



Farmington Community Library's

Teen Creative Writing Competition 2022



farmlib.org



Table of Contents

5 *Foreword*

Poetry, Ages 11–14

8 *Words Must Be Powerful*
Cora Lee
First Place

9 *Creative People*
Akshara Datla
Second Place

10 *The Empty Room*
Mariam Dukhan
Third Place

11 *Giving Up*
Saanvi Budhiraja
Honorable Mention

Fiction, Ages 11–14

14 *One Last Time*
Alana Roseman
First Place

17 *Driftwood*
Anthony Carzon
Second Place

18 *Dynamite*
Saanvi Budhiraja
Third Place

21 *Poisoned*
Eve Lung
Honorable Mention

Poetry, Ages 15–19

26 *pretty places*
Sanjana Datla
First Place

27 *the waiting*
Gwenyth Richards
Second Place

28 *Her*
Krisha Patel
Third Place

30 *If You Only Knew*
Mirabella Koponen
Honorable Mention

Fiction, Ages 15–19

34 *Cracks*
Sanjana Datla
First Place

37 *Journey*
Meher Khanna
Second Place

39 *Only in Times Like These*
Olivia Carzon
Third Place

41 *Theodore*
Liesl Brunner
Honorable Mention

Foreword

The Farmington Community Library created the Teen Creative Writing Competition in 1999 at the urging of Ray Okonski and our Young Adult Advisory Board. They felt that we needed to acknowledge the output of creative endeavors, as well as the reading, studying, and practice that the Library has traditionally encouraged. This year's competition has brought forth an incredible array of artistic talent from the young people in our community. With the help of our judges, we have chosen the best of the many wonderful submissions received. Because the nature of a competition involves a few winners from among many participants, we could not acknowledge all the beautiful writing that it was our pleasure to read. It is our hope that these people, and the people whose works you will soon read, will continue to brighten the world with their creative fire.

Jennie Willard, Teen Services Librarian

Rebecca Brown, Teen Services Librarian

Farmington Community Library wishes to thank the following:

Autumn Cottrell, Circulation Page

Anna Granch, Senior Outreach Librarian

Becky Hall, Children's Services Paraprofessional

Sandhya Kammanadiminti, Children's Services Librarian

Sandi Koponen, Children's Services Paraprofessional

Kathy McKinney, Head of Automation

Lisa Philips, Children's Services Librarian

Monica Sloan, Adult Services Librarian

Faren Watson, Adult Services Librarian

Lijun Xue, Technical Services Paraprofessional

Criteria for Judging:

Judges reviewed entries based on the following criteria:

Originality

Grammatical correctness and spelling

Organization

Word choice

Imagery

Prizes generously donated by the Friends of the Farmington Community Library.

Our deepest gratitude goes to Suzanne Sloat and Ray Okonski, who have sponsored and supported the Teen Creative Writing Competition since its beginning in 1999.

Poetry

Ages 11-14

Poetry, 11-14 - First Place

Words Must Be Powerful

by Cora Lee

My poem was going to be about how books can make an impact on our lives, but the more I wrote the more I realized that it's actually the words that make up books that have such an impact.

If knowledge is power
and books are knowledge,
and words are what make up books
Is it knowledge that's powerful?

How can letters,
string themselves together
to form such an impact on us
How can a line of words,
led by the force of a sentence,
take you on a feverish journey

To open minds
To persuade hearts
To shape lives

How can the pull of a page,
brought together by binding and leather,
battle the reality of the world and win
How can a room full of stories,
made from imagination, and pencil
whisk us away to somewhere else

If words make up books,
And books make up knowledge,
And knowledge is power,
Then words must be powerful

Poetry, 11-14 – Second Place

Creative People

by Akshara Datla

Creative people don't create.
More accurately, we translate
We see what is already there
And know that such things must be shared.

We hear the words that no one speaks.
We note each snowflake as unique.
We catch the notes that no one sings.
We see potential in all things.

We speak a language you don't know
So we must find a way to show
The beauty in familiar land
In such a way you'll understand

This poem, I did not create.
More accurately, I translate.
The words already in the air.
That I must find a way to share.

Poetry, 11-14 - Third Place

The Empty Room

by Mariam Dukhan

I was inspired to write this poem while I was watching a YouTube video about solitary confinement and wondering what people there do to pass time? Do they go insane sitting there for years? Or do they enjoy sitting there not doing anything? This piece is a result of learning what solitary confinement feels like.

Imagine,
If you were stuck in a room
Nowhere to go,
Nothing to do,
What would you do?
Would you walk around for hours on end,
Until you get dizzy
Or would you contemplate,
What got you into this,
Empty room
Empty or full,
It's how you think of it
Full of life,
Or empty and dull
The way you think plays a role in your life

Giving Up

by Saanvi Budhiraja

“Giving Up” is about a person who leaves a very good opportunity to follow their dreams. But the dream is very hard to get and they give up, and they wish they had taken the opportunity or worked harder to fulfill their dreams. It just tells us that “dreams don’t work unless you do”, which is one of my favorite quotes. I wrote this poem keeping this quote in mind.

I thought there was an Ocean of possibilities. They say the world is your oyster. Opportunity knocked at my door. And I let it go. Chasing my hopeless dreams. The sky felt like it was full of dancing stars. But my dream it seems Was out of reach
It moved away from me with a
SCREECH
The sun played hide and seek with the clouds
I felt like I would drown
Drown
Drown
Finally the sea lashed out in anger at the ships,
At the creatures in the sea
Unwilling to tolerate another battle
I gave up
And let the waves eat me up
I got no place in heaven
Neither in hell
I stayed like a ghost
Wandering aimlessly
How I wished if only I had not gave up
How I would give away all the stars in the sky
For another chance
To fulfill my dreams

Fiction
Ages 11-14

One Last Time

by Alana Roseman

Nothing specific inspired me to write this story, and this is the case for most of the stories I write. The ideas may come to me randomly throughout the day, or I may have a dream that inspires me. This story came to my mind spontaneously one day, and I've been building it in my head ever since. My original story is a bit different from the one I wrote: it was originally about the relationship between a young boy and his nurse rather than a sibling relationship. However, while researching and learning more about Polio, I read a true story about two twins, a boy and a girl, who had to be rushed to the hospital because of Polio. Short to say, the girl survived, but her brother didn't. Although my story is quite different, this made me think of how it affected the boy's sister and parents and led me to create a narrative focused on siblinghood and the importance of cherishing your time with your loved ones.

June 21, 1949—As Mom drove me home, just seeing the lush green fields, the horses galloping, and the thousands of bright stars burning in the night sky reminded me how much I missed Louisiana. The nostalgic memories and beautiful scenery were calling to me, and I made a mental note to sketch it in my sketchbook later. *Finally*, I thought. *After two years in the Big Apple, I can finally sit back and relax.*

“How were your studies, Dawn?” Mom asked. “Are you excited to pursue a career in science?”

I sighed. Of course, Mom first asked about my science career because it was all she and Dad saw in me. It started when I came home with the first-place ribbon for my science fair project three years in a row, and the moment I was in ninth grade, they enrolled me in a boarding school. However, attending a school with elite New York students convinced me I'm not the master scientist I thought I was. Well, that and my failing grades in the class. I was about to tell Mom this, but we pulled into our driveway, so I decided to confess to her and Dad when I settled in. I just nodded, forced a smile, and said, “Yep. Can't wait.”

My stomach began to turn, and my heart began to pound as I approached the door of our tiny home. What if things had changed since I left? What if Mom, Dad, and Ethan had been better off without me? Ethan was only six years old when I left, and I hadn't heard

anything from him while I was in New York. The tiniest amount of endearment I received from him was letters from Mom that said, “Ethan says hi.”

Mom opened the door, and my favorite things about the house remained intact: the sweet scent of maple syrup that always seemed to loom over our house, the dim light that shone from Grandma's antique lamp, and the wood floor that creaked under my feet. “Ethan! Dad! I'm home!” I called out.

“Dawn,” a voice said from upstairs. Dad came shuffling down with his farming attire still on and embraced me in one of his bear hugs. “We missed you so much, pumpkin!”

“I missed you too. Where's Ethan?”

“Hm. I think the boy fell asleep early.”

“I'm right here.” My parents and I turned around to see Ethan at the top of the stairs. He was rubbing his eye with one hand and holding his teddy bear with the other. Unable to contain my excitement, I ran up the stairs and hugged him.

“You grew up so much while I was gone,” I remarked, and I wasn't just saying that either. Ethan must have hit a growth spurt because he looked three inches taller, and the front teeth that he had lost were now replaced with two full-grown teeth.

Strangely, Ethan stood there, not even batting an eye in my direction, and bared his teeth. “I know, I know,” he scolded. “I'm going back to bed. All of *you* woke me up.” He looked in my direction, and I noticed the fiery rage in his blue eyes for a split second.

His shockingly harsh words stabbed me in the chest like a razor-sharp, agonizing sword, taking me aback. As he drowsily strolled back to his room, I thought to myself, *Who are you, and what have you done with my sweet, innocent baby brother?* He slammed the door, and I turned to my parents, who didn't seem fazed. “That was strange,” I quietly commented.

“Don't worry about it. Ethan has his last baseball game early tomorrow, so he just wants rest. You two can reconnect after his game,” Mom explained.

“Okay.” I paused. I'd had their undivided attention, so it was time to tell them. I looked down and dug my foot into the ground as I revealed, “Mom and Dad, I don't want to--”

I was interrupted by Mom's obnoxious yawn. “In fact, we should all get to bed. We've had a long day.”

“Um...okay. Good night.” I wasn't tired at all, but I walked into my ghosted room with the yellow-tinged spots that bordered the ceiling fan, which was out of balance and squeaked with every slow rotation. Flopping onto my squishy bed, I pulled out my sketchbook and began to draw our family, looking out at the beautiful scenery I had seen earlier. I whispered to myself, “To-

morrow will be a momentous day. I'll tell my parents I hate boarding school and reconcile with Ethan."

The following day, I woke up to the sound of Mom shuffling around the house. "Ugh, I still haven't found his uniform!" Mom yelled from downstairs. I rolled my eyes. I thought Mom promised she wouldn't lose things around the house anymore. Slipping on my house shoes, I left my room to see Mom frantically pulling clothes out of the closet.

"Did you try looking under his bed?"

"Of course, I—I didn't. Go check for me, will you?"

"Sure." I heard a dry cough coming from his room, and I walked into the room where he was sitting on his bed with a deck of cards. "Are you sick?" I asked him. "If you are, I can tell Mom and—"

"No!" He yelled without hesitation. "I'm fine."

"Okay, okay. Jeez." I dove under his bed, grabbed his uniform, and threw it on his bed. I glanced around his room and noticed that his coveted dinosaur posters and figurines were replaced with everything baseball: from Babe Ruth posters to a signed baseball. I quietly scoffed. One of the things we bonded over the most was our mutual love for dinosaurs. "How long have you been playing baseball?" I questioned with my arms crossed.

"A year."

"I see. It looks like you collect baseball cards now too. Whatever happened to your toy dinosaurs?"

"I threw them away. I grew up from that stuff."

My heart sank, and I frowned. "Even the one I gave you?"

"Yep. All of the toys are in the attic now. I have to go." He walked out with his uniform, but I just stood there, frozen. I came home thinking we could quickly get back into the swing of things, but my little brother grew up, and I wasn't even there to witness it.

We drove to Ethan's baseball game in silence. At the game, Mom explained that Ethan was the star player on his team and helped them win all their games, which led them to the championship. Still, it wasn't going to be an easy victory because the other team was also undefeated. The teams ran to their positions, and a few minutes later, the Umpire bellowed, "Play Ball," and the crowd erupted into applause. The warm, crisp air ran over the field as the game went on, and I quietly prayed that Ethan would win. However, my hopes for his win constantly shifted with each pitch as time passed.

I must've not prayed hard enough because Ethan's team had lost with a strikeout at the final buzzer. Ethan stumbled back to us, engulfed in his sweat, gazing at the bleachers. His shoulders were bowed with his hands barely gripping the baseball bat. "Are you okay, son?" Dad asked.

He collapsed onto the bleachers. "I-I'm fine," he stuttered, and his voice began to crack as the tears escaped his eyes and began to stream down his face.

I hated to see him like this, so I put my hand on his shoulder and consoled, "It's okay. You'll surely win next year with all your hard work."

He grabbed my hand, shaking, and threw it back to my side. "Just leave me alone. You wouldn't even know half of my work because you weren't here! Stop pretending you still know me because you don't."

"Ethan," Mom said. "Please—"

"No! I don't even know why she's here. She should just go back to New York!" He stormed off, still hacking the same dry cough he had earlier today.

My lips quivered, and I hid my muted face with my hands. Maybe Ethan didn't need me anymore and had just outgrown me. Spookily, everything else became silent, except for the sound of my booming, pounding heartbeat and Ethan's coughing between sobs. It was like a pattern: *Bump, bump, cough, cough*, but eventually, the coughs stopped, and all I heard was a single *Thump!* "Ethan!" Mom screamed, and I looked up.

He fainted.

My parents and I sat in the hospital waiting room for what seemed like forever, and I was so bored that all I could do was sit there and count the ceiling tiles. The doctor finally came out of Ethan's hospital room, and we all stood up with our faces drawn tight with displeasure. He glanced at all of us with the despair in his eyes visible through his wide-rimmed glasses. "What is it, doc?" Dad asked nervously.

"Your son," he gulps. "Has contracted Polio." My breath came to a screeching halt. Polio had been spreading like wildfire for the past few years. It spreads quicker in big cities like New York but not in rural communities, so I never worried about anyone in my family getting it.

"Is there anything you can do?" I blurted out.

"We can run a few procedures and treatments, but..." he trailed off. "Nothing's guaranteed."

Mom buried her pale face in Dad's shoulder, crying. "When can we see him?" Dad asked.

"After we give him treatments, we'll tell you where he stands, and you can see him."

Over the next few days, we went home to sleep and eat, but we spent the rest of the time in the waiting room. On the third day, I fell asleep on Dad's shoulder, but Ethan was still on my mind. *I had nothing to worry about*, I assured myself, but I went into a panic and overthought everything, as usual.

The worst-case scenario was that he was paralyzed for the rest of his life. It had to be just that, right? He was only eight years old and had much more to live for. No matter the outcome, I realized I wanted to be

there for him: something I couldn't do the last few years. If this were my last chance, I'd take it. I knew what I had to do. "Mom, Dad," I said quietly. "Can I go home? I'm going to get a few things for Ethan."

They nodded simultaneously, and I was off running. I couldn't help but think the time was slowly ticking away, which made me run faster. At home, I gathered old toys stored in the attic, including his dinosaurs. He may have been too old, but I had a hunch that he would appreciate it. I also collected his new belongings from his room and some old photos. I left the house and realized one missing thing: a cranberry pie from the bakery across the street that Ethan and I would always enjoy on Saturday evenings. I carefully placed all the items in a cardboard box and returned to the hospital. Mom and Dad weren't in the waiting room, so I snuck back to his hospital room to see them over his bed. Ethan looked paler and more fatigued but also frailer and bonier. "Ethan," Mom whispered. "Dawn's here. We'll leave you two alone." She kissed him on the forehead, and both left.

"Hey, Ethan. How are you doing?" He shrugged. "I've got cranberry pie."

He looked up at me with wide eyes and the first smile I've seen from him since I came back. "Really? Can I have some?" I cut our slices, and we ate in silence. He finally broke the silence by saying, "I didn't think you would come. I thought you would be too mad."

"I wasn't mad, just... disappointed," I said jokingly. "But that's all in the past. Right now, I just want to have fun with you. Starting with our secret handshake. Do you remember it?" He nodded. For the next couple of hours, we played with his new and old toys, laughed at the embarrassing things we did when we were younger, and talked about our lives. Ethan did most of the talking. He mentioned baseball, his friends, his teachers, and the girl he liked.

I wasn't saying anything for myself, so he asked, "Dawn, why did you leave without telling me?"

I was about to answer, but he gripped my hand firmly, stared at me with his wet eyes, and cried, "Do you know how hard it's been? I never had anyone to talk to or play with. You left me all alone, and I didn't have a say in any of it."

"Ethan, I'm so sorry I made you feel that way. Even if I did ask you, I didn't have much choice. Mom and Dad have had their plan for me for a while now."

"Don't you miss it here? Don't you wish you could stay?"

"Of course. I love it here, and I never considered myself much of a city girl anyway. Don't get me started on my studies. There's so much I would rather do." He raised an eyebrow, so I clarified, "I want to be an artist."

"An artist?"

"Yes. I feel so much freedom when I put my pencil on the paper. In fact, on Saturday mornings, I would go into the town and sell my artwork, and they'd always sell out!"

"Wow!" he exclaimed. "Why don't you just do that then?"

I bit my lip. "I want to make Mom and Dad happy. Besides, being an artist seems like a risky career choice."

"So?" he asked, arms crossed. "Didn't you always tell me to reach for the stars? You can do it too. It's your life, not Mom and Dad's. Am I right?"

I raised my eyebrows, and lightning crackled through my veins. "Yeah, you're completely right."

We continued to talk for a few more minutes, but our conversation stopped when Ethan rubbed his forehead and complained of a headache. I helped him lay his head on the pillow, and he asked. "Dawn, am I dying?"

His question took me aback for a split second, but I quickly said, "No. No. You're fine."

Everything was happening at the speed of light. I never expected him to be here: wrestling for his life at the hands of Polio. Although I was grasping onto the grain of hope he'd come out of this as strong as ever, I couldn't deny he was running out of time. All I wanted was time, but I couldn't have trapped it. It would've just kept going, whether I liked it or not.

"But I don't feel..." he winced in pain. "Fine." I told him I'd get the nurse, but he grabbed my arm and whispered, "No. Stay here." Even though I wanted to stay strong for his sake, I couldn't help but sob. He patted me on the leg as he said, "I'm sorry I was a jerk to you." Now he was crying too. "You're the best sister ever. I mean it. I love you so much."

"I love you too," I managed to mutter between hiccups. I delved into the bed and embraced Ethan. One. Last. Time.

I kept holding on to him like a baby, and with his last breath, he spoke, "Even though I couldn't reach for the stars, don't let that stop you."

On the last day of summer, it was time to go back to boarding school. I left the house, and the sunshine met my pasty white skin, breaking through the bitter chill in my body. Dad had put the luggage in the trunk, and Mom honked the horn. I was about to get in the car, but I stopped. I had wasted enough time, and I couldn't do it anymore. Tomorrow may be a mystery, but all I knew was that I had that one moment, so I took advantage of it. "Wait! I don't want to go. I want to stay here."

Driftwood

Anthony Carzon

After taking Creative Writing at my homeschool co-op, I started to appreciate the writing process more and tried to write uniquely. This short story had a heavy amount of description that I put into it. I wanted to take inspiration from other writers who gave a lot of thought to their writing; therefore, I made sure I didn't have repetition in the story so that it made it feel fresh and original. The imaginative process behind the story was not as it turned out. It originally was going to be somewhat of a fictional documentary about a piece of driftwood, but I decided to add an ant for more of an emotional travel than just wood traveling which seemed pointless.

A cool breeze declares itself among the swirls and arches of the deep and intimidating ocean. A small driftwood glides along with the assured song of the waves, colliding with each other in a soothing pattern. A small ant resides in an indent in the wood seemingly having no sense of the mater which is at hand. It searches for other residents on this free cruise of a predicament. He has no luck on the search which demotivates him a great deal. Hours pass in the wink of an eye. The sun falls in an animated stroke while the moon awakes. This makes the ant ponder about the day before; wondering how he got into this pickle.

Thunder intrudes into the night proclaiming that danger is on the near horizon. The ant scurries into the indent and rapidly starts digging a small cavern hoping for defense against the raging storm. In mere seconds the rains start pouring down into the deep ocean below. Waves start growing larger while in sync with the wind in a rhythmic movement. The hearty ant cocoons himself into the raft for more protection. The driftwood sails up the crashing waves flipping and turning in the excruciating process. One great wave comes soring down in a threatening form, finally thrusting the raft down. The crease in the wood becomes totally submerged by the flood. The little ant drifts away into the deep abyss with no escape. Peering around himself, he feels a dark fade creep around his peripheral vision. He feels a torturous pressure etching itself into his head creating a splitting migraine that grows evermore. He experiences complete darkness everywhere he looks as the migraine ramps to an unimaginable pain. He finds himself being pulled deeper and deeper into total agony. He passes out in the process due to the agonizing pain.

Foam glides across a sunny beach with small shells stuck into the grains of wet sand. The ant's mind arises from a deep slumber. Welcomed with the dry and peaceful land, the ant ventures into a shady outcropping of grass. Two sturdy palm trees mark the land about one and a half ants away from each other. The ant is greeted by a hammock dwelling in between the two trees. He nestles into the solo hammock excited to finally get some rest.

Dynamite

Saanvi Budhiraja

I wrote Dynamite because I love dystopian books. I love the Hunger Games trilogy, the Divergent series, and the Selection series. I love how you can just imagine a completely different world after our world ends and that's just really cool. Dynamite is an explosive and I think the world later on will be explosive and advanced and dangerous.

Raazi was in her room. Her whole body was sweating. She hadn't even done anything, other than sit on the sofa, praying. But still her whole shirt was wet, it looked like someone had dumped a whole bucket of water on her head. Raazi got up and started pacing around the room. She felt like she would explode through all the thoughts in her body. What would she get on the test? Or would she be killed, or worse would she go join the...the. Raazi couldn't even bring herself to think of the word.

Just then Raazi's mom, Chandramukhi, came into Raazi's room. Chandramukhi was beautiful, unlike Raazi. Raazi was beautiful too, but not as beautiful as her mother. Her mother had glossy black hair, olive green eyes, and olive colored skin, she was tall, slim, and was perfect in every way. Chandramukhi smiled at her daughter, "You're going to be okay. You got this." Raazi said back, "How could you say that? You're perfect." Chandramukhi laughed, and replied, "Really? Do you think so? Well no one is perfect honey. Even if they act like that from the outside. My impulsiveness is an example of that." Raazi replied, "What impulsiveness?" Chandramukhi gave Raazi a sad smile. She put her hands on Raazi's shoulder and sat her down on the sofa.

"That's another story, for another day. I just need you to take your time on the test. And I need you to choose carefully, on every single question. This test can make or break your entire life. You could be kicked out of Keir, our country. Do you want that to happen?" Raazi gulped, "Umm no of course not. I'll be careful." Her mother smiled, "That's my girl! Go change now." Raazi nodded and went to her room. She looked around her room. It was small but comfortable. It was very cozy. There was a small bed, the walls were painted blue, and she had a small desk, and a cozy gray carpet. Raazi sat down on her bed. This might be the last time she ever entered her room, based on her test results. She would be placed in one of the 5 sections. After the test she had

a choice to change her section, or keep the one in the test. It was advised to keep the one in the test, so you can survive. The competition was tough. The first section, Fiadh. People from this section live in the forested area of Keir. They survive in the wild. They are very independent, strong-willed, rebellious, stubborn, and caring. The second section is Eulalia. They live in the city area of Keir near the King and Queen, where there are lots of people. They love people, they are sweet and kind, they are thoughtful, and sentimental. The third section is Adish, these people live in the deserted area of Keir. They are short-tempered, idealistic, passionate, and they will go to any extent to get what they want. The fourth section, where Chandramukhi was placed, is Anzan. These people are quiet, brave, intelligent, reckless, and very capable of doing anything they put their mind to, they are pretty much perfect in every way. They live in little cottages on the grassy areas, in the middle of the desert and the forest. The last section was the Braniacs, they were smart, calculated, and manipulative, they lived in the sky, in sky homes. Raazi saw them in the sky sometimes, they were huge! If you don't get placed in any at all, you're called Dynamite. Long ago there was a place called North America, and everyone died after a pandemic and war happening at the same time. The people who don't get placed in any place, you're dangerous like Dynamite. They don't want the King and Queen in the City to fall. They don't want Kier to fall. So at moments notice the Dynamite vanish never to be seen or talked to again.

Raazi took a deep breath and told herself to stop and change. She wore her midnight blue dress, with sparkly stars. She wore white heels and wore a moon necklace her father gave to her before he disappeared. She tied her brown hair up into a bun, and put on a starry shiny clip. There was a knock on the door. Her mother had come to check on her. Chandramukhi took one look at her and smiled. She cleared her throat and said, "Here comes the Midnight Beauty, Raazi!" Raazi smiled. Her mom always knew how to lighten the mood. Chandramukhi went up to her daughter, brushed the stray hairs off her forehead, and kissed her on the forehead. She smiled and said, "I know you're trying hard to hide your beauty. But don't. It's a gift." Raazi shook her head, "It's not! Look what happened to Loralai. She was the prettiest in town. She was married and happy. But one day after the marriage she had to kill her own husband, because he was beating her and harassing her. And the next day she vanished. All the beauty is vanishing." Chandramukhi shook her head, "We will not think of this stuff now? Enhance your beauty." She looked deeply into Raazi's blue eyes, as if scanning her for secrets. Raazi nodded her head, she knew this was no time to

argue with her mother. Raazi went out of her room, and out of the cottage to go to the Testing Building.

While she walked she thought about the section she wanted to be placed in. Raazi was unlike her mother. She always had a hard time fitting in with the Anzan's. She dreamed about living with the Braniacs. She loved learning and she loved the sky. But then she wouldn't get to see her mother as often. Raazi took a deep breath, and thought, "I will let the test decide. If I want to survive I will have to let the test decide. I will have to let the test decide." Just then she reached the Testing Building. It was huge, made completely of glass. She could see multiple people already in, on computers, with large headphones on, and wires attached to their head. Raazi took a deep breath and stepped in.

The inside was not as breathtaking as the outside. It turns out everyone was on one floor. The Testing Building was just made to look big from the outside. There were hundreds of people all crammed together, section wise. Just as Raazi was looking around, a woman came in. She looked about in her 30s, she was a blonde with blue eyes. She had hot pink glasses, and hot pink lipstick. She was wearing a black skirt, and a black blouse. And black heels. She smiled and said, "I'm Jessica. I am an Anzan. Just like you." She made a scoffing sound, like she disapproved of Raazi being in Anzan. She continued, "I will take you to your testing area. So, let us proceed." Raazi immediately disliked this woman. Jessica started walking away, her heels clacking, and Raazi had no choice but to follow. While they were going to Raazi's testing area, Jessica said, "We're almost there. This place is quite large, if not pretty or tall. You're Chandramukhi's daughter right? So sad. Unfortunate." Raazi felt like punching this woman, but she knew better, this moment could make or break her entire life. Just then Jessica stopped. She motioned toward a brick door, labeled with 305 on top. Jessica smiled, "You are going to be here with Arwen, of Eulalia. Ugh, people there are attention seekers. But whatever, you are going to be with her. Ta ta. Hope that you survive, from the looks of it, you might not." Raazi mock copied under her breath, "Hope blah blah blah."

Just then the door opened. A pretty woman who looked to be in her 20s came in, she had jet black hair, green eyes, and a white blouse, a black skirt, and peach heels on. She was holding a clipboard, she looked at it and smiled at Raazi. The woman was short, so even with heels she was still a bit shorter than Raazi. Raazi was tall for Anzan. She was 5'10.

Just then the woman said, "Hello Raazi from Anzan. I am Arwen from Eulalia. Let us proceed with your test. And I absolutely love your outfit. It is a beauty!" Raazi smiled, "Thank you! You have a good fash-

ion sense yourself." Arwen's eyebrow arched, "An Anzen complimenting other sections? Interesting." Raazi blushed. "I have never really fit in." Arwen smiled, "Well that is for the test to decide." She opened the door wider for Raazi and stepped in herself. There she motioned for Raazi to sit in a chair. The room was pretty much empty, just that one chair was there, and a bunch of wires.

Raazi was already sweating, and a bit reluctant to sit on that chair. But she did as she was told. Raazi asked, "Why only one chair?" Arwen put her finger to her lip. Raazi immediately shut her mouth. Arwen started attaching the wires to both of them. Then she sat down on the floor.

Arwen held out her hand, "Hold it." Raazi quickly put her wired hand on Arwen's wired hand. Then Arwen said, "Close your eyes. I am going to ask you questions. Don't answer them out loud. Answer them in your mind. Okay?" Raazi thought, "Yes." Arwen chuckled, "Many people don't get that right at first. Good job!" Arwen continued, "How many people are in your family?" Raazi thought, "Just me and my mother. My father disappeared one day and never came back." Arwen continued, "Okay. What is your favorite color?" Raazi thought, "I don't really have one. But I have always loved green and gold, so majestic and beautiful." Arwen continued, "Nice. What are your hobbies?" Raazi thought, "I love reading, sewing, and building." Arwen nodded. She opened her mouth to ask the next question. But before that Raazi answered in her head, "Brainiac." For a moment there was no sound at all, Raazi waited. She decided to open her eyes. There Arwen was standing shocked. She was taking the wires off, and typing madly on a computer.

Arwen stared at Raazi with pity in her eyes. Raazi opened her mouth to ask something, but Arwen shook her head. Arwen whispered, "Run, run through the back door. There you will see a beggar, go with him." Raazi asked, "But... But-" Arwen interrupted, "You're Dynamite Raazi. You're the Chosen One."

Raazi backed away from the computer. This couldn't be happening! She never wanted this! She just wanted to have a normal life. Raazi felt lightheaded. But she knew that she had to run away if she wanted to ever see her mother again, ever to lead a normal life again. If she wanted to live, she would need to run. Raazi charged out through the back door, and didn't look back until the Testing Section seemed like a little dot. Raazi started walking, breathing heavily. Trying to catch her breath. She felt really light headed. Raazi thought, "What is the Chosen One? Why did she let me run away? What is happening?" Just then a beggar approached her, she was just about to tell the beggar to get lost because she had nothing. But then she remembered what Arwen said.

She asked the beggar, "Can you help me? Arwen, the lady at the testing center said something about me being the Chosen One?" The beggar's eyes went wide, he whispered, "Shhh... Don't say that here. If they hear you bad... bad.." He shuddered. But continued, "Follow me, and don't say a word. Take off your sparkly things, and toss them off." He scratched his beard. Raazi, outraged, said, "I have no idea what's going on! You want me to toss off all these things for some unknown man to just steal them." The beggar spat, "You foolish girl, you want to be caught by the City guards. Do you want to die? Disappear!" Raazi thought about this for a bit, "Sure, but not this necklace, it's very special." The beggar was silent for a bit, as if taking this in, and then he said, "Sure but make sure it's not visible. And take this ragged cloth and wear it." Raazi took off all her sparkly jewelry, she let her brown hair down, took off her heels, and tossed them all down. She then took the cloak and put it over her dress. The beggar looked her up and down, and he bent down, took some mud and splashed it on her. "Hey!" Raazi yelled in protest. The beggar replied, "Shut up! You were looking too pretty!" Raazi blushed. Was the beggar trying to flirt with her, he looked old. The beggar reading her expression said, "I am not flirting with you, young lady. You looked nothing like a beggar, that's all. Now follow me." She followed the beggar, keeping her head low.

Soon after they reached an abandoned building. The beggar did some weird knocking pattern. An ancient woman opened the door. The beggar mouthed, "Chosen One." The woman looked shocked, but then she smiled and yelled, "Chosen One!" Raazi heard screams of joy. Then there was music. The beggar smiled, and ripped off his beard. Then he used his cloth to wipe off his face. Raazi was surprised! The man was quite young, looked only a year or two older than Raazi. He ran inside to dance as well. The old woman looked at Raazi and smiled, "You can read minds, young lady. You are the Chosen One. You will help us take over the City, and bring our country back to glory. The beggar over there, Raj. He will be your guard!" Raazi's eyebrows arched, "And I would I do this?" The old lady chuckled, "No, you will complain a bit. But you will do it after you hear the full story." Her face turned grim, "Our country is in danger, and only you can save it, Raazi. We will make you do it, even if you decide not to." Raazi opened her mouth to protest, but then the ancient woman put her hand to Raazi's neck. Suddenly everything went black. Raazi fell to the ground, with a thud. *To Be Continued...*

Poisoned

Eve Lung

I wrote Poisoned as a fun little exercise. As a future author with a tendency to plan big, long stories, I needed a breather. I wanted to write a story that would keep me entertained the whole time as I read it, a story somewhat different from what you usually see, but I also wanted to sprinkle in my love for dark humor and writing. I hope you enjoy(ed) the story. :)

On an average Tuesday afternoon, the birds are usually chirping and the bees are usually buzzing. The sun is usually shining, with a big bright smile and some sunglasses.

However, this Tuesday, they're all hiding in fear. Here at Hendrick Middle School, fifth hour gym class is playing Capture the Flag outside, and nature fears children. *Especially* loud, noisy, little brats, like in Hendrick Middle School's fifth hour gym class. I wouldn't blame nature. Kids are scary.

One kid in particular, however, sat in the highest branches of the tallest tree, with a wicked grin on his face. It was so wicked and despicable, that you could see the wrinkle lines on his face. He laughed, looking at his red jersey, and the blue flag in his hand. "You know, I truly am the savior of the red team."

"Well, you would be if you didn't steal our flag too!" Another kid in a red jersey pointed at the red flag, which was also in our hero's hand. "Give it back!"

"No can do, Lucas. These flags are the rightful property of Arthur Lloyd Jr.!" Junior stood up on his branch, which was rough and thick. The wind blew his brunette hair back and forth, and his brown orbs of eyes gazed pitifully at the children below him, which were all darkened by his shadow. The children that were always below him, no matter what elevation they may have been at.

Mr. Zeke, the gym teacher, came walking over at a snail's pace. "Okay, okay, settle down. Junior, do we have to call the fire department again, or can you get down by yourself?"

"I'm in eighth grade. I can obviously climb down a tree."

"Well, I'm not writing you a pass to your sixth hour teacher." Mr. Zeke sighed, contemplating why he ever became a teacher. "Enjoy being late, Lloyd."

Junior looked down at the kids. He had to think about this wisely. Because he had both flags, every kid would be going after him, and if he wanted to win, he

couldn't let a bunch of puny seventh and sixth graders stop him. He couldn't let anything stop him. So, he walked to the edge of the branch he was on, aimed for the red team's goal...

...and jumped from the highest branch on the tallest tree.

"You made me drive all the way from work for *this?!?*"

Mrs. Goldent, the principal, widened her eyes as Minerva Lloyd slammed her fist on the desk in front of her. Minerva was a woman who got angry very easily, especially when it came to her children. Right next to her was Junior, with a set of crutches and a ton of band-aids all over his body. "Mrs. Lloyd, your son jumped from a tree, fell through two more trees, and fell in a thorny bush. Of course I'm having you come get him."

"My *precious* baby would *never* do something like that! I don't understand your need to call me to your stupid principal's office twice a week! Junior's never done *anything* wrong in his life!"

Junior smiled. Well, at least, he tried. There were band-aids all over his face that restricted it. "Well, you know what they say... mothers are always right."

"Ma'am... please leave." Mrs. Goldent gestured to the door.

"That sounds like a great idea. While I'm at it, I might as well pick up my other two boys." Minerva stood up, and then proceeded to grab Junior by his hair and stand him up too. "Have a terrible day."

Before he knew it, Junior was in the car. He often blinked through time, as if things just didn't happen. It was a weird pattern. He just reasoned that he got to skip the boring parts in life because he was special, or that he was just running on autopilot. You could tell he was special (or that he thought he was special) just by looking at him- his hair, which was long enough to be tucked in a small ponytail, and yet have gorgeous bangs. His clothes were very nice, but they had that look of being just worn enough to make his style a little homey. There was no acne, no blemishes, and no dimples in sight. Plus, his friends and family treated him like the king of the world.

"Thanks for getting us out of school an hour early, Junior!" Lucas, who was actually his younger brother, cheered. "I just wish that Ethan was there to see your epic stunt!"

"...I'm just glad that you're okay." Ethan, his oth-

er younger brother, said. "Thank goodness no ambulances were necessary."

"I'm strong and durable. I can survive everything." The band-aid man grinned.

Ethan laughed. "Be careful about what you say. That'll probably come back and bite you in the butt."

"Loosen up a little bit, Ethan! You're only a seventh grader. Stop acting like you know everything, because you don't." Lucas stuck his tongue out at the Ethan in question.

The eldest brother frowned. "There were so many mixed messages, what was I supposed to get from that?"

Suddenly, the brothers turned to Junior. "~~I have no idea, but you screwed up!~~" They declared, in unison.

"I screwed up? What did I do?"

~~"You'll never learn. You're just a sick brat."~~ The faces of Ethan and Lucas began to melt off of their heads.

"I-I can't really understand you, and you're being very creepy." Junior backed away, but the seatbelt was strangling him.

The two dripping and oozing boys grabbed their older brother, who began screaming. "~~You deserve everything that's about to happen to you!~~"

"Junior, do you *want* me to crash the car?!" Minerva yelled. And all of a sudden, everything went back to normal. Ethan and Lucas were perfectly fine.

"Geez, it's like you saw a ghost or something." Lucas scoffed.

"Mhm... ghosts..." Junior nodded.

Ethan grabbed his shoulders. "Are you okay? You're really pale all of a sudden."

"Yep..." The band-aid man lied. In reality, his vision was getting blurry, and everything was becoming very dark. Too dark, as if he were fading away and never coming back. His eyelids were so heavy. It felt like it would be better if he could close them and never open them again.

"You don't have that much time left, Arthur."

Junior's eyes opened. He felt less heavy, and realized that all of his band-aids and his backpack were gone. Along with that, everything was completely dark. "My name isn't Arthur. It's Junior."

"Why? Because your father left, and you wish you weren't named after him?"

"A little bit, yeah." He looked around. "Who am I talking to? Why do you know that?"

A figure appeared in the dark void of Junior's mind. It was tall and lanky, and it looked like it was made out of pen scribbles. The only distinctive feature it had was a great big smile. "That's the only reasonable decision you've ever made, Arthur." The voice, which sounded a lot like his hallucinations of Ethan and Lucas, ignored him.

"You never answered my questions, weirdo."

"That's not very nice, Arthur. Calling people a weirdo... so harsh." It frowned. "Let's... let's just say that I'm a stress-induced hallucination."

"A what?"

"Well, you see, you've been ~~p-o-i-s-o-n-e-d.~~"

"From what? By who?"

"Stop asking so many questions. You don't have enough time for that."

Junior quieted. He never thought he was going to die this young.

"I'm literally just an embodiment of the fact that you're going to die. When you jumped off of that tree and landed in a bush, you actually landed in a bush full of poisonous berries and happened to eat fourteen of them. After a fit of hallucinations, you're currently lying in a hospital bed, with your crying family around you, and you barely have a heartbeat. You're expected to be completely dead any minute now."

Arthur Jr. started shaking. It felt cold. He tried to picture the sterile hospital room he was in. He was probably wearing a baby blue hospital gown that got tied in the back. The only lighting was probably either sunlight or the rectangles that buzzed on the ceiling. His mother and his brothers were probably staring at his cold, empty body.

"Well, I have a little offer for you." The hallucination grinned. In fact, the grin was so wide, you could see wrinkle lines on its face. "Since I'm practically your subconscious and you're in the middle of a fever dream, you still have a little while left to live in your head. You don't want to go out fearing that you'll be too bad for Heaven, right?"

"Wh-why wouldn't I? It's not like I've committed actual crimes."

"It's all about what's in your heart, Arthur. If you're a bad person, you'll go to h-e-double-hockey-sticks. So, what if I do you a favor and help you right the wrongs you've made?"

Junior pictured the hospital scene from his imagination. "I'm basically dead, how could I r-redeem myself?"

"It's simple, really." Hallucination man began pacing. "I'll just take you down a trip through Memory Lane. If you can 'fix' what bad things you've done and have a change of heart, maybe you'll really go to Heav-

en. There's a whole ocean of possibilities to explore."

"...deal. I don't want my brothers to never see me once they arrive in the holy cloud land, anyway."

"Well, you would be if you didn't steal our flag too!"

Suddenly, the world brightened up. The sky was blue, the grass was green, the sun was scared of kids, Junior was up in his tree holding a red and blue flag, and his brother was yelling at him. Down below were Hendrick Middle School's fifth hour gym class, as well as Mr. Zeke. This must've been right before he was poisoned.

"That's... true..." The Red Team's 'Savior' muttered. "Maybe... maybe I'll give them back."

"Huh? Junior, are you okay?" Lucas called. "You've never apologized like that before."

That's true... I've never acted like this before... is this a good thing? Junior thought. "Yeah, I'm fine. Perfectly fine. I'll just... drop the flags."

No matter how much he commanded his hand to, he couldn't drop the flag. The wrinkly pink ball in his skull just couldn't do it. His hand shook and twitched without any luck. *Why can't I do this?*

He glanced over at another tree to see a great big grin and some pen scribbles on a branch too. "Hey, i-it's you... why can't I do this?! I'm *trying* to make a change, but for some reason, my hand won't let go of the flags!"

The hallucination frowned. "It takes work to make a change, Arthur."

Junior stared at the flags in his hand, begging them to drop. Something wasn't right. His hand was aching now, and why did it need to ache? Why was there a physical toll to righting a wrong? "This doesn't feel right..."

"Then maybe I shouldn't have given you a second chance."

The hallucination snapped, and the entire world faded to black for the very last time. And somewhere, in a hospital, the heart monitor of an eighth grade boy went flat.

Poetry
Ages 15-19

pretty places

Sanjana Datla

“pretty places” was inspired by the transcendentalist movement, a 19th century philosophical movement that focused on the independence of the mind, and the beauty and goodness of nature. Specifically, it was inspired by a poem by Walt Whitman called “Song Of Myself,” which I studied in school. I’ve always found comfort outdoors, so Whitman’s work really spoke to me. I tried to capture my love for nature in this poem, so I hope you enjoy it!

the colors of the sky bleed together,
gray into blue into green,
blurry in the stagnant fog,
like someone reached down their thumb and
smudged the canvas

and in this cloudy indistinctness,
the flaws in ourselves are smoothed,
the dampness of the air weighs down our tempers
the smell of pine fresh after rain
chases the lasting grievances from our heads
the pattering of rain drums a rhythm
that keeps us steady against the chilling wind.

and the silky hand of green holds us
warm and clean and blessed

then, as the sun peels away the clouds,
blue sky dissolves falling drops,
the remaining water soaking into roots,
and in this path of these yellow rays,
the motherly warmth fills our lungs,
heating and coloring our skin,
pulling stems from pores of the ground,
light sinking deep into the hills and time to fade out

and the lithe arms of green cradle us,
light and happy and loved

leaves drying and growing and falling,
plants watered and flowered and picked,
fruit carried and beared and eaten,
and our lives tangled in the vines

the waiting

Gwenyth Richards

I wrote “the waiting” about the feeling of anticipation, as well as the insecurity that comes from not knowing what will happen in the future. I was inspired by the image of a beach at low tide, with water so far away that you can see nothing but sand. The infiniteness of the ocean represents something feeling so out of control, like it acts of its own free will regardless of any outside input.

the ocean splashes inches from your feet
the tide keeps moving on and on and on
and when she runs away it's so discreet
you never know she's leaving 'till she's gone

when she's not here the world is only sand
the smell of air is stale and ground is dry
and when the wind blows you can hardly stand
and tears won't fall here even when you cry

you beg the wild water to return
but waves are reckless, free, and far away
the sun is harsh and vile and fires burn
well, what could you have done to make her stay?

right when you cannot wait one second more
you hear the softest crash of waves on shore

Poetry, 15-19 - Third Place

Her

Krishna Patel

I was inspired to write the poem "Her" because at the time that I wrote it, there was a lot of stuff in the news about immigrants coming in from Mexico and how they were being treated. I wanted to write something that represented them and all the sacrifices they have made. The poem also represents other immigrants and all the things they do in order to make their lives better for future generations.

We celebrate the life of her
She was a light in the darkness
A human equal to nature

She ran through every forest
That came her way
Smacking away branches and trees at any cost

Each branch stronger than the next
But that did not stop her
So here we celebrate her

Now at the peak
Those dreams fall back into her hands
A comfortable embrace of herself

Flowers saying hello
Glad to see a familiar face
Put her little head down to take in the warmth

Her face as warm as the sun shining down
Her smile welcoming you in with warm arms
Her eyes, a mirror to the soul

Her goodness is a basket
Waiting to be filled up
By the similarity of those who came before her

She did not let go
She stayed holding on despite any cost
Her curiosity was meant to be as small as a bird cage

But it was not
It was larger than the earth itself
It explored by itself

The forest leaves her untouched
Because it knows who she is
An immigrant, celebrated within herself

If You Only Knew

Mirabella Koponen

That morning in the hospital
the morning like no other
what a Beauty they said when they said when
they saw you
Beauty, meet your mother

And away we go! To and fro, high and low
We run, run, run, so much fun
Leaving no stone unturned and no cloud un
touched.
Look how much we've learned

Oh I love her so so much

In her eyes I see life and love as we watch the sky
above
I watch her face, like silk and lace soft and gentle
is she
Away we go! Far and wide
Her, the Lord, and me

Through broken bones and scraped knees, she
is always there
There in her arms
The pain will end
A place where darkness does not dare

My mother the brave
My mother the strong
when I am with you nothing's wrong

But when the times get rough we'll bow our
heads and
from us tears may fall
yet our sadness cannot linger when
Our Lord will Conquer all

For years and years we face our fears on the path
that lays ahead
unsure of where it leads us
Our wonder never fed.
Away we go! To and fro
But mama is tired so we take it slow

My mother the grateful
My mother the friend
Though I know it has to,
I wish this time would never end

So my plea to Time
Though I beg and borrow
Please hear my prayer tonight
mama is very sick and I fear she's lost the fight

Of coins I have not many and
many the debt I have not paid
But to you dear Time, I pray
An exception may be made

I bow my head in surrender and
from me tears do fall
Lord, I pray you catch them
and that you help her Conquer all

And from this sadness I see a light
Shown before me
And a voice so familiar speaks ever so softly

Daughter, do not worry, mama is safe with Me
And soon together in heaven is where we all will
be

So sit with her
and spend this time praying by her side
And remember the days we spent playing far and
wide

For though the day will come
when she will she will have to leave your side
Do not think that she is not with you
Just because she died

In her mind you will always be so beautiful in
her sight
And soon you'll know she's with you
Even beyond The Light

Your mother the loyal
Your mother the true
Child, her heart still sings for you

Fiction
Ages 15-19

Cracks

Sanjana Datla

In 1892, Charlotte Gilman published “The Yellow Wallpaper”, a short story that explores themes of powerlessness, mental illness, and the effects of the “mad woman” archetype. These themes are all present in Cracks. I was inspired to write about a parent’s grief and the pain of being blamed for tragedies after hearing about real-life cases where parents are baselessly blamed for their child’s death. I was also inspired by the disapproval that some mothers in the workplace face for “abandoning” their children. These three things put together are what made Cracks. I hope you enjoy it!

Twenty miles south of Portland, the Prairie River takes a sharp turn and continues in a straight line until it forms the border between Lead, Oregon and the forests of the Pacific-Northwest. An old willow bends gently over the water, its leaves skimming the surface. Boulders line the riverbank, covered in pale green lichen that grow in radiating circles like honeydew explosions. On one of the rocks stands a scrawny boy in flip flops, who looks down at the murky water and swallows hard. A girl behind him takes him by his armpits, dragging him into the water as he wiggles his legs. At last the boy finds his courage, clamps his eyes shut, and swims close to the muddy river floor. As he adjusts his angle to come up to the surface, his foot brushes against something soft and lumpy, and he opens his eyes slightly. This is the story of death in a town called Lead, and some would argue it begins here: when Caleb Smith opened his eyes and saw the swollen body of Jeremy Johnson.

Nadine Johnson climbed into the driver’s seat of her Ford Thunderbird and let out a small sigh. Her back hurt so much it was numb when she pressed her fingers against it. The doctor in Portland had told her that she needed a year of rest to correct her spine, but she didn’t have that kind of time. She scribbled quickly on a scrap of paper: *set massage appointment*, dropped it back into the glove compartment, and started her car.

Nadine was -and she prided herself on this- a hard working woman. She was a construction worker in the middle of Portland, and every penny she earned was *deserved*. She didn’t stop for the little things in life; she wasn’t a woman who strolled leisurely through the park,

consumed by nostalgia, or a theologian who ruminated on the meaning of life. She completed every task efficiently and never looked back- never tried to understand more of the world than she could see in front of her. But nobody’s perfect, she thought. And that’s why, on this particular day, she let her mind wander.

She thought about the drive home; she imagined crossing the border from the bustling streets of Portland into the cold, uninviting forests and onto the gravel road that rumbled all the way up to a little gray sign that said ‘Welcome to Lead: the strongest town this side of the Mississippi’. Then, she would park her car in the grass behind the shed in her yard, walk down the street to the elementary school, pick up Jeremy, and order a pizza from Olli’s. Then, maybe she would put on a movie, or read a book.

She leaned back into the cracked seat of her Thunderbird as she entered the forest that lined the secluded highway. The sun was sinking rapidly behind the trees, but the moon had not yet appeared, so Nadine was alone, on this great long road. In the silence, she looked up at the branches of the towering trees. Normally, they bristled in the wind, as if pointing her out of their land and into Lead. But today, they stood motionless, as if they were waiting to see what she would do. The idea unnerved her. She turned on the radio: *Starman*, by David Bowie, and pressed slightly harder on the gas pedal.

Suzanne Kelly Michele Bryce was the local pariah, and she knew it. The peculiar part was that she didn’t care. She lived in a small house with a gabled roof just inside the limits of Lead, and she had been content there for forty years. Today, however, she stood outside, next to the gray welcome sign, waiting for something. The wind grew colder, pushing into her pale skin and chilling her bare arms.

She had been shopping at Prairie Grocers in the town when she first heard the news. As she reached her arm into a bin of apples, she heard a woman murmuring into a payphone nearby.

“That’s what I heard too. Janice Smith’s kids found a body at the bottom of the river,” she said. “No, no, I don’t think the mother knows yet. It’s tragic, really...”

Suzanne ducked out of the little shop and walked rapidly to the police station. As she approached the desk, Marty Lance glanced up from the report he was writing, looked back down, and then looked back up again in surprise.

“How can I help you... Mrs. Bryce?”

“Suzanne, Marty. Call me Suzanne,” she said

softly.

He smiled in an effort at an apology and motioned for her to sit on the upholstered chair in front of him.

She didn't sit. "I just want to know, Marty. Who drowned in the river?"

Marty Lance sat up rigidly. He hesitated for a moment before starting slowly. "It was Jeremy Johnson. Nadine's boy," he said, looking carefully at Suzanne's reaction.

"Thank you," she said mechanically, and turned to leave.

"Wait... a moment," Marty closed his eyes and curled his lips, as if preparing to say something very disagreeable. "Will you... tell Nadine? I think she'd like to hear it from you, and not from me," he gave a loud chuckle. "No, she would *not* want to hear it from me."

Suzanne looked at him curiously, nodded slightly, and walked to the gray welcome sign that she stood by now, as she heard a rumble and saw a bright red Thunderbird approaching.

Nadine leaned forward over the steering wheel, staring at the figure next to the gray welcome sign. As she approached, she could make out the fine lines and hunched body of Suzanne Bryce. She was gesturing wildly with her arms, as if she needed help. Nadine slowed down and rolled down her window.

"What's wrong, Suzanne?" she asked, leaning over to open the passenger side door.

Suzanne walked towards the car and took hold of the open door, but she closed it softly without getting in. She waited for a few moments before she could organize the words.

"Nadine, believe me, I didn't want to tell you this. And I'm so sorry. Jeremy is," she hesitated, leaning back from the window. "Jeremy is dead."

Nadine's mouth opened slightly and her eyes fluttered half-shut. "My Jeremy?" she asked, staring at the road in front of her.

Suzanne nodded slightly.

Nadine clasped her hands against her mouth and made a guttural noise that seemed to reverberate against the still air. Her body collapsed into itself as Suzanne looked forward to the faint lines of the town.

"Where is he?" Nadine asked, her voice wet and hoarse.

"Nadine," Suzanne said quietly. "He's passed. He's not here anymore."

"I want to see my son," Nadine breathed. "God,

I want to see my son." She looked to the beige ceiling of her Thunderbird, tears racing down her flushed cheeks.

"I expect he... his body is at the clinic," Suzanne said, leaning back. "Take care of yourself Nadine," she said gently, and let go of the car.

Suzanne watched the car swerve down the road towards the clinic and went back inside to her house to find something to do.

Nadine reached over her son's body and pressed down on his chest as hard as she could. And again. And again. Until finally, a sound: a crack. A nurse turned at the sound and furrowed her eyebrows.

"Good lord, woman. You've broken his ribs. He's dead. Ain't no messing with him now," she said disapprovingly. "Are you the mother?"

Nadine nodded once.

The nurse pursed her lips and shook her head. "Come with me. There's some people here for you."

Marty Lance was uncomfortable in hospitals, but he hid it well as Nadine shuffled into the room.

"Hello, Nadine," he said tentatively. "How are you?"

"My son is dead, Marty. How are you?"

He grimaced. "I don't mean to judge you, Nadine. You know I don't. But I *mean*. What did you *expect*? You left that child *alone* every day of his *life*. You *denied* him the right to have an attentive mother. You- you-" he stopped, reconsidering his words. "I don't mean to be rude, Nadine. But you know as well as I do that you didn't have to be so *unmotherly*. People would have helped you out. You didn't *have* to go to Portland every day, leaving your only son to fend for himself. *You could have been there for him*," he straightened up, looking down at Nadine's cowering figure. "But anyway, it's over now. And look where we are."

"Marty, are you saying it's my fault my son is dead?"

He seemed to consider his answer for a moment. "I'll be honest: yes, Nadine. And I'm not the only one in this town who thinks that it's a mother's *responsibility* to be at home for her child- not parading around from day-break to sunset, doing whatever, you know," he trailed off. "I'm just here to pay my condolences, Nadine. Not as part of the police force. Just as a...friend. It's always sad when a child dies."

Nadine peered up at Marty Lance, who swallowed hard. "Yes, I'm sure, Marty. Thank you," she said,

but Marty's words were like a needle, and she felt something inside of herself burst.

"You don't understand, Suzanne," Nadine said. Her eyes were dull and her voice was flat. She came back to Suzanne's immediately after the clinic. She didn't think she could be trusted with herself. "Without Jeremy, I'm not..." her voice broke and tears pooled in her eyes. "I'm not a mother anymore."

Suzanne took Nadine by the hand and said "Nadine, that isn't true."

Nadine cut her off. "No, it *is* true. And you can say it's not but it doesn't change what's true," she said, and bent her face into her hands and cried.

The room was silent. Nadine sobbed, taking heaving breaths and, for the second time that week, allowed herself to think about the uncertain. Jeremy's plump face, the way his skin felt against hers, how he looked up to every person bigger than him as a hero. Jeremy never doubted her. He never doubted anything in the world. He was kind and trusting and honest to a fault. He was, in short, the only perfect thing Nadine would meet in her life. And he was gone.

"And I keep thinking," Nadine started. "That soon enough, I'll look around and I'll realize that the world looks so different from the time he was here. So different that, if he ever came back, he wouldn't belong. We won't *belong* to each other anymore."

"That's not *true*, Nadine. He'll always—"

"I'm leaving, Suzanne."

Ten days later, Nadine Johnson walked slowly through the middle of Lead. The street was so quiet that she could hear her shoes collide with the pavement and the sound of her breath against the night air. She felt, like never before, that she was *aware* of herself.

She walked past the police station, the grocery store, the post office, until, at last, she came to a wrought-iron gate that guarded an acre of grass and stone. Her shovel dragged along behind her, clattering over rocks and cracks in the sidewalk.

She pushed through the barrier and walked the dirt path that snaked through the field until she, at last, came to a small stone that read "*Jeremy Johnson, beloved son & friend*". She crouched in front of the headstone and patted the soil.

"I'm here, baby. Don't worry. I'm coming to get you," she mumbled.

She sat with her legs spread out in front of her,

humming notes that formed no song, and swayed as she dug her shovel into the soft dirt and threw it to the side. The dirt stuck to her white zip-up sweater and her jeans. She stopped three feet in and rubbed some dirt into her skin and hair.

"Now they won't see me, baby. I'm in camo," she purred, and began crooning '*Starman*' by David Bowie.

"*I'm a Starman*," she sang. "*Waiting in the sky. They'd like to come and meet me, but they think they're gonna die*"

She flung the shovel to the side, where it landed with a *clang* and a *thud*. She scratched at the ground with her bare hands. Hands sinking into dirt (*I'm a Starman*), raw skin and peeling nails (*waiting in the sky*), and finally, wood (*they'd like to come and meet me, but they think they're gonna die*).

She uncovered the rest of the mahogany coffin and laid down gently on it.

"I'm here, baby. I'm here. We belong together, don't you know that? Don't worry, baby. I won't let them take you away. They wanted to take you away. They tried to make me sad so I wouldn't come and find you. But it didn't work, baby. How could it work? You're my baby."

She sat on top of the coffin and swepted the pile of dirt she had created onto her legs and torso.

"I'll be here forever with you, my baby," she trilled. "Forever and ever and ever, and ever and ever."

And then, to bring herself as near as she could to the spirit of the boy found at the button of the river, she dragged the last pile of dirt onto her onto her chest, up her neck, over her mouth, and, past her nose and, finally, over her eyes.

Three people showed up for the makeshift funeral: Suzanne Bryce, Marty Lance, and the priest. The priest left twenty minutes later because he couldn't fathom conducting a funeral on a grave that was already full.

Suzanne and Marty each awkwardly patted the shifted soil, said a prayer, and stood still in their black attire underneath the pounding sun.

"We need a new headstone," Suzanne said.

"Yes, I suppose we do," Marty replied.

And they stood there, next to a river that still flowed the same, near a city called Portland where everything would happen the same, in a country that would go on with the same gumption as it did before. But the city of Lead wasn't the same at all. Everything had cracked.

Journey

Mehar Khanna

In early July, I went to a leadership camp where I met so many new people with different perspectives, experiences, and viewpoints. One story that really resonated with me was one of my closest camp friends sharing about her experiences with gender bias within her family and how she feels and deals with it. She didn't share many specifics but I can only imagine, which inspired me to write about finding opportunity in a situation where it's limited.

Imagine a life where every decision you made was pushed back against, any idea you had belittled, and life you dreamed for yourself crushed, squashed, and stomped: all because you were born a woman in a man's world.

My mother was 17 when she married my then 19 year old father. They immigrated to America immediately after. Both barely knew English, and had no higher education, but they worked odd jobs to pay for my dad's college tuition, eventually earning him a degree and a job. His career has skyrocketed since then; he is the true embodiment of the American dream. My admiration of him stops there though.

My mother is the silent force in his shadow, constantly cleaning up the messes he leaves behind, both figuratively and literally. She has done everything he has with none of the reward. I see her strength, but I see the way the men of our family tear her down, and I experience it myself.

Medicine has interested me since the dress up games of my youth. I loved my small lab coat, my miniature stethoscope, and my fake band-aids. Running around our small house, taking the blood pressure of my stuffed animals, the temperatures of my siblings, and administering shots to my aunts and uncles was my favorite thing. As I grew up, I've always found extreme joy in helping those around me through science. It was never encouraged though, because my male siblings were meant to pursue that field, while I was supposed to learn how to cook and clean.

Science was a passion of mine that I approached with caution, knowing that at home, I would never have the chance to expand upon just that: a passion.

That was, until, I walked into the opportunity of a lifetime. It seemed like a simple Thursday when I walked into Ms. Fresch's AP Biology class, but it

was so much more than that.

The projector was displaying a slideshow about a summer program, and I didn't think much of it, assuming that I wouldn't be interested.

As soon as the bell rang, Ms. Fresch walked in with intent. "Class, settle down," she said, taking a standing position behind her desk. "Today, I want to share a special opportunity with all of you. The Youth Science Scholars Summer Internship is run by college professors at a facility about 2 hours away. Although it might be a far distance for some of you, I highly recommend it. I participated in this program when I was your age, and it changed my life." She paused to flip to the next slide on her computer, where it had a bullet point list of the many different activities at the program. "These are just some of the tracks you can pursue amongst other science-motivated peers, alongside some of the best teachers in the country. Biostatistics, marine biology, and environmental science are just some of the best here."

Ms. Fresch continued to rave about the program, but specifically one activity caught my eye. Introduction To Medicine seemed like a dream.

I daydreamed about the program based on the smiling picture of other high school students with a professor, smiling as the professor pointed at something on the table in front of them. Experiments, studies, research, hands-on experience: this is exactly what I've aspired to do with my life since I was young, and what my family has aspired for my brothers to do since then.

I didn't hear the rest of the presentation over my daydreams, but I grabbed the informational flier on the way out, feeling like I was walking on water all day.

I practically ran home after school, waving the flier in my hand while walking into the house like a madman.

"Mom! Mom! Look look look, can I go?" I almost yelled, handing her the flier.

She greeted me smiling, and took the flier from my hand. I watched her eyes scan the page, her smile falling with every line.

"What? What's wrong?" I questioned, confused.

"Science Scholars? My love, what will your father say? Sofia, who will pay for this?" A moment of silence passed, and then she continued. "Why would you want to do this? Maybe your brothers can, but can you even handle a program like this?"

I stared at her in shock. I'd heard the doubt about me pursuing science in the future from my dad and brothers, but my mom? Never.

“You know what? You’re right. Maybe this isn’t for me.” I grabbed the flier and stormed off to my room.

I knew I would encounter barriers asking my dad to let me apply, but my mom? She always fought for me. In theory. I turned on some music and laid on my floor for a while, thinking about how unfair it was to live a life where even thinking to pursue my passions wasn’t allowed.

All I was asking for was the chance to apply. That was it.

It wasn’t until an hour after I had heard my brothers come home that I heard a gentle knock on my door. I didn’t say anything, but as the door opened, I could hear my mom yelling at my brothers, one of my sisters talking on the phone, and dishes clinking against one another. I perked up, fully expecting my mom to be at the door, but instead finding my oldest sister, Maria.

“Maria?”

“Hey,” she said softly, then took a step into my room and closed the door. “I heard what Mom said.”

I laid my head back on the ground, annoyed. “Yeah, well, I don’t know what I was expecting.”

The room remained quiet until she began to whisper.

“What?” I asked, unable to hear her.

She paused, then took a seat on the edge of my bed. “As a woman in this household, I learned to keep my mouth shut whenever there was something I wanted to do but a man could do it better. It was easier than what you do. You- you never learned that, and I think that’s really amazing. But you just gave up. You like science a lot, don’t you?” She paused, and then continued. “So fight for it. If you wanna do this summer thing so badly, convince them. You can do it, you know. I looked at the flier. The first step is to apply. They can get on board with that, and then you can continue to battle for this camp thing. But Sofia, you can’t give up like that. Just because our journey is harder doesn’t mean it isn’t worth traveling.” She waited, like she wanted me to say something, and then left.

After her conversation, I realized I couldn’t let the barriers other place around me get in the way of my passions. I couldn’t let an opportunity pass me up just like that. Something that made me this happy deserves more fight. My sister was right, I could start with applying, then see where that takes me, and fight the battle one fight at a time. I needed to take baby steps in fighting such an enormous battle.

Only in Times Like These

Olivia Carzon

As a homeschooler I challenged myself to read a classic book every month. By the end of May, I had finished G.K. Chesterton's "Father Brown" short stories and Charles Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities, as well as a few less interesting ones. Two specific parts of Charles Dickens' storytelling stood out to me and stayed in my mind as I started writing my short story. The way the characters were described using traits rather than vivid detail fascinated me, as he described one of the Jaques as a man with an insatiable appetite for something other than food which was later revealed to be blood. Another aspect of his storytelling that I find interesting is his way of portraying the melancholy without the depressing. While the settings are very dreary, there is a certain lightness in the attitudes of the characters that allows the sad parts to be carried by the happy ones. These two points are what I strived to attain. While there is no one side of the story that is blatantly made to copy Charles Dickens, I hope that the overall story achieves something of the kind of emotion sparked by his stories, though in my own style.

The cabin walls shake with every wave that crashes into them and the floor quivers. Lanterns hanging from the rafters swing about with a venom and chaos unknown to any terrestrial creature while barrels roll across the room with a rhythmic thumping. We are on board the cargo ship *L'Etoile*, heading to the ports of the Americas from the French port of La Rochelle. Though our boat is made of strong timber and steel reinforcements, it is thrown around like an unwanted doll in this monstrous storm. It is toying with us, not yet ending our voyage, but still disabling us from ever completing it.

The door heading to the deck has now opened, and the gruff captain can be seen. "All the men must come with me." And he has quickly retreated. The able-bodied men in the cabin are wearily following him, knowing full well it will be to no avail.

As I look around the cabin, I see poor families, so poor they couldn't pay for room on a passenger ship and had take what they could on a cargo one, and orphans like myself who are leaving behind a world of pain, as well as old men and women looking for a bet-

ter place to spend their last few years or perhaps to return to their families who they have left behind for their careers. I can feel the cold emotion of resignation all around me paired with the inevitable regret. Each are from a unique background, all brought together by a grave situation.

A mother has one of her arms wrapped around one of the bolted down bunk bed posts while the other holds tightly a little boy. Her husband, one can safely assume, is one of the men who has just left the safety of this room and entered the raging storm. Instead of an expression of fear, which would of course be expected, she wears one of resolve. Not determination to escape the storm, but resolve in that no stone will be left unturned in trying to do so. Her dress is of a light cotton, worn and neatly mended. Her son's breeches have patches at the knees and has an oversized shirt. Though they are wearing ugly clothes that are in bad shape, they are taken care of as well as can be afforded and show a dignity often lost on those in such circumstances.

My handwriting from here on may appear significantly shakier, and I do apologize. A strapped down crate has just wrenched itself from the floor and slammed against my dominant hand while it was at rest and is now sliding its way across to an old man and woman.

These two are rather different from the others, obviously returning to the States and not on their first voyage, and are sitting calmly grasping one another's hand. The woman is wearing a faded red gingham with a pleated apron and the man is wearing likewise faded breeches and a well-worn overcoat. I assume they are returning to their son and his family from a picture I had seen in their baggage of a young man holding up a little girl. While I believe they have much reason to return, they seem content in their position; they must have lived very full lives.

In the far corner from my position, I can see a little orphan boy with an old man bent down next to him. The small child is crying, covering his grimy face with his grimier hands. On his head rests a kippah, likely his father's for it is just slightly too big. The old man, who is most certainly not an acquaintance of this boy as he has only just now approached him, looks to be of around the same class. He has the face of one who plays cards and drinks too much with all too little to eat. However, he has his wrinkled hand placed on the boy's shoulder and is speaking to him in soothing tones. One can tell, from the way his voice wavers every now and then and his eyes quickly darting to the wall behind the boy to the, oh my! The wall is leaking! Slightly, but that water was certainly not there a minute ago. Regardless, this drunkard seems not quite accepting of this impending doom, though he keeps himself composed to comfort

the orphan.

Similarly, there is a nun who is sitting with a little girl, presumably an orphan as well. Two of their hands are intertwined while the others are holding rosaries. The nun is quietly praying while the girl rests her head on her shoulder half asleep. At the beginning of the trip, these two had become friends. The little girl obviously comes from a wealthy family, as can be seen by her lacy clothing, and must have been orphaned not too long ago; or perhaps she ran away from home, though given her timid personality, I highly doubt it. The nun must have found pity in the child because she has taken it upon herself to take care of her. Every morning, she has done the girl's hair, made sure she had enough food, and kept her warm on these cold nights. While they may have known each other before the voyage, it could not have been for very long considering the fact that the nun was modestly dressed, as compared to the fashionable clothing of the other, and prayed in Spanish and spoke little French. It made a beautiful picture of how little the differences we see in this world really are and that they are worth nothing when compared to the fact that we are all human.

An elderly gentleman stands by the door through which the captain had come. He looks out of place in his elegance and, doubtless, comes from a much higher class. Though his clothes look rather old and worn-out, he carries a golden pocket watch and his long hair is tied back neatly. His expression is, though very worried, and possibly a bit regretful, rather regal. With every wave that crashes against us, he lifts his eyes to heaven and mutters under his breath what I can only assume is a prayer. He leans against the doorframe with an ease that could only have come from attending many events at which one must maintain a constant state of self-control to keep from looking scared or bored and genuinely seems to be more sorrowful on behalf of the others than himself, as if saying, "You poor souls, so much more to--"

I'm truly sorry. A wave has just crashed against the ship, much larger than the previous ones, and has thrown my inkwell across the room. Though, I am not sure it really matters as my writing will be taken to my grave, I have a strong obligation to finish this narration and so I have retrieved the inkwell but will have to cut short my explanation.

While I would like to go on and explain each and every person as they are sitting here and their unique stories, I must confine myself to the conclusion. As I look around, I see a group of people brought together under unexpected circumstances with nothing in common. We do not come from the same country nor abide by the same religion. In the end, it makes no difference. It

is truly awe-inspiring to an orphan who has spent her whole life looking out for herself because no one else will, and not caring that it is so, that all these trivial differences can be overcome. I am honestly overwhelmed.

I hadn't planned to continue, but the cabin door has just opened abruptly; it is the captain. "Make peace with your devils, 'cause the only place we're goin' is down."

A torrent of water has come rushing in from the deck, and I am afraid all hope is lost, though there really wasn't any to begin with, but I would rather die here in this group of people than have lived a thousand lifetimes ignorant of the kindness that is in this world.

Theodore

Liesl Brunner

Theodore was prompted by grief. Our family has been through a lot of bad news in the last year or so, and I wanted to explore the effects of grief on a mother who knows in her heart that her son is gone but won't accept it. Theodore is, at its core, a story of loss, but I believe that even when it seems everything is gone, you can always find the tiny glimmer of hope.

Helen wrapped her hands around her mug, inhaling the warm, earthy scent that drifted upwards. Sighing, she opened her eyes. “Isn’t it a lovely morning, Theodore?” (His name was Theodore, not Theo, and definitely never Teddy. “I gave you a good, strong name,” Helen would say, “and I am going to use it.”) “I may tend to the garden today, if I’m feeling up to it. The good Lord knows that it would need it.”

Across the table, Theodore nodded, smiling his wide, handsome smile. “It’ll be time to plant soon. You need to till the earth, so it’s ready,” he said. Or did he? It was hard to tell.

Helen smiled too, but hers was different from Theodore’s. Sadder. Heavier, somehow, like a lifetime of sorrows had weighed it down at the corners.

Sighing, she heaved herself up from her chair at the kitchen table. Every footstep landed with great difficulty on the rough-hewn wooden floors as she crossed the small room to wash her mug.

As Helen rinsed off the soap suds, she glanced out of the window, squinting against the watered-down early-morning rays of sun that streamed through. Theodore gathered garden tools from the shed outside. He dropped them in the grass next to the garden and straightened, wiping his hair out of his face. The tips of his military-issued boots shone with dew.

Helen looked away to put her mug in the cabinet. When she looked back, he was gone.

A knock sounded at the door. “Goodness, who could that be this early in the morning?” she wondered aloud as she bustled over, wiping her hands on her apron.

An officer in a khaki uniform, the red, white, and blue stripes of the French flag embroidered over his heart, twisted his hat in his hands. “I offer my deepest condolences,” he began.

Helen crumpled to the floor.



farmlib.org

FCL Farmington Hills • 32737 W. 12 Mile Rd. • (248) 553-0300
FCL Farmington • 23500 Liberty St. • (248) 553-0321