

2012
ANN ARBOR DISTRICT LIBRARY
IT'S ALL WRITE
SHORT STORY WRITING CONTEST
FOR MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL WRITERS

Congratulations to the winners of the 20th annual teen short story writing 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.



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Ann Arbor District Library

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The Judges

Natalie Bakopoulos

The Green Shore, Natalie's debut novel is set in Athens and Paris, against the backdrop of the Greek military dictatorship and centered around four memorable characters. She received her MFA in Fiction from the University of Michigan and was recognized as a 2010 PEN/O. Henry Award-winning author.

Judith Ortiz Cofer

Critically acclaimed and widely published poet, novelist, and essayist her latest book, *If I Could Fly*, tells the story of 15 year old Doris, who learns that 'she might have to fly far distances before she finds out where she belongs'. Currently, she teaches literature and creative writing at the University of Georgia.

Kelly Milner Halls

Kelly has had more than 25 books published, one of which is the amazing non-fiction *Operation Rescue: Saving the Baghdad Zoo*, which tells the story of remarkable animals and the team that worked to save them. *Girl Meets Boy: Because There Are Two Sides to Every Story*, is a collection that she edited with YA authors with a he said/she said telling of each story. She lives in Spokane, Washington.

Beth Kephart

Acclaimed novelist for both teens and adults, Kephart currently teaches creative nonfiction at the University of Pennsylvania. She is the winner of numerous grants, including the Speakeasy Poetry Prize. Her essays are frequently anthologized, and she has judged numerous competitions. *Undercover* and *House of Dance* were both named a best of the year by *Kirkus* and Bank Street.

Nina LaCour

Ms. LaCour received a MFA in Creative Writing from Mills College and currently teaches English at an independent high school. She is co-founder of 'Write Teen' a series of YA writing classes. *Hold Still*, Nina's first novel, was published in 2009 and is a William C. Morris Honor book, a Junior Library Guild selection, an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, and a Chicago Public Library's Best of the Best Books of 2009. Her second novel, "The Disenchantments," brings together influences of music and art on a group of friends as they decide what's next in life.

The Judges (con't)

Laura Resau

With a background in cultural anthropology and ESL-teaching, award-winning author Laura Resau has lived and traveled in Latin America and Europe. Her experiences inspired her novels for young people-- *What the Moon Saw*, *Red Glass*, *The Indigo Notebook*, *The Ruby Notebook*, *The Jade Notebook*, *Star in the Forest*, and *The Queen of Water*. She lives with her family in Colorado.

Pat Schmatz

Bluefish is the fourth teen novel for Pat Schmatz. This latest book received a starred review from *Horn Book*, *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, and *School Library Journal*. In *Bluefish*, everything changes for thirteen-year-old Travis, a new student who is trying to hide his illiteracy, when he meets a sassy classmate with her own secrets and a remarkable teacher. Pat currently lives in rural Wisconsin.

Rita Williams-Garcia

Rita Williams-Garcia's work has been recognized by PEN Norma Klein, American Library Association, and Parents' Choice. She recently served on the National Book Award Committee for Young People's Literature and is on faculty at Vermont College MFA Writing for Children and Young People. Winner of the 2011 Coretta Scott King Award AND the Newbery Honor Book, *One Crazy Summer* is the story of three girls from Brooklyn who head out to California to stay with their mother, a poet, who ran off years before; the year is 1968.

Terry Trueman

Stuck in Neutral, published in 2000, was a Printz Honor book, followed by *Inside Out*, *Cruise Control*, and *No Right Turn*. Terry received his degree in creative writing from Eastern Washington University, with degrees in psychology and an MFA in creative writing, also from Eastern Washington. Terry Trueman is the father of two sons, and makes his home in Spokane.

Ned Vizzini

Ned Vizzini is the author of *It's Kind of a Funny Story*, *Be More Chill*, and *Teen Angst? Naaah. . .* He has written for the *New York Times*, *The Daily Beast*, and season 2 of MTV's *Teen Wolf*. His work has been translated into seven languages and will soon be in Czech. He is the co-author, with Chris Columbus, of the forthcoming fantasy-adventure series *House of Secrets*. Forthcoming in the fall of 2012, is a new teen novel, *The Other Normal*s. *It's Kind of a Funny Story* published in 2007 was also a major motion picture from Focus Features in 2010.

The Screeners

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The 20th Annual

Teen Short Story Writing Contest

Speaker

**Caitlin
Horrocks**



Winning the Teen Short Story contest in 1997, Caitlin Horrocks was guest speaker at this 20th Year Celebration of teen writers. Caitlin's stories have appeared in Best American Short Stories 2011, and The PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories 2009, among others. Released in June 2011, *This Is Not Your City* a debut collection of short stories received praise, ". . . impressively sharp" and "appealingly rugged-hearted" (New York Times)

2012 Winners with Caitlin



2012
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IT'S ALL WRITE
SHORT STORY WRITING CONTEST
MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL
WRITERS'
PRIZE-WINNING STORIES

First Place
Middle School

Expressionless

By Elise Blaauw

I used to want to be smart. To be a genius like everyone else. To be the same.

But I am smart. I know that now. I have to remind myself every day, lest I lose the one grain of hope I have left.

So maybe all the other eight graders are learning trigonometry, and the really smart ones have moved on to statistics, while I'm still processing Algebra 1 from fifth grade. Maybe I'm confused when my teacher babbles in Latin and Greek. Maybe I get a little lost when our music teacher talks about the fractal patterns in Bach's work. Maybe it hurts a little. Maybe it hurts more than a little.

Maybe it hurts a lot.

But I know one thing. I understand people. It took me until sixth grade to know how to spell psychology, but I understood it long before. I can tell when people are lying, when they mean what they say, when they have a fake smile. In other words, I can see through it all. At least I could, if there was anything to see behind it.

Maybe it surprises you when I say that they're empty. I don't know what else would be there. There's your brain to process information, eyes, ears and nose to gather more and mouth to pass it on. I've read in books about people whose voices crack with emotion, eyes that shine with happiness or flash in anger.

Then I look at the real world, and I know it's not true. Not true at all.

"Samantha Wilkins, if you do not put down that stack of papers right now, so help me, I will chuck them out the window!" Ms. Ellington says. The words come out even and flat at first, but they peak in the end, like she just remembered that they're supposed to do that when she's mad.

"It's a book, Ms. Ellington," I say, slowly shutting *Harry Potter and the Sorcerers Stone*, a book I dug out of my basement a long time ago. "You told us to read."

"That is not a book, it is foolish gibberish and trash that will fill your mind with silly ideas. When I said read, I intended for you to read your spelling book to improve your vocabulary, which I dare say could use it. How many pages have you memorized yet?" She stares at me, unblinking, making me squirm uncomfortably.

"One," I say weakly. She pauses a moment, then slowly drags the corners of her mouth down in an over exaggerated frown, reminding me of a kid about to throw a temper tantrum.

I pick up the big, worn textbook from under my desk, letting it fall with a thump before me. Ms. Ellington sends another frown my direction. Ever since they stopped printing books everyone has started treating the textbooks we have like they're worth millions of dollars.

But no one cares about *real* books. Books with plots, characters, stories. Books that end, instead of just moving on to the next volume, then the next and the next.

I flip the speller open to the second page, trying in vain to focus on the words before me. The letters seem to peel of the page, swirling around me, forming new words. Words of adventure and excitement. In between the lines I see wizards battling, kids sword fighting, four children standing in a snowy wood.

I rest my head in my hands, listening to the melody of whispers from the studying kids. I wonder how they do it. Then again, I don't think they know anything else. It's like imagination is a foreign term to them. Every kid wears the same thing to school; jeans and a white t-shirt. It's not because of the dress code, it's because they can't come up with anything else. Food is the same everywhere you look. Dull, tasteless bread. Everything in this world is the same.

The bell rings, one short rude note. I slam my spelling book shut and grab my stuff to go.

"You don't try hard enough." It's the first thing out of my friend Zoe's mouth. She doesn't even look at me, for all I know she could be talking to a wall. I just shrug. There's no point telling her that no matter how hard I try, I just don't understand the things she does. "I'll help you study," Zoe decides. I shake my head again.

"You've tried that before. You know it doesn't work. I'm just..." My words trail off. I'm what? Dumb? Strange? Unnatural? "I'm just different."

"No," Zoe says firmly. "You just don't try."

I let Zoe believe what she wants. It's strange that we're friends, the smartest and the dumbest girls in the school. I know why though. Zoe couldn't care less about my education. But if she could accomplish the impossible and get me to learn things, it would make her look even better. It's sad the way she tries to hide her true motives. I can see her fooling even herself, but to me it's plain as day, as though someone wrote the words on her in scarlet letters.

I yank my backpack out of my locker. Zoe follows me to the bike racks.

"I'll come over to your house," she decides. "And we can study together."

I say nothing, unlocking my hover board and getting on, floating an inch above ground.

"See you then," Zoe says. I nod shortly, then take off, weaving between people in my rush to leave the hated school grounds. I slow as I approach the neighborhoods, letting my wavy brown hair fly out behind me. *This must be what flying is like*, I think. I've read in books about people mastering magic, defying gravity. If people today would use their intelligence to do something like that, then we really would be able to fly. People only focus on "realistic" and material things, and flying is out of the question.

I jump off the board when I reach my house. Glancing at the lawn, I see that the cleaning bot has done it again. I pick up a smooth round stone and chuck it at the center of the yard. It's my contribution to this world. One stone out of place in a country full of identical houses. But it isn't just an act of rebellion. It's my tribute to my father. When my mom told me he was dead, I asked where he was buried. My mom just looked at me.

"We don't bury dead people, Samantha. We burn them, like all other waste." Waste. Is that what humans are when they no longer add intelligence to the world?

I fling open the door and tromp up the stairs to my room, not bothering to greet my mother. She won't be happy to see me, even though she tries to appear so. She'd wish that I stayed at school for a study club, or tutoring session. She'd wish I was smarter. People go around trying to make their face look right, but when you actually look at it, it just looks wrong and disproportionate.

I set down my back pack and pull out Harry Potter, setting it gently on my bedside table. I knew it was risky taking it to school, but I was at such an exciting part. But now I want something closer. Something more believable.

From under my mattress I pull out *Little House in the Big Woods*. My eyes skim the pages hungrily, searching for something to hold onto, something I can find in my life. There's nothing. I pause a moment, coming across a word in the text that bothers me, like an itch in a place you just can't reach.

Tears. I ponder the word. *Her face was wet with tears*. Wet. What are tears, that they are wet like water, but different? I pull forth another word. Crying. Crying, tears, wet. I pick up my dictionary, but neither word is defined.

I hear footsteps climbing the stairs, drawing closer. They're too light to belong to my mother. Zoe. I hastily stuff the book back under the bed.

"Hello," Zoe flings the door open. Her eyes land on Harry Potter and she gives me a disapproving look that is more like a grimace. "You know those things are illegal. If Ms. Ellington hadn't been so tolerant, you could be in jail all ready."

I snort. I doubt it had anything to do with Ms. Ellington's tolerance. Probably the fact that if she reported the book, government agents would be all over the school and principal, which is not the sort of media she wants.

Zoe spends the whole afternoon lecturing me on math and science. When she asks me if I understand, I just nod again, though it's not even close to the truth.

Zoe smiles, this sort of smile that covers all of her face but her eyes. People's eyes these days are always the same. I long to sink into one of my books where they change. But when I think about it too much, that seems weird too. I mean, eyes that light up like light bulbs or swirl around. I don't know what I want anymore.

"Zoe?" I ask, stopping her as she turns to go. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Go for it," Zoe says, flipping her curly red hair over one shoulder.

“What are tears?”

All of Zoe freezes. She stops breathing, her eyes glazing over as though she’s seeing straight through the wall into a far away land. For a second I’m scared that I’ve killed her. Then she moves again, a harsh jerk bringing her back to reality.

“I’m sorry, I must have misheard you.”

She didn’t. Her smile is clear as glass, and behind it I see her panicking, the wheels and clogs in her head spinning at a maniac pace, trying to come up with an answer.

“How about crying?” I persist. “What does crying mean?”

Again, Zoe is at a loss, totally and completely overwhelmed.

“You’re making stuff up,” she decides, nodding as she ponders the idea. “Yeah, that’s it. You’re making it up. Don’t worry about it. Your mind usually does that when your intelligence starts kicking in. You’ll be normal in no time. Actually, this is a good thing.” The more she talks, the more she seems to convince herself until I can see that she believes every word flowing from her mouth.

“Wait a moment,” I stop her as her words finally start to register. “My intelligence?”

“You know,” she looks at me funny, at least funnier than usual. “You’re starting boost.”

My face must betray how confused I am, because after studying me a long moment, she continues.

“The alterations you get as a baby.” None of her words are hitting home. I almost expect her to sigh, or roll her eyes, what all the other kids attempt, but instead she continues on like a robot.

“The artificial intelligence everybody has. Most kids feel it’s affects in kindergarten, but it’s possible for things to work out differently. I’m positive you have it. It’s against the law not to. You’re just an outlier. Most people consider that obnoxious, but it proves that sometimes things work out differently...” she rambles on in an even, flat voice.

I clutch my head in my hands. Artificial intelligence. Fake intelligence.

“How do they do it?” I demand suddenly.

“They implant a little computer chip that they hook up to your brain to give you knowledge. It grows with the amount of knowledge you gain...” and off she goes again.

“Did they always do this?” I wonder.

“No,” she tells me. “They started a while back. Before, people weren’t very smart. Kids did foolish things and wasted time, so the government made some changes and here we are, all privileged and smart...” on and on she goes.

Before. Things weren’t always this way. The puzzle pieces start clicking into place. If people weren’t like this before then maybe my books *do* tell the truth. The truth about the past. Maybe those people used to exist. People who’s smiles looked right, who felt, who’s faces and eyes changed. People with expressions and emotions. But they’re gone now.

I know one thing for sure. I am the only human on the planet without that artificial intelligence.

“Why didn’t I get an intelligence boost?” I ask my mother that evening at dinner. I used to be scared to ask direct questions, but then I realized that no matter how touchy the subject, I won’t get a reaction.

My mom chews her tasteless bread. “What?”

“You heard me.”

Her expression doesn’t change. There isn’t one. Her face is vacant, matching her eyes.

“You have them, Samantha. They haven’t come into affect yet.” She doesn’t believe her own words. Neither do I.

“Am I supposed to believe you?” I near the line that I’ve avoided for years. I almost want to make her angry, to get a reaction, to get a mother. Anything to prove to me that she *is*.

I can see her racking her brains for what mask to wear next. Finding nothing suitable, she goes for empty neutrality.

“Of course.” She says it like it’s a no-brainer. Disobedience and distrust come to humans as naturally as flying comes to pigs. *Because they’re programmed that way*, a voice tells me. I ignore it. “Don’t go getting crazy ideas like your father.”

I set down my food. “What did he do?”

If my mother could read expressions, she would have known to stop there. “He made something illegal.” I think about the books I found in our basement. Were those his?

I read between the lines of her answer. He made me. *I’m* the illegal object. I remember Zoe’s words; *It’s against the law not to*.

“Was he smart?” I ask quietly. Maybe he was like me, the one different person in a world of identical people.

“Not incredibly, but he helped design some hover mobiles, which got him on my good side.” It was his imagination that brought him up to my mother’s status.

By the time I go to bed, nine o’clock on the dot, I’ve figured it out. My father was probably like me, his father like him and so on. It started with one person way back at the first chip implants that chose not to have it and passed it on. My father left me my opening to the truth; the books. He knew rules could not constrain me like everyone else.

Still, I lay awake, one question tormenting me. If I’m the human that didn’t get changed, if I’m the original, what is everyone else?

The next day I pull Zoe out of the stream of people.

“Let go.” She says flatly. I cringe. “I need to get to class on time or I’ll-“

“It’s important.” I protest, holding on tight. Zoe looks at me blankly as her mind scrambles to figure out what could possibly be more important than knowledge.

I hesitate a moment, then plug on with the plan I made last night. I need to know.

"It's your mother," I tell her confidentially, watching her face. "They found out after you left school that she has a disease. She's going to die, Zoe," I whisper. There's no reaction. "Soon," I add. "She doesn't have long to live."

Zoe just shrugs. "She wasn't adding anything to the world anyways."

I shut my eyes and try one last time. "But she's your *mom*, Zoe. Won't you... miss her?"

I know her answer before it comes.

I can hardly bear school after that. Walking down the hallways, surrounded by empty people. I can't stand it, watching the expressionless faces pass by. It was always awful, but now it seems worse, now that I realize how they're meant to be.

A feeling of hopelessness washes over me. Then strange things start happening. My throat closes up, as though a ball of sticky dough were caught in it. My eyes smart and sting and my breath comes in ragged bursts. Then a tickling sensation rolls down my cheek. I wipe it and stare at my finger through blurred eyes. It's wet. Water. *Tears*.

I duck my head down and speed along the hallway. But I'm walking slow enough to catch a snippet of a teacher's conversation.

"-pity, I was hoping it'd turn out. That would be a great success story."

"I'll go take care of it," another says. She turns and walks away.

It. The tightness in my chest grows. It hurts to hear these, these *creatures* talking about the only person with feelings as though I had none.

I do the first thing I think of. I walk right out the door. Leaving school early is strictly prohibited and none of the students would even consider it. I don't bother with my hover board, breaking into a run as I head home.

I throw myself down on the hard wood furniture. What is wrong with everything? I toss and turn as time escapes unheeded. Why?

The doorbell rings. I sit up, startled. Slowly, I pull myself to my feet.

"Hello?" I pull the door open. A man stands before me, dressed in a spiffy black suit. A sense of dread washes over me.

"Hello," he says pleasantly. He does a better job at faking emotions, but his eyes are the same as all others. Lifeless. I feel my heart sink. "May I come in?"

"I'm not sure my mom would want me to," I stammer. He smiles, nonplussed.

"Don't worry. I'm from the government. I won't hurt you."

He's one of the people implanting artificial intelligence. Anger swirls around me.

As though to prove that I'm not dumb, my mind plucks the trap out of his words. If I don't let him in, he'll accuse me of mistrusting the government, and I'll be in trouble. If I do, then I'll be in trouble again.

He doesn't wait for my response, brushing past me. "Thank you." He shuts the door behind him. I stare at it, my last opening to the rest of the world closed.

“Sit.” He commands. “I was informed that you were seen,” his lips pucker around the vile word. “Crying. You disturbed the peace of the school, I’m afraid.”

“You have my sincere apologies.” I say bluntly, standing up. “I’m sorry to bother you.”

He remains seated. “May I ask you a question?”

I pull back every urge to say no. “Yes.”

“A confused bank teller transposed the dollars and cents when he cashed a check for Ms. Smith, giving her dollars instead of cents and cents instead of dollars. After buying a newspaper for 50 cents, Ms. Smith noticed that she had left exactly three times as much as the original check.

What was the amount of the check?”

I stare at him blankly. He sighs convincingly.

“That’s what I thought.” He steps near me, his hand reaching into his coat pocket. “I will regret this.”

But he won’t. His eyes are just like everyone else’s. Blank and expressionless.



Second Place
Middle School

Like Summer Rain

by Sarah Kopacz

The music from my iPod reverberates through my head with every step I take and my ponytail swishes against my back. I love running—so exhilarating! The wind rushes into my face while my pink sneakers slap the road. I slow my pace and, breathing hard, walk up the sidewalk to our house. Our Christmas lights are still up from last December. It is October. That’s how slowly things happen in our family. Most everything is on hold “for the time being,” according to my dad.

I gulp down a huge glass of water and hurry into the shower to soothe my tight muscles. Normally, I am very particular about my routine in the shower, but today I wash my hair furiously. There’s no telling how much time we have before we leave for the hospital to see James. Even though it’s a school day, we are still going to visit. Thankfully, my mom cleared it with my teachers that I won’t be at school today, and a friend will pick up my homework for me. Scenes flash through my mind ...James smiling broadly as he receives various awards, picking me up and placing me on his shoulders to run around the football field at half time, encouraging me to climb “just one branch higher,” letting me put my pink hairclips in his hair, dancing with me to Beatles’ songs, teaching me how to catch and throw a football, blowing kisses back and forth to each other, and even playing dolls with me. I remember dancing outside of our Seattle home, turning our faces upwards to catch drops of the warm summer rain on our tongues, without a care in the world. I wish I could feel that free again.

In the heat of a state championship football game last November, James collapsed and was rushed off to the emergency room. He returned home that night and seemed to recover. He tried to behave like his normal, strong self, but soon his football coach told him to take a break from football. James was too weak to make it through the practices, much less the games. I used to love watching him play football; he was so happy. He said it made him feel like Superman—able to do anything. Because he couldn’t play football, James and I started getting up early in the mornings to run so that he wouldn’t get out of shape. We ran all winter without a problem, but as soon as spring peeked around the corner, it became harder for James to run for more than a few minutes at a time. A few weeks later, during one of our runs, he collapsed onto the rain-drizzled sidewalk near our favorite climbing tree, several blocks from our house. He stayed in the hospital for a few nights. The third morning, my parents received a call to come to the hospital immediately. My mom and dad figured James was desperate to return home so they dressed up nicely and left to pick him up. I stayed behind because I had homework to finish. Several hours later, they stumbled through the

door without James, pale with red-rimmed eyes, to tell me the bad news. Near the end of his junior year of high school, my only brother was diagnosed with Leukemia. The prognosis looked bleak. At the time, I didn't understand—I still don't. Now, a year later, he is still fighting.

"Lexy!" My mom's loud voice shocks me back to reality. Grudgingly, I shut off the delightfully steamy shower. In less than five minutes, I am dressed in comfy jeans, a tank top, and a sweatshirt. I shove my feet into my sneakers and pile my hair into a messy bun while I fly out the door and into the car. I dig into my pocket and, thankfully, find a twenty-dollar bill. It will come in handy if James wants something to eat something other than bland hospital food. I would too if I were him. The car ride to the hospital takes exactly seventeen minutes; I have memorized every tree along the way. The rush I had during my morning run has melted away; I rest my head on the seat and close my eyes. My mother's voice drones on and on—I wish I could have some of that energy she overflows with. She monologues about her work at the office, the boring tan color she wants to paint the foyer, and the cable knit sweater she plans on buying at Kohl's. I mutter under my breath, "Like we would have enough money to buy anything from anyplace but the Salvation Army." We haven't been able to go on a single vacation since this whole thing started, not even a day at the beach. Then again, it's not like James wanted this, so I shouldn't complain.

"What was that?" my mom asks. Apparently, I wasn't as quiet as I thought. She turns around in her seat and raises one incredulous eyebrow at me. I just mastered that family trait last month.

"Nothing," I mumble. We pull into the hospital parking lot and my mom rushes out of the car and walks briskly into the rotating doorway, her layered brown hair fluttering in the wind. My out-of-shape Dad and I hurry to catch up. The door explodes with a blast of heat; I'm sure people keep hospitals warm just for the old and sick people, but I'm thankful anyway. Last month, it still felt like fall, but now with the biting wind, it feels more like winter. My parents almost run to James' room but I slow down to buy a hot coffee from the Starbucks near the entrance. Even though I'm hoping the coffee will wake me up, I flop down in my favorite chair in the lobby and relax. This is our normal routine. If I give my parents time alone with James, they give me time with him later. I pick up a glossy edition of People magazine and casually flip through it. Photos of smiling celebrities mock me. Life just isn't like that. If it was, I wouldn't be sitting in a hospital right now reading last month's gossip about these perfect plastic people! "Get a life girl!" I tell myself. But I can't. I have to be there for James. Who knows how much time we'll have left with him? What if he actually dies? What am I going to do then?

Isabella's high voice shatters my thoughts. "You're here again? Aw. . ." she says with a condescending look. Isabella Mancini, a senior in my high school, is pretty, popular, and very proud. She is in the Virginia Mason Medical Center here in Seattle for an eating disorder and walks around the hospital daily eating frozen cherries—one of the few foods she will let touch her lips.

I know all too well that she thinks James is going to die. I jump out of my chair and try to give her some of her own signature attitude, but I'm afraid I look ridiculous standing here sticking out my hip. "He'll get through it, Isabella. James is stronger than anyone I know. You just watch and see. Why do you keep coming around here anyway if you just want to shatter my confidence?" I ask, raising that one eyebrow, hoping it affects her the way it does me when Mom does it.

Isabella studies the Styrofoam cup in her hand, avoiding my question. She pops a frozen cherry in her mouth and takes her sweet time chewing it. How does she look so perfect all the time? At 8:30 in the morning she has on makeup, her dark glossy hair is curled, and she wears a pink sweater and probably the smallest size designer jeans ever made. That's amazing—practically impossible by my standards. She's still too thin, like she could blow away in the wind, but sometimes I wish I could look like her. Suddenly, the first few bars of "Just Dance" by Lady Gaga fill the air. Isabella glances at her phone then answers it with a flirtatious, "Hello?" just as if she were hanging out at the mall, even though everyone knows she's here at the Medical Center.

I roll my eyes and slump past her to throw away my empty coffee cup in one of the huge brown trash cans. Then I wander the halls to kill time and finally make it to room 83. My parents stand to leave as I peek around the corner of the door. On her way out, Mom gives me a quick hug. I notice that some of her energy seems to have dissolved—is he worse? Oh, James looks awful. His eyes are closed and his head rests lightly on the crisp, white pillows. At first, the only noise in the room is his erratic, labored breathing. Then, under the sheet, his hand clicks a pen open and shut about ten times. He knows that this annoys me. His bright green eyes open and his pale lips stretch into a mischievous smile. A split second later, my brother sits up Indian-style, throwing off the sheets, revealing old navy blue and white sweatpants under his hospital gown. I sit next to him. When he tilts his head towards me, I stroke it with my fingertips; his half an inch of hair feels as soft as a chick.

"Hey, how are you, Baldy?"

He lifts his thin hand and rubs my head, too, messing up my hair, "I'm better, can't you tell?"

"Not really," I reply dryly.

"My apologies, Your Highness," he sasses me with a bow of his head. Even though his health has diminished, his attitude and sense of humor have not.

We talk about movies we've seen recently until he jumps up and pulls on my hand. "Come on; let's go somewhere. I'm going to *die* if I don't get out of here."

I stare at him, "That's not funny."

"Yes, it is. You know it is," he retorts, laughing and coughing. He throws his hospital gown on the bed and pulls on a faded burnt orange t-shirt. I lead the way to the vending machine and spend my twenty-dollar bill on Sour Patch Kids, Coke, and lots of chocolate—James's favorite. People give it to him all the time, but the nurses confiscate it. I can just picture them saying in a

superior tone, “He is in no condition to be filling his body with junk food. He needs nutrients, not empty calories.” We lounge together in the lobby’s overstuffed loveseat and talk about school, who dumped who, who asked who out, running, and all the latest gossip from West Seattle High. I don’t have to act tough or cool with James; I’m just me and that’s enough. James devours two chocolate bars and opens a Coke. As he brings the cold metal can to his lips, he grows suddenly serious and looks at me. “Hey, what’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” I lie.

“I’ll be fine. Stop worrying about me; Mom and Dad do that enough without your help.”

“They’re parents,” I say. “That’s just what they do. If I don’t worry about you then who will—besides them, I mean?”

“But you don’t need to because—”

“Yes, I do,” I interrupt, getting louder.

“Hey, hey, calm down,” he consoles me. “Remember what I told you? I know where I’m going and I’m not afraid.” A few months ago, James agreed to go to a youth retreat with a good friend and returned all transformed. He has become a Jesus freak and tries to convert our parents and me.

“Yes, I remember, but I don’t think I’m on board with that, James. I mean, how can a loving God put people on earth only to get sick and die? I just don’t get it. If God’s real, He’s cruel. Or at least it seems like He doesn’t care.”

James only says, “He’s there, really. And He does care. In fact, He loves you; so do I. I’ll always be watching you from heaven, Lexy. I’ll love you forever. Oh, and I’ve got something for you back in my room,” he says with a faint smile on his lips, “something you can remember me by.” He puts his arm around me and then tears well up in my eyes. I brush them away so he doesn’t see, but it’s no use; he does and he hugs me again. I start sobbing. Close in my ear, I hear him start to sing; his voice deep and rich—like chocolate. My sobs subside as I listen to the words. He’s singing something called “Grace Like Rain,” his favorite song lately. Great, this is just what I need . . . a religious hymn. I lift my head from his shoulder and give him a look that says, “Seriously?” His voice falters, but then he laughs. In a strong, steady voice, James sings song after strangely comforting song; I wonder if people are watching us, but close my eyes and listen.

Eventually, I wake to James quietly laughing for some unknown reason. What’s there to laugh about? Was I snoring? I probably look like a mess. How long have I slept? James looks at me, still amused. “It’s only been—,” he glances at his watch quickly “—an hour.”

How does he do that? Either he can read my mind or I am not very good at hiding my thoughts. Anyway, I stand up and stretch. We walk to his room in silence. There isn’t anything more to say.

Room 83 is unusually busy. Nurses run around frantically while my parents anxiously watch the door for us. Amala, James’ favorite nurse, exclaims, “Ah, there you are! You were gone too

long—we have more tests for you!” She turns to my parents and smiles, asking, “You want to stay or are you leaving?” We head toward the door, but James calls me back. He presses a small Bible into my hands. He doesn’t say anything but opens the cover to show me an envelope with my name written on it—I’ll look at it later. For now, none of us want to stay and watch my brother getting stuck again by needles. My mother normally stays to be with James, but right now, she’s not up to it. We go to Wendy’s instead.

Surprisingly, I can make it to my last three classes of the day when we get back. Sam, my best friend since kindergarten, waits for me inside the door of our history class. “How was it?” she asks, concern in her deep brown eyes. “It was okay, I mean-,” the bell buzzes and it startles me. Sam laughs. I guess I am a little jumpy today. Ms. Crane strides into the room, her high heels clicking on the hard, cold floor. “Okay, settle down, settle down. There’s nothing like a bunch of energy-packed teenagers, is there? Oh-” she pauses and stares at me. “How’s your brother, Lexy? I thought you weren’t coming to school today.”

My throat feels sandy but I manage to croak out a measly response, “He’s okay.” Wow, pathetic. Sometimes I despise myself! Why am I so quiet? I replay that scene in my mind all day until I have to ride the disgusting, noisy bus home. Kids yell, music blares, and my head pounds. I want to sleep.

Twenty minutes later I am wearing sweatpants, lounging on my bed, and worrying instead of sleeping. Unable to rest, I drag my lazy butt down the stairs to check my email. I sort out school emails and put them in a folder for later. I browse through the news. Great stuff out there; mass murders, shark attacks, and floods. What is the world coming to? I pull up Sam’s blog and look at some new pictures she’s found on the internet. A huge emerald tree bursts from the dry brown ground of an impossible photo. A little boy in the tree reaches for the next branch. He’ll never reach it. He’s stuck there on my computer screen forever. I want to help him get to the top of the tree. I can’t. I can’t cross the bridge from reality to a picture. It’s not possible. I take a deep breath and scroll down. The next photograph is of a girl completely dressed in black, sitting on the concrete floor of a shadowy room, her arms wrapped around her legs. She looks so lonely. Her eyeliner-rimmed eyes stare blankly at her pale bare feet. I feel like her. She looks desperate for someone to hold her. I imagine myself in her place. Okay, moving on—I refuse to go all soft and mushy. The next picture is of a little girl wearing a frilly lace dress, smiling at the soft chick in her cupped hands. I used to be that little. I feel as if I am a hundred years old instead of fourteen; I don’t always go to school, I almost never hang around with friends, and I will have NO interesting extracurricular activities to put on my college applications. It’s because of James, but I don’t blame him. I mean he can’t help it; it’s not as if he chose to get Leukemia! Why couldn’t I get it instead of him? He is the outgoing one; everybody knows him. I’m the quiet one that nobody would miss. Why am I thinking like this now? I wander upstairs, bury myself in blankets, and listen to the soothing sound of rain on our roof as I drift off to sleep.

Months fly by in a blur of tests, hospital visits, and general chaos. I feel as if I'm not really living anymore. Maybe this is why James told me to stop worrying about him. Maybe I'll try. So, after some serious consideration, I do. I try to get out more and put a lot more effort into my appearance. For the first time in my life, my mom loves going shopping with me because I will actually look for new clothes. I try to make more friends, friends who don't know James, and I'm earning A's and B's in all my classes. I feel more alive, but muted at the same time—like I'm wearing a mask over my emotions. I think about those cheesy shirts that say “life is good,” the ones with pictures of smiling stick figures camping or playing soccer. How can life always be good? Especially when it's not.

There's only about a month of school left, and James is going to have a bone marrow transplant. He isn't nervous, but I am. The doctors assure us everything will be fine, but what if his body rejects the transplant? As sick as he is, any procedure is risky.

Two weeks later, we all hug James one more time before he goes into surgery. He hugs me last and whispers, “Remember, I'll love you forever.” I whisper those same words back to him and try to keep from crying. Once they wheel him through the double doors, I run to the ladies room and bawl. My mind spins from the possibility that the transplant might not be enough. I wipe my eyes with a tissue and decide that no matter what happens, I will be strong for James.

Five long days later, I methodically shower and dress in black. Silently, we drive to a deceptively welcoming building, and heavily walk to the doors.

Death is a cruel word. Sharp and bitter, it leaves no room for anything else. Numb, I sit next to Sam at my brother's funeral service. My parents are crying, Sam is crying, even Isabella is crying. I won't. I cried as I held James' hand while he breathed his last breath, but not since then. I can't. I promised myself I would be strong once he was gone.

Gone. James will never dance with me again. We won't climb any more trees, or eat another chocolate bar. His last words echo in my head: “I'll love you forever . . .” I'll never hear those words again.

After the service, I try not to talk to anyone. Despite my best efforts, Isabella finds me. Her eyes are red and she seems genuinely sorry. She hugs me and starts apologizing for being so condescending, telling me that she really loved my brother. I look at her, startled. I knew they dated for a few weeks last year, but when he became a Christian, she dumped him. I can't believe this girl; now that James is dead, she starts coming around. I don't say a word.

Days pass by and morph into weeks. My grades are slipping, and my mother suspects I'm depressed. Who wouldn't be in my situation? After school one day, I sit in my room and stare at the wall. After a minute, I can't stand it—the silence screams in my ears! I used to find the quiet comforting, but now I want to do something instead of moping around. I stand up and run a hand through my bedraggled hair. My room is such a mess! First, I turn on my stereo and turn up the volume as loud as I can stand. Next, I sort out junk into trash bags, fold clothes, and vacuum until I

am satisfied. Curious, I look under my bed. I pull out gum wrappers, various English papers, and a small black book. I turn it over. It's the Bible James gave me. Now I remember—there's a letter in there that I was supposed to read! Hurriedly, I pull it out the envelope and open it. A Bible verse is written at the top: "For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. Plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." Well, I am not so sure about that. I read on. "Dear Lexy, First of all, I want you to know something and I don't ever want you to forget it. No matter what, I'll love you forever." I can't read anymore; it feels like my heart is breaking all over again. For the first time in weeks, I start to cry. My tears drop onto the paper clutched in my hand and smear the beautiful words. My brother is gone. How can someone who's dead love me forever? Tears turn into sobs and when they subside, something feels different. Suddenly, I can picture James close by, like he's in the next room. And you know what? I can believe that he still loves me, wherever he is; I can feel it. Tears roll down my face and into my hands, warm like summer rain.



**Third place
Middle School**

Shades

by Kristen Hayden

Belief is a funny thing. It gives infallible, if possibly incorrect, reasons for actions, good and bad. It can turn men to beasts or beasts to men. It can fuel war or peace or the idea that there is a monster under your bed. Because if you believe it, there is one. At least in some places.

- Dishatka Rikishantataborinti, priest of The Temple

And this is how the story started. Belief. It actually started a long time ago in a land in which belief was raw and fiery and could be used to give ideas life, within a carriage drawn by two ill-matched horses over a pitted and weedy road. The torches on the sides of the carriage had long since gone out in the rushing wind despite the best efforts of the driver and so the carriage rumbled on in complete darkness but for small slices of moon peering through the flying clouds. The driver muttered angrily under his breath at this horrible wind that crept under his hat, and the way that nowadays torches never worked, now in *his* day they wouldn't go out even in a storm that rushed as fiercely as a thousand-pound tiger on caffeine... The single passenger in the small carriage was curled under her thick traveling cloak and was miraculously asleep. Her traveling bag was spilled over the floor, revealing a flowered cotton dress and the tips of yarn hair from a barely-concealed doll wrapped up in a petticoat. The mutterings from the hunched-up driver changed from complaints about the weather and torches to complaints about how the distance to the blasted carriage house was *always* longer when there was a storm... when suddenly a dark rectangle loomed up to the right. The horses stopped up short in the windless lee of the stables, their happy snorts matching the driver's fervent thanks to any gods who might be around as he swung down from his perch to open the carriage door. The small passenger had only woken up when the wind stopped whistling through gaps in the slatted wooden floor. The gnarly driver helped the girl down with her heavy bag and then pointed up a road glowing slightly in the fitful moonlight.

"Up there, miss, the house. Follow the road. The Master's expecting yeh."

She merely nodded, then started hesitantly up the path that barely kept the wild weeds on either side from touching each other. Her long traveling dress and cloak whipped frantically around her knees like they would have liked to fly away. Locks of her dark hair flapped into her face, and she tucked them with a well-practiced and irritated shove back into her silver-worked snood. She

continued up the path as she squinted at another rectangle up the road, guessing that this was the house because of the moonlight flashing on the glass windows. Too busy staring up at the possible house, she didn't notice that her hair continued falling out of her hairnet from the whipping, snatching wind, until the net wriggled totally free of the pins. A sudden gust grabbed it and whipped it out of her hair and out over the low bushes. She turned her head and followed the progress of the silver snood over what could only be called a moor. It glinted in a long peep of the moon and she watched it until it was out of sight.

Minutes later, she reached the large oaken front door surrounded by curling vines. The ornate knocker with an indistinguishable animal was too tall for the girl. She looked around and picked up a stick, using it to lever up the heavy metal, and then let it fall to make a loud boom. She waited, and then was lifting it again when it suddenly opened silently. This door was made for creaking. It would have been impossible for it not to. The silence was therefore even creepier than it would have been had it creaked. Behind the door was a tall, thin, and dark shape. The girl started and stepped back quickly, but then the shape also moved back until the candlelight poured over a hollowed, hawk-like, sunken face that had seen too much, either real or imagined. *Oh goodness, she thought, that is my uncle.*

“Hello, Rosanna.”

He really does look like a nightmare.

After a brief meeting with her uncle and a cup of hot chocolate, Rosanna curled under the heavy, musty comforter, smelling the scent of old dust and ancient fur cloaks. She had her doll in her hands, hidden under the comforter that was still cold even after having her warmth under it for half an hour. Rosanna was already homesick and tears gilded with moon-silver slid down her cheeks. She was also shivering with cold, her thin nightgown made for the warmer southern climate where she lived. She wished that she had had more foresight when she packed, but it also didn't help that the windows leaked cold drafts across the room. Another chill swept the room, and this one felt different somehow. A hiss that didn't sound like wind swept across the floor, sending a cold chill shocking down her stomach, freezing her limbs and sharpening her hearing. Another hiss whispered closer to her bed, and Rosanna half sat up. There were shadows in every tiny corner, yet there was another, oddly deeper, shadow next to the closet. Rosanna's eyes suddenly could make out the edge of a cloak, the side of an arm, a nose. She gasped, feeling fear racing through her, and she flung herself all the way under the comforter, clutching the doll up close and sobbing as quietly as she could. She fell asleep, crying, shivering, and feeling very, very alone.

Breakfast was quiet the next morning but for the *hoooooosh* of the wind and the clinking of silver on china. Of course breakfast had to be oatmeal with slightly soured milk and lumpy sugar.

Rosanna *hated* oatmeal. It tasted like glue and had about the same texture. It would figure she would have to eat oatmeal in this odd, old, rambling house with her odd bird of a nightmare-haunted uncle. If the speed at which her uncle's spoon moved from the bowl to his mouth was any test of enjoyment, then her uncle was probably enjoying his mushy bowl of oatmeal much more than Rosanna. He wouldn't meet her eyes, instead staring fixedly at various objects on the table, such as the sugar bowl (shaped like something that could have been a rose, but could also have been a cabbage - it was probably an heirloom). The intensity and unblinking quality of his gaze put Rosanna in mind of a lizard attempting to outstare a pair of glass eyes. Rosanna was very glad when her uncle finished and told Rosanna that she was free to explore any room of the house but for his study. He still wouldn't meet her eyes.

Rosanna decided to explore the house systematically starting with the first floor, garden, and then each floor up after that. After an hour and a half of exploring, she still hadn't found anything interesting. She was rather disappointed that none of the intricately worked cabinets had fabulous jewels or notes to horrible a murder mystery that only a young and beautiful heroine could solve. None of the wardrobes, or mirrors, or bookcases were magic doors to hidden worlds. Wasn't that how it was supposed to go? Girl goes to odd relative's house, finds mysterious adventure, and returns, victorious. She had definitely read enough novels to know that to be true.

Rosanna saw in one of the halls a bright and hot beam of sunlight pouring through a dusty window. So, although disliking to leave a job so messily incomplete, Rosanna decided to start exploring the outside of this odd house before the sun disappeared. She decided to start with the stables.

Rosanna loved horses. She loved the warm, comfortable smell of horses and hay. She liked the smooth, wiry hair and long mane and tail, the soft dark eyes and velvety lips. She liked how horses were tidy in everything they did, with no wasted energy or movement. She loved racing along with a horse and she hoped that there would be a good riding horse here.

Rosanna was not disappointed. In addition to the two horses that had pulled the coach last night there was a tall black horse (making her guess that he was her uncle's), and a lovely grey-brown horse, just about her size.

"Aye, that 'orse is Flute. Smart mare. The Master got 'er when he heard you were coming because 'e heard you ride. Would 'ou like too go ou' now?" He had a very odd accent. It bounced from county to county and from peasant to gentleman. Rosanna looked at him carefully.

"E heard?" She inquired, raising her eyebrows. He grinned sheepishly, showing brown stained teeth and expelling a breath that smelled slightly of garlic.

“Yeah, you’ve caught me. It’s just that Master likes me to have a working class accent.”

“He told you that?” She said.

“No, but he kind of glares at you, if you catch my drift.” He was rather an odd man.

Flute was a wonderful horse. She was just about the correct size for Rosanna, and was hardly a bumpy ride at all as they cantered over her uncle’s property. Rosanna was very happy that she had decided to visit the stables.

Returning to the house, Rosanna continued her exploration. The second floor proved as uninteresting as the first, except she did find a family of mice living in an old sofa. She was on the third floor in yet another uninteresting room containing only a wardrobe and a rug when a clammy draft swept the floor, reminiscent of the chill in her bedroom. Rosanna turned around and stopped breathing. A man stood in the room, tall and clothed in black. His face was extremely pale, and there was something very odd about it. Most oddly, and rather dramatically in a ten cent novel kind of way, mist curled around his legs like a hungry cat, which, once seeing that the man wasn’t going to feed it, stretched itself toward Rosanna with damp paws. It seemed to mewl softly and urgently. It swept through her skin and paralyzed her with fear. She thought quickly of all possible exits to the room. Unless the wardrobe across the floor had a hidden door in it, there were no exits except the one behind the man. He stepped toward her, and in a voice that blew away any former fear of hers with even fiercer waves of terror, he said, “*Hello Rosanna.*”

She started breathing, but just barely, feeling her stomach knot and her back go sweaty. His face, now near enough to see, didn’t stay the same. It was like watching a cloud, seeing it change so slowly that it was hard to tell that it had shifted at all. As his features melded Rosanna’s eyes watered when she tried to look at him. A slight hiss slipped out of his lips, sending new ripples of chills down her spine, and she realized why he looked so odd. His eyes were swirls of colors racing, blending, melding, and there was no expression behind them, no flicker of life and no soul. There was a word to describe them, but what? She couldn’t think. If she found that word though, he would go away, right? Rosanna’s eyes were drawn to his, and she couldn’t look away from the swirling... the swirling... whatever that word was, and she felt her self move toward him, and he began to stretch out a hand, pale and spider like, reaching, and she could hear him hissing under his breath as he stared into her eyes, “*Yes, it is whole and pure, the whole to save my half, to bring down the enchanted walls-*”

CRREEEAAK! His head turned back at the horrible sound, breaking the spell, and he vanished, leaving a hole where air should be that pulled the breath from her lungs. The door continued to open with a shriek like, well, a rusty hinge. It was odd. Rosanna hadn’t remembered a shriek when she had come into the room. She suddenly realized that the mist was gone as well.

“Sorry, miss. I didn’t mean to scare you. Apparently I’ll need to oil those hinges.” The figure in the doorway looked at the offending hinges speculatively, then shrugged. “Actually, probably no bother. This room has never been used. The Master wants you downstairs for lunch. He says that meals are to be regarded strictly and horse riding isn’t a suitable excuse.”

Rosanna’s eyes grew accustomed to the backlighting from the window behind the figure, and a boy in cotton overalls came into view. He had thick, windswept hair, a crooked nose, and a smattering of freckles across his nose. His eyes were blue-grey, and they shone, full of all the things that those oddly colored eyes of the specter had not had. She had never been so glad to be burst in upon in her life.

The boy walked her down to the dining room, talking all the way. Rosanna felt relieved that reality was returning after her encounter with the specter.

After the dinner eaten in an irritated silence on her uncle’s part, Rosanna returned to her room again. The dark seemed deeper than before. It took her breath away when she blew out her candle, bringing out sweat on her hands. She hurled herself under the covers, pulling her doll up close and squeezing her eyes shut, willing herself not to listen. There was no sound, and she began to relax, telling herself not to be silly, when the hiss came back, bringing the chill, but now there were other voices with it, just on the edge of hearing. The dread solidified into a solid seed in her stomach, a seed that grew icy tendrils of terror that filled her arms and legs, trapping her muscles. She flew up against the invisible bonds, and fumbled at the matches, trying not to look, but a glow caught her eye and she turned, the matches tumbling unlit from her fingers.

There was the figure in her doorway, tall and black, but now she could see that the black of the clothes was really swirls of deeper, unnatural colors that twisted through each other and gave off a glow. It was very beautiful in a wild way, and she felt her back muscles relax as it mesmerized her. This was nothing to worry about it was just, just, just... a terrifying creepy specter that glowed colors and could send mist that leapt like spirits and could twine up her arms and legs, and hold her so still.

Rosanna opened her mouth to scream out her terror, but the mist filled her lungs and choked her, making her cough for all she was worth. When she looked up, her stomach clenched again when she found herself now face-to-face with the gaunt man with that word she couldn’t remember clothes. He hissed between his pointed teeth, and the noise resolved itself into words. “*-It is the perfect one, innocent, it will whole my half and then, then, THEN we shall see who has power, yes, POWER! THE WALLS WILL FALL!!!!*” He reached for her, stretching out his fingers like cold cobwebs and Rosanna’s ancient instincts, handed down to her from generations of cave-people who didn’t get eaten by the tiger, took over. She slapped the thin hands aside, flinching slightly at their clamminess,

ripped her legs out of the covers and flung herself out the door. She was shaking and still terrified, but now that she had something to fight with, she could do it forever. She ran to the second floor, with some hazy plan of jumping into a room and hearing the specter run past. That's what always happened in those heroine novels, right? Or somehow they found a magical sword and turned with brave fire in their eyes to slay their enemy, becoming a much more assertive person in the process. Except, somehow, Rosanna felt that if a magic sword appeared in her hand right now, she would just drop it and keep running. She didn't remotely feel brave fire kindling in her soul. She just wanted to escape and remember that word that described that man. She knew her mother had told her that her bookcase was the word all the time; she just couldn't remember it now. She felt another thrill of horror in her heart as the feeling of a draft dragging on her legs told her that the mist had caught up, and she looked down to see it glowing around her legs in the oppressive darkness, the corridor only sporadically lit by cloud-ridden moon. How far behind could that horrible specter be, then? She tried to run faster, but she was tiring quickly. The adrenaline was draining, and she still wasn't free of the monster. Her dread deepened again, making her feel weak and helpless as in a nightmare, when a darkness in front of her warned her that she was very quickly running out of hall. She darted sideways just before she hit it, but instead of the new hall that she thought would be there, there was a door, mercifully unlocked. She dragged it open, whipped inside and slammed it on the mist gathering behind her. She could hear it whispering as she leaned, breathing very hard, against the door. "*This is the one-*" "*We will be FREEEEEEEE!!*" "*The walls will be torn-*" "*WE WILL BE FREEEEEEEEEEE!!*"

Then, as if it could get any worse, she felt the mist creeping in around her ankles, lighting the area at the bottom of the door in a sort of silvery glow, still whispering, "WE WILL BE FREE!" It flowed up around her, pinning her to the door, solidifying slightly. She struggled, trying to rip through it, but to no avail.

This is ridiculous, she thought, *mist can't pin things down!* Immediately as she thought this, the grip loosened, and she pulled herself out of the filmy bonds. Then, although she had thought her terror quite used up for the night, she froze again. The mist creeping now under the door was thicker and darker, full of swirling colors. It solidified until it became the gaunt man, his eyes now angry.

"*You shall not run! We will find you wherever you go....*" There was one more possibility for Rosanna's escape. She could see that, but was wondering how much it could hurt. The window was throwing moonbeams across the room, backlighting the specter. If she could just inch around like *this*, and sort of turn like *that* against the wall, drawing him away from it. He was chuckling wheezily to himself now, muttering. Suddenly he reached out, hissing, "*You are MINE!*" And Rosanna bolted. He grabbed at her, holding onto her thin nightgown, which ripped in his claw-like grip. She

wrenched open the sash, squeezed out of the unfortunately narrow window, and jumped as it slammed shut behind her. She fell hard, but had managed to jump into a path of garden, and then she got up and ran in the freezing wind. If she could just reach the stables... But then chill behind her made her realize that it was too late and she felt the horrible bone-dry hand close over her arm, spinning her around. He was angry again. She really had to know what that word was and she asked,

“W-who are y-you?!” Although the word was solidifying in her mind now. And he told her, drawing her ear to his mouth and hissing,

“I am Chaos, locked from your world with walls put up by your gods. Your twisted soul shall never rule the human Earth, and it is that soul which shall build your prison for evermore,” they told me. They enchanted me into a prison of my own halved soul. But I found a way to fight. If I could find a soul whole and beautiful, and take the whole and connect my half, the walls would fall and I could again rule this Earth! And yours is perfect. Innocent... Beautiful... MINE!”

“But what of my uncle’s or the chore boy or coachman’s? Why not theirs?” She was hysterical now.

“Hah! Theirs are hardly beautiful, now are they... And your uncle. He is the one who dreamed me into this world with his sheer belief of the terror of Chaos. But now your soul is mine, and we shall be free!”

She pulled away as quickly as she could, but he was faster, grabbing her arm and pulling her closer to him. Suddenly something flashed in the moonlight, hanging on a tree behind the specter. Her beautiful silver-woven snood, lost last night in the wind! Her mind was pulled away from the beast grabbing her, and he flickered, the pressure on her arm dissipating for an instant. He reappeared, looking frightened. Realization and relief bloomed in Rosanna.

“Hah! You are just a shadow, aren’t you! Dreamed into the world on sheer desperate belief! You can be sent back with belief!” As soon as she said that, he began flickering more and more. She pulled away again, concentrating with every ounce of mind on her belief that he wasn’t really real. The spacing between his reappearances lengthened, as did the gaps in his horrible screams of rage and fear. The mist tried to creep out of the flickering vortex, but suddenly everything disappeared, leaving a garden free of everything except for one exhausted girl and the howling of the ever-present wind. She swayed a little, going cross-eyed. Thinking muzzily, *hah! This may be worth its own ten-cent novel*, she collapsed onto the path.



The Glass Cage

by Hannah Blaaux

Bright lights, white walls, and pain; they were all part of my ordinary day. The bright harsh white lights were always glaring down on me, while the white walls kept me closed in. I was rarely without them, in my room, in the halls, in the testing rooms. Then there was the pain. It came in many forms. Pain at being kept in one glass room, pain at being viewed as a scientific experiment, and of course, physical pain from when they tested me.

I used to have a handler. Her name was Amy and she played with me when I was little. She was there as long as I can remember. She taught me how to talk, how to play, and how to laugh. When I was a bit older, she transformed from my playmate to my school teacher. She'd sit on the floor of the glass room with me and show me how to read, and recognize colors.

"What color is this?" Amy would laugh and toss me my bright green ball.

"Green!" I knew the game well. Amy would quickly ask me the colors of items in my room and I would have to answer as quickly as I could.

Suddenly in the middle of the game, I began to get very excited. "White!" I laughed happily, pointing at the wall. "White!" I pointed at Amy's coat, which was always white, every single day. "White!" I pointed at my own clothing. "White!" I was unstoppable, pointing at my bed, the floor, the ceiling. Everything was white. Then I began to get scared, and suddenly I started crying. *What if all this whiteness swallowed me up?* The tears blurred my vision, and suddenly all I could see was white, white, white. Amy quickly wrapped me in her arms, glaring at some watching scientist. She placed the ball in my hands, and I stared at it, calming down slowly, reassured by its bright green color and its solid feeling in my small hands.

Amy never played that game with me again.

"What letter makes a 'kkk' sound?" she asked me one day, sitting cross legged on the ground, looking at me from over her metal glasses, her pencil poised at her clipboard. I pointed to a spiky letter, one line with two sticking out of it in opposite ways.

"K," I told her, looking at her anxiously for justification. Amy would brush her short brown hair out of her eyes. She was always doing that- her hair seemed to be in a perpetual state of resistance against her hair band.

"Good job!" Amy gave me a hug, which I wriggled out of. "What's the matter?" she asked, her green eyes concerned.

“K for cage?” I asked her solemnly. It was a word I had picked up from one of the scientists. *“Yeah, we’re done testing for today. It’ll take a bit more time for it to be fully developed. Take it back to its cage.”* The scientists had then taken me back to my room where Amy had been waiting anxiously.

Amy froze at my question.

“No, no that’s a C, a curvy C,” she said finally. “Not a K.” Her eyes were filled with a sadness I didn’t understand.

Every day, Amy would have to leave, giving me a hug and kiss before she left.

“Where are you going?” I’d ask, but she’d never tell me. The glass room was my world. The only other place I had been was down the hall to the testing room. It was a quiet room, filled with the humming of various machines. They’d hook me up to one or another, and make me run, or jump or just move. It was just part of life, the way things were. I got up in my glass room, played in it with various toys Amy had given me, went to the testing room, learned letters back in my room, and finally went to sleep in my room. I knew of nothing else.

Then one day, Amy gave me a book. It was a large picture book, the letters big and it mostly consisted of very simple words. I opened the book gleefully, and stopped and stared at the first picture. It was a little human, which I learned later was a boy, throwing a ball in the air. I put my finger over the blue space behind him. It seemed to cover the whole page, but had bits of white floating in it.

“What’s that?” I asked Amy. She hesitated.

“The sky,” she whispered.

“The sky,” I repeated it to myself, making sure I wouldn’t forget the new word. Another image caught my eye. It had a long brown rectangle and then a green top. It looked like it was moving, the shades of green bending and twisting while bits of green fell to the earth. “What’s that?” I asked again.

“A tree.” Amy glanced fearfully at the camera which watched my room. I read the book, stumbling over words and pausing over pictures. The boy, named Alexander, was playing with his ball, which got blown away by the wind, *“What’s the wind, Amy?”*, and he had to go run and get it. I read it three times through, fascinated by the strange world that the boy lived in.

“Where’s his glass room?” I asked Amy. I knew that my room was made of glass. I had asked Amy about what the clear hard stuff was, and I had learned a new word: glass. Amy’s expression changed, a shadow falling over her face as she bent down to pick up the book.

“He doesn’t have one.” Amy once again glanced at the camera. I felt bad for the boy. How terrible to not have a glass room like mine! Suddenly something occurred to me.

“Do you have a glass room?” I asked seriously. Amy paused, biting her lip. An entering scientist saved her from answering. Amy jumped up. I watched silently.

“Ms. Maxwell.” The scientist nodded stiffly.

“Dr. Bane,” Amy greeted him back nervously. Dr. Bane frowned. He was a tall man with a crop of thick black hair, and one of the only scientists I recognized who had no glasses. He was always there when I went to the testing room, and I could tell he was some sort of leader with his commanding presence. His long white coat was spotless.

“Ms. Maxwell. I have something to discuss with you.”

“What is it?” Amy’s gaze slid away from his, and she stood tensely.

“You are getting too attached to the specimen,” Dr. Bane began, not even looking at me. I stared at his eyes, dark and steely. “I know you’re still fairly new here, but didn’t we clarify that you were to spend less time with it? It will be getting a new handler, who is a bit more... hands off. There’s a new ward, and we’re going to be transferring you, so please make yourself ready for that when the time comes.” Dr. Bane’s voice was like ice. Amy’s brown eyes grew larger.

“You’re transferring me?” she asked, glancing at where I sat silently watching.

“Yes. There is need for you in the disease immunity ward. You have done an excellent job. In fact, it has survived much longer than we expected, although I suppose that is not your doing.” Dr. Bane paused. “So, it’s time for you to move on.”

“Sir,” Amy stopped, took a deep breath and began again. “I request to stay here. She’s just a little girl, only three years old. She needs me; I’ve spent almost every day of her life with her!” Her voice was beginning to sound more desperate, her hands clasped tightly behind her back. I stayed perfectly still, watching Dr. Bane’s dark eyes.

“Maxwell, it is not a little girl, it is a science experiment.” Dr. Bane’s voice was as hard as steel. “You cannot allow yourself to become attached. You’re a good handler, one of our best, but this is your weakness. These are not children. They are experiments. We will never be able to do our job unless we think of them as so.” Dr. Bane glanced at me, and I ducked in an effort to avoid his cold gaze. “The specimen will begin undergoing serious testing. We think the quality we have created in it will begin to show itself. You have one week before you are transferred. I trust you will be prepared.”

Dr. Bane left, long legs carrying him out of my room.

Amy stood still, her body rigid.

“Amy?” I hugged her leg and gave her what I knew was a charming smile in an effort to cheer her up. I didn’t understand what the conversation was about, but I understood she was upset. Finally Amy picked me up, and hugged me wordlessly. I smiled, thinking everything was okay, and wriggled to get to the ground. I turned to one of the pages in the book. I found the words I was looking for.

“The boy, Alexander, threw his ball up into the air. Oh no! The wind blew it away! Can you see the ball?”

I stumbled over the word I wanted. *Alexander.*

“What does Alexander mean?” I asked Amy, eager to understand every single part of the story so I could read it to myself when she went away at night. Amy sat down beside me, her face tired. Something was hurting her, but I didn’t know what.

“It’s a name,” she told me. “Like my name is Amy.” She pulled her hair back into a ponytail. I stood up and played with it thoughtfully, loving the feeling of the sleek soft hair under my fingers. Suddenly I was puzzled.

“What’s my name?” I stopped playing with the hair. Amy didn’t say anything. She glanced at her watch.

“Time for me to go, honey. Be a good girl, alright?” Amy’s voice was held more concern than usual. Something was still bothering her, I could tell. She gave me one last hug, then left. I watched her go until she rounded the hall corner and I couldn’t see her anymore. I returned to my book, reading through it. Then I went back to the page with the strange word *Alexander*.

“Alexander,” I told myself. Then I decided that the boy in the book would just have to share his name, because I was taking Alexander as my name too. “Alexander,” I repeated and smiled. I had a name.

That morning, I found the picture of Alexander throwing the ball up in the air. I set the book out on the floor and waited for Amy to come. She finally did, slipping in through the door. I laughed happily and gave her a hug. She looked over me carefully, as though to make sure nothing had happened to me while she was gone. Then the open book caught her eye.

“Were you reading it?” she asked surprised. I nodded and pointed to myself.

“I’m Alexander too!” I said proudly. Amy gave me a puzzled look. “It’s my name!” I informed her. “Do you like it?” I crawled into her lap, looking eagerly for approval. Amy didn’t say anything for a long moment. Then she gave a little laugh.

“Yes I do, Alexander,” she told me, and her pleasure made me laugh with delight. Everything was okay again, Amy was laughing.

The next day, for the first time, I tried the door in my glass room. I was used to it being closed, and had never really wondered about it. But I wanted to see those strange things called “tree” and “sky”. I wanted to meet the strange boy without a glass room. The metal knob stayed firm, and the door didn’t move at all.

I twisted the knob again, but nothing happened. A scientist was walking by, and noticed me trying to open the door. He looked alarmed and shouted something I couldn’t hear. Suddenly Dr. Bane was there, Amy right behind him. I scurried back to my bed, feeling guilty. Amy let herself in, and for the first time, I noticed that she placed her hand on a sort of box thing which made the door open. Amy knelt by me, and I stared at the ground.

“Don’t play with the door.” Amy’s voice was stern. I hung my head ashamedly. Dr. Bane nodded approvingly at Amy’s harshness. I began sniffing, and I could tell that Amy had to restrain herself from comforting me. I looked at her, silently begging for forgiveness.

Dr. Bane cleared his throat. "I think it is time we began testing it." Amy opened her mouth, but shut it, her whole body tense. Her brown eyes flickered concernedly from Dr. Bane to me. She walked close behind as Dr. Bane led me away to the testing room. I studied his face for any sign of emotion. We got to the testing room, and I was strapped into the usual machines. But something was different this time. Shadows loomed large behind beeping monitors and the white lights seemed harsh.

"Start with something small. It's not used to pain," Dr. Bane told a woman who was pulling out various utensils.

"How about a small puncture wound, no worse than a simple vaccine?" The woman pulled out a small silver sliver.

"That's good." Dr. Bane was breathing more rapidly. The room was filled with more scientists than usual; it seemed that something unusual was expected to occur. "Ready?" The scientist at the computer nodded. The lady with the silver sliver approached, and suddenly on the palm of my hand, I felt a prick of pain. I recognized the feeling from when I banged my head on the ground and when I stubbed my toe once. I screwed up my face and debated whether or not to cry. A small droplet of blood formed in the middle of my palm, then suddenly I felt a sharper pain, much stronger than the first prick, and a wisp of energy disappeared. The scientists all gasped. My palm felt itchy, I looked back at it. The small cut was gone; instead there was smooth uninterrupted skin in its place.

Dr. Bane's eyes grew large. His mouth formed words, but no sound came out. Suddenly he was able to speak.

"We did it!" he straightened and faced the small crowd of scientists. "We did it!" The scientists began clapping, disbelief still on their faces. "Do it again," Dr. Bane told the lady. I felt the slight prick, and this time, Dr. Bane showed everyone the small puncture on my small hand. The sharper pain came again, a much sharper pain that made me gasp, and I felt some more energy slip out as my skin began to itch. This time I watched the wound. The cut faded, blending into the rest of the hand. All that was left was a small smudge of blood. The scientists once again burst into applause, and Dr. Bane motioned for them to do it again, but I was done. I began screaming angrily, and wouldn't let them near my hand. Dr. Bane frowned angrily, and for the first time, I felt afraid.

Then Amy was there. She unstrapped me from the monitor and picked me up, where I sniffled and shot indignant looks at Dr. Bane.

"Maxwell, put her down at once." Dr. Bane's voice was dangerous.

"I will, but don't you think she... it's had enough?" Amy put me down, as though to tell Dr. Bane that she would follow his orders. I clung to her legs. "We don't want to overexert it. Did you look at the computer results? The healing process takes a lot of energy, in case you didn't notice." Amy's voice sounded like she could care less, and I realized that she had referred to me as "it" for the first time. Dr. Bane hesitated. Then he nodded.

“Perhaps I judged you too quickly, Maxwell,” Dr. Bane said thoughtfully. Amy nodded respectfully then picked me up. I was glad to be back in my glass room, comforted by its familiarity.

“Show me your hand,” Amy told me, sitting beside me on the floor. I uncurled it for her, displaying the tiny smudge of blood. Other than that, there was no sign of broken skin. Amy breathed in quickly in a small gasp. Then her gaze became angry, but it was not anger at me. “They’ll never stop now,” she murmured. Suddenly she drew me onto her lap. “What do you think, do you want to go see the sky?” she whispered to me, hugging me close. Then she left without another word.

For the first time, Amy came at night. She had always left before lights out, but suddenly she was there, a dark figure blending in with the shadows.

“Where are we going?” I asked as she ushered me out of my glass room.

“Shhh,” Amy whispered. “We need to be very quiet, alright?” Her voice was tense. I nodded. We wove through dark halls, past countless glass rooms. We weren’t going to the testing room; we were going somewhere I had never been. I stared into a glass room, and could see something stir in it. Amy pulled me along.

Suddenly red lights started blinking and a beeping noise filled the air. Lights switched on, and confused voices called out.

“There has been an escape. I repeat, there has been an escape,” a speaker blared. Amy’s face paled, the flickering red lights plunging her face in and out of darkness. She grabbed me and began running, doors now streaking by. I clung to her fearfully, feeling our hearts pounding in unison. For a moment I could see a door, with a glowing red sign. Exit. But it was hopeless. I hid my face in Amy’s shoulder, clinging to Amy for one last moment as the white coated scientists swarmed towards us. Her arms tightened, and I could feel her breath on my hair.

“Alexander, oh Alexander,” Amy whispered. Then she was pulled away.

I didn’t get to see the sky that day.

“Amy!” I screamed as they took her away. I was taken back to my glass room. But it was no longer my home. With a curvy C, it was a cage.



Second Place
Grades Nine/Ten

When the Sky Falls

by Leon Pescador

A meteor. A solar flare. An earthquake. This is how the world ends, doesn't it? A big explosion. Maybe a white light or a loud trumpet. No. No, it doesn't. The world doesn't end like that. At least my world. My world ends today. There's no loud, grandiose bang. I get the quiet, dragged out end. The sky is about to fall on my head.

As I enter through my high school, I realize I forgot to finish the reading in *Grapes Of Wrath* last night. With that, my impending doom has started to descend on me in the form of my English class. I walk through the maze of hallways to American Literature with Mr. Ackerman. I walk slowly, taking my time. My stroll there is stroll of shame, the same way a convicted killer probably walks to his death. And as his walk ends when he sees the spot where he will be lethally injected, mine does too as I see Mr. Ackerman as I walk through the door.

I sit down right at the middle of the classroom. There are twenty-five seats and a person for each. Here, in this spot, I believe I won't get called on. The middle is the most inconspicuous space. As the class begins to fill up, my heart pounds a bit faster. Time starts to slow down. Each movement of the minute hand on the clock feels like it's taking a year. My brain starts to panic, thinking of excuses and scenarios that I can use to explain the lack of reading I did. If I get called on. I think I will be called on. I know it. I'll be the first person to be victimized today for not knowing a chapter of one of John Steinbeck's great American classics. Kind of like when Jim Casy gets killed. But in this chapter of my life, there will be no Tom Joad to avenge my death. It's seven fifty.

Class has started.

"Okay, enough chitchat everyone. Alright . . ." The teacher said as a few more came in. "Good morning class. We have a long our ahead of us. I want you all to take out your books. We're going to go through some questions." Mr. Ackerman ordered. He rose from his desk and carefully selected a piece of chalk. I closed my eyes. The chalk scraped on the board and after a few seconds it stopped. I knew it was going to be me. I would walk up to the board blind, hoping to catch a whisper of from the front row about the answer. And right there, the sky would get a little closer, inching its way to me as Mr. Ackerman would question me in front of twenty-four people on why I did not know the answer.

"Mr. Cheng," He said. My opened wide as he called my name. "This is class, not nap time." I almost rose from of my seat, but then he called on Melissa Johnson from the front row to answer the question. One down, who knows how many more to go. The next name to be called was Ahmed Mehdi, the boy sitting to my right.

"Okay, now for the last question," If this was going to be the last question, my odds of surviving the class were good. "Sam Cheng, how about you answer this question." I looked at him, then the board. The question asks what happened to Tom Joad. He repeated my name again and I slowly got up from my chair. I walked to the front and picked up the chalk. My hand slowly moves toward the board. I hope for some sort of a deus ex machina to save me. But nothing saves me. As I tell Mr. Ackerman that I don't know what happened to Mr. Joad, I feel like I'm falling. Falling into an endless black hole. No one can wants to catch me and even if they did, they couldn't.

The void owns me now.

As I return to my seat, the teacher continues his instructions. I close off the world of because a memory that happened a year back. It was conversation between my father and I. Something we usually don't do. It was back at home. Ten PM. Friday night. His accustomed stare, looking at me as if he was at his pediatric clinic trying to diagnose a patient.

"Stop being a clown in school." He said sternly, "They have the circus for clowns. Do you want to join the circus?" My dad doesn't let a single question fly by someone, especially me. He demands answers.

"No. I don't want to join the circus." I responded, my monotone past his mind. These conversations were routine. I would fail his expectations. He would talk to me. I would emerge punished for whatever I had done and when I failed his expectations again, it would repeat. It's a vicious cycle.

"What do you go to school for? To play around? To get distracted with the other kids. What do you go to school for?" He asked, temper rising.

"To get the grades I need so I can go to a good college." I told him. He didn't want any other answer. He didn't want my opinion. All he wanted was for me to meet his hopes, nothing less. As I replayed this moment over and over again, I thought about our prior talks. I was Prometheus. He was the eagle. Every time we had this same conversation, the same eagle would descend on Prometheus. My dad's cold words eroded my confidence and self-respect, just as the eagle devoured the poor man's liver. And today, the same eagle would plunge from the sky to eat mine when I reached home and my grades reached my dad.

He got up from his seat, waving a white piece of paper in front of me. My semester grades. “Do these scores get you into a good school? Do they!?” He inquired. His disgust morphed into anger. “Do you go to school for this!? Do you!?” That was it. There was nothing after that. The memory disappeared as the sliding of chairs grabbed my attention. I was in the classroom again. Everyone was leaving, so instinctually I grabbed my backpack and left. I was the last student to exit the room.

The door closed behind me.

The next class was math. Analysis. Ms. Hammond teaches it. I didn’t hesitate to meet with friends or awkwardly enter the conversations of acquaintances. I just walked to my next class. My head was down. My shoulders were down. I was in the doldrums. All I hope is that math will go better than writing.

That’s all I hope.

The lesson is up on the board already as I sit down in my usual seat. The bell rings, but my peers still pour through the door like water through a dam. The last student finally enters and door closes. Ms. Hammond gets up from her desk and launches the day by writing two problems. I watch and slowly write them down in my notebook.

I stare down at the paper with a frown. The paper stares back. The equations are cryptic little puzzles that I don’t know how to solve. The jumble of integers, exponents and whatever else is on the paper would be laughing at me right now, if they could laugh. But they aren’t frowning like me.

Lucky them.

With the numbers on the board piling up, one integer after the last, I can feel even more compressed. It’s someone’s forgotten junk slowly gets crushed by a trash compactor. And at the bottom there’s me. But trash is not crushing me. The integers on the board are crushing me. And the stress of having to get past those integers is crushing me. And even after all that, my grade performance under the weight of all that crushes me down even further.

At least the garbage survives the trash compactor. But when it’s all over, there’s still something left, isn’t there? I don’t know. Maybe not this time. Because truth is, there’s a day like this every year. A day where everything goes wrong. One where I feel like the sky is falling on my head. But this day is different. I don’t know if I can go back to my home and deal with this day. No. No, I can’t. The pressure is suffocating. I feel like I’m about to implode like a dying star.

The bell rings. Class is over.



Third Place
Grades Nine/Ten

The Rapid Evolution from Dumpee to Dumper

by Madeline Woods

I guess my guy troubles started just before Homecoming. Well actually they probably started a lot sooner than that. Like, in eighth grade when I gave this note that was actually more of a poem to this guy I liked. Well actually I gave it to a friend who gave it to his friend who gave it to him. I've never really figured out why we do things like that. Especially in middle school. I was always amazed that anyone ever got into a relationship, and I use the word "relationship" very tentatively when describing girl-boy relations in middle school, because of how everyone acted like saying who you like was a social taboo and if they didn't like you back you would literally crumple up and die. Well anyway this guy I gave the note to couldn't figure out that it was me who wrote it even though to me it was blatantly obvious so I stopped liking him. Two years of obsessive crushing down the drain. My point is that I've never been very lucky when it comes to guys.

Yeah, and then Alex turned me down. Well I was kinda disappointed obviously. Heck, I was a wreck. And it wasn't like when you get a little peeved and you make a big deal out of it cause no one notices that anything is wrong. This was the "I'm so depressed that I'm trying really hard to hide it and I don't want to make a big deal out of it and please don't ask if I'm ok cause I might just burst out crying and bite your head off if you do." It was part of the reason I let Kylie set me up in the first place. I was just so mad at society and guys in general and I was annoyed that I was brave enough to go against the sexist high school dating norms and ask a guy out and then be turned down.

Well actually I gave him a note after third hour and told him to get back to me at lunch. I didn't put any gooey sentences on it or draw a bunch of pink hearts on it or anything. I just asked Alex if he wanted to go to homecoming and to tell me at lunch. God fourth hour was horrible. Especially since Kylie was sitting next to me and I made the mistake of telling her cause I was all giddy and excited. Big mistake. Cause then at lunch when Alex turned me down, I'm not going to go into the gory details not that he was mean about it or anything he was actually really nice but I still really don't like talking about it, anyway Kylie was glaring at him and then she *punched* him (just on the arm) even though I told her not to because Kylie never does anything you ask her to do because well, she's *Kylie*. I really should just stop giving notes to guys.

And Alex and I are still like really good friends now but I'm still a little like "seriously, you couldn't just go to Homecoming with me". He didn't even end up going to the dance, just to dinner with our friend group, which probably should have been awkward but it actually wasn't but it still

kinda ruined Homecoming and my birthday which was the next day. I spent the entire dance wishing that he was there, and wishing that I could ask him to dance, and wishing he hadn't turned me down. And then on my birthday I was all depressed because I was sixteen and had never been kissed before. Not that that actually even matters but you try telling that to a melodramatic sixteen year old girl. And yeah, I knew I was being melodramatic and all teen angsty and that really bugs me when other people are like that so then I felt like I was a hypocrite and that made me feel even worse. But Alex is a nice guy and we're still friends. So yeah. But it still kinda made me really insecure like I was "what's wrong with me???? Am I like grossly unattractive or am I just really annoying or do I just disgust you in some way?????" It didn't really help my already fragile teen psyche.

And then Kylie wanted to set me up. What I should have said when she first brought it up was "Thanks for the offer but NO." But instead I was more like "Um.... Ok?" and when you give Kylie an inch, God will she take a mile. Like if she's being really annoying and meddlesome and you snap at her she'll look at you like you are the most evil person on the planet and that she just can't possibly *believe* you just said that to her because she is the most innocent and wonderful person ever and she only does these things because she is such a good friend and she cares about you *so much* and she just can't even begin to imagine why you are being so *ungrateful*. And then if you don't immediately back track and apologize she'll start crying. She's really really *really* good at crying. Anyway you end up feeling awful and apologizing just to make her stop because honestly crying people freak me out. Especially when Kylie cries because she has these really big eyes and when she starts crying she doesn't sob or anything, she'll just *stare* at you while about a billion tears pour from her eyes.

And if her manipulative talents weren't bad enough she uses them to meddle. She loves to meddle. Like last year she set up two of my really good friends who like didn't even know each other and it actually worked so now she thinks she's Yental and gets involved in everyone's relationships. And I mean EVERYBODIES relationships. She's actually a really awesome person she's just a little too involved sometimes. Or most of the time.

Like when she's not screwing with my life she's super fun to be around. She's one of those people who just gets so excited about things that their enthusiasm kinda just seeps into your mind. And Kylie's like completely competitive, which can also get really annoying now that I think of it but that's not the point, because it makes for really fun Twister tournaments. And she's one of the most creative people I know and one of the most unique people I've ever met but she's unique without trying which makes her all the more amazing. My point is she's not all of the annoying meddlesome person she is in this story. She's just like that in this story. But she's not like that all the time. Just some of the time. Does that make sense?

Anyway against my better judgment I agreed to have lunch with this guy, Danny. And he was... Nice. But he's also really awkward and he seems like he's kinda a wimp and that he tries really

hard just to be different and honestly that type of person really bugs me. Because seriously if you have to try hard to set yourself apart from the crowd then is there anything that's actually interesting about you? But he's really nice. But he's really Christian which in itself doesn't bother me in the slightest but it really annoyed me that he asked if I was Christian before he met me because that really doesn't seem like something you need to know about someone before you meet them especially in High School. And the whole thing was just really uncomfortable. And I really probably should have expected awkward cause, well, Kylie refers to him as "Awkward Danny". So yeah, just not my type.

But after that he kept texting me. Like nothing over the top at all we just talked a little about writing and stuff. But I always let it trail off because I really didn't want to lead him on or anything and I kinda just wanted him to stop texting me. And then when he asked me if I wanted to hang out I'd always say I was busy. In my defense I really was busy. I had track practice and homework for four accelerated classes. If I really wanted to hang out with him I really probably could have made time but I really didn't actually want to. Like if Alex asked me out to coffee I would probably reply "YES!!!!!!!" in a heartbeat but I just kinda got faintly annoyed every time Danny asked to hang out and thought of all the other stuff I would rather be doing. So like finally I just ignored him and I was really hoping that he would take a hint but apparently he didn't since he texted me back like two days later asking if I was busy. And of course I told him I was and then he texted me back "When would be good for you?"

And how was I supposed to reply to that! He didn't give me any easy way to get out of it. I could have said "Never" but I'm really not a mean person and that seemed really mean and it wasn't like I could ignore it cause I already replied to his other text so it was obvious that I had my phone with me and it wasn't like I could say "I'm going to be busy for all of eternity". The guy had me in a flippin corner! And to make matters worse the only thing I could concentrate on was plotting Kylie's murder which was extremely entertaining but completely unhelpful. It's a really good thing I actually like Kylie most of the time.

Finally I just called Danny and told him I wasn't interested. And again I really don't want to get into the details. It was the most completely painfully awkward thing I've ever had to do before. How do you tell someone who you hung out with two weeks before during a thirty minute lunch period that you don't want to be in a relationship with them or really even get to know them because there were a lot of better things you could do with your time. I know that sounds completely horrible but it's true. And trust me it sounds ten times worse when you're telling it to someone over the phone. I had to break up with a guy who I had known for like less than a month and I haven't even had my first kiss yet! Aren't you supposed to be in a relationship before you actually have to break up with someone?

I guess this is what I get for putting myself out there. Like it really annoys me how there are girls who never have to step out of their turtle shells but guys still like them and they can find guys

who they like back without trying very hard or being the least bit uncomfortable but apparently I don't have a pretty enough turtle shell or whatever to like get guys who actually like me to ask me out. According to Kylie it's just because they are all scared of me because I'm smart and have strong opinions about stuff but that doesn't really make me feel all that better. Actually it kinda makes me feel worse. Who wants to be the girl who scares all of the guys away? Like why can't I find a smart guy with strong opinions who actually likes me? And I'm not going to spend all of my time waiting for a guy to sweep me off my feet but not waiting didn't seem to work out all that well either. Oh well, there are more important things than boyfriends anyway.

I think I should just stay away from guys for a while. They're just not worth the trouble.



First Place

Grades Eleven /Twelve

Everything but Wings

by Madeleine Bradford

I have something wrapped around my spine.

I am not sure if it is friendly. I think it may have tried to talk to me once or twice, but only in growling noises, which were not speech so much as sound, patternless and primal. And I am the only one who seems to hear them, so I suppose it's natural that I am the only one bothered by this.

It is heavy, this thing, and it has curled-wire scales that poke up under my skin, making little patterns that look lovely but hurt like hell. Its heart- if it has a heart- may well be located in the thrum just between my shoulder blades, which sounds a bit like a rubber band being twanged back and forth. My doctors say that this sound is just my heartbeat echoing, but I do not believe them, because heartbeats cannot echo- reason being, the ribcage is crammed with stuff. Lungs, memories, organs, blood, fears and faults and all of the things that we like to pretend are secret, even though they're not.

Day by day, the thing grows heavier. I walk bowed, now. My friends all joke that I'm old before my time, ha ha, and this is what comes of not getting exercise, and perhaps I need a cane? It would not have to be a *normal* cane, they hasten to reassure me. It could be an interesting one. With dragons on.

"No, thank you," I say, very politely, "I'm just fine."

They are not convinced. They take me to see doctors, who examine the marks and ask me if I have ever been struck by lightning, and then prescribe various medications, which I cannot bring myself to use. The pills stare at me from their sickly yellow bottles, accusations of weakness.

You are so stupid, their silence tells me. You are so stupid, because you will not let anyone actually help you get rid of this thing. You are so stupid, because you are not only too afraid to try, but you don't actually want to be rid of it, secretly. You are so stupid, because you think that you're lonely, and you are stupid also because you think that you don't mind.

I start to wrap the pills in tissues and throw them one by one away in the garbage. It makes me feel better, in a way- like I am accomplishing *something*, even if it is the exact opposite of what I'm meant to accomplish. Perhaps I hope that someone will notice that the pills are dwindling, and think, my, she finally buckled down! What perseverance! What an Inspiring Story that girl has! Though of course no one notices, because no one else checks the number of pills so obsessively. Into the garbage they go, cocooned tightly in little wads of white tissue, until at last I have mummified the final pill, and the pattern on my back is still growing.

I try yoga. The only thing this does for me is make me feel rather foolish.

I try dieting, but it doesn't work, because I break my diet in two days, thinking that perhaps it is this very focus on weight that is dissolving our societies and in any case I miss cake.

I try homeopathic remedies, which taste like rust and linger on everything eaten afterwards. I try to convince myself that they make a difference, but I know that they do not.

Finally, my friends give in.

All right, they say.

It's just your odd condition, they say.

We'll write a book about you someday, they say. When we're all rich and famous.

And so I go back to cake and band-aids. I put all of my yoga books into a box, and leave it on the library steps, feeling like a mother abandoning an unwanted child- a failure of nature, in some inexplicable and undeniable way. Yoga cures everyone *else*, I think. Why didn't it work on me?

"I know what will take your mind off of things," One of my friends- Lia- says, her eye shadow so caked-on that I have a feeling you could peel it off and find the exactly shape of her eyes, "There's a circus in town."

"It could be fun," she says.

"You should go," she says.

"What the hell," I say, shrugging. It isn't as if I have anything better to do.

The thing that I always forget at this stage, though, is how much I hate circuses themselves. The idea is fine, distant and full of the promise of masks and suitably vintage creepiness and interesting colors and unhealthy food, but up close these things look so much less *real* than they do in the mind. That's what nightmares are, though, of course- things so down-in-the-blood true that

they seem to be obviously false. It's our mind's method of self-defense- filtering out all of the truly terrible as 'fantasy', as well as most of the truly good. The terrible can be fascinating, of course, but I'm not so sure anyone really thinks that they personally *deserve* the good, and for that reason it is hidden so much deeper than you might expect.

I go through the maze, the nasty, vomit-inducing roller coaster, the vomiting itself, and then hot dogs on sticks, covered in cornmeal. I am just about to leave, with a sore stomach and disillusioned, bitter feeling welling satisfyingly in my temples when I hear someone call my name.

"Cordelia, wait, please."

I hesitate. Surely they don't mean *me*. That voice does not belong to any of my friends. It reminds me of the way a child sounds, after she has cried herself out, and has no more energy left to smooth her words back into grammatically correct sentences. I mean, the voice used grammar, well enough- but there is the same feeling to it.

It reminds me of me.

"Cordelia," the voice comes from next to me, and I find myself looking at a woman in a bird mask, faded red feathers tickling the air around her face. "Come back to the tent of horrors, will you? I think you have a problem that a friend of mine might be able to sort out."

"What problem?" I ask, thinking of the taste of my own spit, and how I really should never eat things after vomiting (or go to circuses) ever, ever again- practical, inglorious, every-day things to be thinking about, especially right before something so very odd happens. But I don't know it is going to happen, so I go right on thinking them.

"The one," she says, "That's curled around your spine."

"Ah," I say, wondering if I had perhaps drunk anything unusual while I was in the food tent. "That one."

"Yes," she says.

I am about to turn away from this madwoman in her beaked mask, leave this circus and any hope of fixing my back here to rot forever in my memory, when I make the mistake of looking at her eyes.

There is an obvious struggle in them. I cannot fathom what she's trying to decide, but I try to, anyway, because the one plain thing about this is that she is struggling over *me*. She is wondering if she can trust *me*, wondering if she should have come here, to lead me to whatever it is she wants

to lead me to. She might be wondering if I can handle it, or even if I'm worth it. And suddenly, seeing the scales tipping back and forth inside her skull, I want to be worth it.

"Okay," I say, quickly, before I can change my mind again. Her smile softens.

She leads me back through the tents, navigating sideways that I didn't even know existed, walking between crimsons and greens and occasionally over types of paving I don't remember seeing on the wide parking lot in which the circus is set- cobblestones and brick-ways and, at one point, a dirt path leading directly through a tent, which has a flourishing jungle inside of it, green and glowing- then back out into the stale city air.

The tent we are headed for seems no different, and when we reach it I am not even sure this is the one I ought to enter. I glance at her, and she nods encouragingly. I realize I do not even know her name.

"Go on, Cordelia," she says.

Inside of the tent there is a small grey room, that looks paradoxically cramped, considering the gaudy exterior. I suppose it might be possible that all of the gold paint and bright colors had made the tent seem larger than it was, like a bird fluffing up its plumage to appear frightening, but I do not think so. Another woman, of undeterminable age, walks in. She is wearing no mask, and a plain black dress, with her dark hair coiled around her head like a crown. She is carrying a wooden box.

"This is the patient, then, I take it?" she asks, and her voice is warm and rich, but for some reason I trust it infinitely less than I do the rasping woman. The rasping woman nods, silently.

"You may go, darling," the woman with dark hair flicks her fingers negligently, and at the ends of them I can now see that her nails taper into claws- talons, really- and her fingers are too long and too thin.

The rasping woman bites her lip, and gives me one last glance before she leaves, but I cannot tell what she is trying to say. Or trying not to say.

"Now," the woman with dark hair smiles like she has a marvelous secret, "Let's sit down, shall we? You take the bench."

And indeed, there is a bench in the middle of the room- a wide one, made of decidedly unfriendly looking wooden planks, as harsh as concrete and stained the color of cold rain. It is long enough to be the base of a bed-frame, and shaped just enough like a coffin to worry me. I lay down anyway. It will make no difference if she kills me- the thing around my spine has been doing that for

some time anyway, I am sure of it. Nearly sure. Almost exactly positive.

“Hmm.” Claws scrape and brush against my skin as she peels my shirt away from my back. Goosebumps shoot all over me, and I can feel acid mumbling in the pit of my stomach. “I see.”

She turns back, and looks at me with much more serious eyes- bright green, I cannot help but notice. The green of EXIT signs. “I think I see the problem here. You have a shadow wedged up under your skin, and around your lumbar vertebrae.”

Lumbar vertebrae. It sounds ominous.

“Do I need surgery?” I ask- not nervous, exactly, but not calm either- and she surprises me, flashing a mouth full of sharp teeth as she smiles.

“Heavens, no.” she says. “Have you ever had a splinter?”

“Of course,” I say.

“This will be almost just like that.” she says, and she smiles again.

Almost, I think. Almost, as in nearly, but not quite.

“What’s the difference?” I ask.

“Shadows are slightly larger than splinters.” She opens her wooden box, and takes out a pair of tweezers as small as eyelashes. “Close your eyes,” she says. “This won’t hurt a bit.”

I can actually feel her reaching the tweezers into a pore of my skin, and I can feel the snag, when they catch on one of the curled-wire scales of the shadow, like my breath is being pulled backwards on a hook, out of my chest.

“Ah,” I hear her say again, and I imagine her smile. It is terribly grotesque, in my mind- I find I cannot picture it exactly, but keep warping the edges into something of a death rictus.

The process of tugging the shadow out of me is excruciatingly slow. It is all wound up in me, she explains- like a tapeworm, in that it was thin and ribboning and miles and miles long, but not like a tapeworm, in that it is perfectly harmless other than for the fact that it would eventually have killed me.

When she tells me to open my eyes, the shadow is pooled in a tumble of a glossy ribbon-like substance beside me. There is a wetness to the wood around it, as if water has been poured on the bench. When I ask what it was, the dark-haired woman shrugs.

“Blood,” she says, dispassionately, “Yours. Some blood was necessary.”

She does not say why, or, I think, a bit morbidly, for whom.

The scales of the shadow, that had been so sharp against my skin, are limp and sorry-looking, like flowers after a wedding. Picked, and discarded as easily as crumpled napkins. Somehow betrayed. For a moment, I wonder if I have done the wrong thing, taking that shadow out of me.

“Will it die?” I ask.

“It’s dead,” She says, wiping her hands off with a striped towel. Streaks of red follow her fingers. “And you should probably leave, now.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because,” she says, “You have a reason to. And because you can.”

For a moment, I feel a twinge of pity for her. And then she reaches out, prodding the limp side of the shadow none-too-gently with her fingernail, her face curving into a smile that isn’t a rictus, but rather something gentle and kind, and, remembering the look on her face when she said, ‘it’s already dead’, my pity goes out like a light. It is as if she is talking to the carcass, almost- saying, *‘you and me both, kid.’*

Fine, I think. *Fine*. If you’re so determined to think of yourself as dead, if you’re so determined to pity yourself into nonexistence, fine. There is nothing stopping you except for a flap of cloth.

But sometimes that’s enough.

“So?” The rasping woman asks, waiting for me outside the tent. She is not wringing her hands, not exactly, but they are twitching, as if she wants to wring them but hasn’t quite the nerve. She is clearly trying to convince herself not to worry. Why would she worry about me? I’m only a person. But, it occurs to me, maybe that’s the point.

“It was a shadow,” I say. My own hands are shaking. I lace them together, and watch as the joints of my fingers whitened with pressure.

She sighs, in- what? Disappointment? Relief?

“I thought it might be,” is all she says. “You see them a lot, here. In the city.”

I look again at her eyes, which look back at me from over her plastic beak, black as vacuums. The feathers of her bird-mask twitch in the barely-there breeze. I remember the other woman,

locked inside the tent, inside her own heart, inside her own mind, with nothing but a dead shadow for company.

“Would you like to have dinner with me?” I ask.

“Okay,” she says, and she smiles.

“You’re very brave, you know,” she says. We walk away from the circus, and it seems to me as if the city air is no longer stale, but tastes of secrets bleeding out and sunlight rushing in.

“Maybe,” I say, but I don’t clarify whether I’m answering her statement or just stating the word, as in, Maybe...

Maybe I will learn how to play the violin, or dance a waltz in the middle of the street, or bake a thousand cakes. Maybe I will smile at strangers. Maybe I will admit everything that shadow kept curled inside of me, and empty my ribcage of all of it’s insubstantial cargo. Maybe I will write it down, becoming lighter and lighter with every word until at last I am a hollow person, my bones honeycombed, my blood effervescent, my every hair curling like the legs of a brittle star, trying to fill itself with sun.



Second Place

Grades Eleven /Twelve

Black Walnut

By Josie Benson

We stand at the end of the driveway, teetering with our heels hanging over the edge of the curb, framing the house with our hands and imagining countless combinations.

“I think it’s the bushes. They’re too asymmetrical,” you say.

“If you put another bush there, we won’t be able to see out the window,” I say.

I’ve been trying to tell you this for the past hour. Or, more precisely, that I won’t be able to see—it’s the window of my room we’re talking about.

“But it will look right,” you say. “Balanced.”

I sigh and turn to survey the yard. The irregular dips have—for the most part—been smoothed so that a lawnmower can roll over them without stalling. And the new coat of paint that your wife wanted makes the house stand out—purple may not be my choice, but it’s better than the previous pale mint green that had cracked to reveal the bleached wood underneath.

“Dad.”

You turn to look at me.

“What?” you say, your voice lilting like a guilty man’s. “It doesn’t look right.”

I kick a clump of asphalt that has broken free from where the driveway meets the grass. It bounces a short way up the driveway before skittering off into the lawn, where I know a lawnmower blade will strike it.

I leave it there.

I picture my room with a new shrub in front of the window, the stripped branches stretching across like bars in the wintertime, the light green and brown a permanent part of the room’s color scheme. Before my mental image is complete you speak, your voice hesitant. “Well, do you think the soil is good enough? The holly bush was dying.”

I stand there, my feet now planted in the grass, unsure of how to answer. Are you deferring to me because you don't know about gardening, or because you want me to make the choice?

I look again at the house and think of the complexity of the plant life surrounding it. The black walnut tree in the backyard kills almost everything except the grass in a fifty-foot radius. Mom said it's because its roots release a toxin. It killed the peonies I transplanted from her house.

Meanwhile, the Virginia Creeper has coiled its way up the trunk of the tree, seemingly choking it like the kudzu of the South; but really, it doesn't affect the growth of the tree. The thin tendrils of vine fit neatly into the crevices of the bark, like pipes in a trench.

The roots of the tree are winding their way around the house, pushing up the turf into the lumps that litter the front yard. The driveway is starting to buckle as a root searches its way to the surface, reaching past some underground obstacle in its search for nutrients. You always tell me to drive slowly over that bump, even though it's no bigger than the drop from the end of the driveway to the street.

"I don't know," I say in a bored voice. I walk up to the house, unsure of whether you're following me. I notice that the yew, a shrub that was there before we moved in, is starting to discolor. Maybe the area affected by the black walnut is widening. I look at the shrubs we planted not too long ago, and wonder if they're the type that will survive and live together with the vitriolic old tree, or if they'll succumb to its underhanded means of survival.

Jason stares at us from the window. I wave politely, and continue walking around the house, surveying our work. Sometimes I can forget he lives here—he just sits so quietly in his room. That is, except for when he tantrums. Most days, it's like living in that split second between when you turn on the stereo and when you remember you left the volume dialed too high, that small moment of silence before the sound comes crashing into you. And even after he's settled down, I can feel him sitting there, all his suppressed energy just waiting to erupt. That type of feeling in your own house is unnerving.

I'm not sure what I'm looking for in the yard, my eyes skimming over the earth drying in crumbles from our last planting efforts—only that there's something to be found. I don't want a shrub in front of my window; that I'm sure of. But maybe light green and brown are perfect colors to go with pale blue walls. Maybe it's better to be separated from the outside by more than a thin sheet of glass. Glass breaks, after all.

I remember when, shortly after we moved in, I was playing with the kids from this neighborhood and one of the older boys decided to throw the walnuts that fell from the tree during

a storm. The fibrous green husks looked soft like fruit, like they would give against barriers, but were nothing less than solid when launched towards the window of what would later be my room.

I remember the window being boarded up for weeks, but you tell me it was only a few days. You also tell me that no one uses plywood boards—those are only used in movies, during hurricanes, and in poor neighborhoods. But my memory is adamant.

I picture myself inside the house, being forced to look out through an array of foliage. Then, I picture myself as someone simply driving through, someone on the street looking at houses. You do have a point. With another shrub, the landscaping would be more symmetrical, it would look better; we would look like our neighbors.

It would only be from inside the house that you would be able to tell that something was unbalanced. You would only be able to see what effect our outward appearance has on our lives if you were standing in my room, looking outside.

I look again at the discolored yew. The walnut tree is sequestered in the back yard, but its effects are far reaching. It would be useless to get another bush if the tree is just going to kill it anyway.

I look at the bushes we've planted in the past few weeks. I did research, looked through Mom's old gardening books and on the internet, to find plants that could tolerate the presence of the walnut—then I directed you to the shrubs with sweetly scented flowers like forsythia, rhododendron, rose of Sharon.

I hope these sources are reliable. We invested time and money in planting these shrubs. They had better live, especially since it was on my advice that you selected these particular types.

I realize that I don't actually know what we should do. Really, I just want the tree gone, for the ecosystem hidden away in the back to resemble the one in front. Yet, to actually remove the tree would, I feel, be to desecrate the nature in our backyard, something I've had neither a hand in creating nor a right to destroy.

I dig my foot into the recently disturbed dirt, not caring that the dust puffs up and resettles to cover the toes of my white shoes.

You come up behind me. "What do you think?"

I weigh my options and decide I have to tell the truth. "I don't know," I say again.

You are visibly stricken. Landscaping isn't cheap. "But we planted all those other ones. It will look horrible if everything in the front yard dies."

"I know. I'm sorry."

And I realize it would also be horrible if the tree were to die. I think of all the other things I learned about the black walnut while doing my research. That black walnut trees prevent erosion, and so its absence would be bad for the already bumpy yard and its thin soil. That the flavor of wild-harvested black walnuts is prized over the milder English walnut, but its shell is harder and thicker, tightly bound to its husk, much more difficult to remove. That in the spring, like a maple, its trunk can be tapped to release a sweet thick syrup that can be drunk. And as I now know, that while some plants are poisoned by its toxins, not all are sensitive to its protective mechanisms.

I walk inside, feeling neither victorious nor defeated. And I can see you out the window, your head cocked, squinting at the bushes, standing with your feet squarely on the curb, imagining various possibilities.



**Third Place
Grades Eleven /Twelve**

Sadie's Eyes

by Vanessa Decker

“Have you ever read *‘The Sea Gull’*, Dr. Bennett?”

“No, unfortunately, I have not. Why?”

“The plot of the play is this: ‘a young girl lives all her life beside a lake; she loves the lake like a sea gull, and, like a sea gull, is happy and free. A man comes along by chance, sees her, and having nothing better to do, destroys her.’”

“That was lovely. I imagine that in this case, you are the sea gull.”

“Actually, Dr. Bennett, on this particular occasion, the sea gull is you.”

Dr. Bennett cleared his throat. “Have a seat, if you would.”

Bennett’s stomach protruded over the lip of his desk as he leaned forward. He licked his thumb and rubbed it along the edge of his glasses; however, the substance that was plastered to them remained impervious to his efforts. He sighed, placed them on the bridge of his nose, and studied his subject all the same. The patient before him was much younger than those he typically encountered, and yet in the girl’s features he could detect a secret wisdom, conveyed by the flicker of an eyelid or the twitch of a lip. He smiled slightly and reviewed the girl’s hospital admission. She was twelve and called herself Sadie. She had been diagnosed with manic-depressive disorder, anti-social personality disorder, and generalized anxiety disorder by three previous psychiatrists. Given was an excerpt from a journal that she used to keep, and Bennett quickly scanned it:

“People say that I frighten them sometimes. They say that there’s something funny about my eyes; they never correspond with what I’m doing. They say that perhaps it’s like I’m watching something carefully, something that no one else can see. I think they’re trying to be mean, but I don’t mind. It sets me apart from the others, as though I possess a quality that none of them have or can understand. I am a different animal than the others, but I mustn’t tell lest anyone tries to turn me into what the others are. I draw in blood. The only way to guarantee attention and affection is through catastrophe.”

He glanced up at the child then, whose eyes keenly studied a tiny fleck of down that ascended across his desk. In an instant, they flickered to meet his own. Sadie's eyes seemed unreasonably large and luminous; they were very beautiful, edged by thick, dark lashes. Their initial impression was one of great brilliance. It was only after a moment of observation that Bennett was able to discern a problem.

To begin, the irises were yellow. They were so large that there was barely a white back round to frame them, and they moved much too quickly for their size. They darted across everything, absorbing and understanding, piercing the air with tiny, pinpoint pupils, small and slender enough to resemble those of a snake.

The ovular pupils bore into Dr. Bennett's until his hand nervously edged up to wipe away the beads of perspiration that had collected along his receding hairline. Only then, seemingly triggered by this display of discomfort, did the girl smile slightly.

Bennett blinked and adjusted himself in his chair. He hadn't felt so nervous since his first appointment with a patient. It was absurd to feel this way now, after nearly twenty-eight years of practice.

He smiled, more affectionately this time, and yet he couldn't look her in the eyes, he feared, ever again. He cleared his throat.

"So tell me... Sadie, is it? What brings us together today?"

"I play with blood." She said flatly.

"I see." Said Dr. Bennett, jotting down a note not on what she said but how she said it. He scanned the report. "So it seems. Would you like to tell me about it? When did this start?"

"I've always played with dead things." Her pupils contracted. "I don't know why everyone despises it so. I'm not hurting anyone."

"Have you thought, perhaps, that you're hurting your family?"

"No. I'm not getting my blood from them."

Dr. Bennett winced. "You've been painting... you make paintings in blood."

A dark photocopy had been included in her report. It was a lake at a red sunrise. "This is beautiful work. Is this, by chance, the lake from *'The Sea Gull'*?"

Sadie's lip twitched. "She loves the lake. She is happy and free, like a sea gull..."

“How is it that you acquire such quantities to paint with?” Dr. Bennett continued.

“I’m twelve.” Replied the girl. “I receive a forth of a cup of it every month from nature. I cover my hands with it.”

Bennett chose, for the time being, to overlook this confession. “I see. And what do you feel when you do this?”

“I look into the mirror and pretend that I’ve just been caught doing something dreadful.”

“And it’s the surprise that you enjoy, then? Perhaps you like to be shocked by your own abilities? It says here that you’ve had a history with decorative make-up. Would you like to tell me about that?”

“I have face paints in my bathroom. Blue and red, mixed, with a green lining makes a good bruise. I can draw one on if I need to escape from something by pretending that I’m hurt.”

“That’s very clever.”

The girl’s candor was so overwhelming that it led Dr. Bennett to suspect that there were many things being concealed from him.

Bennett swallowed.

“You said ‘affection stems from catastrophe.’ Perhaps you believe that these dramatic shows are the only legitimate way to merit affection. You think yourself unworthy of love in the absence of danger.”

“That’s very clever.” Sadie mimicked. Her voice was soft. “I had never so much as imagined that.”

There was a patronizing quality to her voice that deeply unnerved Bennett. There was a wall between the girl and him, more impenetrable than any he had ever encountered. It was his profession to access and unravel the strange inner workings of the people who walked into his office, to soothe and disarm them, and then piece them back together in the configuration in which they were meant to be born. This was his job; he had done it countless times, and yet he couldn’t bring himself to so much as look into this child’s serpent eyes.

She made him feel stupid, like a child who loudly announces a conclusion that everyone else arrived at long ago. She mocked him, and she did not believe in his abilities. He questioned her right to make him question himself. He was angry because he had no reason to be; she had made no

attempt to pique him, and yet he felt that his practice, the one thing in which he prided himself, was under siege.

After two hours, he claimed to know nothing about her except this: she was hiding something from him. At twelve, girls were supposed to think about fashion and famous actors, and this girl painted blood lakes.

He wrote, feigning condescension to mask his fear:

“The situation is a bit humorous, really. There’s nothing sincere in the least about her ‘blood performances.’ I believe them to be strictly for show; she has found the most disturbing and upsetting ritual she could and unleashed it upon everyone, trying to incite any kind of emotion or affection. The only truly unnerving thing about the child is her ability to act. She reads us, it seems, all of us, she knows what we want and yet there is an element of comedy to it all... very clever, frightening potential...”

He glanced up at the girl again and added:

“It seems she was correct. There is something lurking beneath those enormous irises... they are like curtains, trying to conceal a monster within...”

It was at this point that Bennett’s pen failed and with a slow swallow, he wiped the ink from his thumb.

The clock chimed twice, and abruptly Sadie stood. Her face was of an angel and her eyes of a bird. A bird of prey, in this particular case, Dr. Bennett reasoned.

“Thank you for your time, Doctor. Unless I am much mistaken, we will get along very nicely.”

She smiled then and her irises enlarged again, swelling to fill her eye sockets, squeezing the whites back into her skull. She left Bennett to curse himself for finding pleasure in her approval.

Hours passed and he never attempted to stand. He mopped his face with his sleeve. He didn’t even bother with his glasses; they had slipped down his nose and he doubted that they would stay if he chose to replace them. There was something inhuman about this girl. He was a mere child in her presence; no, that wasn’t right... he was a sea gull.

There was a tiny dot of light on his desk. He couldn’t get rid of it. He covered it with a piece of paper, and there it shone upon that paper, strong enough to blind him. He seized a heavy textbook, slamming it down upon the speck; again and again he threw book upon book over the spot

of light yet there it shone, winking in mockery. The doctor's heart rate was rising; there was a thick, wet popping in the veins in his neck. His skin burned a baking white and his cracked lips gasped for breath. There was a horrible whining about the room; every time someone in the building turned on a light, Bennett was sure that he could hear the alteration in the electrical current, and it was enough to deafen him.

He was drowning, he was sure of it, in a red lake at sunrise. Air was circulating through his lungs and yet no oxygen was absorbed. He fell at last to the floor, gulping and gasping beneath his star map, which twinkled down upon him indifferently. He implored the stars, with gaping eyes, to help him, but they only sparkled and drifted away. It was only after so many years that he noticed how terrible they were, watching for generations the sufferings of man and standing idly by. The light of day faded from his office, and the night that replaced it was the darkest he'd ever seen.

His psychiatrist certificate hung near by. That was his; he was a doctor. That wasn't right. He was a child. He was a sea gull.

