, 826michigan Volunteer

### Grade 7

Angela Scott, 826michigan Volunteer  
Charmaine Chui, 826michigan Volunteer

### Grade 6

Diane Alson, Dexter Lib. Teen Librarian  
Lisa McClure, Chelsea Lib. Teen Librarian

Contest Coordinators: Vicki Browne & Shirley Coleman  
Contest Assistant: Tahira Naeem



**2011  
IT'S ALL WRITE  
PRIZE-WINNING STORIES**

**BY  
MIDDLE & HIGH SCHOOL  
STUDENTS**

**1st Place  
Middle School**

**Clark and Division  
By Samantha Puckorius**

Dave Williams started his first day at the Clark and Division train station on Monday, February 27. He was an engineer. The cold February air cut straight through his neon green CTA windbreaker. He walked in the tunnel, buying his time looking at the rounded roof above him. The thump of his boots on the tracks was the only sound except for the whistle of the wind above the underground ceiling.

Dave sat down in the office by the window overlooking the train stop to eat his lunch. He noticed an older man sitting alone at the far end of the station. A large green overcoat covered the man's hunched shoulders. A red tattered knit cap covered the man's head, a few sprouts of hair visible under the cap. He had a small amount of stubble on his cheeks, surprisingly more well-shaven than any other homeless person. A black scarf was around his neck and brown fingerless gloves covered his hands. Worn black boots could be seen from under the bottom of the green coat. A rip in the seam of the boot gave way to a gray sock. He was shaking from the cold. Dave paid no further attention to the man and continued to eat his turkey on rye with mustard and lettuce.

A few weeks later in March, Dave noticed him again. The man sat there every day, from eight in the morning till five-thirty at night. Dave asked his coworkers about the man, but no one had noticed him sitting there.

Dave watched the man from the office window while he ate his lunch. Dave felt bad for him. Sure, it was March, but in Chicago it was still cold. The wind seemed to go straight through your clothing. Having no money made food even harder to come by. The man was probably hungry.

Dave walked out of the office with his lunch. The man paid no attention as Dave approached him from across the train stop. Dave stood next to the bench for a few minutes, unsure of what to say. Deciding that words were just a formality, he sat down next to the man. "Hello," said Dave.

The man continued to look across the tracks. It seemed as if he was waiting for a train to pass by. His eyes never wavered, though no train would be coming for quite some time. Clark and Division was under repairs, and no trains had been by in weeks. "My name is Dave Williams. I'm an engineer at this stop," Dave said.

The man continued looking across the tracks. "What's your name, sir?" asked Dave.

He did not reply. Dave started to open his lunch—a thermos of hot coffee, a sandwich, tuna on whole wheat with mayo and tomatoes, and a shamrock shaped cookie with green frosting wrapped in plastic. Dave poured some of the coffee into the thermos lid and offered it to the man. At first, the man simply ignored the cup. Dave extended his arm even farther towards him. The man looked down at the steaming coffee and then up at Dave. Dave was surprised. From a distance, and even as Dave sat next to him, the man appeared to be over fifty years old. Now as he looked into the man's cerulean eyes, Dave realized that the man was younger than he was, and Dave was only thirty-six.

The man took the cup of coffee from Dave's hand and started drinking. Dave raised his sandwich to his mouth to take a bite, but froze before he clamped his incisors



into his lunch. He tore his sandwich in half and asked the man, "Do you want some?"

The homeless man nodded his head and extended his knit-gloved hand. Dave watched him closely while they ate. While he held his half of the tuna on whole wheat, the man's hands appeared fine, but as he folded the napkin Dave had given him, his hands twitched and shook with every motion. Dave handed him a cookie wrapped in plastic. The homeless man started to unwrap it, but his fumbling hands could not seem to be able to grab hold of the wrapper. "Would you like some help?" Dave asked.

A simple nod was the only reply given. Dave took the cookie and unwrapped it, the green frosting sticking to his numb hands. He handed the shamrock cookie back to the man and resumed eating his half of his turkey on rye.

After a few more minutes, Dave checked his watch and realized that his lunch break was over. He got up from the bench, picked up his gloves and the remains of his lunch, and started to head back to the office. He paused for a moment in thought. Dave turned around and set his nearly full thermos of hot coffee back on the bench with the man. "Have a nice day," Dave said as he headed back to work.

The next morning, Dave entered the station around eight forty five. The man sitting on the bench in the large green overcoat was already there. As he approached the office door, Dave noticed that his thermos was placed in front of the door, empty. Dave picked it up and entered the office. He would have one the guys fill up later when they went on a coffee run.

For a whole year Dave and the homeless man sat together on the far bench at the Clark and Division station eating lunch. They never spoke. Every day Dave would help the man with his lunch, the small task of unwrapping plastic too difficult for the man's hands. When it became hot outside, Dave brought him water. When it became cold, Dave got the homeless man his own thermos and would fill it up with steaming hot coffee for him. On holidays, Dave would bring him a present or treat. The unspoken agreement to share lunch was a bond that the two shared. They felt a sort of dependency upon one another. Dave's coworkers always eyed him unusually now, wondering what he was doing talking to, let alone sharing his lunch with a homeless man.

Dave began to notice that the homeless man had other problems besides his hands. During lunch, the man would occasionally stop eating and stare back across the tracks. His body would become rigid. Sometimes he would even drop his food in his seemingly catatonic state. Dave learned of John's true problem one day in December.

That particular December day was one of the coldest days that winter. The temperature was seven degrees with a wind chill of negative one. The crisp winter air seemed to fill the subway station. Dave's lungs were becoming frozen and sore, worn out from the difficulty to breathe. He walked in the tunnel, returning from an early morning check of the electrical wires to make sure they hadn't frozen over. Another train would soon be passing by, and Dave quickened his pace and jumped up onto the platform. The faint whirring of a train could be heard, not so far off in the distance. Huddled, asleep underneath his bench, was the homeless man. No blankets covered him, just his customary winter gear, not warm enough for this type of weather. Sleeping was dangerous. Many didn't wake up when it was this cold out. Dave walked over to him and began to gently shake him awake. The man barely stirred. He was mumbling incoherently. Dave shook a little more forcefully, and said, "Sir. Sir, wake up."

The man began to writhe in his sleep, becoming more agitated in his slumber.

Dave shook him even harder. The man bolted awake, eyes wide open and screamed. He looked at Dave with fury, not recognizing him. The homeless man jumped up and stood in an aggressive stance as if he was prepared to fight. Dave put his hands out as a sign of surrender. The homeless man ignored him and tackled Dave. He began to strangle Dave, his large hands enclosed around Dave's windpipe. The man seemed to be under a trance of unrecognizable fury. Dave fought him off, punching the homeless man's chest. The choking would not relent. Black spots started to appear in Dave's line of vision. He took his arm and rammed it into the homeless man's elbow. The homeless man lost his grip and fell backward onto the cold, hard gray cement. Dave got up and went over to the homeless man. Dave stood over him and was prepared to strike. Before he could lay a blow, Dave looked down at the homeless man. He was cowering in a fetal position with his hands covering his face. Dave froze in surprise. He nudged the homeless man with his foot. The man in the green overcoat looked up at Dave. The bright cerulean eyes of the homeless man were wide with tears. His shame and fear were evident. The man was trembling.

The homeless man began to crawl away from Dave. He got up and ran out of the station, turning to look back at Dave. Dave faintly called out after him, "Wait."

Dave's breathing was still constricted. He took calming breaths and rubbed his neck. He was going to have bruises. The grip had been so tight. He closed his eyes, still shaking from the lack of oxygen in his blood flow. "What just happened?" he asked himself, "Why did he attack me? What had I done wrong?"

Dave thought about what had happened in his head. He had walked over to the homeless man and shook him awake. The homeless man had been mumbling and writhing in his sleep. Maybe that was it. He seemed to be having a nightmare. Was he reliving the nightmare?

The next day the homeless man wasn't at the station. Dave spent his whole lunch break searching the station, checking all the nooks and crannies he could find or knew of. After a week of searching, Dave went out to the street above during his lunch break. He searched the local alleyways till he found them. In an alley behind the nearest coffee shop was a group of homeless people. He approached them cautiously, calling out, "Hello," in order to not surprise them. They all turned to look at him, but then ignored him as if he wasn't there. He tried to approach them. As soon as he got close, they scampered away like rats. "Please, I need your help," said Dave.

They continued to ignore him. "I'm looking for a man who used to sit down at the Clark and Division station. He wears a large green overcoat, black boots, a red knit cap, brown gloves, a black scarf. He hasn't shown up in a week. Please, I need to find him," pleaded Dave.

The homeless continued to ignore him. Dave began to walk away when he felt someone grab his arm. He turned around and an elderly Hispanic woman had her hand on him. Her dark brown eyes bore into Dave's green ones. She made him feel as if she could see right through him. Her tan skin was weathered and wrinkling, showing signs of her age. She wore a magenta cap over her frizzy black hair. A blue and red flowered scarf with tassels covered her hunched shoulders. Under that she wore a brown corduroy coat with a large green sweater that reached to her knees underneath. Black sweatpants covered her short legs. She wore white sneakers, or at least once they were white. "Are you the one who fed him?" she asked Dave in a strong Spanish accent.

“How did you know about that?” Dave asked.

“He stopped coming for lunch every day. He only sleeps here now. He used to be here all day but not anymore,” she replied.

“So where is he?” Dave demanded. “He hasn’t shown up for a week.”

“Calma, Señor. We haven’t seen him either. He was here a week ago. He was running and out of breath. We asked him what was wrong, but he never talks. He huddled in a corner and grabbed his knees. He rocked back and forth. His eyes were wide open in fear.” The old woman cocked her head to the side. “What happened in the subway, Señor?”

“I, I, I don’t really know. He was sleeping under his bench. It was too cold to sleep there, so I went to wake him up and check on him. He had been mumbling in his sleep and moving. I shook him awake, and he jumped up and attacked me. We fought, he started to choke me, and I threw him off of me. He cowered on the ground as if he was ashamed and got up and ran away. I haven’t seen him since.”

“He attacked you? He is usually very quiet and keeps to himself. Did you do anything wrong? Take something of his?”

“I don’t believe I did. I just woke him up.”

“We’ll watch out for him. I’ll send one of us down to tell you if we see him.”

“Thank you,” John said.

He walked back to the station, his head down, contemplating all that had happened.

Dave never saw the homeless man. He searched for him during his lunch break and on the weekends for two months. It was early March, and the train tracks were frozen. Dave was called in at midnight on Saturday night to defrost the tracks at the station. It was dangerous work. Trains still passed by.

Dave was defrosting the control panel handle with a blowtorch when he spotted a large object down the tunnel in one of the holes in the wall. He walked over, stepping over the racks as he went. Dave realized what the mound was when he was a few feet away. It was the homeless man covered in a blanket and cardboard. Dave approached quietly, not wanting to wake him because of what happened the last time he did. One of the man’s blankets had fallen onto the tracks. Dave picked it up and placed it over the man. He walked to the control panel where he had left his thermos. He placed it next to the man in the cubby hole.

Dave returned on Monday to find his thermos in front of the office door. At lunchtime he went to the cubby hole where he had found the man. The homeless man was asleep again. Dave set the lunch in the cubby hole and went to eat his own lunch in the office. The next day the homeless man was sleeping on the bench. The subway station was filled with parents and excited children. The homeless man was hiding in a corner, away from all the families. Dave was in the office, watching the train monitors. A little girl with blond pigtails in a bright red pea coat was peering over the edge of the tracks, trying to see the train that would soon be arriving. She was teetering over the edge, one step from landing on the tracks.

The little girl leaned even farther. She lost her balance and fell onto the tracks with a little yelp. No one saw her. No one saw her fall except the homeless man. He threw off all of his blankets and got down onto the tracks.

Dave was watching the monitors when he saw something in the corner of his eye.

He looked at the monitor. The homeless man was on the tracks. Dave's eyes widened in shock. He peeled out of the office. A train was due any minute.

When the little girl fell, she hit her head and was knocked unconscious. The homeless man tried to lift her, but the edge of her coat was stuck in the tracks. He began to unbutton the coat. His shaking hands fumbled with each red button. He could hear the squeak of the train get louder. The train lights could be seen not so far off down the tunnel.

Dave stood on the platform above the homeless man and the little girl. "What can I do?" he asked.

The homeless man looked up at him with fear in his eyes. "Help," the homeless man replied quietly.

Dave jumped down onto the tracks and proceeded to get the girl out of her coat. A crowd was beginning to gather on the platform above. "My baby!" a woman yelled above.

Dave turned his head to speak with her while he undid the buttons. "Ma'm, I need you to stay up there. Everything will be alright."

The woman began to sob as she watched her child laying in peril. Dave pulled the girl out of her coat and lifted her up. The front of the train was quickly approaching. Dave put her onto the platform. He pulled himself up and turned to help the homeless man. The homeless man reached up to Dave, but his arm was too short and he was too weak. Dave leaned down even farther. He was going to save this man. He pulled with all his might, yet he felt nothing grab on. He felt himself get pulled back. All he saw was the blur of a train passing by.

The trains in Clark and Division were shut down for the rest of the day. The police came not quickly after the homeless man died. They had been called because of the little girl. Dave was the first to go onto the tracks to look at the body. He bent down, feeling as if he couldn't breathe because of his guilt. Tears started to appear in Dave's eyes. He looked down at the homeless man. The man's body was beaten and broken. His cerulean eyes were hazed over. A piece of shiny metal caught Dave's eye. It was connected to a chain. He put it in his hand and looked at it. It was a pair of dog tags. They read Capt. John Downings, U. S. Army, 506<sup>th</sup> Airborne, Company F, 6/23/52.

Dave sat next to the body in shock. He remained there until he felt a hand on his shoulder. A police officer was standing over him. "The EMTs already pronounced him dead, sir. There's nothing you can do. We need to take the body now," the officer said solemnly.

"He was a soldier," Dave whispered.

"Pardon me, sir?" asked the officer.

"He was a soldier, officer. He wasn't just some homeless man. He was a soldier," Dave said a little louder this time.

The police officer, seeing the dog tags that were still in Dave's hands, said, "We'll make sure he gets the proper burial."

Dave nodded, not wanting to say anymore. He put the dog tags down, stood up, and climbed back onto the platform. His shift was over. He gathered his things and left the station a changed man.

Dave was regarded as a hero that day, as was the homeless man. Dave was awarded a medal from the mayor. None of it mattered though; he wanted to know more

about Captain John Downings, Army veteran and homeless man of the Clark and Division station. A week after the accident, Dave went to the Army office downtown. He approached the desk and requested Captain John Downings' file.

Captain John Downings had been born in Joliet, Illinois, to Louis and Mary Downings. John and his four siblings had been born and raised on the Downings farm, six miles outside of downtown Joliet. He enlisted during his senior year of high school in 1970. Less than a year later John deployed out to Vietnam. He was in the 506th Airborne, Company F. He fought all over Vietnam. He received a silver star, a Purple Heart, and the Medal of Honor. He was wounded in a mine explosion not long after receiving the Medal of Honor. He was sent back to America in 1977. John was diagnosed by Army doctors with PTSD and schizophrenia not long after.

The file ended there. Dave read the file cover to cover. He handed the file back to the desk after an hour and a half.

Dave Williams worked for the CTA until he retired at the age of sixty-five. Even after he retired, he brought food to the homeless at the train stop. There was always at least one homeless person at the Clark and Division stop until the day Dave Williams died.



**2nd Place  
Middle School**

**Nexus  
By Carissa Skye**

The Nexus Guard.

They are the strongest, the fastest, and the smartest. They protect us when no one else can.

None of them are over nine years old.

<><><><><><>

Rider surveyed his bunk. Nothing in it was moving, and there were no wet patches. He swept back the sheet and made a close inspection of the mattress. No new stains. Rider hopped on. It seemed he was safe, for now.

The rest of the small, dark room was a madhouse. Small children ran, screamed, jumped, wrestled, and generally did what small children do. That was why Rider had checked his bed, in case any of them had dared played a practical joke. Rider was way up in the Guard's hierarchy, since he had the double blessing of a powerful gift and age. Rider was the second oldest kid in the block. He would be ten in two months and - Rider stopped for a second and counted on his fingers. Two months and 18 days.

"Rider?" He looked down at the kid tugging on his pant leg. It was Bolt, a five-year-old boy who could do something the white-coats called "the voluntary escalation of a body's electrical charge to produce a lightning effect." The bunch of fancy words, it turned out, meant the kid could shoot lightning bolts. He was pretty high in the pecking order, too.

"Yeah?" Rider asked absently.

"Can you come? We wanna play a game."

"Sure. Whatcha doin'?" Rider responded, jumping off his bunk and following Bolt through the mess of children.

"We're gonna play tackle-tag. But ya ain't allowed to use any cheats," Bolt sighed. That particular was instigated after Racket, the only kid older than Rider, had started playing tag by using his powers of mind control to freeze everyone in the room. The white-coats got mad and said the "excess use of extra-sensory powers could cause unanticipated side effects." But the rest of the kids agreed that mind-freezing wasn't a fair way to play a game. So they made a rule. It was the way the Guard worked. The kids ruled themselves and paid as little attention as possible to the white-coats.

Tackle-tag was taking place in one of the training yards. The goal is to keep away from the person who's 'it,' while 'it' tries to tackle people. Tackled people die and have to sit out for the rest of the game.

Forna was 'it' for this game. She was an eight-year-old girl who was really fast and could jump and flip and run really well. The white-coats called it 'agility' or 'dexterity.' As Rider and Bolt watched, she used a post as a springboard to leap onto the back of eight-year-old Durna, bringing the super-strong hulk of a boy crashing to the ground. Rider shook his head, teasing Bolt.

"You didn't tell me Fornia was it! I'm waiting 'till next round." Rider went over to sit next to Racket, his best friend. The two watched Fornia leap and flip over the court like a demented butterfly, bringing down one kid after the other.

“It’s been no fun since I can’t use my mind,” Racket told Rider. “I’m no speedy. I’m weak in my body.”

“But you’re mind-strong,” Rider argued, surprised at this sudden down in Racket’s usually happy self. “Only Senti can beat you in school, and you can beat her in the races. It’s like the white-coats say, that all the gifts have a down-side.”

“Yeah,” Racket agreed. “Still, it’s harder when you’re body-weak. The strong ones get all the attention.”

“And you saved ‘em all when that giant cat-mutt was eating Knocker. You got it to run off and jump in the river!” Rider protested.

“Yes, I do feel that my mind-powers are getting stronger. I wonder what I’ll be able to do soon.”

Forna concluded the game as she kicked the legs out from under Boulder, leaving Riona the last one standing. Riona had fangs and retractable claws. She was really good in a fight, and no one liked to get near her just in case. As Rider hopped up to join the bell rang, calling the kids to mind-school. They all groaned. Only the mind-strong people, like Senti and Racket, enjoyed the book learning. The rest of them, with body-gifts, preferred the training and fighting classes. Rider was somewhere in between. His Gift was a mind-gift. It let him see and understand what creatures like humans and mutts were going to do before they did it, a mind-gift that was used for fighting. Those sorts of Gifts are very rare. It meant that Rider was a good student, but he didn’t particularly like school.

“All right, kids, settle down, settle down. This is the start of your lesson on basic genetics. This will help you explain and understand some of the abilities that you exhibit,” the white-coat in the front of the room bleated as the Nexus kids spilled into the classroom. This was the highest-level class, for older kids and those with strong mind-gifts. The white-coat who ran it, a black-haired woman who liked the kids to call her ‘Auntie,’ was one of the least liked white-coats in the Nexus Guard compound. She was always pushing for more tests, nightmare sessions where children were hooked up to computers and forced to run on treadmills or take electric shocks while their bodies’ responses were monitored. Auntie thought that they were essential research.

Despite their dislike, the children settled down quickly. They knew the consequences if they didn’t.

“Now, let’s start with an overview of the recent history which caused your mutations.” That was another reason Auntie was disliked. She treated them like they were all as dumb as the newest body-gift Guard. They’d only gone over the nuclear apocalypse once a month, in relation to different topics.

“Now, children, as you may remember, the world a little over ten years ago was very different. There were thousands of cities, all of them bigger than Nexus, and billions of people all over the globe. Animals were very rare, as humans took up most of the room. There were no mutts or Gifted, not yet. Then bad people got hold of the nuclear weapons supply of a country called North Korea. The world’s governments refused to answer certain demands, so the bad people set off the bombs. These bombs made huge explosions and wiped out almost all of the humans and animals. Then the effects of these bombs, called radiation, infected a lot of babies, both human and animal. The radiation changed certain parts of your genes, causing you to be different from normal.” Auntie rambled on. She talked to them in a mix of white-coat blather and baby talk, another

reason she was hated.

Rider watched Racket out of the corner of his eye. Racket always hated this class, but today he was worse, staring strangely at Auntie. Rider remembered the phrase he heard one time, 'if looks could kill.' He enjoyed thoughts of what different kinds of looks might do to Auntie.

Racket clenched his fist, nearly growling. Suddenly Auntie's mouth snapped shut mid-sentence. Her head jerked backwards, and she fell against the wall behind her. Racket was glaring murderously at Auntie.

"Racket, no! Don't hurt her!" yelled Grallay, a gentle, sweet girl who could lift almost any weight. "Racket! Stop!"

Racket looked down, seeming confused, his fist still clenched in front of him. Auntie struggles for air.

WEEEEEOOOOOO!!! WEEEEEOOOOOO!!!

The alarm rang, impossibly loud and far away, bursting through everyone's thoughts, shaking off Racket's grip over Auntie. A mutt attack. The children leapt out of their desks, running pell-mell for the door. Racket hesitated, then went with them as Auntie used her desk as a crutch to struggle upright.

The kids filled the hallway. There were no more than two dozen of them, but somehow they filled up the space as if there were twenty dozen. There had been only five in Auntie's class, but they had all been trained to fight the mutts, the mutated animals, aggressive and powerful. They attacked the city of Nexus for food and survival. They had run virtually unopposed until the powers of these children had been discovered. Now the safety of the last city, the last human outpost in North America, lay in the hands of a few dozen children.

Those children dashed into a room, rather like a gymnasium, filled with strange piles of equipment. Some of it looked like bullet-proof vests. There were iron rods and packets of seeds. These were the children's equipment, the things they used to fight. Bolt used an iron rod to channel his electricity. A girl called Flower could manipulate the plants, making them grow up fast and dangerous. Rider took only a thin suit, designed to protect but not inhibit movement. He needed nothing to channel his Gift of knowledge, of the foresight into creature's actions.

Rider didn't consider such things as he ran with the another, a boy who could hear with amazing accuracy. He could hear a fly buzzing across the room, and he led them to the place the alarm was ringing from, on the far side of Nexus. Ringtail, a girl who could run twice as fast as Forna, scouted ahead then returned. She shouted as the kids ran.

"It's some kind of mutt wolf pack. They've got a building closed up, and they're going to break in soon! There must be ten of them!"

The children pounded around a corner onto the scene. A few bikes were overturned, and one of the mutts looked like it had already found a meal in a Nexus citizen. The ten wolves, all of them taller than Rider, turned to see this new threat. They growled, coming together to form a menacing line.

Rider ran ahead, into the ranks that had been practiced so often. Agile people in front, then the strong attackers, kids with no fighting-skills behind.

He was the first rank. They were there to protect the strong ones behind them, the ones his kids called the Pounders. They ran into the enemy first, distracted and



scratched them so the Pounders would be safer.

Rider was in the center of the line, Ringtail on his right and Forna on his left. A bolt of lightning shot overhead, distracting the wolf-mutts even more. Then the ranks crashed into them.

Rider dropped as he came in, sliding under the wolf-mutt's snapping jaws. He came up, side-stepped to let Ringtail pass, and grabbed the long fur of the wolf, climbing onto its back. The wolf growled and turned to snap at him.

Just in time to get Riona's claws in its eye. The wolf yelped, half blinded and in pain. Racket leaped off it seconds before it ran, away from a raid gone horribly wrong. Then it stumbled and froze, held in place by Racket. Rider turned away. Watching Racket force creatures to kill themselves always seemed to him a perversion, something wrong and twisted. But the white-coats liked it.

The battle raged around him. The Guards were as close to outnumbered as they ever were, and counting out kids like Senti who did nothing but stand and watch made the numbers almost equal. Rider and Riona's easy victory hadn't reflected the rest of the battle.

After the initial shock of the attack, the fight dissolved into simple melee. A whirl of fighting, of kicking and dodging and injuries and pain. The white-coats told the kids it was awesome, important work, but that didn't mean Rider had to like it.

Still, none of that mattered now. His senses were on high, reacting to the slightest movement, kicking into an opening and moving out before it closed around him as the jaws of a wolf-mutt. This was what the Guards trained for, and they were good at it.

Then something went wrong. Rider heard a scream, Forna's scream. He turned, leaping away from the wolf he was fighting, to see her clamped in the bloody jaws of a wolf-mutt. Rider ran to her, dodging around wolves, joined by the other children who could get away from their wolves to help Forna. How had she gotten caught? The wolf-mutts were slow, and she quick and fast.

The wolf-mutt saw the determined, shocked children closing in around it and decided it had had enough. It bounded off, Forna still in its jaws, signaling a mass retreat for the five remaining wolf-mutts. They leaped over the bodies of their comrades and away, away from the slaughterhouse. Ringtail raced after them, but she soon stopped and came back, knowing she couldn't take on six wolf-mutts by herself.

What was Racket doing? He should have stopped the wolf, easily, yet he didn't. Then the wolf was gone, and with it, Forna.

Rider stopped, stunned. Forna, gone? How was that possible? She was always there, fast and powerful. No one ever got...taken...by the mutts. They were too good for that. No. It wasn't possible. He turned, to see Racket standing next to him.

"Why didn't you stop it? It got Forna! What did you do, Racket?" Rider wailed. Racket simply stood there, grinning a little.

"Don't you see, Rider? This is what the white-coats do to us. They put us in danger and act like it's a good thing. I just wanted to point it out."

"What are you saying? What did you do to Forna?" Rider cried, attracting the attention of the others.

Racket shrugged carelessly. "I zapped her for a second, is all. Anyways, why do you care? You're always prying into me! Why don't you leave me alone?" Racket

abandoned his usually casual attitude, getting suddenly violent and defensive, settling into the an attack posture, glaring angrily at Rider.

“You killed her, Ra...”

“So?!” Racket screamed, his eyes blazing, his face twisted into a demonic caricature of a smile. “I’m sick of this, of tagging along like a puppy, following orders! I’m leaving, and the rest of you would be better off if you did, too!”

Suddenly Rider’s legs fell out from under him. A red-hot spot of pain flared in his side, like someone was digging a hot poker through his ribcage. He screamed and writhed, curled up on the ground. *Oh, make it stop, just make it stop.*

Riona crashed into Racket, breaking his concentration, leaving Rider gasping on the ground. The fifteen remaining members of the Guard circled around Racket. They stood in silence, staring at him. A low rumble started around the circle, a growl as they watched Racket, the one they all turned to when they needed help, the calm, mellow boy who had just killed Forna and tortured his best friend. What was happening to him? He was getting more and more angry, whirling in circles, glaring at them, fingers curled into claws.

Ringtail collapsed. She fought with herself, her hands forcing their way to his throat. Durna grabbed her hands, holding them back, until he, too, was invaded and staggered away, gasping as his mind forgot his body needed to breathe.

Racket was smiling, sure of his power now as he held in place every one of his classmates, the hated Guard, the little blank-minded followers. He was different. He was strong. He could do anything. He needed no masters, no people who like these who would question his every action.

And he could do this easily in his anger, finding levels of power he didn’t know he had, easily stripping a mind of its defenses and pushing it to the limit. He laughed, exultant, safe in the knowledge that nothing could hurt him. The master looked down at the screaming children. He had put them there. They were weak. He would rule.

<><><><><><>

In a lab back at the Guard house, three white-coats were examining files. A fourth ran up, holding a sheet of paper. He spoke.

“Do you remember when we realized the genes changed by certain mutations caused side effects such as paranoia and aggression?” this white-coat asked his colleagues.

“Yes, and we charted the dates that these changes would occur for each of the children so that we could take them out of commission and ensure the safety of Nexus,” answered another, easily, unworried but curious.

“I just realized, looking at these files. We made a mistake in the calculations. Subject 00027, the one who can control minds. His date is today. He is powerful enough that the mutated genes will probably cause him to attempt to destroy or dominate whoever he’s with. We have to get him out.”

“The subjects are out fighting, though! There was a breach. Ten wolf-mutants got through the wall. He’s with them,” gasped a different white-coat. “The fight will trigger the aggression genes and speed the process. We may have to neutralize the subjects. All the subjects. We don’t know what he’ll do to them.”

“Neutralize? How? This is going to be a sociopath who is capable of mind-

control! I've seen him force creatures to quit breathing, or take them over and make them fight for him!"

"With those chips we implanted in their brains. We can cause them to self-destruct. The only problem is that the signal for the self-destruction system is sent through a wave. Any other chip within thirty feet of where we send the signal will also self-destruct."

"What will the chip's self-destruction mechanism do?"

"Basically? Blow up in miniature, blasting a hole in the brain and causing instant death with no recognizable symptoms from the outside."

"Is there any way we can avoid killing our other subjects?"

"Not unless they are far away from him, and if his mental structure is indeed decaying he'll probably have the few he hasn't terminated under his control and acting as a bodyguard."

"Let's look at the security camera on that street. If need be, I have the authority to use the cameras and to make a choice like that," said the last white-coat, a trace of sadness in her voice.

The white-coats went to a nearby computer and logged onto the security system, pulling up the camera on the street where the attack was. Racket is walking away from the camera, a few of his fellow Guards surrounding him, walking like zombies. Others lie dead on the ground behind them.

The white-coats sigh. The woman brings up another program and types in a long, complicated series of passwords. Then a window comes up.

**SEND SELF-DESTRUCT SIGNAL?**

**Y/N**

The white-coat hits the yes key and turns away from the screen.



**3rd Place  
Middle School**

**Raindrops  
By Dani Smotrich-Barr**

A Y A N A

I used to dream of rain. It would look like it smells, of hope and promises, it would look like it tastes, wet and refreshing, it would look like it sounds, calm and pattering. And I would press it against my cheek and it would be beautiful.

I don't think about the color of rain anymore, don't care what it looks like. Instead, I think about my father and I wonder what he looked like.

Today is Katarina's birthday. I have bought her a book and wrote her a card. Mom and her are getting to read Braille pretty well, but I use regular letters anyway.

Deer KatarinA,

You are an amazing sister. I love you veR y much and hope that you have the best 16<sup>h</sup> biRthday you cood posseibly have.

Love,

Ayana

Writing has always been hard for me, but I am taking a class on it and now can write a pretty reasonable letter. Miss Tina, the teacher, takes my hand and puts a pen in it and gently guides it over paper to write the letters. Of course I can't read what I wrote, so I write all my school essays and assignments using special computer software that can write in Braille. Mom bought it for the home computer, too.

\*\*\*

K A T A R I N A

Yesterday was the best birthday ever! Mom took us out to dinner and Ayana wrote me a card herself. I'm really happy for her that she's learning to write, but it makes me feel kind of stupid that she can write in Braille and normal letters and I can hardly write in normal letters, as my English teacher revels in writing on all of my essays. Oh, well. She always was the more poetic one.

This morning, Ayana was acting kind of weird. I made pancakes and slathered hers with raspberry jam, how she likes it. But as soon as I handed the plate to her, she asked what it was. I told her it was pancakes with raspberry jam. She handed the plate right back to me and ran up to her room in tears. It took me a few minutes to remember that raspberry jam was dad's favorite.

I worry about Ayana sometimes. I think she thinks I blame her for the accident. I think she blames herself sometimes. She used to let me throw her into my arms and call her Aya. Now she hardly speaks at all.

I tell her that it was raining. It was slippery. He would have crashed even if she hadn't called out to him. But I know what she is thinking. It wouldn't have happened if she could see.

\*\*\*

## A Y A N A

So today at school, Miss Hanna told me that I had exceeded my group level and would be moved up to the next class. This may sound strange, but at Nova Academy, nothing is strange. You see, there aren't any grades at our school, just groups based on maturity and academic level. My old class had me and four other kids, one of whom was almost sixteen years old but tended to be as hyper as a puppy. As you can imagine, our class was beyond chaotic.

I was happy to be moved up to the next class until I found out that there was only one other kid in it, a 15-year old kid named Harry. He has severe epilepsy, so he can't walk or talk or anything and he has a lot of seizures. I might as well have been invisible. The teacher tried her hardest to help me with my writing, but it was really hard to concentrate while he was babbling across the room. At one point, I asked the teacher what all the noises were about, and she responded that I was lucky not to be seeing the poor kid's seizures. I bet he was drooling too. I know that he probably has a brain as sensible as mine and it's all just physical, but it's hard to feel at home with him.

\*\*\*

## K A T A R I N A

There's one word in our house that is forbidden. It's not idiot, it's not stupid, it's not even a cuss word. It's retard. Mom has drilled into our brains since we were little that this word was used to describe someone who was developmentally challenged. She said that kids today use "retard" as an insult, so it WILL NOT BE SAID IN OUR HOUSE. When I was really little, I used to whisper it to the mirror, wondering what was so bad with it. When Ayana was born, I stopped saying it. The rule in our house was ten cents for any old name-calling, grounded for THE WORD. But that wasn't what made me avoid

the word. Nor was it Mom's angry look that could make a drooling vampire start crying. No, it was that Ayana heard THE WORD enough already. When they saw her leaning on me just to walk down the street. When they saw her feeling in front of her to avoid trees. Nobody said it to her face, just mumbled it to their friends, sometimes even mouthed it so she wouldn't see them.

I ask her if she still gets teased and she says. NO KATARINA, as if she is insulted that I could even think up such a notion. But I see it anyway, the way people stare at her when she wears her NOVA ACADEMY shirt, the way some days she comes home crying, the way she never uses her cane anymore.

\*\*\*

## A Y A N A

School is coming along fine in terms of my writing, but poor Harry is still having seizures, and constantly. Today he came to school in his blue NOVA ACADEMY shirt. Scrawled above it were the words *I go to* and below it were the words *because I'm a retard*. Miss Rhianna, my teacher, told me to go to the office and ask for a change of clothes for Harry. She knows that I am quite capable of finding my way down the school hallways. In addition to the fact that I have been going to Nova for six years, the hallways are covered with big footprints that rise above the floor and lead the way around the school so that blind students can get around. It makes me feel handicapped, but it does help.

When I got to the office, all they had was a giant sweater which some kid had lost. It had a grape juice stain on it, Miss Rhianna told me later as she discarded it and instead put Harry's sweatshirt on him and zipped it up so it would cover his shirt. I have never cared much about my appearance, but I am careful to wear a clean T-shirt and jeans every day. My mom has long given up on taking me shopping and instead orders all my clothing online. It's kind of weird, sometimes Katarina will tell me about this cute new dress she got and I'll ask her what it looks like. She'll say it's light purple and I wonder, what's it like to be in a world full of color? To know what purple means? What about blue? Red? Green? It almost makes me cry.

\*\*\*

## K A T A R I N A

I am running a fever today so I stay home from school. I lay on the couch and mindlessly click the remote. Soap opera. Advertisement. Basketball game. Cartoon. Finally I settle on an "I Love Lucy" re-run. It's the episode where Fred, Ethel and Ricky bet her that she can't not tell a lie for twenty-four hours. When an ad comes on, I click off the TV and close my eyes. Ayana used to love TV. She would listen to the dialogue and the music, laugh at the right times and pretend like she could see it all. She hardly ever

watches it anymore though. She says its too confusing, like watching a band play without hearing their music.

Ayana comes home, banging the door behind her. Her guide from school yells a good-bye to her as she heads back to the bus. “Ayana...” I say, sitting up. “Oh, hi, Kat.” She says, just noticing me. “Feeling any better?” “A bit.” I respond, sitting up. “Ayana, do you want to play cards or something?” Ayana has special cards written in Braille that she got from her school. “Not really.” She mutters and begins to make her way upstairs. I notice that her face is streaked with tears. “Aya-papaya.” I coax, using her favorite nickname from when she was little. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She tells me, still heading up the stairs, feeling for the next one with her feet, knowing there are fourteen of them.

I stand up, headache gone now, and run after her. She is sitting on her bed, hugging her pillow, tears streaking down her face. “They took my books from me. They wrote all over them, in ink.” She cries through gasps of breath. “They called me- they called me a blockhead and a bozo. They said I was THE WORD.” I hug her, fever forgotten. “I’m sorry, Aya.” She ignores me, covers herself with her blanket.

“I just want to be normal.” She whispers, her voice muffled through her white covers. Her whole room is white. She says she likes it that way. She doesn’t want to have to wonder what she’s missing. “I know.” I tell her. I kiss her on the forehead like I did when she was three and I was seven. “It’s raining again.” She says. “I used to love it. Rain, I mean.” “I know.” I tell her. “I used to love it too.”

\*\*\*

## A Y A N A

Tomorrow is Christmas break. It couldn’t come sooner. I tell my mom that I can’t possibly go to school today. To my surprise she agrees. She stays home from work, where she tells me they’re just having a party anyway, and plays cards with me. We listen to the radio and she makes mac and cheese and chocolate cake. It’s been a long time since we’ve had a whole day just to ourselves. She tells me that Katarina has a wonderful surprise for me for Christmas and I try to get her to tell me what it is. She doesn’t.

\*\*\*

## K A T A R I N A

It’s Christmas, finally! I wrap my gifts in purple paper and tuck them safely under the tree. Finally Ayana wakes up. Mom makes hot chocolate and pancakes and we wolf them down. We sit around the fireplace and sing carols. Grandma calls to wish us a Merry Christmas. Then it’s time to open presents. We both take Mom’s presents first.

She's gotten me three pairs of jeans and a pink cardigan. I hug her and a tiny origami flower falls out of the package. Mom's really into origami. Ayana gets speakers for her ipod and a baseball cap. She gets an origami frog. She's grinning and thanking mom, but I can tell she's kind of sad. I swallow. This is our first Christmas without Dad.

Then I open Ayana's gift and she opens mine. I can feel the tears coming. She's given me a framed picture of Dad and her and me on our trip to the Rockies. Her eyes have the same dull, sad expression they always do, but she's smiling and her hair is blowing in her face. Dad looks just like I remember him, tall, happy and quiet. I go over to Ayana and hug her. It's the best gift she could have possibly gotten me.

Finally she opens the gift from me. Usually mom has to tell her what she's gotten, but not this time. It licks her face and settles right into her lap. I tell her that he's a vision dog. I tell her that she can go anywhere she wants with him, she can even go to a normal school. She's laughing and crying at the same time, petting the Labrador puppy in her lap. I ask her what she's going to name him and she answers right away. "Raindrop." She says.





**1st Place**  
**High School Grades 9-10**

**I Will Not Forget to Speak**  
**By Madeleine Bradford**

There is a simple melancholy that touches here, like fingers to lips when the librarians are telling you to be quiet. Again.

There used to be a church on this street- it wasn't much. I mean, it was grandiose. It was a church. But it wasn't much.

I used to go there every Friday to put new flowers on the alter, because I worked on Sundays. I figured if I could at least put flowers on the alter of god, this made me a little religious. As though holiness could ever sanction my wrapping it around my schedule rather than the other way around- but it was work. I needed money. I figured Jesus wouldn't mind.

I'm telling this to you, and I hope you understand that it's not because I like you, and I don't find you interesting at all. Maybe if you know this you will go away and let me talk to my wall in peace, and find out that the cracks in the wall are the cracks in my sanity. I will bleed everything honest, and you have no right to hear me.

Perhaps I'm being sinful.

Actually, I'm not too worried about sinning, or god, or church. And the alter flower thing was more of a habit than a prayer, more a meditation on the week than fervent dousing of doubt in the fires of- whatever. What I'm saying is, I could have stopped going to church, and I wouldn't have minded. I could never deal with sermons, anyway.

But I didn't get to choose.

I guess people stopped going, there, one way or another. I guess donations weren't enough to pay the bills, and religion doesn't have endless pockets, no matter what the total of religion owns, or maybe the bigwigs of the Church capital C decided that our little church wasn't worth the money. This is a little cruel of them, I think to myself. This is just another stab of hurt in a 'person well past caring'. If I was one of those. Which I'm not.

When people say that, I wonder what they're thinking. Seriously. Well past caring is a phrase only used by people who actually do care, really, much more than they want you to know. Or maybe, in a twisted way, they want you to know that they still care and use that pathetic little phrase to paper it over, so that you can peel it away and know their sorrows. Because that seems to be what people want, right? Resonance.

One of the Church Moms, and trust me, I say this with every stereotype of the phrase in mind (they had a knitting circle. A knitting circle!) took me aside one afternoon, one Friday afternoon, as I deposited my geraniums that were now- then- in season, and told me the church was going to close. She said it gently, as though she was terribly afraid I would be upset.

I had told a chorister once the reason why I didn't attend regular ceremonies like the rest of the knitting-needle gang. I suppose he spread the story, because everyone who I know from that church looks at me now as though I'm fragile, as though being poor makes me porcelain. Or worse, they assume it has hardened me, and I can take anything and roll with the punches, so they come up to me with a story about their aunt's dog and how it died when really *I don't want to deal with all of this!*

Perhaps they thought the church had become important to me. And it wasn't, it really wasn't. Actually, buying the flowers had become a bit of a bother, a bit of an annoyance, but I couldn't in good conscience stop bringing them. It's like, what if I abandon my post, and they can't find another flower-bringer? They won't have any flowers for the next service! So, okay, I'll bring double next time, and they can use the ones they don't use this week next week, and it'll be okay, right?

Wrong. Flowers wilt. But I never seemed to realize this. I think maybe I didn't want to realize this. I was the Flower Lady. No one called me that- in fact, I think only a handful of really conscientious grandmas and a few of the Moms really even knew my name, and then there was this one kid who was really nice and helped me unload the car for a couple of weeks, but kept calling me Jared, when I'm clearly female and my name doesn't even start with a J.

But, I was the Flower Lady. And there is power in a title, even if no one knows you have it. Even if no one knows you at all. It means that you have yourself. You can introduce yourself and then you will be a Courtney or a Maggot to whoever you have met, but you still know, secretly, inside yourself somewhere, there is always the Flower Lady.

Anyway, what if they couldn't find someone to do the job? Or worse, what if they found someone to do the job, and she brought the wrong things? I could just imagine it. Orchids out of season, primed to wilt before the mass was over. Daisies, with their meek faces and wimpy little stems, in vases too short for them, drooping like regrets over the side of the altar.

Maybe they wouldn't even know when there were deals on dahlias in the farmers market! Maybe they wouldn't go to the farmers market at all. Probably, they wouldn't. They would probably be a grocery market perfect-rose snob, when everyone knows that if you pick the unopened ones you get a fuller bloom.

It took a long time for them to talk about it, I guess. The plans dragged and dragged, and I think that one construction company canceled at some point. I never really thought it was

going to happen. There were posters everywhere (Sale In Store! Half Off Hymnals!) and they were there so long, they became like old friends. I would open the door, and there would be the crayon smiley face telling me I had a month to turn in my last donations, as though I was going to die, and these would be the last donations, ever, I turned in.

When it happened, it happened so quickly I hardly had time to miss my daily message of death. And I wouldn't be so upset by this, only, I just went to the farmers market and they were out of dahlias. And I have a vase on my counter for them, I picked it out last week, from the vases I now have time to use. And it's empty. I don't know what to do.

I made time for this. I scooped things out of the way- a meeting with a friend, a coffee break, a clandestine movie stolen from the hours I could be working, though those were few and strict. And now the time is like my empty vase, and the water in it is already waiting, and now if not for want of dahlias, my day would be complete. But I can't look out my window, because right now there is a space where a church should be.

No one ever really knew my name, and maybe it doesn't make sense that I care. Maybe in a way I have already started to become the funny smell and flickering lights down the street where no one goes. Should I be feeding pigeons?

I don't know. Pigeons have always seemed like the people in the hallways who push past instead of saying 'excuse me'. Which might seem like practically all of them these days, but it's not, not quite. There must be something redeeming in them, though- pigeons, I mean- otherwise I wouldn't be so fascinated. Maybe it's how dumb they are.

Don't look at me like that. It's true. You know it's true. Pigeons are fantastically dumb. I don't mean to badmouth birds that can't badmouth back, but you can just tell. I don't know how. Maybe it's a misconception. Maybe the way the folds of their skin fall above their beak and their eyes are so beady and set just so convinces us that pigeons are stupid.

"What are you doing here? Hiding?" My best friend asks me, but she's not really my friend. She just works a hot dog stand and invited herself into my house one day. She fought with her boyfriend, and I was a regular- but we won't go into that. Just say we're acquaintances. And, okay, maybe there was a tiny bit of a friendship thing going on. Anyway, she doesn't have anywhere else to go, alright?

"Yes," I say. It's true. I don't want to go back to the farmers market and see if, maybe, they have some other flowers that would fit my vase. I left right away when I heard the dahlias were gone. I don't want to try the grocery store, even though, logically, I know that Church Mom wouldn't be there, ready to force me to buy a bundle of perfect roses. Even if the perfect roses would look just gorgeous with my vase and its particular yellow.

If you buy them small, you get better blooms.

“Well, don’t you at least want to turn a light on?” She asks, and she doesn’t wait for an answer- she never does, that’s one of the things I like about her- just flips the switch. And it’s bright.

The table is shiny, and not just superfluously- the wood is glowing.

It should be. I cleaned it.

She’s not the sort of person who likes to clean things, but I kind of like that, too. It gives me something to do. It means I get to clean her house, when she’s not at mine. Mostly she’s here, though- eating my food and waiting for the Boyfriend. He is often late.

I also vacuumed the floor, though you can’t really tell. I get a feeling of accomplishment from this. It’s not, I cleaned the kitchen, it’s, I *cleaned* the *kitchen*, with an air of practiced nonchalance and a dishtowel draped inconspicuously over the shoulder. It’s a pride thing.

So it’s only natural that I cleaned the vase, too. But I wish I hadn’t. It’s being yellow at me. It’s not like I was going to use the thing, anyway. And it’s big and it takes up dish space and the glaze has a crack in the corner. And it’s so very *yellow*.

I’m dangerously close to standing up and getting my bike and riding to the market again, or maybe to the grocery store, just to prove to Church Mom that I can.

But I feel like maybe I should stop myself. I mean, maybe I should just wallow, for once. I’m always so active, I always have to be doing something- and it was an effort you wouldn’t believe that it took to clear this afternoon. Maybe I should take the time to, like- reflect, or something.

I’m already halfway out the door. “I’m going out,” I say, “Need anything?”

But I know already she won’t come with me- she’s getting ready for a date with boyfriend number two, and luck to them both, though anyone can see he has the wrong sort of nose. He’ll be a jealous phone monitor, just you wait. You can tell by the way his hand constantly strays to his pocket, and though he restrains himself from getting out his phone, the restraint is visible and taut, and likely to tear at any moment, and then she will be stuck boyfriendless, again.

It’s clear that the phone is his primary preoccupation, and Melanie is second. (Melanie is the acquaintance, by the way.) So, of course, the breakup is inevitable.

When I fall in love with someone, I have often told the stupid park pigeons, they will be mad for me. Nothing like this namby-pamby list business. There will be no priorities- only the stark ‘yes, this is it, this is her- groceries? What groceries? Buttons are used for texting? Who needs oxygen?’

And I will know, because I'll feel it, too.

I'm not so sure anymore, though. I don't know if you can honestly be so levered by another person without losing something in the transition- like, if you suddenly find them, and your life tips all the way over, surely something is bound to fall off. Maybe priorities are important, more important than I think, and I should give Boyfriend 2 the benefit of the doubt. I won't, of course, but I kind of feel better for having realized I should.

So I'm alone as I unchain the bike. The apartment steps have this hideous black stain on them that I think is tar, and I make a mental note to have that checked out by the proprietor. It's been there for months. It's time somebody did something.

My shoes are all wrong for biking, but at this point I don't care. I can take a route without passing the church, I reason, if I turn left at the stoplight, and this is what I think for five blocks straight, like, Starbucks, remember to turn left, hi Mrs. Gossy, remember to turn left- but at the last second I decide I don't want to. I turn right.

And then it's there. The carcass of some huge leviathan, half melted in the sun- not implausible, for I have to say, the heat is deafening. It's a spring day that already feels like summer, and it's static to my skin, but I'm not listening right now. The whale's eyes are empty- someone took the stained glass out already, of course. That would be the first thing they did. Right?

It would if I were in charge. When wrecking balls are involved, stained glass doesn't fit the scene. And I remember nothing of which windows went where, or even what scenes were in them- not that it matters. I'm starting to wish I had taken pictures. Why did I never take pictures? I should have, I had enough warning. And now all I will ever know is what I remember. All I remember is that they were beautiful.

Stained glass. There's that stain again. Steps and glass- maybe I should just leave it, let it all be. Let it spread, let it stick, let it stay. Why should I care? It's just- surface. Glass, tar, vase, table, kitchen. Thin dye all over the hands of the city- thinner than blood, and for the comparison, still, somehow more disturbing. Maybe there's something wrong with me for thinking this. I'm terribly tempted to pull a Lady Macbeth, just yell, 'out, out damned spot!' until it goes away, but I'm not that kind of person. I will clean tables until they glow.

I probably do care.

The ribs are poking through, jagged metal ribs and aching stone flesh. I wonder how they kept it quiet, for surely it must have bellowed when it bled. I had been counting on the solidity of it- the crash. I had been sure it would wake me up one night, at midnight, and I would know, with some sort of mental click, the church was gone. I had been counting on that definitive lack, the solid evidence of noise to keep me sated as I starved for myself. I was the Flower Lady, and there was no need for me any more.

That had been when I had gotten it into my head that I could be a Flower Lady without a church. Of course I knew it was silly, but by the time I really realized this, it was too late. I had already lugged the vase out of the cupboard, I had already cleaned it, and it was already being viciously yellow. There was no hope for it at that point, of course. Once you start yellowing something, it's yellow all the way. There's something about the overt cheeriness of the color that just won't let you stop.

The grocery store had a special on dahlias, but I wasn't looking for them anymore. I mean- I saw them, but I wasn't looking for them, exactly. And they had a better deal on roses. I brought a bundle home, furtively, as though hoping someone would stop me and accuse me of buying the wrong type, make me bring them back. They were the wrong type. They were parchment-colored with bleeding pink edges, and although they were not perfect, they were already half open.

But they did look good in the vase.



**2nd Place**  
**High School Grades 9-10**

**Importance of Being Intact**  
**By Emily Xiao**

The café across the street where I spend my sultry summer days waiting tables sits in the margins of our grimy, forgotten town streets. In the shadows lurk shadows that, more often than not, do not know the concept of trust. Outside the thin walls, people of the town live their lives, and they live their lives as men and women and children and every type of dog known to man, but in here, only the fry cook changes every month while the previous one throws down his greasy apron into a boiling pot to chase some pretty girl north to New York City. These boys never return unless they happen to remember who waits for them at home, and few do. These girls never stop walking into the café with their dreams of escape.

In this town, everybody sees but nobody quite knows one another, and people come here, to this café, to steal little loving glimpses at others they see only during the daytime, and they warm their stomachs with food and minds with stories.

In this town, people rarely know your middle name or favorite color. They know the curve of your body and how your eyelashes fold when you blink, and they recognize the way you hold your cup as you drink from it. Once in a while, however, somebody comes along who has stories on their own lips to tell rather than in others' faces to seek.

Last night, I met a strange boy in the café whom I had never seen before, and this is the story he told me when I asked for his order.

“People call me Johnny, though my name is Frederick. Go ahead and call me Johnny. I don’t mind—I find that as time passes, I cease to care either way. I was born in a place so small its name is thoroughly inconsequential. My last name is Sullivan of Sullivan Hats Company; my father makes hats for a living and my mother spends that living on better-quality hats to wear on her own worn out head. I think that’s a hoot.

“As a result, we—my family—don’t have much; we don’t have much extra money to waste thanks to my mother’s constant spending, we don’t have much stuff thanks to the bank’s friendly house calls, we don’t have much company thanks to my family’s lack of social aptitude, and we don’t have much love because Father and Mother, as they tell me, made ‘a lot of stupid careless mistakes no normal person would have made.’

“I will tell you this, however: Sullivan Hats Company wasn’t always in such a bad state. Far from that. To tell you the truth, it was pretty hot in the old days when my grandfather first started it up. All the young people had to be caught with a brand new hat from Sullivan’s if they wanted to get in anywhere, and even a secondhand one might do you a little good in picking up a girl. It was the depression and Nixon’s campaign that did Sullivan Hats in. Couldn’t have us hat it to him instead, huh?”

“What a life. What would you like to eat tonight, Johnny?” I asked once more. He only tilted his curly head downward to look at my clean white socks, barely visible beneath the hemline of my khaki trousers. Glancing down beneath the table, I saw that his own skinny ankles were bare and smooth beneath his scuffed and outdated black-and-white saddle shoes.

“Scrambled eggs are fine. How about that? Breakfast for dinner? It would be funny, wouldn’t it?” Johnny’s dark brown eyes crinkled into themselves like a dying flame as he smiled. He sat balanced on only a quarter of his seat, legs folded in the way a princess might fold her hands, and his head bore a gray newsboy cap.

“You’ll aggravate the chef, but all right. Did your father make that hat?”

“This one?” He gave his forehead a light touch with his left index finger, “No.”

“All right. That’s fine, I was just asking. I’ll go get your eggs.” I turned for the kitchen. In the background somebody had turned on the small television at the bar to some glitzy awards ceremony in the midst of the Hollywood lights and fur-trimmed coats.

“Hold on there a second,” Johnny said, clasping at the fabric of my shirt. “I told you the story of my life. Did you like it? I’d like to tell you why I told it to you. In fact, I will. This is going to be funny, I promise you, and it’ll blow your brains out of your ears. I promise you. Just stay a little longer and listen.

“Do you know what roly-polies are? I’m sure you do. Those little bugs that curl up into tight little bullets of balls when you touch them? The thing is, I was walking to my friend’s house this morning. Now, I say ‘friend’ here as a mere formality—he isn’t really a friend of mine, partly because his name is Mort. What kind of a name is that? So I was walking to his house because his sister—well, if you saw her, you’d understand, if you know what I mean. She’s kind of like that actress there right now, on the television. Look. What a beauty. And I was walking to Mort’s house, and here’s where the roly-polies come in—I saw one right there on the sidewalk. And this was weird, know why?”

He bore his eyes at me. Impatient, I offered, “I suppose because—”

“That’s right, because roly-polies are supposed to be in the soil, in the dark and damp and moist places. You knew this, right? Well, this wasn’t a normal roly-poly. It was an almost dead one, and I say almost dead because it was in half and still twitching and jumping all over that white sidewalk block. And I thought to myself, can you imagine? I mean, can you imagine that kind of luck, not can you imagine me thinking. But that’s how we’re all going to end up, alive and half-dead and in half and twitching, if we keep going on like this, even those people laughing their mascara off in Hollywood, California. So I figured I’d do something different for a change, take my godforsaken belligerent parents out to dinner for once with the spare change that happened to be in my pocket. Don’t ask me how I came by that change, because I don’t even know myself. It’s impossible to



come by any money in this part of the country. Anyway, I still had to head over to Mort's place first to see his sister.

"The thing is, though, Mort had his toes all in a tangled wad with his horrible socks because he had overheard some other neighborhood guys like Bill and Eckel talking about my messed up family life and how horribly my parents act in public. I can't blame him, honestly. You should have seen my mother last week at the bank. But he, of all people, didn't want to be seen letting me into his house. Can you imagine? So he said to me at the door, me out in the bright sunshine among his bright sunshine flowers, 'Johnny, I'm sorry, but I just can't associate myself with people of your type anymore. I'm sorry, but your family is, well, strange. And those who don't know about your family find out eventually.' And the most humiliating part was that his sister was right there, leaning her hip against the wall in the background looking unusually tender and nodding along with him. So I said to Mort, chuckling a little to lighten things up, 'Hey, Mort, I guess I'll just have to tell everyone I meet from now on about my family just to make sure they know, huh? Heh, heh.' So I suppose this explains part of why I told you about my life. Good explanation, yeah? And I suppose also because I invited my parents here, to this café, if that's all right with you. Because if I didn't, I'd end up like that roly-poly, writhing in half, if I'm not already." Johnny gave me a broad grin exposing his pink gums.

"Johnny, I'll go now and tell the chef you want scrambled eggs."

"Sure, I suppose that's probably best. Would you mind bringing me a glass of cranberry juice while I'm waiting? I hate the stuff, but it'll make my parents seem more bearable in comparison. I've learned to do this sort of stuff over the years."

"We don't have cranberry juice. Would coffee be all right?"

"Coffee? No, I love coffee, especially pure black coffee. It smells like heaven in hell. How about apple juice, do you have any of that?"

"Apple cider?"

"That'll have to work. Thanks. Come back soon, because I have more to tell. Oh, and can you change the channel? I'm not interested in watching any stupid Hollywood awards ceremony for how well you can make a beautiful woman cry onscreen."

"I'll just turn off the television, O.K.?"

"Oh well, not everyday's good for starting a revolution." Johnny shrugged a lazy one-armed shrug as he extended his legs straight out beneath the table.

I returned ten minutes later to find Johnny sitting straight in his chair with his legs tucked in beneath his seat. His gaze shifted slightly from his still, folded hands to the plate of scrambled eggs as I set it down on the table in front of him along with a three-quarters

full glass of golden apple cider, but he said nothing for a few seconds.

“Could it be that I’m already a roly-poly?” The words trickled in a soft brook from his lips. “What a mad world. Thank you for the eggs.”

I hesitated. “You’re welcome, but you know you can’t think like that. You—”

“What time is it?”

“Almost ten to seven.”

“My parents should be arriving soon. I should be happy, right?” The corner of his mouth turned up only slightly. “I guess I’ll just give you a wave when they arrive.”

Between six-fifty and seven-ten, the bell at the door of the café rung three times, each languidly announcing the arrivals of the fat mechanic from next door, tall Mrs. Mofferty who taught at the primary school, and a girl sent to the café by her mother to escort her drunken father home. None of the ensuing footprints belonged to Johnny’s parents.

By seven-thirty, they still had not arrived. Johnny stared at me from across the room as if to say, “Here I am, alive and half-dead and in half and twitching.”

The streetlamps finally flickered on outside, their orange glow outlining tiny rims of dirt left on the café windows by evaporated raindrops. In the glass’s reflection I saw Johnny counting his change on the table in front of him, sliding the coins around in smooth ellipses with his tapered, grasshopper-like fingers. Johnny still sat alone like this, limbs tied downward to the tile floor, four hours later when I finally took off my apron to head home. He only acknowledged me with a slight wave of his left hand and a tip of his newsboy cap.

He was gone the next morning. Nobody had bothered to wipe down the tables from last night, and I headed to where Johnny had sat to find a smattering of coins still arranged atop a clean napkin on the tabletop. Twenty-nine quarters, three dimes, seventeen nickels, and two cents. Johnny had touched neither his scrambled eggs nor his apple cider; he’d simply vanished into the black streets outside. His parents had never come.

Here we are, alive and half-dead and in half and twitching.

The bell pealed. A pretty girl walked in for breakfast.



**3rd Place**  
**High School Grades 9-10**

**To Fix the World**  
**By Erin Baughn**

I know that if I fix the world, you will love me. I know that I might get insane with power. It's a risk, but for you, I'll do it. If you will love me, I'll be fine.

I remember when we first met. We first met at a protest. You were protesting the war and I was just there to see what all the fuss was about. You tripped and fell onto me. I caught you, brushed you off and set you back on your feet. You thanked me and began protesting again.

I didn't see you for a month and eight days, not that I was counting. I was just hoping to see your face again, but I knew it was pointless to keep looking. We met for a second time at a coffee shop. It was one of those co-op places. I was there because I was meeting a friend nearby and I needed a coffee. You were there because it was the only place in town that lived up to your standards for organic and fair-trade.

All the tables were filled and you walked in and ordered that tea that I learned to love during the months that we spent together. You stood there and tried to see if someone was leaving. You spotted me, recognized me, and asked if I would be so kind as to share a table with a stranger. I chuckled and stated that we weren't really strangers—remember that protest? You smiled and your eyes got all squinty, they almost closed, but didn't. You looked at me like you knew that it would draw me in even more. I know it sounds stupid to say but your laugh sounded like wind blowing through the trees and birds chirping and water flowing all at once. We talked for forty-five minutes—we both got up for more to drink and that's when I heard your order for tea. When we sat down, I wondered aloud if that was your natural hair color. You responded by ranting on all the chemicals that are in dyes and how you wouldn't slowly kill yourself that way. I forgot about my friend and I left that place with my breath taken away and your number written on a napkin.

I didn't get the guts to call you until three days later. It wasn't because of that stupid rule. It was because I was too flustered and I couldn't form the words, not even in my head. And right as I was dialing your phone, mine started to ring. I looked at the number and it was you and I took a deep breath and said hello. You said hello and my name to make sure it was me because it didn't sound like me since I hadn't spoken in a while and I was scared. I smiled, but realized you couldn't see me, so instead I said your name. We talked for a while and we hung up after planning a time and place to meet.

Did you notice that every time we met, the same things happened? I would get there early and you would arrive just a minute or two late. We would exchange greetings and talk and talk and talk. But I never went to your house. And you never came to my apartment. And we were okay with that.

There was that one time, a few months after we first met when we were saying goodbye and you looked—as always—so sad to leave. And you kissed me on the cheek

and I kissed you on the lips. And we both left. And we didn't see each other for a while after that, but it was fine with me.

The next time we met, we greeted each other with a kiss. By then, I knew about you. I knew that you were vegan because it was your personal way to stop climate change. I didn't mind meat; it was what I grew up with, but I became vegan for you. I knew that you were for rights of any kind. Women's, LGBTQ, racial, you name it. I knew that you cried when you heard about that tsunami that hit Indonesia and booked a flight with what little money you had and raced over to help. I donated a few dollars to Red Cross, but nothing more. You promised me that if there was another disaster—and there was—you would bring me with you, and you did. I knew that you loved your sister though she was your opposite. I knew your cats' names and what color each of them were, though I had never seen any of them. I knew that you had read the dictionary one summer during high school when you were bored. The only books I ever read in high school were the ones assigned by teachers, so you started recommending books that are now my favorite. I knew that you had few friends, but the friends you had were amazing and you didn't like to go long without them and they felt the same about you.

I remember when I told you that I love you. And you stumbled over your words and looked at your feet and said thank you, but did not return the statement. I didn't hear from you for a week after you said that. I got a call on a Tuesday afternoon. It was you, telling me that you wished you could say that you love me but you just weren't sure. It was best for you to devote all your love to fixing the world, rather than figuring it out for one person. You told me that it was best if we break things off right then and there and I just listened and you said goodbye and I said I love you and you hung up.

I lived my life normally—for the most part. I went to work, I did what I did, but it wasn't enough. I was retracing my steps one day and happened upon that cafe that we had met for the second time in. I sat at the last empty table and you walked in. You walked in and didn't notice me and got your tea with a spoonful of honey and a dash of your brown sugar. You looked around and after a moment, saw me. You walked over to me and asked to sit like that second time we met. I still love you, so I said yes. We spoke of what we had done in the months that we had been separated, but not like we did before.

I asked you as we both stood up to leave what it would take to gain your love. You told me to fix the world.

I am going to fix the world. I am going to become president or king or prime minister or emperor or dictator of somewhere and I am going to fix everything. I'm going to stop all the wars. I'm going to fix the world so that you will love me. I'm going to stop everyone from using oil and killing animals and hating each other. I'm going to make technological advances in what's right, rather than stupid things that I'll just have to fix later. I'll colonize the moon and name a city after you. I want you to love me and I know that you want to love me but you can't unless I do this.

So I'm going to fix the world and it doesn't matter if I become power-hungry. Because the world will be fixed and I know that despite things I might do after, you will love me. If you will love me, I'll be fine.



**1st Place  
High School Grades 11-12**

**TAPS  
By Alexia Antoniou**

The green bottle was sweating between his fingers, pearls of water dripping through the top of the lattice iron table and spattering across his knees. His free hand perched at the edge of his receding hairline, acting as a dam against the sweat pooling there around the springy, brindled hair. He licked the back of his teeth.

“It’s hot out here,” Gregory announced. His sister spooned potato salad onto a paper plate and slid it across the table. “Feels like the Fourth of July. I like it when my weather acts like it’s supposed to- give it to me straight, right?” Genie wiped a veiny hand on the front of her shirt and clicked her tongue, trying to remember if she had left the stove on or not.

It was her backyard they were sitting in- her and Buddy’s, anyway, their cabin. When she had woken that morning, all of their patio furniture was missing, from the table down to the seat cushions; sometime during the night, Buddy must have gotten up and dragged it down the hill to the dock, because that’s where she finally found it.

Buddy was an insomniac. Before, she would try to sit up with him, but after fifteen years of marriage, Genie usually just took a Benadryl and went to bed. Some nights, though, a storm might wake her and there she’d find him, three in the morning with half his body out a window, the wet wind slapping slicks of gray brown hair across his face and his arms spread like he was going to embrace someone.

Today, however, the sky was clear. She and Gregory sat with their chairs angled so they could dangle their feet in the water. As she watched, his tongue flicked out to catch a glob of mayonnaise clinging to his mustache, reminding her.

“Um.” Genie turned in her chair, fumbling for the nurse’s name. He was a young man, and quick. He looked up from where he’d been lacing her mother-in-law’s shoe, eyes gold hazel like a deer’s.

“Yes?”

“Can she eat any of this?” She gestured to the bowl of potato salad. A fly crawled across the cover, feet sticking to the cling wrap.

The nurse looked at his patient. Buddy’s mother crouched in her wheelchair like a shifty-eyed rag doll, her hands folded in her lap and a suspicious curl to her mouth.

“Mrs. Bannister? Would you like something to eat?”

Genie sighed. "She can't hear you," she said, and brushed away the fly. The nurse gave a tight smile and scratched a spot on the back of his neck.

"Maybe, maybe not."

Genie stared at him.

"She's a mute."

"That's true," the nurse agreed. "Anyways, I don't reckon she'll be very hungry now that she's started up on this medication- not for a day or so, at least."

"Oh," Genie said, but she was watching a heron skim over the lake, its wings the same slippery blue as the water.

The dock creaked as Gregory reached below the table to open the Styrofoam cooler. He was wearing one of Buddy's old shirts, and the way it stretched across his shoulders and choked at the collar made it look like he was trying to squeeze into one of his daughter's tees. The damp skin formed a puffy ring around his neck.

"You're welcome to some food yourself, if you want," Genie offered uncertainly. The nurse brushed the dirt from his knees and crossed over for a plate.

"Don't see too many male nurses," Gregory remarked. "Now you see, *I'm* a cop." The silence that followed begged some kind of answer. Receiving none, Gregory aimed an experimental flick at the neck of his bottle. Satisfied with the responding *clink*, he leaned back in his chair and gave the bottle another flick.

"How's work, Greg?" his sister asked, crushing a potato chip in her hand.

"It's fine," he started to shrug, than stopped. "You remember Pavel? Came to dinner last year, remember? Russian guy, with the funny little beard. Ten years he's been in and out of the station. Gets picked up every other month- never anything real bad, you know, but there it is. Funny guy." He paused to scratch his mustache, grinning. "'Gregorovich,' he'd shout whenever I was loading him into the car, 'you're a *Cossack!*' But they've really got him now."

Genie, who had only half been paying attention, looked up from the lake.

"Botched robbery," he explained. "Somebody got shot, and now they're shipping him down to the state prison before trial. I *told* him last time I brought him in, I told him 'Pal- they are going to come down hard on you one day.' And now he'll probably end up on death row."

He downed the rest of his drink in one gulp, though there was more than half of it left. His face was a little red. "His wife sent me a basket of pierogis. *Christ*." He rubbed his face with the heels of his palms. "Say, where's Buddy at anyways?"

"In the boat house."

Gregory and Genie started; they had forgotten about the nurse. He was tearing pieces from his hotdog bun and throwing them to the lake, his hands watched closely by Mrs. Bannister's glittering eyes.

"And where's Monkey?"

The nurse rubbed his nose before answering,

"She's in the boat house, too."

At that moment, the door was flung open by a girl with arms full of fireworks. Her sleek braid was held together with red and blue hair ties and her shins were spotty with scratches.

"There you are, Monkey. Come and give your aunt a hug." Genie languidly let her arms fall open. Monkey hesitated. Then, tightening her grip around her treasure, she bobbed forward to bump her cheek against her aunt's.

"What'd you got there?" her father asked, sitting up. The crisscrossing metal had bit a pattern into the backs of his arms and neck. Monkey puffed out her cheeks and said nothing.

"Where'd you get those from?" he tried.

"Uncle Bud."

"I didn't know we had fireworks," Genie mused, eyeing the boathouse door. She was waiting for her husband to appear, but the shed's only movement came from the flutter of white curtains at the side window.

"Well put them down, dumpling. Those things can blow your face right off." Greg grimaced at his stomach, wishing he'd eaten a little less. Already his gut felt bloated against the taught fabric.

"In fact," he continued, "that's how your Uncle Buddy *himself* lost those fingers! You ever look at his hands?" Genie's face, gray with sun exposure, suddenly flushed. Monkey stared at her father.



“That’s not how he lost his fingers,” she said.

“Who says?” asked her aunt.

“Uncle Bud says. He says he cut them off himself.”

There was a silence like a vacuum. The nurse’s hand twitched as it flicked the last of the crumbs to the fish. Even Mrs. Bannister seemed to lean forward in her wheelchair. Abruptly, Monkey dropped her armload and cannonballed into the water, scattering fireworks all across the dock. A roman candle dropped into the water.

Gregory cleared his throat.

“I thought you told me it was fireworks,” he said finally, looking past his sister.

“That’s what he told me.” Somebody- Genie wondered who- had decorated the spokes of Mrs. Bannister’s wheelchair with scraps of red and white crepe paper. The streamers seemed to droop from their scotch tape in limp exhaustion.

“Anyone want a drink?” Gregory asked, looking from his sister to the nurse, then, somewhat uncertainly, to Mrs. Bannister.

“No,” said Genie, waving her hand, “but you go ahead and have one, Greg.” The nurse raised his eyebrows. Genie eyed him over her brother’s bent back.

“Hey,” she said, “don’t you play the trumpet?” The nurse buried his hands in his back pockets, and the sun that hit his face revealed freckles hiding beneath the tan skin.

“Sure.”

“I *thought* you did.” She smiled at him as her brother straightened, having peeled off his beer cap with the bottle opener dangling from his wallet chain.

“Yours is the red car?” Greg asked. “Yeah, we saw one of those instrument cases in there. Wondered what it was; Monkey thought you played the flute.”

“No,” said a voice from the water. “*You* said that.”

“Why don’t you play for us?” said Genie. “Why don’t you play something patriotic for Independence Day?” She had been about to say ‘for Buddy’s Day’; her mind was still on the boathouse.

“No,” said the nurse quickly.

“Please? It would mean so much to Buddy. And to me.”

Gregory snorted.

“You think a rousing round of ‘Taps’ is going to lure him out here?”

“Eat your potato salad, Greg.” She snapped. The nurse quietly placed his plate on the ground beside the wheelchair and started up the hill towards the car.

The sun was sinking lower in the sky now.

“Musicians are all alcoholics,” Gregory declared and polished off his fifth beer of the day. Above the mustache, his nose was leaking. “All of them. Even the tuba players. They carry liquor around in their cases with the instruments, and the reason they’re so-called *starving artists* is because they blow all their money getting shitfaced- sorry, Monkey.”

“What do you know about musicians, Greg?” Genie asked stiffly. She laced her fingers across her right knee and pulled it into her chest.

“I know enough. I’ve been to that polka bar down on Terrence Street a few times.” He closed his eyes and began humming. “Bum bum bum *bum bum bum...*” He turned his head and blew his nose into the shoulder of Buddy’s cast off shirt.

The sun was melting over the lake, floating on the water in fifty different colors like a brilliant oil spill. Even the sides of the little girl’s head reflected tangerine and emerald and gold.

“Monkey?” Genie called, staring into the cold beetle eyes of her mother-in-law; it was like gazing into outer space through the wrong end of a telescope. Genie shuddered.

“Go ask Uncle Buddy to come out here, please.” Monkey gripped the edge of the dock and popped out of the water, body spilling across the wooden planks. She was up in a flash.

“We should get going soon,” came Gregory’s voice from behind his castle of empty green bottles. “Marjorie will be a bitch if we’re late.” Genie pursed her lips.

“He says he’s coming in a minute,” Monkey called from the lawn beside the boathouse. The water was snaking down her legs and her wrists and her braid, dripping to the parched tongues of grass between her toes.

“Monkorovich,” Gregory thrust an accusing finger in the direction of his daughter, “you’re a *Cossack!*”

When no one responded, he recommenced his humming. Genie looked around her back yard as if in defeat, bringing a wrist to her forehead.

“What’s that boy doing up there?” She wondered aloud, remembering the nurse. She had wanted him to play something military like, from the army, wanted Buddy to hear it and to come out to them. Monkey squinted up the hill.

“He’s smoking,” She said, and trotted up the slope to the driveway.

The wind had picked up some, so the nurse had to keep his hand cupped around the lighter as he brought it to his lips. The small flame at his chin transformed his face, so that for a moment he was only a jumble of shadows and patches of light and then the flame went out and it was his face again. He dropped the lighter into his pocket, smiling when he saw her.

“Hello, Monkey.” He gave a cheerful salute.

“My name’s Angie,” she said. He considered this.

“Mine’s Thomas.” They shook hands. Beside them, the cabin squatted in the dark like a giant, hollow-bellied toad. Its shutters were rotting, practically dropping from their hinges, the screen door a loose flap of skin held agape by an upturned cinderblock. Standing on the driveway, they could smell the dampness radiating from the wood.

“Is it true what you said about your uncle’s hand?” Thomas asked after a while. Angie nodded. She was trying to copy his easy lean against the car.

“It was because of the bugs. He says he could always feel the bugs crawling around on his hands. Especially at nighttime. He couldn’t see them, but he says he could feel them, and he could feel they were made of metal and that they were eating him from his hands. And then he cut his fingers off.” She pinched a pebble between her toes and let it drop. “When he was in the jungle.”

“Huh,” Thomas said, and folded his arms across his chest. The temperature had dropped some since the sun went down. Pretty soon, he would have to wheel Mrs. Bannister back inside the house. Angie shot him a sideways look.

“He’s not crazy,” she said. She watched him chew his lip and waited until he nodded.

“Do you want a smoke?” he asked, dropping his own cigarette to the driveway and grinding it into the gravel. Her eyes widened.

“I’m nine years old!”

Laughing, he patted her on the head and strolled down the hill. Her father passed him on his way up.

“Hey, Monkey, time to go.” He made to rub her head but missed, instead brushing her nose with his fingertips. The car was already unlocked when he opened it, falling rather than lowering himself into the seat. Monkey turned her head until she could see the dock where four silhouettes blended into the wood and water.

The sky exploded above their heads, raining down in green and yellow sparks; across the lake, someone was setting off fireworks.

“For chrissakes, get in the car!” Gregory called, beating on the horn for emphasis. His head lolled from the window like the tip of some giant, mustached tongue. Light from the firework was fast dissipating; Monkey could barely see the small shadow of her aunt shove Uncle Bud in the chest, a hard push that nearly sent him tumbling into the lake. Then the light dissolved.

As they drove off, the fireworks began in earnest. It felt to Monkey, crouched in the foot space beneath her seat, that they were fleeing the site of a nuclear fallout.

Four hours later, Buddy Bannister stood barefoot on the dock with a trash bag full of paper plates and potato salad at his feet. In his late fifties, he was a man built like a blade- lean and pointed, with a jutting chin and a long, flat nose. Behind him the tables, chairs, and busted umbrella were piled on the grass, waiting to be ferried back up the hill and home again. A mound of broken green glass glittered on the dock. The moon was out. Its mild glow had a softening effect on the scene; his denim shirt appeared less wrinkled, somehow, the chipped wooden dock smoothed over- but even this light could do nothing for Buddy’s hand.

It was his right hand. The white flesh was a mottle of reds and blues, colors leeching from his wrist to pool by the scar tissue of his knuckles. Only his thumb and three-fourths of his index finger hung from this lump; they were like two gnarled roots reaching down towards the water of the lake. He closed his eyes.

He was listening. Cal Davis used to say that cutting off one sense made all the other ones stronger, that blind people could hear everything and the deaf all had vision like super heroes- Davis had planned on going to medical school before his letter arrived, and there was always something quasi-scientific coming out of his mouth, right up to the end. He could remember that, too: Davis divvying up a handful of rice between the lot of them, sucking his gappy teeth and shaking his head over the waste Buddy had made of his

hand. It had been early in the morning still, the mist rose green and smothering from the dirt where Buddy lay on his side. He had his head clenched between his knees, he was shaking. Ferris Anderson, the stutterer, asked if there was any peanut butter left, and then a bullet sprouted from the middle of Davis' forehead and the man was dead. His last word had been 'bacteria'.

Buddy was listening now for fireworks, but they were finished, over, leaving behind a haze of smoke that settled over the lake like pulled cotton. Animals had begun to settle in again now that the barrage was over; he could hear them clawing up the trees. Grass rustled. Twigs snapped. A frog splashed from the water to the shore, hitting the sand with the old sound of things falling to the ground and not getting up again.

Buddy imagined his wife lying in their bed, her hair tucked in pink plastic curlers and her body tangled in the sheets his mother had given them as a wedding present. He thought of the trash bag still lying on the dock, and his eyelids almost flickered open, but he caught himself and crinkled them shut. Inhaling, he took a step forward and into the lake.

It was so warm he could cry. Sinking through the water, he felt his shirt scrunch around his body like an outgrown skin, so he peeled it off and kept it gripped in one hand so that it wouldn't float away without him. Beneath it, his chest was thin, almost concave, and blindingly pale. His collarbones thrust forward. All the while he could feel the pores of his body expanding and expanding until the lake began flowing into him and Buddy himself was seeping out through his skin and diffusing across the water. They were reaching an equilibrium, and then his foot collided with the bottom of the lake and he kicked out, rising up again through the bubbles and the silt like a seven-fingered saint.



**2nd Place  
High School 11-12**

**Running  
By Ben DeVries**

The couple in the opposite seat is bothering you. They're twenty-somethings and unaware of your presence. She's got her head on his chest. He's drumming his fingers on the top of her head and looking down the side of his face at her. They are murmuring—loudly enough that you can hear without catching any of the words.

You slump deeper into your seat and stare out the window. You wish they would shut up.

Beyond the smudged plastic of the window, Chicago's South Side is rolling past, the teeth of the Skyline growing in the distance. The train is on an elevated platform, and you are looking down at rooftops and one-way streets lined with parked cars. Few people are out because it's so cold; a draft seeps through the sealant at the bottom of the window. You push a gust of air from your lips and fog the pane. When it clears, you see your reflection beside a weather-streaked billboard with an ad in Spanish for Southwest Airlines:

*¿Quiere alejarse?*

*Sí.*

You venture another look at the two across from you. They've begun kissing. It is a tender, mostly silent affair, but other people in the car are noticing. You feel embarrassed for the couple—embarrassed that you are sitting so close to them—and that irritates you further.

The train bumps. She giggles. He pulls her back to his face.

The two disembark at the University of Chicago platform. By now the train is nearly full, and a taciturn black woman with gray hair and prematurely arthritic fingers takes the seat across from you. You check the time on your cell phone. 7:53. School started eight minutes ago.

At 8:08 the train groans to a halt inside Millennium Station, and you join the jostling exodus. Yellow lights stud the ceiling of the boarding platform like the buttons of a spine, illuminating the concrete floor in dusky circles. You follow the crowd to the ramp leading into the station proper. Blue tiles, stainless steel, and glass storefronts greet you. There is a Starbucks nearby. Coffee sounds good—Grande with a splash of creamer—but your funds are low, so you walk on.

After a visit to the restroom, you head aboveground where the station empties

onto Randolph. The wind is cold as it whips around the looming buildings. You pull your chin beneath the collar of your winter coat, puffing steam and wishing you thought to grab a hat before you left. To your right, traffic rumbles up and down Michigan Ave., and across the way you see Millennium Park, empty in the morning hours.

The stoplight at Michigan and Randolph changes, and you watch as a woman in a jacket and scarf hurries across the opposite side of the street, pushing a stroller.

“Little cold to be out with a kid,” you want to call after her, but a fresh gust steals your courage. Instead you imagine Carrie in the woman’s role, hunched against the cold, her bare hands clutching the top of the stroller, a diaper bag bouncing from one shoulder.

Mommy.

The image is strange, and you shake your head as you turn deeper into the city.

You don’t have any destination in mind, but it feels good to be outside and alone. You walk with your hands shoved into the pockets of your jeans and your chin pressed into your neck. People in trench coats and winter jackets brush past you, their faces flushed, and you realize you are walking slowly. You slant toward the curb, heedful of the lake of street slush that has accumulated along the road.

You wonder when they’ll figure out you ditched. Soon, probably—if not already. School has been going for nearly a half-hour. First period is a quarter of the way through. Phone calls will be made—perhaps are *being* made—after your whereabouts, and your parents won’t have an answer.

You dig your phone from your pocket. You wish suddenly that you left it at home as you initially planned. Any minute now “Mom Cell” or “Dad Cell” will buzz to life on that screen, and then what will you do?

You jam the cell back into your pocket. The last thing you want is another confrontation with your parents.

You turn north on Wabash. The El rattles and roars on the overhead tracks, a metallic dragon clawing its way along a tunnel. You wince at the noise until the train disappears. Nearby, a flock of pigeons huddles beneath an iron-grate staircase leading up to the platform, pecking at garbage and bobbing their heads. You aim a kick at them, and they scatter.

Your cell vibrates. Your stomach plunges into your bowels, but you growl and fish out your phone. It’s not your parents calling. It’s a text from Carrie.

where r u

For some reason this makes you feel awful. It is a simple question, yet in your mind, it transcends the constraints of those three words and grows enormous in size and suggestion. It bespeaks her need, your guilt. *Where are you?* And more than anything—more than anger at your parents, frustration with yourself, even irritation with Carrie for attempting to contact you—you feel the overwhelming weight of responsibility.

It terrifies you.

Pausing in the shelter of Popeyes' entryway, you tap a hasty "im fine," send it, and tuck your phone away. When she texts again, you don't reply.

You hear the distant clatter of the approaching El, and you veer right on Lake to avoid it, thinking vaguely about walking the Magnificent Mile. In your mind "where r u" pounds like the steel wheels of the train. You are having trouble concentrating. Behind you, a cabbie lays on the horn as he swerves to miss you jaywalking. You wave a hand after him and step onto the sidewalk.

Your thoughts tumble unwillingly to your parents' reaction to the pregnancy.

You are in your father's home office. Dark green walls. Bay window. A large, T-shaped desk with law-book laden shelves at the arms of the T. You are standing at one side of the desk, your eyes focused on a smudge on the desktop protector. One hand clutches the edge of the desk; the other is a fist by your side.

Across from you are your mother and father. Your mother is standing behind your father's cushy, leather executive chair, her arms folded across her small breasts. She is a thin-faced woman with dark, gently curling hair. Her skin is pale, and her lips have disappeared into a flat line.

Your father is the only one not standing. A book lies open on the desk, and his fingers are laced together on top of it. He is leaning forward in his chair, his sandy mustache complemented by the reddening of his face. His eyes are narrow behind his reading glasses.

No one speaks. The computer tower hums beside a black monitor where the Windows logo is flashing.

"She's pregnant?" your father says at last, as if your initial admission had not been enough.

"Yes, sir."

"Carrie?"



“Yes, sir.”

You risk a glance at him. He is removing his reading glasses. You see his hand tremor.

“How long?”

You swallow. Though you are the one standing, you feel minute. You see him as a criminal must see a judge—imperious, merciless, gavel poised.

“I don’t know,” you manage. “Two weeks? She just told me yesterday.”

“How long have you been screwing this girl behind our backs?”

You see your mother flinch at this. You flinch, too. He isn’t shouting yet, but he is one step removed from it. You have seen your father erupt before, and you fear this might be the first spluttering bursts of lava.

“Well?” he demands.

“I don’t know—I—”

“Bullshit!” Your father gains his feet in a rush. He is a big man and almost upsets the chair. Your mother catches it, steadies it, and then reaches to steady your father. He brushes her off and stalks to the other side of the desk.

“How long were you banging this girl before you finally knocked her up?”

He is shouting now—in your face and shouting. You can feel tears leaking from the corners of your eyes, smearing your vision. Burning.

“A year—two? I don’t—”

“Like hell you don’t know.” Your father looks like he wants to punch your lights out. His eyes are wild—piggish, almost. He is breathing fast and reeks of stale cigars.

You look to your mother, wondering if she is going to intervene, and see that she is wondering the same.

“Damn it.” Your father wheels around and stomps to his desk. You capitalize on the moment and take two steps back.

“Damn it all to hell. Dammit. Dammit. Dammit.” Two heavy fists settle on the desktop, and he leans toward you. “Two years. Can you believe it, Marlene? Two damn

years our boy's been rutting like an animal with this girl."

You can see the spittle leaping from his lips as he speaks, each word enunciated as if it were something foul he was trying to expel from his mouth. Your jaws clench.

"You don't understand," you say. "Don't talk like you understand when you don't."

"Oh-hoh-hoh." A vicious smile cracks his lips, and he steps lightly to the corner of the desk. "I understand perfectly well, son. Oh yes. The question is do you understand?"

You glare at him.

"You're planning on attending college next year," your father continues. "How are you going to do that now, *Papa*? You've got a kid—a woman who's going to depend on you. What are you going to do? Work full-time?" He snorts. "You're not going to get far without a college degree. You need clothes, diapers, baby formula. How are you going to afford that?"

He has rounded the desk again and is advancing on you. "Do you realize," he rumbles, "what you've done to yourself? Do you?" He prods your chest with a finger, and you stumble back. "Can you even begin to—begin to *comprehend* the fix that you've gotten yourself into? That you've gotten *us* into?"

He stares at you as if he expects an answer. His lips are pressed together; his eyeballs are bulging. His nostrils flare like a bull's.

You keep silent, grinding your teeth and glaring.

"Fine."

Your father retreats to his desk and slumps into his chair. After a moment's hesitation, your mother lays a hand on his shoulder. He doesn't seem to notice. His face is dull—sagging. He is nodding to himself, but he says nothing. He stares at nothing. Finally he leans his arms on the desk and cups his face in his hands.

On the wall behind you, a clock ticks minutes out of existence. The sound is impossibly huge.

"I don't know," your father says at last. He shakes his head upon the prop of his palms and spreads his fingers, so that he can see through the slats. He does not look at you.

“I don’t know. I don’t—I don’t know what I can say. What I can *do*. I just don’t know.” He sighs and lifts his hands from his face. “I don’t even trust myself to speak at the moment. I need time—time.”

He stands and, without looking at you, leaves the office.

You stare after him, uncertain of how to respond or even of what to think. Your breath is coming in shallow bursts, and you are suddenly aware that you are crying. You want to say something—anything—but you can’t. Words escape you. Thought escapes you. So you stare—humiliated.

The STOP hand at Michigan and Lake is blinking. Six seconds. Five. Four. Gentlemen, start your engines.

You bolt across the street, keeping an uneasy eye on the cars testing the stop line. They take off as you hit the curb, streaming steam from their exhaust pipes. You watch them for a moment, then re-pocket your hands and start north.

You are still amazed that in the fallout of Carrie’s pregnancy, your mother—not your father—hurt you the most. She did not rail and scream. She did not jab fingers into your chest. Rather, she placed a bomb inside your head and, wearing a calm, sad face, watched it go off.

She is bending over the oven when you walk into the kitchen. After your father’s eruption, you retreated to your bedroom and stayed there through lunch and dinner. But hunger eventually undermined your self-imposed exile, and you took station by the door, listening for the inevitable sounds of your father’s retiring into the bathroom to process his meal. Only when you heard them did you make your move—the prodigal son returning.

Your mother looks up as you enter. The ghost of a smile kisses her lips. She is baking chocolate chip cookies, and there is a rack of them cooling on the island. They smell wonderful.

“Help yourself,” she says.

You do not answer—you do not want to ruin her act of generosity by speaking. Aware of your unworthiness, you take a cookie and eat, watching as your mother slides a fresh tray of dough into the oven.

“You know we love you,” she says, straightening. “Your father and I.”

She is staring at you. You shift, leaning against the island, and allow your eyes to wander to the mahogany cabinets by the fridge. Slowly you nod.

“Good.”

You hear water running, and then your mother steps into your plane of vision, drying her hands with a towel.

“Hungry?”

“Yes,” you say, softly.

You sit at the table as your mother fixes a plate of leftovers for you. Your father is still in the bathroom, and you hope you can eat before he emerges.

Your mother returns and sets the plate in front of you.

“You aren’t still upset with him, are you?”

You lie and shake your head. Fajitas. Your stomach gurgles.

Your mother, looking relieved, smiles and nods and then takes the seat across from you. Warning flags go off in your head, and you ram half of a fajita into your mouth.

Your mother waits.

“So,” she says when you swallow, “now that this is all finally in the open, have you thought about what you are going to do?”

Boom. Detonated. Your next bite tastes like paste. Your mother is watching you with large, pitying eyes. She offers you a small smile to encourage you.

You wish you could remember how you responded. You must have said something, but your memory of the conversation is hazy. What are *you* going to do? Not us. Not Carrie. *You*.

where r u

Your phone buzzes to life.

*This is it*, you think.

It is. “Dad’s Cell” is calling, blinking like an SOS on your cell’s display. You let the phone vibrate in your hand, watching it with the same morbid fascination that you would extend to a train wreck in slow motion. Eventually it goes still.

You feel a grim satisfaction knowing that wherever they are, your parents are

having a heart attack.

Ahead of you is the Du Sable Bridge, which spans the Chicago River. You took Carrie here for her birthday last summer—bought two tickets for a Wendella boat ride on the lake. You had just started sleeping—

*rutting*

—together, but no one knew. And who cared? You adored each other. You remember riding the locks out to the lake, the boat's motor moaning softly, the water whispering against the hull. You had one arm wrapped around Carrie's shoulders and the other twisted around her arm, your fingers running through hers like laces on a shoe. The sun was bright; the air warm. You remember the brush of her lips against your ear when she spoke.

You push a gale of stale air from your nostrils and watch it dissolve into the cold.

Last summer seems an age ago.

You stop near the center of the bridge and lean against the railing. You look down. The water is murky—wintry and wrinkled and ugly—and you see a Styrofoam cup floating beside its plastic lid and red straw, rolling like a bobber with the waves.

You find yourself suddenly thinking of George Bailey in that movie your mother always makes you watch come Christmas. *It's a Wonderful Life*. George's life is in shambles, and he's through. He's had it. He's taking his ball and leaving. In this particular scene, snow is falling in big, fat flakes, and George is at a bridge of his own, bracing himself for the leap.

You almost laugh. You're no George. You wouldn't jump if someone put a gun to your head and told you to. You're a coward—a stupid, rutting coward. And now that you've been told to shovel the shit you made, you run—you run and keep running.

You exhale and look again at the water, at the cup bobbing beneath the bridge. George Bailey would never have made the mess you've made. And besides, when George almost gave up, he had Clarence to stop him. He had his guardian angel.

Where's your guardian angel? Who's going to stop you? All you've got is your Styrofoam cup, afloat but floundering in the water—and even as you watch, a wave overwhelms the cup, floods its open mouth, and drowns it.

In your pocket, your phone vibrates again. It's your mother. You shiver and pull your hands inside your coat sleeves. The phone goes quiet.

Thirty seconds later, she calls again, and instead of returning the phone to your pocket, you cradle it in your hands. With each new buzz, the noise of the city—the growling of car engines, the rush of the river, the murmur of passing voices—fades.

Your thoughts bend to Carrie—to the child, whom, not even a month in the womb, you are fleeing. You draw a shuddering breath. You’re doing no better than your parents. Worse, actually. They did not run from you. You did that yourself. And now you’re doing the same to your unborn child.

In your hand, your phone vibrates a third and then a fourth time. You think again of George Bailey and realize that Clarence never saved George. George’s friends saved George. George’s family saved George. All Clarence did was convince George to give them the chance.

He stopped George before he ran too far.

You look at your phone. On the fifth buzz, you pick up.

“Hey, Mom. I’m coming home.”



**3rd Place**  
**High School Grades 11-12**

**Herra's Nation**  
**By Logan Kilpela**

A violent, frigid wind there blew across the intermittent isles of hoary snow amid a vast outreaching sea of ice. As it swept across the tundra to the coast, the only sound that broke the lifeless quiet was the fleeting chorus of muffled voices hissing among the needles of every lonesome conifer atop that desert heath. Too cold it was for snow to fall in earnest, so it drifted from the heavens a flake or several at once, as a fire on a dim night will send up sparks to the Moon. Darkness was already glowering under the shaded skirts of the pines while the golden disk of the Sun bled sanguine purple rays across the World; for a moment there wavered a brazen, liquid bulb on the horizon, hovering over the distant boundary of the frozen ocean. There, the remote grinding of berg on berg seemed as faint as if part of some silent, passing dream in the mind of a man who stood there, unmoving, above the seashore.

He was clothed in brown, the colour of his beard. There was a reddening blush on his cheeks, and a thin, glittering film below his nose. His gaze was cast out far, over the hills, looking east. There, the Sun's last glaring flames illuminated a band of figures retreating into the distance. He slowly walked on, his leather boots as stiff as wood as he dragged his feet through the powder-snow. He followed in the footsteps of his predecessors, lightly dusted with frost, and came behind them over the rolling hills to the wide unending tracts of land beyond, spreading in all directions, save far away in the East. There, mighty parading mountains bestrode the distant evening air, their lofty crowns lost, brooding, amid the low clouds. The man's quarry was already ahead of him on that even ground, out even beyond the long shadows of the hills cast by the setting Sun. There were a great many deer far away ahead of them, steadily scrounging their way under the snow toward the remote girdle of trees about the mountains.

Hobbling cautiously sideways down the last hill, careful not to let snow into his boots, the man came to the open plane. He found the snow less deep there, only an inch or several covering his ankles. He could not see the deer any longer, and only a suggestion of the mountain-peaks amid the fog. But his view of the men grew clearer; they seemed no longer out of his reach, and he walked swiftly, though not hastily, in their footprints, coming gradually closer. When he could hear their voices indistinctly, he slowed to match their steady pace, keeping his distance.

They wore clothes much like his, and their unclear words, clear and rich like bells, sounded much like his own. Suddenly, a great crescendo of noise swelled from the group. It was a song of victory and brotherhood, old and long remembered from far back in unrecorded time. But the man was startled and frightened, and flinched, falling clumsily to his knee. One of the group, who had not joined in with his fellows, turned at the sound of the man falling into snow. He shouted out at once. The prostrate man recoiled as the troupe all came round, their song quiet. They seized him, but he struggled violently. He had heard by now that their language was not like his, and their men were not his friends or kin, as perhaps he had hoped. Several of them pinned him down and at the same time conversed with the rest of their fellows, their language sounding to him like the harsh,

unintelligible chattering of crows, or the babbling intercourse of triumphant wolves.

The quietest of them abruptly made a comment. He pulled his hood off his head and began to pace around the group and their captive, who had now all gone quiet. He grew steadily more animated, pointing at the man as he did. The man had stopped struggling as they had turned from mocking to heated debate. He watched their thin, elegant faces intently as they discussed him: and so he had no warning when the tallest of them, the one who had spoken, took a dagger out of his coat.

The man acted almost without thinking. He clumsily and desperately tore his adrenal body with such force that he flung his restrainers off before they tightened their grip on him again, wrenching their arms. More of the group had drawn knives by the time he pulled himself free, and they lunged at him at once while he fled. One of the blades caught him in the back, but his coat was too thick and stiff, and the dagger stuck there. It came loose when the man pulled himself aggressively free of his assailant. But the rest of the rabble had used this time to nearly encircle their quarry. He ducked as they came down on him, and he rolled in the snow, back the way he had come. He stumbled to his feet—from rolling to sprinting in an instant—as his pursuers apprehended him. The thick cloak he wore billowed out behind him, snapping like a drum as he fled, running back west in their footprints. Breathing evenly, like a calm and determined bear, his eyes fixed only on the tract in front of him, he came to the foot of the steep hill and began to climb.

As he sped up, he turned his head for a moment. The lean, tall gang of his aggressors had stopped; they were all breathing heavily and steadily. But the man did not stop: gulping air through his mouth and nose, roaring deeply as he exhaled, he half-crawled his way up the slope. He did not stop even when he had crested the hilltop, for he had seen the spears in their hands, their points as cold and grey as their makers' eyes.

When he finally halted, rolling himself in the snow to slow down, he tumbled on his side into a thick bank of snow and ice. He lay there, looking up at the low-hanging clouds wheeling through the sky like a descending fist, its clawed fingers open to engulf the mountains. As his breathing leveled out, he rolled back up onto his knees and looked back where he had come from. The sky was now grey, and the snow a pale blue. He could not see over the hilltop, but was sure his pursuers were not behind him any more.

But he was mistaken. They sat low, just below the hilltop, peaking their heads up at him, muttering amongst themselves.

'What is he, do you think?' said the first of them.

'Teina! Keep your voiced down', hissed the second. 'Looks like a foreigner, someone from over the hills, most certainly—but perhaps further. He's a sneaky little fox, after all: came very close to catching us.'

'Oh, they're all like that', said Teina. 'They're sneaky but they're stupid. Stumpy little dwarf didn't even have a spear on him.'

The second of them, Komen, nodded, a smile on his lips. But Herra, the tallest, broke his silence and turned his deep, stony eyes away from its fixation on their quarry. 'There's a reason he only had a knife. Maybe he lost his spear: he certainly was surprised when we found him out... But he was clearly trying to pull a fast one while we were all singing—trying to knife one of us. God, what a fool! A knife?' And he snorted in amusement.

'What do we do with him, then? He might have been trying to get us back for something. Has any one of you ever gone that far, done anything to those animals?'

'They're jealous', said Teina. 'They must be. Our land is wider: more deer.'



'Maybe he was waiting to ambush us', said Komen, 'when we'd killed a deer. It's almost hard to believe that such big-headed people could make blades so dull and useless.'

'St!' Hiryo spat, clapping his hand over Komen's mouth. He lay there, poised and tense on his belly, looking ahead, eyes wide to compensate for the growing gloom.

The man had got up and was gathering up his knife and a small, beaded necklace that had been flung from him as he ran. Komen and Teina rose up slowly, as cats delicately testing the air for the moment to pounce. Hiryo ran off to their left, intending to drive the man into his comrades' awaiting spears; but the man caught sight of him as he ran and leapt so high that he had already turned his body almost wholly round by the time he came down again.

Despite his thick frame, the man was a swift runner. He kept his body low to the ground, the wind rustling in his red-brown hair. But over the sound of the wind in his hair he could hear more loudly the growing sounds of his pursuers' footsteps, their longer, skinnier legs like deer's, swift and sprinting. As they ran up behind him, he began to weave, running erratically back and forth, trying desperately to throw them off. One of them, the tallest, was soon almost within arm's reach, and the man turned to look him in the eye. And in that moment he saw something there that he had never seen on a man's face before, even on the grim, high-cheeked visages of these cold murderers: it was a look of such senseless, vehement hatred that welled up from every spring and fountain of his being that his grey eyes hardly seemed in focus so bent was their will upon their singular purpose.

And in that minute moment, the man decided what he should do. No thing had so terrified him in his life as the look in the eyes of the tallest of these men—men! Or so he had thought: for now they seemed more intent upon his destruction than any man he had ever seen, or any rearing mammoth he had ever come upon. With this in mind, he wheeled his thick, short body mid-stride and hurled the massive brunt of it into his attacker. His head was bent too low to see it as he struck the long, thin breast of his murderer, but if he had looked, he would have watched the light in those cold grey eyes flicker for a moment, and then go dark as their bearer tumbled onto his back into the snow.

Such a great corporate bellow there arose from the man's pursuers that he could begin to hear his own heart rapping at the very canals of his ears. It vanished, muffled by the snow and wind, as soon as they let it go, but no less was the horror of its release to the cowering man. He knew now that they had cause to kill him, for two of the troupe had stooped to help their fallen comrade, while the others came in such hot pursuit it seemed to melt the snow ahead of them. Their great spidery hands seized him from behind and tore him down upon his back, knocking his wind clean out.

Time seemed slower as the man watched Herra, the tallest, take his place above his head. He thought for a moment back to that morning, when he had left the cave intent upon finding a herd of deer from which to pluck a meal. And in his desperation and his jealous rage he had tried to overtake a band of what he had taken to be intruders. He saw now that they must be gods of some sort, mighty beings far beyond his comprehension or mastery: they were tall with lofty brows hid among the clouds and thin, bony cheeks like cruel ivory tusks poised to gore him. No such rich brown of hair had he ever seen among his own people, nor any eyes of this colour, like the wheeling sky by day.

Yet gods were supposed to be good, helpful creatures that only showed themselves to earthlings in their hours of direst need. Then these must be dæmons, or some depraved race of men from across the Sea—for it was rumoured that some men could swim the oceans like otters, slaughtering every clan of the man's kin they came upon. Revulsion so great welled up in the man's heart as he stared into Herra's eyes that he wrinkled his face in defiance and spat a great gob of his own gall into the wind, where it was sped away into the night-air.

Herra vomited a venomous roar that gurgled in his nose and throat like that of some mountainous, rearing mammoth, and it flew back in the face of their hostage. In his eyes, bitter and wrath, there bloomed a kernel of fear: horror grew there as Herra's band seized upon him for the last time. Such was their offended rage that their strength wholly overwhelmed each taught sinew, each clenched muscle, of that writhing form, helplessly contorted against their anger. He bellowed in frustrated dread, cowering under his up-thrown arms.

They had all dropped their spears to the ground, and were wrestling with his bearish trunks, when Herra stamped upon his insolent mouth: the man's front teeth splintered, and he howled like a wounded wolf. Now they found it much easier to contain him, he was in such a variety of pain. Hiryo and Teina bound the crippled man and hoisted his ruined form onto their shoulders. So heavy was he that Teina's cousin Midien took up his own share of the burden; and together the three walked over the crest of the hills, back the way they had come. Herra accompanied them, leading them on in the darkness, as the other eight of their band continued on their first trial, looking still for game.

'You have two hours!' called Herra to the departing men. 'I do not think you will find anything, but you must look nonetheless: we shall make an incantation in this rebel's blood for your good luck.'

And so the two groups split, the one walking out toward the distant shade of the mountains, where night was black; and the second bestriding the snow speckled with moonlight that shone through the overhanging dimness. They looked for all who might have seen them like a quiet funeral procession returning with a fallen soldier. But every now and then the form they bore would seem to jerk and struggle, only to be subdued by a blow from the man who walked at the head of their party. But none of them said anything until they had come over the last hill to look down into the wooded dell where their houses were put up. At the utmost depth of the valley, the snow was melted away by a series of fires piled high into the night, huddled figures cooking food and conversing about it.

The four men bore their load down through the spruces, looking ever forward to the orange light before them. They passed some twenty homes as they wound their way among the trees. Each dwelling was made of the tusks and ribs of mammoths, propped on their wider bases so that they met at the same point, from which long, broad mammoth-hides were hung. These tents had each a flap at their base, cut out as a door, through which the travellers might glimpse a cot or a small fire burning as they went.

As they came into the light of the four great fires burning at the bottom of that wooded hollow, the women and men about it lifted their voices in a song. They began to dance around the fires in a figure-eight, weaving and singing, their faces lifted in smiles of joy at their togetherness. Even some of the young children dotted about throughout the camp came down and clambered onto their parents' shoulders, shouting in abashed

imitations of their elders. A moment of rejoicing and forgetfulness in the midst of the bitter famine that gripped their people. Hardly had they sung a single verse when one of the women, Ultelo, who bore hers and Teina's daughter Tilki upon her shoulder, caught sight of her husband and Herra their chief. She saw the upturned face of their captive, his wide eyes glittering with fear, and knew that he was a foreigner, and that this must be some gravely serious affair.

She dropped to her knees and let Tilki down, whispering for her to go back up to their hut and leave her to daddy. Then she straightened up and came forward, her dark brown hair falling over her eyes, which had lost all the bright joy of the song. It had now died down, and in its place, a new sound arose: a great shout of fervor. For the men and women had seen and guessed the reason for their return. Soon Herra, Teina, Hiryo, and Midien stood at the centre of a clambering crowd, which begged them with ferocious, eager faces to know why they had brought this scum into the heart of their land.

'Silence! silence!' bellowed Hiryo. 'Listen! For we have brought this swine down to the fires for your judgment!' There were some cries of approval as Hiryo, Teina, and Midien forced their captive to stand, despite his weariness. He gazed ahead with terrified eyes, his knees shaking from the cold and dread. Herra stood beside him and grasped him by the brownish hair on his crown, addressing his people.

'Look at him! Look at his face and you will know you look upon the face of a dog! This is a creature with the slow wit and ruthless anger of a bear!' There were some growls of bitterness and disgust from the crowd. The people's faces, formerly ecstatic in their rejoicing, were now contorted in a fierce, accusatory loathing. 'This beast spat in my face and struck me to the ground: he laid siege upon us on the plains and tried to murder us! He did not understand the greatness of his own folly! But we shall let him discover it!' There was no more cheering, for now the rabble cried indistinctly for blood.

And Teina raised his hand, crying above the tangle of voices, 'How shall we punish him for his insolent attack?' There was a roar from the crowd, and some of them leapt forward, trying to get at the man, who stood there, immobile for his own horror. But some of the colder and wickeder villagers held them back, waiting quietly to hear the man's doom. As the people worked this out amongst themselves, Herra stepped forward almost unnoticed and whispered in Teina's ear. He nodded, and raised his hand on high again. After some moments, a tense silence fell. The man seemed to know, though he understood nothing of their words, that this was the point at which his doom would be decided.

'We will give him to the gods, and let his sacrifice be a warning and a reminder of the crime his race has done against our leader.'

There was such an outcry that the man wavered and swooned. Hiryo, who stood at his back, caught him under the arms as Midien picked his legs up. The two bore him as he struggled to the edge of the firelight. There several of the crowd were moving a great frozen stone, covered in speckles of dead lichen, into position. When the man saw this, even through his terrified stupor, he began to twist and shriek wildly. At this the crowd laughed and spat at him, saying that this was just payment. 'Look at him!' they cried. 'Look at his face! That hideous nose, like a great broad beak! And that thick, stupid forehead, like line of hills!' And they covered their mouths and made grimaces of disgust and mockery at him. Then Herra took up his spear, and Teina a long stone dagger, and five men held the man down and he writhed and shivered and began to weep.

The World seemed to move more slowly as the man looked into Herra's eyes. He towered above him like some menacing dæmon, a spear poised in his hand like a sceptre. In the moment that their eyes met, the two persons seemed briefly to relent. The look on Herra's face was not now hateful, but he seemed acutely aware of the power he held over the man, who seemed less afraid than stoic. Perhaps Herra saw it as an apologetic look that crept into the depths of those deep, ugly, foreign sockets, for he seemed to hesitate in guilt for a moment. In truth, it was a look of sorrow for ever having woken that morning, for ever having left his cot far away over the hills, that welled up in that wretch's face. And then Herra grasped the spear with his other hand and with a contorted look of fearsome hate and offended wrath drove the spearhead into the man's breast. He gave a gasp of shock and pain, and his head flew back, face to the sky. He could not breathe, and felt all sensation and awareness withering in his brain. And at this moment that Teina struck his head off with the long stone blade.

The rabble hooted and roared and stamped in delight, and danced around the fires, all their hunger and toil and troubles forgotten. They said many spells and prayers over the body, which they tossed headless on the faggots. The bonfire roared and sputtered, as if unwilling to accept this gift: and so they strewed the fire with some of their precious animal fat, the tallow sizzling to life and almost wholly consuming the lean corpse. This took some hours, and in that time the camp grew quiet as the villagers went to sleep or sat in silence and prayed that Heaven keep watch over the hunters who still had not returned.

The man's head they put on Herra's spear, so that it loomed like a gory icon over the heart of that proud nation. When the seven hunters returned, a deer slung across their shoulders, they dropped at once to their knees before it and praised their god for this token of righteousness and justice. They told Herra that they had seen several other lumbering brutes like this dead one on the road, but that these were engaged in the butchering of a mammoth, which they had frightened over a cliff with torches.

'They are clearly dangerous foes', said Limpo, a stout and logical man. 'We cannot let them invade our kingdom openly like this! We must defy them. This', he said, pointing to the man's head, 'is evidence enough of their insolence. Let's strike them dead if they come near us again. We did not have the numbers or the light tonight, but if we set out tomorrow with twenty men, we can find the scum. I'm sure they'll come back to that carcass tomorrow and days after, it's so vast.'

'There will be a ring of these hideous heads here once we have finished. And these arrogant little pigs will know that they cannot simply roam free, to and fro as they please', was Herra's answer.

And at midday on the morrow, a host of some thirty men, many of them young and eager for blood, departed from the dell and went out into the hill-country. Limpo and his hunters showed them where the carcass of the mammoth was, and they all laid hand upon it and stripped all the meat that its killers had been unable to take. And then they waited, hidden among the trees and behind the hills, for the unwitting men to return.

It was not two hours before there was a heap of ten or twelve bodies strewn about the mammoth-bones. The snow was stained with blood and Herra's men were weak with the fierce running and cutting they had done. They built a fire and roasted their lunch from the mammoth over it, talking in high spirits amongst themselves: they seemed not to give a thought to the many corpses strewn about. Not a thought, that is, until the Sun

began to sink. Then they went about to the dozen dead forms and cut each head from its thick neck; and the twelve chieftains of Herra's nation came as heroes back into their camp, where their murders and their thieving were celebrated and honored in song and dance and story for a hundred years hence.

