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WNDB®

weneeddiversebooks.org

Creative Writing Awards

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.” —Maya Angelou

“Read a thousand books, and your words will flow like a river.” —Lisa See

“Indeed, learning to write may be part of learning to read. For all I know, writing comes out of a superior devotion to reading.” —Eudora Welty

“To gain your own voice, you have to forget about having it heard.” —Allen Ginsberg

“If there’s a book that you want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.”

—Toni Morrison

2020 Selected Poems, Stories, and Memoirs

INTRODUCTION

A Company With Creativity at Its Core

Penguin Random House's commitment to individuality and artistic expression has led to unparalleled success in publishing the best literature by writers in the United States and worldwide. Our company philosophy and dedication to creativity, education, and innovation are the cornerstones of our publishing mission as well as our corporate philanthropic activities. Penguin Random House is passionate about fostering the freedom to create for our authors and our employees. This freedom to create is at the very heart of the Penguin Random House Creative Writing Awards.

The Mission

The Penguin Random House Creative Writing Awards wants to know what young adults have to say. Our mantra is that we are looking for writing with a strong, clear voice, by authors who are daring, original, and unafraid to take risks. We want to recognize the unique vision and voices of high school seniors with scholarship awards while encouraging student writers throughout the writing process.

The History

In 1993, immediately after establishing its world headquarters in New York City, Bertelsmann sought innovative ways to give back to the city that offered such a wealth of creative talent. Among its many philanthropic ventures was the Bertelsmann Foundation's World of Expression Scholarship Program, designed to encourage, support, and reward young writers and musicians growing up in this cultural capital.

The program began with scholarship awards for excellence in literary and musical expression and then quickly expanded to include programs that would foster that expression. Fall workshops in public high schools across the city offered a jolt of creativity to high school seniors, jumpstarting students to create original work. Classroom

teachers clamored for materials that would help them infuse creative writing into the classroom; World of Expression teaching artists responded with a booklet of lesson plans and staff development workshops for teachers and administrators. A summer writing program for juniors offered an intensive course for developing writers. The World of Expression website provided access to writing- and music-related resources for teachers and students year-round.

Twenty-seven years later, and now known as the Penguin Random House Creative Writing Awards, the commitment is apparent. Program winners have gone on to study at a wide variety of colleges and universities around the country, from City University of New York to Harvard. Many have also continued their education at trade or technical schools. To date, the program has awarded more than \$2.8 million dollars in scholarships to public high school students for original poetry, memoir, fiction, drama, and graphic novel compositions. In addition, the program brings together educators, teaching artists, community leaders, authors, and industry professionals (including Penguin Random House executives) to inspire, guide, read, judge, and celebrate the work of hundreds of diverse writers each year.

The Program Today

In 2019, Penguin Random House partnered with We Need Diverse Books (WNDB), a national grassroots organization that advocates for diversity in children's literature, to facilitate the expansion of the competition beyond its origins in New York City to graduating seniors from public high schools across the country. The goal is for youth from coast to coast to join previous recipients, who include award-winning and published writers and journalists as well as distinguished professionals in a variety of fields. Winners will receive a total of \$50,000 in college scholarship funds, in addition to other awards for runners-up.

About WNDB

We Need Diverse Books is a grassroots organization of children's book lovers that advocates essential changes in the publishing industry to produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people. It is our mission to put more books featuring diverse characters in the hands of all children. You can learn more about our programs at www.diversebooks.org.

2020 Scholarship Winners

FIRST PLACE SCHOLARSHIP AWARDS

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Poetry	Jeffrey Liao, <i>Museum of My Own History, Age Sixteen</i> , Livingston High School, NJ
\$10,000 Fiction & Drama	Erika Whisnant, <i>Loophole Abuse</i> , Burke Middle College, NC
\$10,000 Personal Memoir	Ivana Cortez, <i>Planet: Elkhart, Indiana</i> , Galena Park High School, TX

MAYA ANGELOU AWARD FOR SPOKEN WORD POEM

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Spoken Word	Orlane Devesin, <i>Evolution of the Black Woman</i> , Hiram High School, GA

NEW YORK CITY ENTRANT AWARD

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Spoken Word	Maya Williams, <i>To My Catcaller</i> , Edward R. Murrow High School

HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
Albemarle High School, VA	Liana Tai, <i>My Name Isn't a Tattoo</i> , Poetry
Boston International, MA	Naika Louis-Charles, <i>Set Doulè Nan Sèt Konba</i> , Personal Memoir
Briarcliff High School, NY	Saule Konstantinavicius, <i>Veronika</i> , Poetry
Brooklyn Technical High School, NY	Gloria Lam, <i>Ode to Dust</i> , Poetry
Carteret High School, NJ	Maria Fernanda Llave, <i>This is Me</i> , Personal Memoir
Cass Technical High School, MI	Jamir Bowers, <i>The Last Witch Doctor</i> , Poetry
Douglas Anderson School of The Arts, FL ..	Michelle Manunga, <i>When I Come Home</i> , Poetry
Dublin High School, CA	Rijuta Vallishayee, <i>Three Minutes</i> , Fiction & Drama
Eagan High School, MN	Claire Lindemann, <i>The Tavern</i> , Fiction & Drama
Edward R. Murrow High School, NY	Katerina Greveni, <i>Suicidal Strangers</i> , Personal Memoir
	Anaya Massiah, <i>Dough</i> , Personal Memoir
El Capitan High School, CA	Shiwani Lata, <i>Repetition</i> , Poetry
Fairview High School, OH	Sophie Malloy, <i>Concrete Icebergs</i> , Fiction & Drama

HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
Fiorello LaGuardia High School, NY	Mirel Dominguez, <i>The Mount Vernon Hotel Est. 1799</i> , Poetry Susan Shimanovsky, <i>Puddles</i> , Poetry
Foothill High School, CA	Arushi Avachat, <i>Of Honey and Spice</i> , Personal Memoir
Greendale Senior High School, WI	Makayla Neldner, <i>Ismene</i> , Fiction & Drama
Gunn High School, CA	Isabella Yu, <i>The Crows</i> , Fiction & Drama
Hamilton High School, MT	Josie Baggett, <i>15 Minutes</i> , Fiction & Drama
Harrison Central High School, MS	Chase Yano, <i>Yoooper Girl</i> , Personal Memoir
Hempfield High School, PA	A'Kyre Dean, <i>True Miracle of Birth</i> , Personal Memoir
Hunter College High School, NY	Samuel Ahn, <i>Ode to Boston Market</i> , Spoken Word Emma Diaz, <i>Alternate Accounts . . .</i> , Fiction & Drama Nathalie Hartman, <i>Encounters</i> , Fiction & Drama
James B. Conant High School, IL	Jill Patel, <i>Die in a Car</i> , Personal Memoir
Lake Nona High School, FL	Morenike White, <i>I Wish I Was Taught</i> , Spoken Word
Lawton Chiles High School, FL	Jackson Powell, <i>X and Why</i> , Poetry
Liberal Arts and Science Academy, TX	Zooxanthellae Deckard, <i>Honey Dew</i> , Poetry
Marion Harding High School, OH	Lily Janson, <i>A Miracle in 1 Pound 3</i> , Personal Memoir
Miami Lakes Educational Center, FL	Jaleel Gaillard, <i>A Dance with My Father</i> , Poetry
Middle Creek High School, NC	Ashley Robertson, <i>Under a Cloudless Sky</i> , Fiction & Drama
Nellie A. Thornton High School, NY	Edwina Belizaire, <i>Broken Streetlights</i> , Poetry
Newcomb High School, NM	Khaliyah Keedah, <i>A Dress Fit for a Princess</i> , Personal Memoir
Niles Township West High School, IL	Penelope Alegria, <i>Papa's Deli Order</i> , Poetry
Norman North High School, OK	Emily Nguyen, <i>America Didn't Belong to Me</i> , Personal Memoir
Northwestern Regional High School, CT	Madeleine Giaconia, <i>Leave a Message</i> , Fiction & Drama
Oakdale High School, MD	Natalie Flynn, <i>Manhattan</i> , Poetry
Ottawa Township High School, IL	Felicia Lalla, <i>Two Vultures</i> , Fiction & Drama
PA Leadership Charter School, PA	Madalyn Rehman, <i>You've Left Me Freezing</i> , Fiction & Drama

HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
Paramus High School, NJ	Regina Valencia, <i>Three-Way Intersection (Excerpt)</i> , Poetry
Peak to Peak Charter School, CO	Ayush Garg, <i>Good Morning, Baba!</i> , Personal Memoir
Piedmont Hills High School, CA	Camiea Ardoin, <i>I, Too Am Darkskin</i> , Poetry
Prior Lake High School, MN.	Camille Will, <i>The Initiation</i> , Fiction & Drama
Severna Park High School, MD	Emily Allgair, <i>An Ode to the Words We</i> , Personal Memoir
	Abigail Linthicum, <i>The House with the Red Door</i> , Fiction & Drama
Spring Creek High School, NC	Feifei Kaglic, <i>The Red Thread of Fate</i> , Fiction & Drama
Stroudsburg High School, PA	Hafsaa Benzizoune, <i>My Hijab Journey</i> , Personal Memoir
Stuyvesant High School, NY	Derek Leung, <i>Strength</i> , Poetry
	Xi Lu, <i>To Plant a Tree</i> , Fiction & Drama
	Andrew Ng, <i>Men Don't Cry, (Unless . . .)</i> , Personal Memoir
	Anna Xia, <i>Small Talk on Habit</i> , Poetry
Tabb High School, VA	Anna Vargas, <i>To All the Things I Couldn't Say</i> , Spoken Word
The Bronx High School of Science, NY	Diyarhi Roy, <i>The Obstacle Course</i> , Personal Memoir
The High School of Fashion Industries, NY	Vanessa Silva-Burgos, <i>Guerrera / Warrior</i> , Personal Memoir
Theodore Roosevelt High School, IA	Jolie Seitz, <i>The Importance of Buddy . . .</i> , Fiction & Drama
University High School, FL	Christina Nguyen, <i>Tôn Đán</i> , Personal Memoir
Wake Early College of Health And Sciences, NC	Poojah Shah, <i>A Gamble of Respect</i> , Fiction & Drama
Wauwatosa East High School, WI	Augustina Piel, <i>Snake Eyes</i> , Fiction & Drama
Western Dubuque High School, IA	Nicole Gudenkauf, <i>The Essence of Summer</i> , Personal Memoir
William Mason High School, OH	Sarah Odeh, <i>Epitaph</i> , Poetry



Orlane Devesin

SPOKEN WORD

Creative Writing Mantra:

*"People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them."
is by the phenomenal James Baldwin. His essay "Stranger in the
Village" forever changed my life and writing.*

My Hobbies:

Reading all kinds of language books and YA action-romances.
I also avidly enjoy films and shows from all over the world!

College I Packed Up For: Georgia State University



Ivana Cortez

PERSONAL MEMOIR

Creative Writing Mantra:

*"There is no formula on writing, only a flow from your mind,
to your heart, to your hand and onto paper."*

My Hobbies:

I enjoy writing short stories, creating art and theatre.

College I Packed Up For: Houston Baptist University



Erika Whisnant

FICTION & DRAMA

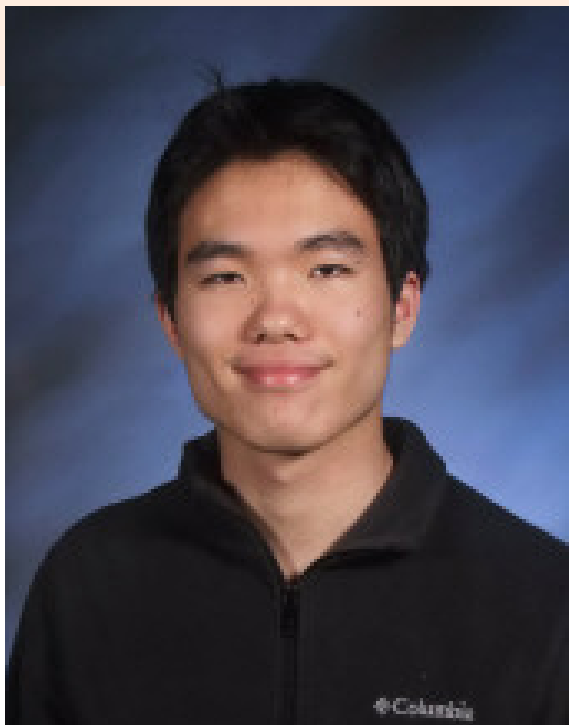
Creative Writing Mantra:

"At least a page a day." If I can get a page down, then I know I am making progress in my stories, and sometimes inspiration strikes and I'll end up hitting more than a page. But when going is tough, repeating "just a page" over and over helps me push through to the end.

My Hobbies:

Reading, doodling, gaming, and sleeping.

College I Packed Up For: Eckerd College



Jeffrey Liao

POETRY

Creative Writing Mantra:

Write your obsessions. Experiment with the boundaries of language, sound, genre, the human and the unhuman.

My Hobbies:

Watching animated TV shows, listening to dream-pop and indie music, trying new food.

College I Packed Up For: Princeton University



Maya Williams

SPOKEN WORD

Creative Writing Mantra:

*"I am too positive to be doubtful, too optimistic to be fearful,
and too determined to be defeated." —Hussein Nishah*

My Hobbies:

My hobbies include writing fanfiction about my favorite TV shows,
working on my YouTube channel, and becoming emotionally
invested in fictional characters.

College I Packed Up For: Howard University

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“Your skin is never a badge of shame.
Don’t you get it? You’re a code the world
hasn’t cracked yet.”

—Orlane Devesin

First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

SPOKEN WORD

Evolution of the Black Woman

By Orlane Devesin

Hiram High School

Dust

Dust.

Like the sands of Ethiopia between her toes.

Her crown composed of ebony kinks.

Shadows of what used to be.

Dust. Like the sands that would be swept into her marble palace halls.

I suppose the world has forced themselves to forget,

allow me to retell the story.

Dust. Like the history of Mama Gaia put to rest.

Oh, how the world forgets how she was the first empress, the first
mother, the first wife, the first sister.

How the world spits on her beauty as if it is nothing.

Because when I see darkness, I see beauty. I see resilience. I see strength. You see intimidation.

Mistranslation of 1000s of years. You see it was never the angry black woman.

It was the mother that screamed for her baby as they tore him out of her arms.

It was the wife who had to leave her husband on the plantation.

A living demonstration of everything being pulled away from her tight-fisted hold.

How her hair is revered as ugly because it defies gravity. But when she wears it in braids, the world believes she is hiding.

She is only protecting her strands from the burning judgment of the world.

Heat is bad for my hair... I mean her hair... I mean our hair.

How she is the only woman on planet Earth who must now live with the fact she is the complete opposite of the standard of beauty even on her own continent.

How she was usurped from her throne,

Thrown into a world that equates her beauty to grime.

Dust.

Like the dust, my grandmother would broom out the front door of her
beaten home in Ayiti.

Dust like the remnants of her story.

Bones

Bones.

Crackling like the fires sitting at the base of my belly.

I wish the world would stop trying to put them out.

A moment of silence for the pioneering woman that was always a little
too “dark” or a little too “smart” or a little too “loud,”

Proud of the bones that sunk to the bottom of the ocean. If you squint
hard enough that’s not driftwood.

She said I’m going to leave a path back home for my babies.

Bones.

Breaking.

The sound of her babies being punished because they grabbed a little
extra food to feed mama...

because you can see her...

Bones.

Like the ones we paint on our faces to honor the dead.

Bones

Like the ones that lay beneath my skin.

Upholding my form.

With a spine, my mother had to tear out herself and replace with steel.

If she didn't do it, then the world wouldn't hesitate to take that away
from her too.

Because like the ones that came before me...

Beneatha... Ruth... Maya Angelou... Queen Asantewa... Anacaona...
Grann Toya...

They lined the path that I begin to walk alongside now.

Funny when I look down at the ground. It's no longer made of dust.

I must find my way back with their...

Bones.

Skin

Skin masked in gold.

A gold that couldn't be stolen from mama Gaia's bosoms.

A gold that is so valuable, the sun is able to recognize his children.

It's what sat on thrones in ancient Ghana then.

It's what sits in #BlackGirlMagic now.

It smells like Cocoa Butter and Excellence. Heaven sent.

The pleasantness from which it glows.

Coming in all different shades. I'm talking a Dark Chocolate,
Caramel, Almond, Cocoa-type galore.

Natural. Weaves. Extensions. Box Braids. Senegalese Twists.
Cornrows.

Be comfortable in your skin. Be exhilarated in who you are.
Because it is woven in your DNA.

Woven like the baskets balanced effortlessly on your sister's heads
back home in Africa.

Interwoven in quilts made to guide your people North to liberation.

Your skin was never a badge of shame.

Don't you get it? You're a code the world hasn't cracked yet.

That's why everything else is an open book.

Sister, a Rubik's cube ain't got nothing on you.

Family, this is a liberation poem. Celebration.

A *"what's good, we here"* poem.

A *"y'all tried to put us down for centuries and we still here,"* poem.

And at the end of the day, the beauty of it all is...

this all resides within your skin.

Woman

Dust. Bones. Skin. Woman.

Here we are today. Congratulations.

When I shove my fingers in my hair, I feel Africa.

When I touch my skin I taste colonizer.

Almost but not quite. Like milk poured into my great grandmother's
cup of morning coffee.

We call that *café au lait*.

When I speak I hear revolutionist.

When I cry it burns like sea salt.

I wonder why.

Woman who has conquered hell and back.

I suppose the world has forced themselves to forget,

allow me to retell the story.

Woman made of dust, bones, and skin

“No matter how cold the snow is, no
matter how much my hands stung,
no matter how hard it was to breathe;
I had to get back up.”

—Ivana Cortez

First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

MEMOIR

Planet: Elkhart, Indiana

By Ivana Cortez

Galena Park High School

With my face buried in the snow, and my tongue caught in my throat—I prayed. I prayed that the laughing would stop, that the sticks would stop coming down on my back, that this thoughtless act would end. I hear a boy shout down at me as he strikes the back of my head with a branch, “Never forget this, *dummy*.” I always chuckle at the memory of the boy calling me a “dummy.” We were only nine when I was attacked in the woods by my classmates. The word “dummy” seems so childish. A playground insult. But the disdain and hatred behind it that December day made the word sound grown up. But this was not the playground. This was not a game.

I moved from Houston, Texas to Elkhart, Indiana at age eight. The two cities seemed worlds apart. Mexican supermarkets were replaced with Whole Foods. The taste of *pan dulce* was replaced with McDonald’s. The delicate twinkling of Spanish was replaced with the heavy thudding of English. I felt as though I was on a different planet. My classmates treated me as though I was from a different planet. They pulled at my long braids and mimicked everything I said. I was a little brown alien on their planet. They wanted to poke and dissect everything about me. I thought maybe this all meant that I would be well liked in this new environment. I would turn out to be wrong.

That first year on planet Elkhart was turbulent. The popular white girls whose faces were in magazines and on TV liked to spray me with their perfumes because I smelled like a “taco stand.” A boy on the bus would not leave me alone until I admitted I was not as good at English as he was. And the neighborhood kids enjoyed throwing rocks at the

windows of my house. My mom promised that it would not be forever. She told me that the white kids were just “not used to me yet.” But what was there to get used to? My light accent? My darker skin? My presence? I began to think I was imposing on the planet Elkhart, Indiana. It was clear that although I came in peace, my visit was viewed as invasion.

The following year, during recess, in the dead of December, a group of boys had stolen a basketball from me and my friend. Any other day and I might have just let them take it. But I felt this burning inside of me. This flame of defiance in the blizzard that told me that I had to go after them. Before I could talk myself out of it, I was off. Snow crunched underneath my boots as I followed them. I chased them into the woods behind the school, an area we were prohibited from entering during recess. Soon my breath fogged up my glasses and the cold air stung my lungs. I stopped to gather my bearings.

I remember the calm before the storm. The moments before my world would be swallowed with white. I recall how bare the trees were. How they crawled up to sky like thin brown arms from the earth, reaching for the sky. I recall how the snow was virtually undisturbed. It lay on the branches and on the ground in a thick white heap. I recall the soft hum of the children playing on the playground from whence I came. The light laughter and yells like white noise in this white environment.

Before I knew it, a sharp pain sprang across my back, completely knocking the wind from my chest. I landed face first in the snow. One strike after another came down on my back, my head, arms, and legs. My mind raced faster than I could keep up with and the panic started to set in. I turned my neck in the snow to look up. The three boys were now lifting fallen branches up over their heads and bringing them back down on me. They were a group of scientists taking apart an alien in their lab. The laughing and name calling seemed so far away from where I was lying paralyzed in the snow. All I could hear was my heart beating inside of me, and my thoughts bouncing off the sides of my skull. I prayed. I prayed for it stop. It did not.

I opened my eyes and looked around in the snow. My eyes darting left and right in their sockets, seeking an escape. Beside my right hand was the ironic answer to my prayers: a fallen branch. All at once

the burning was back. The fire had started again. I grasped at the branch, clutching it firmly in my cold red hand. With my eyes shut tightly, I rolled onto my back, flailing my newfound weapon violently in the air. The three boys all at once stepped backward. Before they could come back down on me, I brought myself to my feet. I held the branch out before me like a sword.

I remember the calm after the storm. The four of us in the woods, wild-eyed children. The boys looked out to me with varying degrees of confusion and disgust. I recall the trees looking more sinister than they had before. They were no longer reaching up, but they were looking down mockingly. I recall the snow looking as though it had seen war. In the fight, the violence had revealed the dead brown earth under the white snow, making the area look muddy. I recall the high pitch buzzing in my ears, my brain crying out in my head.

I heard a familiar voice call out my name over the buzzing. A teacher off in the distance yelled out to me. Salvation, I thought. The teacher rushed to us and immediately pulled the branch from my hands. "What on earth do you think you're doing to these boys?" All at once the flame was extinguished. Stuttering, I tried to explain myself. I was not the threat here. I was not hurting anyone. I was hurt. But the words did not come out quickly enough. The teacher would not hear any of it. She gripped her large hands on my shoulders and shoved me out of the woods, the boys close behind us. The buzzing grew louder and louder as she guided us into the school and then to the principal's office.

As a child, I had always tried to stay out of the principal's office. I did as I was told. I followed all the rules. I said please and thank you. I wanted to be the best child I could be. But as I sat in the principal's office, bloodied and cold, I felt like I was the worst child. It did not look good for me. The dirty alien pointing a weapon out to the three clean boys threateningly. The teacher who caught us clearly felt as though I was the one at fault. I was starting to believe I was the one at fault. No matter what I say, I thought, no one will believe me. I felt sure that whatever story the boys would come up with, it would most certainly paint me to be the threat everyone thought I was.

Tearfully, I told the principal what happened in the woods. I still remember the way his face frowned at me when I recounted the

actual attack. The way the corners of his mouth dragged his whole face down. In the middle of my sputtering he handed me a wad of tissues and when I went to put them to my eyes he stopped me. “No,” he said, “sweetie, those are for your nose.” I pressed the white tissues to my nose and when I looked down at it, it was stained red. I had not even noticed how injured I was. My hands were covered in mud and were decorated with red streaks from where branches had met them. Later, I would note the bruises on my back and ribs, the bump on my forehead, and the swelling in my left ankle. The principal stood suddenly as I paused. “Go to the nurse, sweetie, I think I know what I have to do.”

Shakily, I rose from my seat and walked to the nurse. Sympathetically, she handed me an ice pack. Later in the day the principal approached me in the nurse’s office. He told me the boys were dealt their punishment—being made to sit alone during lunches for the rest of the month. I was in the clear, I was not in trouble. I was the happiest at the fact that I was believed. I was not to blame for what happened to me. An hour later, the smallest of the three boys approached me in the office that day. He was thin and short. His eyes cast downward were puffy and pink. His nose was a bright red, like a cherry stuck to the end of it. He looked up to me with remorseful eyes, “I’m sorry,” he began uneasily, “the other guys said you were a dirty beaner and I believed them. I’m really sorry.” Over nine years later, those words still echo coolly in my head. “Dirty beaner.” No one told me that this planet would be so cruel. He went on to tell me that he told our principal everything. He promised to me that he did not lie. He looked deep into my eyes and told me not to worry. He was sorry.

At the time, the wounds were too fresh, my nose was still bleeding, and my coat was still muddy. I was not prepared to hear an apology. I was not prepared to accept an apology. I began to sob into my bloodied hands, and I asked the nurse to get him to leave. I never told him that I forgave him. I think about him and his puffy eyes often. He seemed truly remorseful and I never thanked or formally forgave him. I wish now that I had.

My stay in Elkhart after the incident in the woods would last another year or so. In that year, the harassment seemed to intensify. I would wake up to loud bangs in the night to discover cracks in my window. I would walk outside and discover human feces on my

driveway. I would be physically assaulted another three times before I left. The beating in the woods was a turning point for me. In the moment that I grabbed that stick off the ground I decided, no one was ever going to keep me down again. I decided I was not going to give up. I decided that I would stand my ground. Anytime anyone would tease me or get physical with me after that, I never let it show how much it hurt. I refused to show weakness. I refused to yield. I refused to be kept down.

Although my time in Elkhart, Indiana was full of bullying and casual racism, I learned so much. I learned how to deal with negativity. I learned that in the face of adversity and discrimination that I must be brave. No matter how cold the snow was, no matter how much my hands stung, no matter how hard it was to breathe; I had to get back up. There are moments where I feel beaten down and that maybe I cannot do it anymore. Moments where my knees begin to buckle and my throat feels caught in a trap. Moments where everything seems out of reach and impossible. Then I remember the snow. I remember what it was like to be down. And then I remember to get back up again.

“His helm was tucked under an arm,
and his long hair caught the light in
a dozen colors, like opals.”

—Erika Whisnant

First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

FICTION & DRAMA

Loophole Abuse

By Erika Whisnant

Burke Middle College

Anita was in her tower, going over her spell books. Of course, it was not her tower, it belonged to her father, and of course she wasn't supposed to be reading spell books, but it was too late now. The tower hadn't been properly checked when she'd been transferred, not that there had been time to check the tower. Anita, escapee of two towers already, was too devious not to be contained, so she had been placed in the tower as quickly as possible. Because of this, she had discovered the spell books, and therefore the spells.

Her father would have been furious if he had ever found her doing this. Not that he would, as he never checked up on her. However, Anita had a plan in case he did, a charm spell to make him listen to her rational thinking, after all the tower thing was a bit outdated. In fact, it was completely outdated. However, her father didn't care about that. Her father cared that his only child was a girl, and therefore could not inherit the throne. Her father cared about a worthy suitor. And her father cared about tradition.

And it was tradition for a princess to be locked up in a tower until a prince could rescue her.

So here she was, in tower number three, under a geas to prevent her from going against her father's wishes. It was an annoying geas too, multifaceted. The first part of the geas was the traditional part, that she would marry the knight who managed to defeat her guardian, climb the tower, and rescue her. The second part of the geas (initiated after escape number one) stated that she could not leave the tower without help from another being. The third part of the geas (initiated

after escape number two) stated that the being who helped her from the tower could not be her guardian.

And the only way to defeat the geas was through a loophole (she had found a few, but had not found the opportunity to exploit them yet), true love's kiss (unlikely since she was stuck in a tower), a god's blessing (also unlikely), or by simply going through with the geas until all quotas had been met. That option would leave her free after the marriage, as long as her father didn't stick her in another tower if her husband succumbed to an accident. But by then, Anita was pretty sure she would know enough magic to keep the geas from being reinstated.

A call from below interrupted her thoughts, making her jump in surprise. "Anita! We've got company!"

Anita stumbled up and across the room to look out the tower window. She scanned the horizon, then looked down at her guardian. "Really?! I don't see anyone!"

Geoffrey stretched, his bat like wings spread out to catch the rays of warm light from the sun. "Trust me, I can smell the metal from here." And Anita believed him, the chimera was very good at what he did. Though, if she was being honest, that too was partly because of magic. Geoffrey himself was also under a geas, one for protecting her, another for preventing her leave of the tower unless someone else helped her.

And there was also the matter of the few strengthening magics Anita had placed on Geoffrey herself. Which probably wasn't fair to her would-be suitors, but Anita always warned them that they should just turn back. If they didn't listen, that was their problem. And then they became Geoffrey's problem, or his meal, depending on how much he'd already eaten that day.

It wasn't the way a princess was supposed to think, but Anita had been hardened by the years of imprisonment. Since her only companion was her guardian, who didn't mind snacking on knights, she had become accustomed to death quickly. Besides, the knights always had the option of running away. Or outmaneuvering Geoffrey, after all, the geas said that the knight had to defeat her guardian, not slay it.

But then again, most knights weren't used to thinking like her.

Anita leaned down and called to her guardian. "Tell me when he's in earshot!"

"Shall do, Princess!" Anita smiled grimly and looked out the window, searching for a figure in metal. Part of her hoped that this would be the one to save her. Part of her hoped that Geoffrey would eat this one and therefore save her from a life of wifely duties and the possibility that her kingdom would crumble in the hands of an inept ruler. But mostly, she hoped that this knight would help her in a way that would not trigger the geas. Unlikely, but she could hope.

Finally, after a time where she walked away from the windows to collect any spell components that might be useful, Anita spotted a glint of light on metal. The knight was approaching, on foot too. (Odd, most knights came on horseback. Perhaps this one liked his exercise. Or maybe he was simply bad with animals.) As soon as the knight got close enough, Geoffrey roared, "State your business!"

The knight came to a stop. "I am here to rescue the princess, as you may well know."

"Wait!" Anita called, leaning as far out of the window as physically possible to do without falling, "Do you know what rescuing me entails?! Once you are married, you will not be allowed to leave the capital! After all, you must be taught how to be king! No more rescuing damsels in distress! Instead, you will be forced to learn how to navigate court, how to make peace and operate a kingdom! Do you want that kind of responsibility?! Do you want to be king?!" The speech was very impressive, with as much emotion that could be forced into words that were shouted at the top of her lungs.

The knight lifted his face plate and looked up, and even though it should have been impossible, he met Anita's eyes. From this distance she should not have been able to make out the color of the knight's eyes, but Anita could. They were blue, a pale, intense blue that looked like ice, with a black ring. Anita sucked in a startled breath. "Why Princess," the knight called, "I did not know what rescuing you entailed. Thank you for the warning. However, it is against my code to let any creature stay trapped in any way. Therefore I must continue on with this path." He drew his sword, and the rasp as the metal left the scabbard echoed in the air.

Geoffrey growled, low and long. "And I cannot let you pass, knight."

"Well then, chimera, let us see if you can stop me." The knight's voice was confident, too confident for a man in armor with nothing but a sword against a beast with a lion's head, dragon's wings, eagle's claws, and scorpion's tail.

"Wait!" Anita cried, desperate now (just because she was used to bloodshed didn't mean she had to like it), "for my guardian is as much prisoner as I! Would a man as noble as you take pride in killing a creature who has no choice in the matter?! Geoffrey is under a geas too!"

The knight froze, and Geoffrey's growl lowered to a thrum. "Well, truer words were never spoken, Princess," the knight said, sheathing his sword. "I can see the magic around him as I can see the magic around you, now that I look. Yet I cannot leave until you are free, but I will not slay one who had been forced. What would you suggest, oh twister of words?"

Anita gaped. Geoffrey gaped. The knight's shoulder shifted. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Well," Geoffrey coughed, "it's just most knights don't listen to her words, not at all. They just boast and then get eaten."

"Really? They must not have been very smart."

"No, not really. In fact, we haven't had a knight here in about a month. I thought we were running out of knights."

"How odd."

While the knight and chimera conversed, Anita thought. His eyes glowed (it was the only explanation for why she had seen them so clearly), he could see magic, he could see her clearly even at a distance, and his voice carried even though he didn't sound like he was yelling. "Uh, knight—"

"My name is Xarith."

"Xarith then, are you human?!"

"I'm sorry?"

"She asked if you were human." Geoffrey's rumbling voice had turned suspicious, and his tail swished.

"Uh, well, no, not really. Not at all." The knight looked sheepish, well, as sheepish as he could look from this distance.

"Great! Could you destroy the tower?!"

"Yes."

"Wonderful! I need you to do that!"

This time, it was the knight's turn to gape. Geoffrey was quicker on the uptake, and he spun around to face the tower. "Princess," he cried, "you are in the tower, remember? Destroying it will destroy you!"

Anita chuckled, "I have spells to protect myself, and if I am in danger, you must save me!"

"But I cannot help you leave the tower!"

"And if there is no more tower?!" Anita couldn't help smiling, it was, after all, a brilliant plan.

Geoffrey sat, stunned. "Oh."

"Well then," said the knight, Xarith, "I think I see the gist of your plan. I will be back temporarily." He turned, the plume on his helmeted head flashing with the movement. (It looked, from this distance, almost like opal, but that was ridiculous. Still, a white horsehair plume was interesting.) In a matter of moments, he had disappeared.

"What am I supposed to do?" Geoffrey grumbled.

"Catch me!" Anita called, then she stepped back into the tower and started to mutter the correct words for a protection spell. Then she got ready, waiting. She wasn't sure what she was expecting, but what came wasn't it.

Out the window, she could see something large flying her way. Something large with wings, a long looping tail, and scales that flashed like opals in the light. Anita's jaw dropped and her knees went weak. Dragon. The knight was a dragon. For a split second, she wondered if the geas would have taken hold anyway, but then she figured it would have. A knight who was a dragon was still a knight after all. But then she forced those thoughts away for another time and focused on the dragon.

The dragon landed on the tower, and stones cracked with his weight. His head craned so one eye could peer through the window. "And what, Princess, would you like me to do?" There was a soft hissing quality to the dragon's voice, something inhuman, but the words were respectful so that was good. Probably.

Anita regained her resolve. "I need you to destroy this top bit and send me flying as far as possible. Then I need you to destroy the tower as fast as you can. Not a stone can be left standing. No tower, no geas, got it?"

Xarith nodded, "I understand. Chimera, are you ready?"

"Yes," Geoffrey's voice sounded very small, "I think."

"Good, get ready Princess."

Xarith pulled his head back and pushed off the tower, sending the structure shaking. Anita set her stance and wove a shield spell over her protections. She had it up just in time for Xarith to hurtle past the tower, wing and shoulder hitting the structure. Rock shattered like dry wood, and Anita was hurtled through the air, fragments of stone bouncing off her shield as she shot into empty space. Anita pulled a feather out of her belt (plucked from one of her pillows while she waited for the knight's approach) and gripped it in one hand as she screamed the syllables to the next spell. Immediately her decent was slowed. She fell softly, watching as the rocks around her hurtled down, occasionally bouncing off her shield. Then she was plucked out of the air by a set of eagle's talons and carried away from the crashing debris.

Geoffrey landed heavily and set her down on to the ground with surprising gentleness. Anita stood, brushed the dirt from her skirt, then looked up at the chimera, who towered over her. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he rumbled, then he turned to the tower, which was quickly becoming nothing but rubble. "Do you think it worked?"

Anita gave her skirts another shake to hide her triumphant grin. "Of course it worked, the geas is only in place if there is a tower. No tower, no geas."

Geoffrey chuckled, low and long, "What will you do, now that you have escaped?"

"Well I can't go home, dad will just put me in another tower, and this time I don't think a dragon will just happen to arrive and take offense. I think I'll travel, learn a little something about the people I'm going to rule."

"A girl traveling alone? Sounds dangerous."

The dragon disengaged from the tower, pulling himself into the sky and flying away.

"I'll think of something." She always did.

"Hmm, perhaps you could ask the knight to be your escort. That way if you do get caught, you'll have a little bit of defense."

Anita tilted her head and mulled it over, "That just might work." She looked at her guardian, now former guardian, and said, "What will you do?"

"I think I'll head home, back to the deserts in the south. I miss the sand, and actual sun."

"I wish you luck."

"And to you, Princess." Then he launched into the air, form dark against the blue sky. Anita watched her constant companion for the last two years leave for his home, and then waved him goodbye. She almost felt like crying, perhaps because he was leaving her, perhaps because of the implications of what he had said. No doubt, there would be a lot of work to be done when she became queen.

Footsteps behind her, the soft slide of metal against metal. Anita turned from watching Geoffrey's diminishing form to watch Xarith approach. His helm was tucked under an arm, and his long hair caught the light in a dozen colors, like opals. Anita blinked, then she blinked again. "You're a girl," she said, unable to contain her surprise. From her tower, she had been unable to see that Xarith's armor was cut for a more feminine frame, not that there was much difference from normal armor, but still.

Xarith smiled, her ice blue eyes twinkling. "So, I am. Where is your guardian headed, Princess?"

"Home."

"Ahh," She turned to watch the direction, smiling softly. "A noble friend."

Most knights probably would argue, but then again, most knights didn't give him a chance. "He is indeed. Where do you plan to go, Sir Xarith?"

Xarith glanced slyly in Anita's direction, her lips twitching slightly. "Why do you ask?"

"I was wondering if you could be persuaded to escort a princess in her travels. We live in dangerous times."

Xarith turned to face Anita, then kneeled, hair cascading over her shoulders. "So, we do. I would be delighted to serve you, Princess. My blade is yours."

"Your claws and teeth too, I hope." Anita joked, a smile pulling across her lips.

Xarith laughed and stood. "Those too." She held her arm, "Shall we go then, Princess?"

Anita took the proffered arm and said, "We shall, but please, do call me Anita."

"As you say, Anita."

And so, the princess who was a sorceress and the knight who was a dragon stepped forward into their future. A future full of daring and danger, of failure and victory, of monsters and gods and all in between. But that is a different story, for a different time.

“Sometimes, I feel the lost syntax of my
mother tongue clawing at my throat,
hoping to reclaim her son again.”

—Jeffrey Liao

First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

POETRY

Museum of My Own History, Age Sixteen

By Jeffrey Liao

Livingston High School

EXHIBIT I: EXCERPT FROM DIARY ENTRY: OCTOBER 19TH, 2013

"It wasn't until today, when Nathan from school squinted his eyes at me

and told me to go back to my dirty country, that I realized how it felt to be ashamed of my own skin."

EXHIBIT II: PAIR OF BROKEN GOGGLES

The ocean was my first mother. She made me tsunami.

She made me revolution. I am a product of radio static, of immigrant dreams

thawed by the slow of summer, of a native tongue silenced by a bullet wound.

I still have the scars of a sunken geography etched into the fissures of my palms. I still wear the misshapen syllables of my parents' broken English

like a second name. When I was ten, I butchered my own throat and tossed out the mangled organs of my old language, swallowing my accent to baptize my tongue clean.

For years, I tried to navigate the learning curve of a new hemisphere

by undressing myself of my yellow phantoms,
the way you must first learn how to float
before learning how to swim.

EXHIBIT III: GHOST OF MY THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD SELF

In eighth grade, I waged a war with the boy in the mirror.
I was a reckless arsonist, dousing the almond-slant of my eyes
in gasoline,
setting fire to the constellation of pimples strung
along my face. I became of the scorched earth,
wasting futile hours attempting to destroy every cell of my being,
aching for all-American blue eyes the size of saucers, for the
sunflower-blond hair and porcelain skin I saw in magazines.
I prayed to a broken faith for the type of transformation
they sang of in the movies. For the day I saw my body
as anything other than a cemetery. Under the bruised glow of
moonlight,
I spent sleepless nights researching ways to win the battle,
then the war, failing to realize there is no way to win a war
in which the enemy is yourself. Sometimes, though,
I still want to fight.

EXHIBIT IV: CONVERSATION BETWEEN MY GRANDMOTHER AND HER NEIGHBOR, CIRCA 2015

"What's it like being a communist?"
i am not.

"Do you eat dog?"
no.

"Jeez, are you always this uptight?"
my english not good.

"Is it a cultural thing?"
i sorry. i don't know.

"What? I can't hear you! Speak! Do you know how to speak?"

i do speak. just quieter.

EXHIBIT V: YELLOWTAIL

In a market stall in New York's Chinatown, where the fish outnumber people,

I am a foreigner among my own blood. I breathe in exhaust fumes like the air

in heavy monsoon season: a toxic alchemy of smoke, fog, and dust.

I do not remember the language of my birthplace,

but I do know the language of the body, of being Chinese-American—the way mothers push past each other in order to get the last pound of gutted mackerel,

the way children complain of rice-swollen bellies to ignorant ears,

the way fathers hunch their shoulders inward as if to make themselves invisible.

The portrait of a nation hardened by silence, so used to being unheard that we do it to ourselves.

A kaleidoscope of fish stares back at me, hollowed out like a thousand corpses.

I imagine the fish drowning in air—their fins convulsing

like snakes, bulbous eyes wide and unseeing, full of trauma instead of light.

I wonder if I am like their eyes: unable to see past my own reflection, which is to say,

I cannot love myself but hate my own yellowness, which is to say,

I do not love either of us yet.

EXHIBIT VI: LIST OF SLURS I'VE HEARD THROUGHOUT MY CHILDHOOD

chink. tai-chink. ching chong. slit eyes. coin slot. squint. dog-eater. eggroll.

gook. grasshopper. ninja. fresh off the boat. yellow boy. chinaman.

EXHIBIT VII: TELEGRAM

"it's just a joke."

"i don't think that asians, like, face actual discrimination."

"how are they so good at math?"

"are they all this awkward and shy?"

"your parents will probably beat you up if you don't get an A."

"why are asian guys so feminine?"

EXHIBIT VIII: MY BODY

My body is a tired thing. Even now, it is bleeding from self-inflicted wounds, and I do not

know how to heal them. My body is an abandoned wasteland. A ghost town. I tell it to leave,

to pack its belongings and find another boy to haunt. I want my body to take the contagion

it inflicted upon me and toss it into the sea. But my body always stays. It is the only thing

that holds me at night, when every dream I have is a montage of my body's funeral. It is the

only thing that admires my own nakedness, because it too knows how to be unwanted and

androgynous, how to carry the impossible burden of never being enough.

EXHIBIT IX: PHOENIX

Sometimes, I feel the lost syntax of my mother tongue clawing at my throat,

hoping to reclaim her son again.

EXHIBIT X: RAILROAD TRACKS

In 1869, Chinese migrants built the transcontinental railroad,
a bridge connecting the East with the West,

the spark that propelled America into modern civilization.

Thirteen years later, the government prohibited Chinese immigration so that even our own victories were not ours to enjoy.

I never meant to write this story into tragedy, never meant for us to be written off as yellow weeds in a white garden. Sometimes, I imagine my life as a series of railroad tracks, no clear end in sight.

I can only hope for the version of the story

where my Chinese is the destination instead of the roadkill, the version where

I run toward it with open arms, shouting, *I am here, at last.*

I've come home.

“Be prepared for the emotional baggage left at the airport with claim tags only women can read.”

—Maya Williams

First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

SPOKEN WORD

To My Catcaller

By Maya Williams

Edward R. Murrow High School

To the man approaching me as I walk down the street. STOP. With every following step you take be prepared for the reparations that proceed you. Be prepared for the persecution of feminine injustice that lightly scrapes your palms while my palms have already bared the scars. Be prepared for the emotional baggage left at the airport with claim tags only women can read. Be prepared for the tears you cry that burn a brand across my cheek. I guess you don't care though. Is it that you don't care. Or do you just not know.

You've now entered my personal space as if the door was cracked open just for you. But the door was locked I had locked it before I left. And you, you somehow got in without a key. I don't understand. I took every necessary precaution that I was supposed to.

To the women who are not aware of how to protect yourselves on a walk. Rule #1 never make eye contact with potential intruders, the eyes are the spare key left underneath the plant pot. Rule #2 a smile is a window left open on the first floor so close that right up and shut it tight. Rule #3 the more angry you appear the less approachable you seem. Right?

Right? Or was my anger just an invitation for your suggestion that I

“smile baby” or an invitation for your suggestion that I “relax.” Relax. I can relax once the pressure of your assumptions no longer dictate my happiness. I can relax when I can tell my father to return the pepper spray I put on my Christmas wish list. When I find a new deflection because “I’m only thirteen” seems to have become too mainstream. When you make me no longer question if my short shorts are too short as I walk out my front door. I need to relax, I can’t relax, I will relax once you stop taking it upon yourself to decide what I asked for based on the physical appearance of my 16-year-old body. Don’t I have two more years to consent. Two more years to decide when and where I want to be sexualized and victimized. I guess there’s no need to wait. The distinction between yes and no are unnecessary in this situation because... it’s just a compliment, right?

I never knew a compliment could make my external beauty repulse me internally. So please, to the man approaching me as I walk down the street, STOP. My mind can’t handle another invasion.

“This is masked prejudice, not a compliment, but something like validation still flushes my cheeks.”

—Arushi Avachat

Of Honey and Spice

By Arushi Avachat

Foothill High School

This is what I know of India:

1. Summers spent on dirty rooftops. My cousins and I go up here every afternoon of our visit. The streets of Jaipur glitter below us, and there is dusty air and peeling paint and laughter.
2. Baba's singing. His music fills the space between us on car rides to school. His voice is rough like crumpled paper and thick, gravelly, but it carries a certain sweetness to it too. I don't always understand the words; my Marathi isn't strong enough, but I like to listen anyway.
3. My mother's beauty. Baba has a picture of her from when they were young. She is in black and white and the corners of the photo are creased from time, but you can see her there, dark eyes and fair skin and elegance.
4. Language, a little from both sides of my family. When I was younger, I spoke a tangled conflation of Hindi and Marathi, all muddled into one. I pull the two apart as I get older, learn the differences in their sounds. Hindi is softer, lighter, has more shape to it. Crushed velvet and honey. Marathi is harsher, sharper, has more jugular sounds. Edges and corners and spice.

I don't know much else.

i.

I'm seven when I learn my culture is something to be ashamed of.

It's lunchtime, late summer, and I'm sitting at the shaded tables near the cafeteria. I'm with Taylor, the first friend I made after moving into town, and a few other girls I don't know too well. They all have inside jokes I don't understand and shared memories without me. I try, but it's hard for me to fit in.

I have homemade aloo paratha for lunch that day, one of my favorite foods. I watched my mother roll spiced potato and dough into thin, circular sheets the night before, every movement patient and deliberate. She let me help her make the last few, but mine were obviously amateur, bumpy instead of smooth, more paint-splatter shaped than round.

"What is that?" Taylor asks me when I open my lunch box. Her voice is curious, not very kind. She leans in closer, wrinkling her nose. "It looks weird."

Embarrassment crawls into my stomach. "It's called aloo paratha," I tell her in a tiny voice. "My mom made it."

She wrinkles her nose again, and her freckles stand out darker from the movement. "Looks gross."

A little heat rises in my cheeks. I want to tell her it doesn't taste gross, but I don't. I'm too embarrassed to say a word. The conversation moves on to another topic after a few short moments, but the shame still sticks there, thick and heavy. I realize I've found another reason I don't fit in here.

I don't bring Indian food to school again for years and years.

ii.

I hate speaking in Hindi and Marathi when people are around. I don't want to be Indian in public.

At home, though, my parents always have me speak to them in honey and spice. Baba actually makes me repeat my words in Marathi every time I speak to him in English.

"Why?" I whine after one such moment. It's elementary school, just a few months after the Taylor incident, and I hate the terrible *weirdness* of the Indian syllables that roll off my tongue. "I only need to know English. I'm American." I don't say it, but it's implied: *Not like you.*

My words must hurt him, but he stands firm, and eventually, I repeat myself in Marathi.

iii.

When we were little, my older sister and I spent our weekends choreographing dances to Bollywood songs. Or rather, she choreographed, and I followed her lead. We would spend hours twirling our hands and shimmying our hips and mouthing lyrics we didn't fully understand.

I remember this when I'm in sixth grade, and my mother pushes me to join the Bhangra Club. Bhangra is a type of Indian dance, different from the Bollywood moves my sister and I spent our summers practicing, but it's reminiscent of old times all the same. Mamma wants me to participate, just like Aashna did when she was in middle school. I don't know how to say no to her, how to explain that I'm embarrassed, that I am insecure and care what people might think in a way Aashna never did, so in the end, I give in and join.

Our big performance is the talent show. It takes place during school, and all students attend. I wear salwar kameez and red lipstick and nervousness, and when I peek out through the curtains to see the crowd, I spot my two best friends sitting in the front row. I tell myself to breathe, that they won't make fun. No one will make fun.

The boy I have a crush on is the MC for the talent show. He has chestnut-colored hair and dark chocolate eyes and I am as in love as an eleven year old can be. When he announces us, I walk onto the stage with all the confidence and poise I can manage.

The actual performance isn't too bad. The audience loves the exoticness of our costumes, the clacking of the wooden instruments, and I hear my friends clap and shout my name as we dance. I think I enjoy those five minutes, actually. It's just the moments after I hate.

Nate, the MC, approaches me once we finish. I'm sitting back-stage, drinking a bottle of water, exhausted from the dancing. "That was fun to watch," he tells me.

I smile and force myself to speak; I always forget how to when he's around. "You think so?"

"Yeah," he says. Pauses, laughs a little. "A little weird, but entertain-

ing.” He says it matter-of-a-factly, nothing cruel in his tone, but his words stick in my mind, and it’s all I can think about. Color flushes my cheeks because he’s *right*, it is weird, and more than that, I’m weird for being a part of it.

I swallow hard and smile, like I’m not bothered, but thoughts are spiraling in my mind. I shouldn’t have agreed when Mamma wanted me to join. I shouldn’t have; I’m not like Aashna; I care what people think. I don’t want to be weird. I want to be liked.

Sixth grade is the only year I’m in Bhangra Club. When my parents ask me why I quit, I don’t know what to tell them. I think I recognize even then that it’s not about the dance and it’s not about the boy; it’s something bigger, something worse. The need to be like everyone else. Shame I can’t get rid of. I want to unzip the skin they gave me.

iv.

Middle school passes on, and things at home start to change. Mamma and I fight constantly now. She is demanding, wants too much. I’m never good enough for her. My sharp mouth doesn’t help things, either. Baba is the glue, the unlucky mediator, that keeps us from falling apart, holds us together.

When my mother is angry at me, and this is often, her careful English slips. There’s a more obvious accent. Rounded vowels, forgotten r’s. Words squished together, off tempo. When I’m angry too, I’ll point it out. Correct her pronunciation, make her feel stupid. It’s cruel, another reminder of her otherness, and sickening guilt crawls into my stomach the moment after, when she falters in speech.

In a way, I’m projecting my shame onto her. Making her feel she should be embarrassed of her accent because I’m embarrassed of my culture. It’s awful, wrong, and I don’t know how to apologize for it, how to make it right, so I never do.

v.

One day, late in the winter of my freshman year, a boy tells me I look “exotic.” He’s handsome and tall with bright eyes and white skin, and for some reason, his opinion matters to me. “You’re kinda pretty for an Indian girl,” he adds too, dimples cutting into his cheeks.

This is masked prejudice, not a compliment, but something like validation still flushes my cheeks. I give him a “thank you,” and it’s months before I regret saying it.

That’s the worst part for me. Not his words, but how I take them. For years, I let myself feel small because of the color of my skin. It took a boy to tell me there was some semblance of beauty to be found in my exoticism for me to feel worthy again, if only for a moment.

vi.

Spring rolls around. Soon, I see white girls like Taylor walking down the halls with henna-painted arms (“*I got it done at the fair!*”), talking of music festivals and bindis and cherry-picked pieces of the very culture they made fun of me for belonging to.

The sight makes me sick, but there’s a part of me that wonders, *If they like Indian things, why can’t I?*

I think that’s when I start to realize the blame doesn’t rest with them, it rests with me. Their closed minds and prejudices are meaningless in this. I’m the only one responsible for my shame.

The problem with remorse is that it comes after, when the wrong has been done and can’t be made right. I feel it once too much is already lost.

When I can’t read the Hindi of my childhood journal entries, swirly loops of writing in a language that doesn’t belong to me anymore, when my grandmother calls to speak to me in Marathi and I have to ask her to repeat herself, because the edges and corners and spice of her words sound foreign in my ears, *then*, I finally understand what I’ve done.

This is the price of my shame. If I push my culture away for long enough, I might actually lose it.

vii.

Diwali is on a Thursday this year. Mamma spends hours in the kitchen making my favorite snacks, most fried and dripping oil and carrying the promise of heart failure if overeaten.

On the day of, I pack some chakli in a ziploc bag and bring it with me to school. I share the snack with my friends during lunch, and most of them love it. But the inevitable also happens, and someone tells me how strange my food looks.

This time, I don't freeze up like I did all those years ago. I smile instead and tell her it tastes amazing.

“His fingers clenched around it, palms
leaving indents on the aging paper, red
washing his vision.”

—Madeleine Giaconia

Honorable Mention

FICTION & DRAMA

Leave a Message

By Madeleine Giaconia

Northwestern Regional High School

“Hey, you’ve reached Cassie Peterson. I’m sorry I missed your call, and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

“Hey, Cassie. It’s Jack. I know we haven’t talked in a while, but I was thinking about you the other day, and I just wanted to hear your voice. I’m home this weekend. Please, call me back.”

If one traveled deep enough into the woods north of the New York City suburbs, he would find a winding dirt road. If he had the patience to follow it until its end, he would discover a cluster of houses, grouped tightly together like an inseparable family. Most sported faded and chipped paint, their foundations adorned in once-manicured flowers now weeping under the sun. Brass numbers in sweeping cursive gave each home a numerical identity.

Number Five was the oldest in the neighborhood. It belonged to Jack Skye, a young man who had inherited the house the previous year when his mother passed away. His mother had carefully kept soldierly rows of daffodils on either side of the front walkway. Now, their untrimmed stems fraternized with the weeds.

Next to Number Five was Number Seven, the only house with fresh paint. The color, a deep emerald, mirrored the ancient trees standing guard nearby. A cat door was embedded in the front entrance, and bright yellow curtains peeked through the windows.

It was in front of Number Seven that Jack Skye now stood. Hands sunk into the pockets of a pair of faded blue jeans, he gazed into the

upper window on the left side of the house. His eyes, a striking shade of green, were gazing somewhere beyond the panes of glass, into a life that time had forced him to leave behind.

He had played in the bedroom beyond that window once, with his best friend Cassie, who lived in Number Seven. For young Jack, those four walls had enclosed the grandest place in the world—a ballroom one day, a battlefield the next.

From his jeans pocket, Jack took out the key to his house. It hung from a braided friendship bracelet, frayed and faded from the years. He turned the bracelet over in his palm, glancing back at Number Seven and letting the nearly tangible link of memories between the braid and the house flow up his palm to his mind.

Then, he slipped it back into the pocket of his jeans, turned, and walked back down the drive, leaving the empty house behind him.

"Hey, you've reached Cassie Peterson. I'm sorry I missed your call, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

"Hey, Cassie. It's Jack again. I'm home this weekend. I think I told you that last time I called. Sorry. Anyways, I started cleaning out the attic this weekend. There was a lot of Mom's old stuff in there. I guess I just didn't have the heart to throw it out after she... well, after last year. There were some nice clothes and toys. I gave a lot of it to the shelter; it wasn't doing me any good, collecting dust up there. That's not why I called, though. Get this: I found the memory box, do you remember? The one you made for me when Dad died. You and Mom, you put all sorts of things in it I could hold to remember him whenever I missed him the most. His dog tags, his favorite mixtape, the whistle he always wore around his neck. I remember, I left it with Mom when I went to college. I figured she needed it more than me, all alone in the woods out here. All these years, she kept it, that little thing you made together. Anyways, I just thought that might make you smile. I've got it at my place if you want to take a look. Maybe call me back and let me know? Alright. Bye."

Number Five's attic was cramped and dusty. A narrow walkway formed from cardboard boxes and suitcases ran through the middle. One could move if he crouched over far enough to avoid cracking his head on the ceiling beams. One tiny window, shaped like a ship's porthole, let in several weak streams of light.

Jack sat in the attic, the boxes and cases around him opened wide to reveal their contents: clothing, shoes, jewelry, art supplies, drawings—all unmoving evidence of a life cut short. Unlike most dutiful sons, Jack had not thrown out any of his mother's possessions after she had passed. To get rid of anything she had touched was to desecrate the shrine to her life, which he could not accept had ended. How could someone so full of joy, who gave her whole life to others, have hers taken from her before it was her time?

However, home for the first time since his mother's funeral, Jack had finally started unpacking the mess. Now on the second day of his endeavor, he was moving to the back half of the clutter in the attic.

Jack pushed a box of Christmas lights into the pile of containers he had deemed worthy of getting rid of. He reached for the box behind it and opened its latch. It was the kind of thing his mother would buy during a sale shopping spree at a craft store—small and decorated with inspirational quotes. Inside the box was a pile of folded letters, covered in messy child's scrawl, many written on colorful construction paper and adorned with stickers. Jack felt his stomach drop slightly as he realized what they were: letters from Cassie, exchanged when they were learning to write at school.

Jack, the top one started, I don't think Princess Ophelia will be happy about this, but...

Jack almost laughed, but the humor was quelled by a sudden urge to rip the letter in half. His fingers clenched around it, palms leaving indents on the aging paper, red washing his vision. Images of a girl with chestnut hair and a boy with skinned knees, of laughter and princesses living in castles inside their heads, flooded his mind, tumbled over and over until they were overtaken by flashes of light and the deadened beeps of hospital equipment—

Jack did not notice he had ripped the letter in two until he felt his hands jolt apart, the connection of the paper between them gone. He looked down at what he had done, his breaths labored and his fingers shaking.

Slowly, he closed the box and tucked the torn letter into the pocket of his jeans.

"Hey, you've reached Cassie Peterson. I'm sorry I missed your call, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

"Hey Cassie, it's Jack again. I worked on the attic again today. I found this old box of letters we used to send every day when our parents taught us how to use the mailbox and we thought it was magic. Every day, and we lived across the goddamn street from each other. But when we actually had miles between us to send stuff across, we barely talked. You could've written to me, called me, but you didn't. Not once. I know we ended things badly before I moved away, but for God's sake, you could have *tried*. Just once. That would've been enough."

Within a five-minute walk from the cluster of houses flowed a small brook. It was shrouded by thick trees, which curled over it as if to protect the delicate stream of water from the world. Years of bike tracks and footprints etched themselves into its banks.

Jack followed one of the trails of footprints down to the edge of the brook. He glanced around, observing with mild relief that he was alone. The brook had been a little-known secret when he was a child, but it had started to attract more visitors as he grew up.

Kneeling, he studied the stones beneath the water. The rocks he and Cassie had coveted as children were the smooth orange ones with a translucent sheen to them. He had filled a jar with them in his bedroom. Jack spotted one, nearly hidden beneath a layer of silt and dark rocks. He reached beneath the water's surface and plucked it out, rubbing it against the leg of his pants to dry it before placing it into his pocket.

As he turned to head back to his car, his phone buzzed against his chest. Withdrawing it from his jacket, he glanced at the screen and felt his stomach drop to his feet.

"Hey, you've reached Cassie Peterson. I'm sorry I missed your call, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

"Hey Cassie, it's me again. I'm... I'm sorry for what I said on the last call. I don't know what I was thinking. Of course it's not your fault we stopped talking. It's mine. Wasn't it always my fault? That's what I do. Over and over again, I mess up. I'm sorry. God, Cassie, I'm so sorry. I'll tell you that to your face, I promise. I'll tell you that in person when you wake—when you come home. I'll tell you when you come home."

The sun was going down, and Jack was driving down an empty road, his hands shaking on the steering wheel. His body reeked of antiseptic, a smell he had known too many times before.

The road made a sharp bend as it turned into a bridge, stretching across a gorge below. Bright orange barriers and a warning sign prevented drivers from crossing the bridge.

One of the bridge's guardrails was twisted violently, ripped as easy as paper, the jagged metal sticking out at deathly angles. Around it, the air was still and quiet, as if the wildlife, too, had stopped in silence to stare at the scene as Jack had.

Slowly, Jack opened his car door, stepping into the road and crossing to the shoulder. He stood in the grass, the wind blowing softly through his hair, and stared at the metal carnage with eyes too far away to see.

No one drove down the road for a long time. No one saw the man in faded blue jeans weep, and no one saw him bend to pick one of the wild daffodils blooming on the side of the road and slip the flower's head into his pocket.

"Hey, you've reached Cassie Peterson. I'm sorry I missed your call, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

"Hey Cassie, it's me. I visited you today at the hospital. On the way there, I remembered to take the long way around to avoid the bridge, but I forgot on the way back. Well, I guess that's not true. I did remember. When I was ten minutes out from the hospital, I remembered. But I didn't stop. Why did I keep going? I told myself I'd never look. I told

myself if I ignored it, if I stayed away and pretended the accident didn't happen, everything would be okay. Maybe if I never saw where it happened, I could pretend you'd be outside your house when I got back home, watering the plants, and I'd run to you and tell you I'm sorry. Maybe then I could imagine you smiling with your hair down, instead of laying in bed with machines breathing for you. God, Cassie, I can't do this anymore. There's so much I need to tell you. I'll say it to you when you wake up. Please, Cassie, you have to wake up."

It was a Saturday morning, and it was raining outside.

Jack's attic was cleaned and sorted, his mother's clothing packed and donated. He had kept a few items: her pearls, the dress she wore to his graduation, and his father's best suit, which she had kept for years in the back of her closet, tucked away like a precious secret.

That Saturday morning, Jack had put on that suit and slipped the dog tags from the memory box under his collar, closing his eyes to try to capture the fleeting image of the smile lines around his father's wise green eyes. *Hold your head up, son*, his dad had always told him. *The world is afraid of a man who knows his own strength. Hold your head up high, and they can't touch you.*

With his mother's pearls slipped into his breast pocket, resting near his father's tags, he let his parents' love and resilience fill him from the distant place where they now rested together. If his father could throw himself into enemy fire to save his younger comrade, if his mother could put on makeup like armor and raise her son despite her own grief, then Jack could leave his home that day.

The sun was setting when Jack finally arrived back at the circle of houses. Instead of pulling into the driveway of Number Five, however, he headed towards Number Seven. The key was still under the biggest flower pot on the front porch, where it had been for twenty-seven years. Jack let himself in and made his way to the kitchen, where he slowly flicked on the light. A design of painted willow trees swept across the paneling and over the cabinets. Cassie's careful brush-strokes were distinctive, as gentle as her smile.

Jack lowered himself into a chair, placing a small wooden box he had been carrying in his lap, and slowly withdrew his phone from his

pocket. He clicked a familiar number and waited as the unanswered ring echoed throughout the house from the phone resting on the table by his arm. When it ended, the usual beep sounded and her voice filtered through to his ear:

"Hey, you've reached Cassie Peterson. I'm sorry I missed your call, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

Jack wet his lips, his breath shuddering in his chest. "Hey, Cassie, it's Jack. I just wanted to hear your voice again." His words caught in his throat and he clenched the phone tightly in his fingers. After a moment, his voice returned and he continued.

"I want to tell you a story now, the way you did when we used to go camping." He raised his eyes to the willow tree wall. "Six weeks ago, I got a call from old Mrs. Jenson in Number 3. She thought I should know that something had happened to you. I asked her what, and she started crying. She said your car was hit head-on by a truck, on the old north bridge, and you were in a coma. They weren't sure if you were going to wake up.

"So I came back. I hadn't talked to you in two years, but I came back. I couldn't stand the thought that if you never—" His voice broke, but he pushed on. "If you never woke up again, I wouldn't be there. I waited. For eight weeks, I waited, Cassie, and they told me you might never get better. But I never gave up, you know? I didn't."

Tears swam in his emerald green eyes. The rain slid down the windows in rivulets, as if the sky was weeping with him.

"I went to your funeral today, Cassie. It was raining outside, but I think you would've liked that. You always liked things to be unusual, didn't you? You thrived when stuff went wrong. I loved that about you. Cassie... Cassie, I loved you. No, I was in love with you. That's what I really wanted to tell you. I never got to. Now I'll never get another chance."

Blinded by the tears coursing down his cheeks, his fingers fumbled clumsily at the latch of the box in his lap before raising its lid to reveal the items resting at the bottom: a faded rainbow bracelet, a torn letter, an orange stone, the head of a daffodil.

"I made you a memory box, Cassie," Jack whispered, "so that as long as I'm alive, I'll never forget you. Just like Mom did, when Dad

died. But she was luckier, wasn't she? She got to have a whole life with him. We'll never get that. I'll never get to tell you I love you every morning, and wait for you to come home at night. "

Jack picked up the friendship bracelet and turned it between his fingers, remembering how Cassie had presented it to him at recess, her whiskey-brown eyes sparkling as she smiled. How long would it be before he forgot her smile like he had forgotten the sound of his father's voice, how he was forgetting the smell of his mother's perfume?

"But you wouldn't want me to be sad, would you? You would tell me to be happy for what we did get, not mourn what we never will. That's how you always thought. I wish I could be like that, Cassie. I wish I could be like you. But I'm not sure I can. I'm not sure I'm strong enough."

Jack turned his eyes to the ceiling, looking skyward the way his mother always did when she talked about his father. "I'm sorry, Cassie. I'm sorry we didn't have more time. I'm sorry I came back too late. I'm sorry I only was strong enough to tell you what I wanted to say once you were unconscious. Did you hear me, all those times I talked to you at the hospital? They say sometimes people in comas can hear people talking to them. I don't know if that's true, but I hope it is. And if it isn't, then I'll say now what I said a hundred times at your bedside, what I'll say every day until the day I die: I love you, Cassie. I love you, I love you, I love you."

Slowly, his heart aching with an unspeakable grief, Jack lifted the phone from his ear. His finger hovered over the red button for a long moment before he finally hung up, one last time.

Taking a deep inhale, he leaned back and closed his eyes, fingers resting on the box of what Cassie had meant to him. He could feel her there, all around him; in the room she had painted into a forest; in the room where she had brought wonder to their tiny corner of the world; in the room where he had loved her and never told her.

But then, Jack thought, maybe she was watching, dancing with his parents behind the clouds, and maybe somehow she knew.

A small smile spread over his lips, and outside Number Five, the wilted daffodils began to blossom once more.

“Silhouetted against the city of big
shoulders, my father’s big shoulders
knot against their hissing English.”

—Penelope Alegria

Honorable Mention

POETRY

Papa's Deli Order

By Penelope Alegria

Niles Township West High School

When my Social Studies teacher spoke of DREAMERS and visas, she said undocumented was a synonym for illegal.

My hand shot up to tell her she must be mistaken:

My parents were undocumented, and they were not criminals. Illegal is a synonym for killers or criminals, and my papa was no criminal.

On weekends, I help him with the deli order at

Jewel. I point out verses on the posters behind

the counter:

Yo quiero cuarto de libra de Sarah Lee Honey Turkey

"I want a quarter pound of Sarah Lee Honey Turkey."

Yo quiero media libra de Queso Americano.

"I want a half pound of American cheese."

I walk him through each word,

but he gets stuck on the r's and the s's—

he says he hears English like hissing radio static,

but I need him to walk up to the deli counter and order American
cheese

because criminals don't eat American cheese.

When my father is pulled over on 69th street,
passengers huddle in the backseat of his Uber
as red stars, blue shirts, and badges
float in the grey sky outside.

Silhouetted against the city of big shoulders,
my father's big shoulders knot against their hissing English.

Because I am at school at debate practice,

I miss 19 of his calls.

After the March sun has set, I finally call back,
but I am too late.

The passengers have been Ubered by someone else.

He sits on the cold, concrete curb while
policemen hiss radio static, open compartments, turn over seat
cushions,
and all my father hears is,

"car,"

"license."

They say,

"exit,"

and he thinks the country,
he thinks expired visa,
he thinks goodbye hugs and tears at O'Hare
and returning to his mother's house in Peru,
to the yellow streetlights of the barrio he grew up in.

When I finally call him back,
I want him to put the cops on the phone.
I want to tell them he only drives Uber on the weekends,
to tell them he's on his way to pick me up,
to tell them he can order a pound of American cheese for 1.99 at
the deli
and that is important because criminals don't eat American cheese.

Instead, I tell my father,

*Yo siempre estoy contigo.
Vamos a Panda Express cuando regreses a casa,
podemos conversar sobre pollo de naranja.*
Let's go to Panda Express when you get home,
we can talk about it over orange chicken,
but when we go to the deli this weekend,
you have to order.
¿Como se dice? Dime.

And he says,

"I want a quarter pound, uh, Sarah Lee Honey Turkey."
The blue and white lights fade
and he turns the key in the ignition.
"I want de half pound of cheese American."
And under the yellow streets of this cold March night,
he starts home.

“They ostracized me and put a stopper to
my mouth that really just wanted to run.”

—Anna Vargas

Honorable Mention

SPOKEN WORD

To All the Things I Couldn't Say

By Anna Vargas

Tabb High School

When I was little my tongue was a f-flat, rounded thing.
It garbled in my mouth and did loops and clumsy jumps
Like a newly born f-f-f-oal it could not run
Fast nor smooth and sometimes not at all.
My mouth was just a cave for a shlumpering
Recalcitrant dragon that waited for someone to prod it to awareness
And in the meantime breathed heavily "A-b-She", "A-B-She"
While the school opened its doors only to stamp me with a "C."

In the meantime, I read
Books and magazines and the back of cereal boxes
And occasionally my teacher's curved lips when she watched me struggle
Over simple words in English, the foreign tongue.
And even as the stuttering in my heart reached up my throat
And held with grimy hands my tongue
And shook it around some
I thought to my books and talked inside my head.
Through the years writing and reading became an outlet
Although the me in my stories never choked over simple words like

“bread.”

Also, intonation,

the beast that grabbed me by the neck when I wasn’t paying attention,

And stressed unstressed creases between my eyes

Caught the inquisitive stares of my peers

And demanded attention.

Like when I said “pédestal” not “pedéstal”

And “fum-igate” not “fume-igate”

Which was what I wanted to do to all the wrongs inside my brain,

Oh, god, what was wrong with my brain?

With others, every moment was rehearsal,

Only to never receive a call back.

While in every presentation, I waited in the back.

Not to mention, simple things took so much *time*

“My name is Anna” then

Three truths but they all sounded like lies.

Because who’s to believe me when I say

“I have n-n-never been b-b-butter, I mean better!”

So instead I played charades with life.

With the word being “fluent”

I ice broke my way past strife

And countless linguistic obstruents.

The words that came easily in my language

Didn’t exist in another,

And rolled r’s and ら (ra) り (ri) る (ru) れ (re) ろ (ro)

Didn’t help in explaining why Hogwarts’ finest Hermione

Is not, in fact, Her-me-own.

My strange speech patterns and my strange sounding words

Branded me with my own brand of outsider-y

That made others shun

Before my story had even *begun*.

They ostracized me and put a stopper to my mouth

That really just wanted to *run*.

School was my forge which refined my tongue to steel

Like a snake it darts, having lost so much weight

And I graduated a time in my life

That cris-is

That 1st amendment freedom of being life-less.

A-b-She is not someone who will bend to insecurity!

A-b-See my growth and see my ability!

To string words into beauty

And to embody possibility!

To all the things I wanted to say

That got caught in my awkward ways,

I fling them out now for the world to praise

(cue the acclaim):

I am not defined by the things I couldn't say.

I. Am. What. I. Say.

“I heard his promise and felt it pressed
into my bones.”

—Jill Patel

Honorable Mention

PERSONAL MEMOIR

Die in a Car

By Jill Patel

James B. Conant High School

There is no right place to start a story about death. I could start with the first time my grandpa picked up a cigarette. I could start with memories of breathing poison into my lungs, the taste of it in the air. Or the first diagnosis my *dada* was ever given. I'll start it, instead, with a car ride. With a prologue.

It takes thirty minutes to drive to my grandpa's house. I visit often. It's been a hub for my entire extended family since I was a child. Back then we'd arrive early in the day and leave when the sky turned black. It was while we were leaving one such night, when my grandpa began his death. I was watching the lights fly past when my dad got the call.

I don't remember what he said, but I remember the soft syllables of Gujarati twisting tense on top of his tongue. I remember asking a lot of questions with no answers. I remember turning around, going back instead of leaving. The last thing I remember is the weight of my *dada's* hand on my head as he vowed to never smoke again.

That was the first and only time I ever turned around after leaving his house. I heard his promise and felt it pressed into my bones. And there his words lay, true and unassuming; I never got to smell the warm, tobacco on my grandpa's clothes again. It stayed trapped in my lungs, though, the ghost of it.

It became half-remembered. A phantom that hid in each of my earliest moments with my *dada*. A steadfast presence that faded into the background of my constant trips, there and back. It was an add-on to the rest of a sentence, barely important enough to be included at

all. There were more important games to play and stories to laugh at after all. It was idyllic: his house was rosy and soft-edged in my memories, back then.

I treasured each of those little road trips. Each one was its own story, with a rambling introduction and an exciting middle and a bittersweet conclusion. I first heard that my *dada* had lung cancer as a quiet first chapter in my cousin's bedroom. I didn't cry. I didn't feel anything at all.

"*Dada's* going to die," They whispered.

"We're not supposed to know," they said. I nodded and held the words in my chest. I kept it there until I was heading back home, the cold AC blasting against my fingers. Then I breathed in and out and let the ghost of my *dada's* smoke bury itself there instead.

I didn't ask my parents about it; I somehow, somehow forgot about it. My sister cried for him as she graduated and that's when I remembered again. I cried too, not for her, or him, but selfishly for me. Because *dada* would never get to see my diploma like he did hers.

I wasn't supposed to know though. And I played my game until it was obvious even to me, as a child, that no one could bear hiding it anymore. The exposition was almost over. Eventually, the only one that didn't know was my grandma.

I can trace the start of my tale of death to the promise my grandpa made us that night. But the turning point of my story happened much, much later. On another ride back from *dada's* house.

It was quiet. Our car rides usually were. I was staring out the window, finally tall enough to see more than just the sky when I turned my head. There was a stillness there. A facade of peace in the way the wind pushed the trees along. In the way crooked traffic signs skid past my eyes. In the way the clouds crept forwards in tandem with me. There. And then gone. I treasured the silence of it, the finality of it. But it didn't last long. My parents began asking me questions. How long I knew. What I knew. How I was feeling, knowing that my grandpa was going to die soon.

I knew I was supposed to cry then, so I cried. I stared out the window at the endless street signs and let my eyes well with tears. I was meant to be scared, to be a sad child, so I gave them that. And

when we stopped talking, I went back to staring out of my window with dry eyes and nothing on my face. The silence stayed.

We drove to my grandpa's a lot more after that. My sister left and it was just me and my parents. We drove every single weekend, without fail. I would have a backpack packed, and I would leave school on Friday ready to spend my half hour staring out the window. We didn't talk. There was nothing to say.

My grandpa had less than a year to live. But he died a lot slower than that. We spent three years going back and forth to his house. Constantly visiting, constantly taking the trip there.

Those first months, I was with him the entire time I was visiting. Playing cards and hanging out with the whole family. He wore hats, and that was all the cancer stole from him. The only pain I had to see during each of my trips were the worn beanies that started adorning his head.

Nevertheless, I would spend the car ride back exhausted. Sometimes, I'd fall asleep against the window. Others, I'd watch the house slowly disappear behind us, excited to visit and play again. And others, I'd stay up and watch the moon follow us as we ran back home. I'd watch the street lights come closer and closer, and then farther away, further than I could ever reach.

I'd want to touch them, but they'd never come close enough. They would grow and grow in size against the window, until I blinked and suddenly they were far again. The word "inevitable" with all of its hard consonants and abrupt syllables became known to me.

I stopped playing Scrabble with my *dada* when I visited. I started spending more time going to the playground with my cousins. We would play games together as my aunts cooked and my uncles talked and my grandpa slept.

Each weekend was different, but they were never sad. They were just moments frozen in time. There was dancing and tag and delicious food, and a lot of cheating at card games. I thought it would never end. But I always found myself in the backseat of my parents' car, staring up at the stars that had come out to wish me farewell.

My *dada* got worse and worse. It was hard to notice because it was so slow. Every climax needs build up after all. His sickness crept

forwards while we weren't watching and one day I turned around to notice his house filled with horrors.

A loud machine that helped him breathe. Rows of shots in the fridge. Lines of pill bottles. A wheelchair we were not to touch. Gas masks he wore over his face. I stopped talking to him, stopped being able to. He stopped leaving his room altogether.

I heard stories. Of my grandpa's new, explosive anger. Of emergency trips to the ER. Of a madness that seemed to take him over. Of my grandma threatening to drink bleach because of *dada's* manic fury. Of my dad's new, sad eyes. I never saw more than a hug and a few whispered words from my grandpa.

I always, always started and left with that. My trips began with the same rows of trees, the same buildings, the same bridge. And they finished with the same street lamps and the same twilight sky. They started and ended with the same hugs, the same few words.

Then one summer, I completed middle school knowing my grandpa would be dead before I started my freshman year. Time was flying; the climax was arriving. I drove to my grandpa's house more than ever before. Each time my mom would remind me:

"This could be the last time, Jill."

"It's any day now, Jill."

"Say your goodbyes, Jill."

I hated the goodbyes. I had no goodbyes for my *dada*. I had three years of goodbyes, I had the stars in the sky and the buildings burned into the backs of my eyes. I had the lights on each street and hundreds of hugs. I had cigarette smoke hidden in my lungs. I had no goodbyes left for my *dada*.

The last goodbye I gave my *dada* was the last time I ever saw him at all.

He held my hand and smiled at me. I told him I loved him. My grandma fed him dal next to me, it dribbled over his chin as he gazed blankly at me. He mumbled a lot. He said a lot of words, but not one of them was "Jill". My mom and grandma tried to help him get there, but he never did. He held my hand and I held his. I left with that.

The next drive to my grandpa was on the way back from the

airport. Everything was different. The sights, the space, the silence. But our destination was the same. Before we went into my grandpa's house though, my dad pulled me and my cousins aside. My dad told us, with the saddest smile on his face, that *dada* was gone. This was another truth carved into my bones, my cousins had whispered it to me days before. I hadn't cried then. I didn't cry when my dad told me after. I cried as I entered the house. I entered a house shaking with tears. I entered a house drowning in its own grief. I sobbed with it, until the tears stopped coming, and then I waited until I could cry more.

I drove back the next day, the last trip back from my grandpa's. I don't remember the trees or the lights or the stars. I don't remember looking up, or out of my window. I know I did. Yet still, I don't remember the end of my grandpa's story. Or rather my story of my *dada*. I drove home that day. I didn't cry.

He died quietly. He lived in my car window, in the strokes of people and nature that became the backgrounds to my mini-road trips. He lived in my poisoned lungs. He lived in my dad's smiles and my cousins whispers. He lived in the stars. He died there too, in each place I connected him with, in each person he was connected with. And I was there. For all of it. From beginning to end, his death became my life for years and years. I was there. For the beginnings of the prologue and the last words on the final page. So in the end, my grandpa's death ended with a car ride.

“Through the slivers of moon that still
shone between the branches, Kim only
saw glistening eyes and beaks twitching
like insects.”

—Isabella Yu

Honorable Mention

FICTION & DRAMA

The Crows

By Isabella Yu

Gunn High School

Kim's bike skidded over a rock with a crack and squeal. She braked, cursing. Of course the best time for a flat tire was during a storm.

She looked beneath her bike and flinched. It was no flat tire. Under her bike, bathed in a patch of blue moonlight, lay a baby crow—a nestling that the storm had blown from the trees. She had ridden clean across its neck.

Kim shuddered, reaching for the animal but pausing. She didn't want the wrath of the baby's parents unleashed upon her. The crows here were rumored to seek retribution toward those who had wronged them. The McTavishes had had their roof bombed with droppings after they'd removed a tree with crows' nests on it. The Shangs had their screen doors pecked to oblivion. Maybe if she covered the body, they wouldn't come after her.

She shivered at the thought of another rider running the bird's guts to the ground. Its eyes would bulge until they popped out, and its brains would dribble out of its skull like egg yolk...

It was useless thinking about what could happen. Kim rolled her bike off the corpse and nudged it toward the side of the road with her foot. Just like soccer practice. The bird proved an inadequate ball, though; its disproportionately heavy head flopped as if attached by noodles to its body. Kim shuffled some leaves over it. A hasty burial, but thankfully, the dead didn't have feelings.

Two mournful caws emanated from the trees behind her. Kim cursed. Just what she needed, to be hounded by the nestling's

parents. A small voice in her screamed that she deserved it, running over a helpless creature and kicking it into a ditch like it was a soda can. Ignoring it, Kim turned toward her bike when something rustled in front of her. She couldn't distinguish anything from the dappled moonlight, but she thought she saw a flash of glassy eyes. Then stillness.

A crow stepped into the space between the shadows, its right eye cocked toward Kim.

Kim shrank back from the bird before realizing it was just a crow, probably hoping to see its dead child like any sentient being would. Yet it did not hop toward its dead baby like crows did. It walked, its gait more fluid than that of a cat's.

Kim neither wanted to confront the mourning crow nor did she want to eat dinner late, so she started toward her bike. Immediately, her foot slipped on something slimy, and she saw the ground rushing up on her. Even before her nose mashed into the mud, she could smell the crow droppings coating the leaves. Her cheek slipped on a puddle of the stuff, rattling her skull.

Groaning, she hoisted herself up on an elbow. The fall had painted the underside of her body black and white with droppings, and with a jolt, she realized that she could not tell where her body started and ended. She had melted into a grave of feces. Beyond her, the crow was squatting with its head bowed in front of its baby, feathers ruffled against the wind. At the sound of Kim rising, it shook its feathers sleek and turned its head towards her.

Right then, Kim did not want that crow to look at her. For it to lock its glassy gaze upon hers... Kim couldn't even picture what sorts of horrible things would happen. She did not realize she was whimpering until the crow turned its gaze upon her. Head cocked toward Kim, its throat bobbed up and down as if it were trying to sing. Kim found herself unable to look away.

If she'd looked up, she would have seen five more crows in the elm above her, emerging one by one to enjoy this spectacle. Their bodies coated the trees until they eclipsed the crescent moon. Only then did she gaze upward to see what had blackened the sky. Through the slivers of moon that still shone between the branches, Kim only saw glistening eyes and beaks twitching like insects. The birds hopped from tree to tree, innocently inquisitive like small vultures.

Heart racing, she made to remove herself from the bird droppings, but they'd congealed into a scab around the underside of her body. When she lifted her arm, black and white ropes of slime wrung around it, snaring it back. Worse, they'd siphoned away any feeling in her legs. She couldn't even twitch them.

Kim pressed down the vomit that had been sloshing in her belly. Nothing in the world could have been this sticky and numbing, not even the spiderwebs that clung to every inch of Fairfield. Something was terrible about these crows, from the way their eyes darted to the way they pooped to the way they looked upon their baby's grave with sickening sorrow.

The only thing she could do was swim through it. She would swim through it all if it meant escaping the gaze of those birds. So she dug her fingers into the ground, through the feces and into the crumbled soil. Pulled herself toward the road. Dig. Hoist. Repeat.

Kim's fingers met with leaves after too long. Looking behind her, she saw a measly 3-meter-long track her body had carved in the droppings. She breathed a sigh of relief when she spotted no crows in the trees.

She felt something tugging on her leg. Then she saw it. A crow was perched on the back of her calf, plucking at her thigh. It had worked through jeans and skin and was now feasting on her hamstring. Diving its beak into the flesh, it surfaced with a squelch and a sliver of muscle in its beak. Bone glistened in the center of her leg.

Kim shrieked. The crow on her leg calmly raised its head. Behind it, like tombstones rising from the ground, four more crows' heads emerged. They had been burying their beaks into her feet and had reduced both to tendon and bone.

"Get off me!" Kim screeched.

She tried raising her arm to swipe at the birds, but ropes of droppings clawed her back. With each futile attempt, she felt an insidious numbness bloom from each forearm until she had lost feeling in both.

Through the mop of hair that had congealed in front of her face, she could see the crow that had been eating her thigh in front of her. Kim screamed until she felt her eardrums burst and her throat fill with blood.

The crow cocked its head, stalking toward her until its beak nearly touched her nose. Up close, Kim observed that a crow's feathers were quite soft, like meadow grass after rain.

They were the last thing she saw before the crow plucked out her eyes.

“Because *We* are the intersection,
even though it might be easier to live
somewhere else.”

—Regina Valencia

Honorable Mention

POETRY

Three-Way Intersection (Excerpt)

By Regina Valencia

Paramus High School

This is it. Where they all meet,
a hazardous place to go.
Yet i am here,
at the crossing of:
lgbtq+ street,
immigrant avenue,
and venus symbol drive.
And although no one else is exactly like me,
there are others who appear.
Because *We* are the intersection,
even though it might be easier to live somewhere else.
We are here.
No matter how much you want to bulldoze it away,
We've paid the price.
with our days (*over*),
our souls (*and over*),
our lives (*and over again*).

“Faye had been waiting for months to help bring a new life into the world, and today was the day that she would do it.”

—Xi Lu

Honorable Mention

FICTION & DRAMA

To Plant a Tree

By Xi Lu

Stuyvesant High School

Faye Zou said she had plans that evening.

And she was telling the truth too, though she thought her usage of the phrase was a loose interpretation of the convention. To most, she supposed, the phrase meant that someone would be tied up with social obligations or some other form of interacting with acquaintances. What she had planned that evening was nothing of the sort.

Ms. Zou left work early like the rest of her peers, who had asked her if she wanted to join them for dinner. She politely declined, stating that she had plans that night. Her coworkers asked her if her plans had a name. Ms. Zou smiled at their jest, and bid them goodbye. She took a shortcut, walking into the passageway of City Hall, strolling beneath the low reliefs carved into the arching ceiling. The path led her to an asphalt walkway between two buildings, and then finally, into the crowded streets of Chinatown. The Q train rumbled across the bridge overhead, embedding its vibrations through the antiquated Lower East Side tenements as it passed.

She had practically grown up in this neighborhood, Faye thought. Between all of the family outings and weddings held at the banquet hall under the bridge, she had been to Chinatown practically on a weekly basis. Yet, for the time up until she had started venturing out into the world on her own, free of any familial guidance, her knowledge of her second home was limited to a two-block radius. There was the bakery that sold giant fluffy castella cupcakes dotted with slivers of almonds; the restaurant she and her aunt frequented whenever the

latter visited New York; the hole in the wall eatery with folding chairs and tables that served her favorite wonton soup and sesame peanut butter noodles; and there was the banquet hall. No matter how dingy the hall was in the morning, its stained carpeted floors and dirty mirrors and other imperfections seemed to disappear at night when a wedding would take place. The walls were covered with festive red velvet, the chandeliers were polished, and the atmosphere would be filled with optimism for the happy bride and groom. From a young age, Faye declared that she did not believe in love, no matter how many weddings she attended. She had never seen her parents in love, for one of them was long gone. She had seen members of her family torn apart by ugly divorces that would not have happened if the silly notion of love had never occurred to anyone. Love was a sham she thought, that is until she met Martin Nazar. Maybe at some point, she had begun to shed her muddy view of romance in favor of something more optimistic.

But she mustn't think about that now. It was not the time to do so. It would never be the time and the place to think about what was and could have been. No such time would be wasted, Faye decided.

A gentle breeze scented with the smell of scallion pancakes blew back Faye's glossy black hair. She stopped at the stand and purchased two pancakes from the vendor and continued walking. Faye knew that her grandma enjoyed those pancakes immensely, but the elderly woman's rheumatic joints meant that she could not eat them as often as she would like. She made a right at Monroe Street and proceeded down the increasingly narrow streets.

Faye had been living in anticipation for this day to come for months now, and it was finally here. She made a right at the heavy metal gates of her grandmother's apartment building, pulled the heavy door open and walked in, waving hello to the doorman. She made a final right down the path of the shared garden, entered the building and then her grandmother's apartment.

"Nai nai," she called out.

A short and round elderly woman shuffled out of the kitchen.

"Ah you didn't have to," Grandma Zou insisted while holding her hand out to receive the pancakes.

"Of course I had to," Ms. Zou replied, knowing that what she said was true. She always wondered why her family still abided by such formalities. Both of them knew that her grandma expected scallion pancakes every time Faye visited.

Faye shed her wool coat and threw it over the couch. She turned her attention to the large fig tree that her grandmother kept near the window. Its leaves were much larger than her hands, probably even bigger than the hands of Martin. In those hands, she found the comfort and security that seemed to have eluded her as a child. Faye shook her head as if to dislodge the thoughts that were forming in her head. Now was not the time. There would never be time to waste time in such a manner. She admired the leaves. They were fuzzy as if they were made of felt and were a breathtaking shade of emerald green. Months ago she had taken a blade and encircled a branch with it, making one incision about the circumference, another an inch away from the first, and then once more as if to connect the first two cuts. Once all the necessary lacerations were made, she peeled back a layer of the bark and chiseled it away. She bandaged the wound in a layer of sphagnum moss and then set the branch in a plastic bottle cast to keep the moss in place. Now, the bottle was bursting with shy pale roots. Faye had been waiting for months to help bring a new life into the world, and today was the day that she would do it. She cut the new tree off the original branch and bid her grandmother goodbye.

Faye walked quickly, wanting to get home as soon as possible so that she could pot her new plant in soil. The second thing on her mind was wanting to get into the subway station before the rush hour crowds swallowed her altogether. Swallowed whole. That was what had happened when she met Martin. He had engulfed her despair with his seemingly boundless confidence. But then the two beings intertwined into one and she panicked, not knowing how much left of her was her anymore.

The F train rumbled out of East Broadway station, and into Delancey. An elderly gentleman departed and Faye claimed his seat. She sat whilst chiding herself for thinking of Martin again. It just was not the time. Instead, she thought, she would think about how she would manage to help the delicate roots break free of the plastic cast without being damaged. The plastic bottle already had one cut along the side that courageous roots were bursting out of. She would peel

away the cast slowly to avoid damaging the plant. But the procedure would mean root breakage no matter how careful she was. No, she could not slowly remove the support without damage. She had to think of something else. Perhaps she could make another cut on the other side and remove the plastic casing completely. Yes, that was what she would do. She would make a clean cut from what had once supported the fig tree. What was once support had become a cage.

“This is 74–St Broadway. Transfers available to the E, M, R, and 7 trains.” Faye realized almost too late that it was her stop. She quickly gathered her belongings and dashed out of the double doors before they closed. She climbed up a flight of stairs and made her way over to the escalator. Then, she climbed another flight of stairs and came to an aboveground platform, where a 7–train approached. She stepped into the warm train car, grateful to be sheltered from the chilly wind. She took her place in front of a set of train doors opposite of those she had walked through. A man with a guitar walked in behind her, followed by a boy holding a cap and a guitar, followed by an older man with an accordion. The trio began playing mariachi music. Unlike usual when she was tired and irritated by the unnecessary noise made by street performers, Faye was appreciative of the live performance.

Martin had completely changed her music tastes. While the old Faye would just listen to whatever playlists her friends had thrown together, the Faye that was well acquainted with Martin’s lectures about 80s Rock and Alternative would carefully curate her music. She was introduced to a world before her time. The Talking Heads. Pixies. The Who. Led Zeppelin. The Raconteurs. Mötörhead. She was grateful to him for his influence. But now was not the time to be thinking about him. Why couldn’t she just appreciate the live mariachi without thinking of people she was not supposed to think about? It would be better for her to think about her new fig tree. After she removed the roots from their cage, she would have to pot it. It struck her that she did not have any pots on hand. Oh, how she had a tendency to forget crucial things. Faye remembered that she had meant to throw out a plastic container that used to hold frozen éclairs. She still had the container—why not drill some drainage holes on the bottom? She smiled at her own ingenuity. It was okay that she was forgetful; her intellect would make up for it. She really did come up with some good ideas sometimes. The tree would have so much space to grow into its

own. It would be watered every once in a while, as it did not need much care. And in the spring, it would grow fruits that she would be able to share with her family and friends. Given minimal care and enough space, the plant would flourish and come into its own.

It was Faye's stop. She got off the train and admired how hues of pink and purple streaked the evening sky. She was off on her way home to plant her fig tree.

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