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WNDB®

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# Creative Writing Awards

2022 Selected  
Poems, Stories,  
and Memoirs





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# 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-nine 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 and drama, and spoken word 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](http://www.diversebooks.org).

# 2022 Scholarship Winners

## FIRST PLACE SCHOLARSHIP AWARDS

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Fiction & Drama .....	Kayla Xu, <i>Chasing Memories</i> , Scripps Ranch High School, San Diego, CA
\$10,000 Personal Essay/Memoir .....	Eva Martinez, <i>Proud</i> , Valley Stream North High School, Franklin Square, NY

## AMANDA GORMAN AWARD FOR POETRY

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Poetry .....	Sagar Gupta, <i>Conversation Starter: How is Your English So Good</i> , Thomas Jefferson High School, Alexandria, VA

## MAYA ANGELOU AWARD FOR SPOKEN WORD

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Spoken Word .....	Ife Martin, <i>A Letter to Dr. King</i> , West Bloomfield High School, West Bloomfield, MI

## NEW YORK CITY ENTRANT AWARD

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Poetry .....	Arianna Steadman, <i>Food for Thought</i> , Hunter College High School, New York, NY

## HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
Belton New Tech High School @Waskow, TX. ....	Maheshwari Rajesh, <i>An Escape</i> , Fiction & Drama
Boca Raton Community High School, FL ..	Primrose Tanachaiwiwat, <i>Chinoiserie</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Boiling Springs High School, PA. ....	Samantha Gatuz, <i>It Takes a Village</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Broadwater High School, MT. ....	Eimie Day, <i>Claire and Ringo</i> , Fiction & Drama
Bronx High School of Science, NY. ....	Vicki Zou, <i>the space in between</i> , Poetry
Brooklyn Technical High School, NY. ....	Wesley Kwok, <i>The City Pigeon</i> , Poetry
Cass Technical High School, MI. ....	Troy Hardges, <i>Finding My Vision</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Centennial High School, MD. ....	Krystal Wu, <i>Dream: A Fictional Memoir</i> , Fiction & Drama
Central High School, KY. ....	Irumva Joselyne, <i>Failure</i> , Spoken Word

## HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
Century Academy, CA .....	Anushka Shah, <i>The Variables In Luck</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Cheyenne Mountain High School, CO .....	Isabel Morin, <i>Unicorns</i> , Poetry
Cosby High School, VA.....	Colby LaTessa, <i>In Disregard of Hopelessness</i> , Poetry
Cranston High School West, RI.....	Nicholas Perrotta, <i>Letter To You</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Crystal Lake South High School, IL.....	Muskaan Jadeja, <i>Tangerines</i> , Fiction & Drama
Denver School of the Arts, CO.....	Clarise Reichley, <i>How To Live With Climate Anxiety</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Destrehan High School, LA .....	Indira Escobar, <i>Cejas</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Dougherty Valley High School, CA .....	Eva Maciukiewicz, <i>Disciplinary Action</i> , Fiction & Drama
Douglas Anderson School of the Arts, FL ..	Blair Bowers, <i>Your Favorite Song</i> , Poetry
Eleanor Roosevelt High, CA .....	Nichole Ye, <i>Someday the Dream Will End</i> , Fiction & Drama
Epic Charter Schools, OK .....	Cali Sickler, <i>I Miss You</i> , Poetry
Fiorello Laguardia, NY.....	Iris Santalucia, <i>Man to Hound</i> , Poetry
Forest Hills High School, NY .....	Amaya Adu, <i>Lark's Hyacinth</i> , Fiction & Drama
Georgia Cyber Academy, GA .....	Darrese Williams, <i>Big Girl Energy</i> , Spoken Word
Georgia Cyber Academy, GA .....	Elyah Williams, <i>I Hate the Color Brown</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Granite Hills High School, CA .....	Madison Dietzen, <i>Mainland Keiki</i> , Poetry
Gull Lake High School, MI .....	Madison Quinn, <i>I Am Caught</i> , Poetry
Hagerty High School, FL.....	Abigail Lin, <i>Eternity</i> , Fiction & Drama
Harriton High School, PA .....	Gabriel Klaumenzer, <i>Memento tui Infelicies Mortis</i> , Fiction & Drama
Heritage High School, NC.....	Kevin Parris, <i>Where Do I Belong?</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
High Tech High School, NJ.....	Kiana Roman, <i>"I Am From," "My Mama, My World," "Rich Port,"</i> Spoken Word
Hinsdale Central High School, IL.....	Amy Dong, <i>The Monty Hall Problem</i> , Fiction & Drama
Holyoke High School, MA.....	Grace Whitlock, <i>It Was Never a Dream</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Homestead High School, WI .....	Madeline McDonald, <i>Words for my Mother</i> , Poetry

## HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
Hunter College High School, NY . . . . .	Elizabeth Louie, <i>Trebles and Tribulations</i> , Fiction & Drama
Ida High School, MI . . . . .	Evelyn Jesky, <i>On Being Blinded</i> , Poetry
Imagine School at North Port High School, FL . . . . .	Neftalie Cajuste, <i>That's Nuts</i> , Fiction & Drama
James B Conant, IL . . . . .	Johanna Selmeczy, <i>Fickle Forgiveness</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
James Bowie High School, TX . . . . .	Arlo Craft, <i>This is Daedalus Speaking</i> , Poetry
Jimmy Carter Early College, TX . . . . .	Esmeralda Loera, <i>The Flowers She Gave Me</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
John R. Lewis High School, VA . . . . .	Shekinah Jaze, <i>Weaved Vessels</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Kenowa Hills High School, MI . . . . .	Zoe Paskewicz, <i>adoLIEscence</i> , Poetry
Kings Mountain High School, NC . . . . .	Ashlyn Wood, <i>Doll Alive</i> , Poetry
Ladue Horton Watkins High School, MO . . . . .	Annie Pan, <i>Neither a Hero Nor a Villain</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Lakeville North High School, MN . . . . .	Sarah Rauf, <i>The Cardinals' Visitation</i> , Fiction & Drama
Laurel High School, MD . . . . .	Rosane Ndaha, <i>La Fille Camerounaise</i> , Poetry
Lawrence Free State High School, KS . . . . .	Mary Katherine Shultz, <i>Writing as an Act of Rebellion</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Loudoun Valley High School, VA . . . . .	Carleigh Leavitt, <i>I Look Like My Mom</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Lowell Senior High School, IN . . . . .	Vincent Perez, <i>The Bodies</i> , Fiction & Drama
Maquoketa Valley, IA . . . . .	Amaya Hunt, <i>Burden of a Blessing</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Norfolk County Agricultural High School, MA . . . . .	Jessica Desrosiers, <i>Chronic</i> , Poetry
Norman High School, OK . . . . .	William Madden, <i>Him</i> , Poetry
North Star Academy Washington Park High School, NJ . . . . .	Jessica Rosado, <i>Latinidad</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Northampton High School, MA . . . . .	Madeline Raymond, <i>Asking Price</i> , Fiction & Drama
Oconto Falls High School, WI . . . . .	Kayle Hines, <i>The King's Assassin</i> , Fiction & Drama
O'Fallon Township High School, IL . . . . .	Kate Wexell, <i>how high is the water?</i> , Poetry
Parkway Central High School, MO . . . . .	Ellis Brown, <i>Natural Anxiety</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Patrick F. Taylor Science and Technology Academy, LA . . . . .	Anna Do, <i>The World Outside</i> , Fiction & Drama

## HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
Pennsbury High School, PA . . . . .	Anika Koul, <i>The Chicken Story</i> , Fiction & Drama
Port St Lucie High School, FL . . . . .	Sophia Perafan, <i>My Personal Vendetta in a Man's World</i> , Poetry
Raritan High School, NJ . . . . .	Emily Moran, <i>The Colors She Was</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Riverwood International Charter School, GA . . . . .	Nyla Ward, <i>Pigments</i> , Poetry
Rockford Senior High School, MI . . . . .	Natalie Hilliker, <i>Flight of the Scarlet Macaw</i> , Poetry
Sam Barlow, OR . . . . .	Jaden Bales, <i>Born Selfish</i> , Spoken Word
San Pedro High School, CA . . . . .	Kearstin Bell, <i>The world is NOT what it used to be.</i> , Poetry
Sharon High School, MA . . . . .	Dana Blatte, <i>Reconstruction</i> , Fiction & Drama
Sherwood High School, MD . . . . .	Noa Tepper, <i>One Half</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
South High School, CO . . . . .	Michelle Gosselin, <i>A New Book</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Standley Lake High School, CO . . . . .	Rhianna Dains, <i>Things I've Noticed About the World</i> , Poetry
The Urban Assembly School for Law and Justice, NY . . . . .	Zoë Singleton, <i>The Voice of Change</i> , Fiction & Drama
Thousand Oaks High School, CA . . . . .	Renee Fournier, <i>Because the Tar Wouldn't Melt</i> , Fiction & Drama
Timber Creek High School, FL . . . . .	Tobie Chan, <i>Cash Register</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Walt Whitman High School, NY . . . . .	Gabriel Gonzalez, <i>Second Chance</i> , Fiction & Drama
Walter Payton College Preparatory High School, IL . . . . .	Surya Newa, <i>The Visitor</i> , Fiction & Drama
William H Hall High School, CT . . . . .	Anastasia Haubrich, <i>The Voices in My Head</i> , Fiction & Drama







# *Sagar Gupta*

POETRY

## **Creative Writing Mantra:**

*There are no boring stories, only boring storytellers.*

## **My Hobbies:**

Playing volleyball or table tennis, listening to music,  
hiking, annoying my twin brother.

**College I Packed Up For:** Georgia Institute of Technology



# *Kayla Xu*

FICTION & DRAMA

## **Creative Writing Mantra:**

*Use words like a paintbrush to bring scenes alive with emotion and heart.*

## **My Hobbies:**

Singing, badminton, tennis, art, coding, creative writing.

**College I Packed Up For:** Princeton University



## *Ife Martin*

SPOKEN WORD

### **Creative Writing Mantra:**

*I write for myself. I have to remind myself I am not writing for accolades or praise. I am simply writing to express my voice and hope my story resonates with others.*

### **My Hobbies:**

Outside of writing poetry, I love to act, travel, try new foods, and watch Korean dramas.

**College I Packed Up For:** Howard University



## *Eva Martinez*

PERSONAL ESSAY/MEMOIR

### **Creative Writing Mantra:**

*Write often, and eventually write well.*

### **My Hobbies:**

Outside of writing, my hobbies include singing, playing guitar, baking, and reading.

**College I Packed Up For:** Vassar College



# *Arianna Steadmann*

NYC ENTRANT

## **Creative Writing Mantra:**

*What else?*

## **My Hobbies:**

Playing the violin and piano, reading, and playing soccer.

**College I Packed Up For:** Dartmouth College

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“You are lost in a sea of language, of prefixes  
and suffixes that make your head spin.”

—Eva Martinez



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## First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

PERSONAL ESSAY / MEMOIR

# Proud

*By Eva Martinez*

Valley Stream North High School

It's October 3rd, 2015; you are sitting in your room taking an "Am I Gay?" quiz from *Buzzfeed*. You are crying. Your lips tremble, and your voice has been lost to sobs. It's something close to three in the morning. You are not crying because of the results; you are crying because there are none.

Like some magic 8-ball from Lucifer himself, the test has told you that it is up to you to determine your identity. You are someone who lives in a world of memorizing answers and rote learning. Your parents taught you how to think critically about art, music, religion, politics, and all the other big words adults like to use. Still, they never taught you how to think critically about this part of you. You suspect they never had to.

You're too scared to Google anything. You don't want your mom to see your search history. So you let the questions fester. They burn into your soul with a fervor you never knew was possible.

You would like to say that the burning hurts you. That the pain shapes memories and decisions, or it informs some greater understanding of the universe around you.

It doesn't.

Instead, it sinks down into the shade of who you are becoming. If your eyes linger too long on the pretty woman on the magazine cover, who would blame you? You try to convince yourself that it's just because you don't know her name. This will not be the last time you fail to convince yourself.

You know that there are words for people like you. You watch the *Obgerfell v. Hodges*'s decision live on TV. Your mother smiles and says, "good for them," and that is that. You do not tell her that you feel like crying; she does not ask why you are smiling so strangely.

You wonder what it must feel like to dance in the sea of colors you see on the streets of DC. Your dad smiles and then changes the channel; he wants to catch up on the Mets game. The images of rainbows large enough to swallow the capitol building are tattooed onto your synapses.

Later, you see the first gay couple to be married in New York on *Say Yes to the Dress*. You sit quietly, waiting for a comment from your grandma. The comment never comes.

Once, you will creep up to your parents' bedroom door. It is 6:30 on a Saturday evening, and you will open your mouth to speak. The air around you will still for a moment; this is the first time in your life silence slips its greedy hands over your lips. It will not be the last.

It will take you two years to find a space where thoughts like yours seem normal. You know better than to discuss it with your friends at the time, so you turn to the internet.

Suddenly there is an explosion of life. There are words to refer to every type of person you could ever meet, and someone is always making more. The words scare you. There are too many, and they all hold so much weight.

You are lost in a sea of language, of prefixes and suffixes that make your head spin. The riptide pulls you out to sea, and you are assaulted by a barrage of letters, all jumbled to become one infinite black ocean. You know nothing of who you are and where you will go. Here, you cannot breathe water or air. Sink or swim, you will not survive.

Until you do.

You survive because the water is only as lonely as you make it out to be. If you sink, you will find mermaids with tails that glitter like oil slicks. If you swim, you see ships with stories of every place you could ever know.

Survival is ingrained in you, so you continue to survive. When you are done visiting mermaids, and the sailors have run out of stories. They may ask you a question or two. They simply wonder how it is precisely that you define *you*.

You still don't have an answer to that question. You expect the worst; you have visions of teeth and talons. You expect to be sent off the plank. Instead, you are granted kindness. They don't know who they are either.

They tell you that this ocean is for all of us who don't know. You are shocked that the "us" includes you; it doesn't feel wrong, so you stay.

You learn to tie knots, and you learn to navigate using the stars. You know how to grow your own tail now, and the murky waters, once terrifying, now feel like home.

With joy, you tell a sailor this. You see the sadness in his eyes when he tells you, "that means it's time to leave." You don't want to leave. You have just found warmth in a murky black ocean. You had just learned to sail this ship, and now you are forced to chart a new course.

You wave goodbye to the friends you made. You don't know if you'll ever see them again. One of them shouts your name, but just as you turn to face them, a wave crashes in your vision. There is no time to be sentimental now; you must keep yourself afloat.

You take your map and plan your route. It is only when your boat touches land that you realize where you are. You are home. You are home with new scars and new memories, but this is still home. You ask your dad if the Mets won last night and your mom if she wants to go book shopping. For a second, everything is normal. You did not just walk off a boat from a magical sea. Your hair has not grown, and you have not changed.

As the seconds pass, though, any sense of normalcy shatters. Your mother squints and asks about the strange flag on your ship. Your dad tells you not to move. Your parents have always been good with words, and the confession they drag from you is sharp and messy like broken shells washed too far onto the shore.

Yet, they collect these broken shells and press them together in their

palms. They tell you that you are loved, no matter who you happen to be in love with. Just like that, the cracks in the shell begin to fade. They are not fixed, they are still brittle, but they begin to heal.

Oh, what healing will do. No longer will you drown in waves of words too niche for how you feel, nor will you struggle to explain why your gaze lingers on the pride displays at Target. You will still be awkward and messy, and you will cry too much over silly things, but that's growing up.

You are happy now with who you have become. You would like to think that 10-year-old you would be satisfied too. She deserves to be happy. She deserves to love herself in the way you do now. You are so far away from where this story began and yet still so far away from its ending. You no longer strain against the weight of your own fear. You are strong. You are one drop of water in a sea of color, but here, you are home.

You have survived through four long years of inner turmoil for this day. It has been exactly four years and four days since the *Obgerfell v. Hodges* decision. In that second, you realize how light you feel, no longer bogged down by the heavy questions in your soul. You have grown up, and you are no longer worried about precise definitions. You are loved by your family and friends, and you might just love someone too. Nobody cares who exactly that is. Your friend is next to you; you giggle as he smacks a rainbow heart sticker onto your forehead.

It is June 30th, 2019; you are somewhere in downtown Manhattan, and you are laughing. You are waving a rainbow flag that your parents bought for you amongst a crowd of others. You hear music start playing, and then you are dancing. You don't have to wonder anymore how those people in DC felt four years ago. You know it now too.

You stand with your shoulders back, laughing and dancing. You smile at the sea of color surrounding you, and your mom catches a photo of you dancing, flag in hand. You are strong here. You are safe here. You are a part of an "us" larger than yourself. You are crying again, but this time you are happy.

You are *proud*.



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“And we’re questioning if the right to live  
is a luxury.”

—Ife Martin

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## First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

SPOKEN WORD

# A Letter to Dr. King

*By Ife Martin*

West Bloomfield High School

Dear Martin,

3 score years ago, a great American,

In whose symbolic name we stand today

Declared he had a dream

A dream that swelled the chests of his people

And sparked a fire in their eyes

A dream that inspired generations

But Dr. King,

What's a dream if you can't make it reality?

It becomes a fairytale

Stories lost to time etched into our bones

Buried with broken bodies

Burdened on stolen land

Where strange fruit still hangs from west coast trees

And we're questioning if the right to live is a luxury

It's not up to me to save

Those who put holes in our ship  
Our cries for help are seen as rioting

The world takes so much  
And it's still adding on fees  
Mama told me that nothing in this life is truly free  
I should have listened

I wish we would have listened in history,  
That way it wouldn't repeat itself  
But history is written by the victors

And we can barely win an Oscar  
We can barely win an election without an insurrection  
And somehow we still sharing the blame  
So, what are we supposed to do now

Violence isn't the answer, peace sure ain't working  
And unlike everyone else, we can't pretend like it doesn't exist  
Delete it from our timeline and change our profile pic

When did you realize you were living more than just a movement?  
When your insistence became a fight for existence?  
When these rights we long for, civil or unalienable,  
Are the same things keeping me up at night

When did you have time to dream?  
I'm sure you were plagued with the same nightmares as me  
Where darkness steals your breath,



Sound lost in the vacuum of space  
And sweat beads on your skin as if it will somehow protect it  
Not realizing it was the very thing that makes you a threat

Why does it still make me a threat?  
What good's the content of my character if it's colored by my skin?

If I'm not as white as the castle's ivory walls  
I'm formidable comme la Porte de Non Retour  
I'm formidable like the Door of No Return

I'm formidable like the last sight you see as you're being stolen from  
your home  
Invoking fear with my mere presence

Doctor, how did you find time to dream?  
When they force me to stay woke  
I'm pressured to educate my oppressors,  
I'm not allowed to get rest  
This sacred time my body needs to survive  
Is now an act of resistance

Dr. King, I want to see your dream  
We've come so far . . .

I mean, we've come so far, right?

Then why is everything we do seen as wrong?  
We tell them "We're thugs cause The Hate U Give"  
They still think it's a work of fiction and a Tupac song

We're bashed in the media and targeted in the streets  
From the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire  
To the curvaceous slopes of Cali

Dr. King, ask Langston  
What happens to a Dream Deferred

How it dries up like a raisin in the sun  
How it festers and breaks down  
Like a weary mother carrying the world on her shoulders  
You see what this dream deferred has made us shoulder

We've faced bullets and whips  
Fire hoses and tear gas  
Dogs and tanks aimed at empty palms gracing the sky

But we keep trying  
Streets flooded with tears and blood

Our voices filling the sky, collecting over storm clouds  
Hoping that one day the change we speak will rain down upon us

So Dr. King, thank you for this dream  
But it seems that "one day" you hoped for is yet to come  
And glory only belongs to common legends

Your dream isn't dead  
Because we are the future, expanding beyond an American Dream  
We got the world to join our fight

Opening eyes to our harsh reality  
And shining light on our greatness

Like that freedom song goes  
This little light of mine  
I'm gonna let it shine

Let it shine  
Let it shine  
Let in shine

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“I was devouring books since before I lost  
my baby teeth ravenous for distant lands  
and wise dragons that spouted proverbs”

—Sagar Gupta

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## First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

POETRY

# Conversation Starter: How is Your English So Good?

*By Sagar Gupta*

Thomas Jefferson HS for Science and Technology

you see, i was devouring books since  
before i lost my baby teeth  
ravenous for distant lands and  
wise dragons that spouted proverbs  
washed it all down with warm onyx ink  
and drowned in the mildew and saccharine  
of aged leather and wood pulp  
i grew up watching WordWorld and Sesame Stre—

*but you speak so well! where are you from?*

oh, you mean how is *my* english good?  
i was born and raised on the east coast  
lived in northern virginia all 16 years  
so i don't have the southern drawl  
that my kindergarten teacher had  
(sometimes she mixed her i's and a's)  
anyways i pick up new words from

cheesy rom coms & sunday crosswords  
& the Shakespeare we analyze in school  
my friends and I make flashcards  
to study for grammar quizz—

*but where are you really from . . . like . . . where are your parents from?*

yes, my parents speak english too  
they were taught it in school just like us  
i picked up hindi from dinner table banter  
but it felt clunky and awkward in my throat  
carved Himalayan contours in mouth  
uncharted, yet to be mapped with tongue  
and so i never bothered repeating it back  
instead i worship taylor swift and bruno mars  
fill voids with their autotuned soliloquies  
learn of heartache and young love  
belt out each lyric like it's gospe—

*wow i didn't know they spoke english there.*  
*and you don't even have an accent!*

actually, it's the second most spoken language in india  
but don't take it from me  
take it from my grandfather  
who sees the scarlet *colour* of his ancestor's blood

staining pale british hands where you and i  
see the same scarlet color and picture Target bullseye  
take it from his father  
who hid for his life in the hollow of a drum  
only a child when they descended upon his village  
so no, i'm not proud of my english  
of these force-fed diphthongs and steamroller fricatives  
i'm not proud of a choice i didn't get to make

but please, no need to be impressed  
i'm just playing by your rules

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“The suspense invigorated her; it made  
her feel like she was truly alive.”

—Kayla Xu



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## First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

FICTION & DRAMA

# Chasing Memories

*By Kayla Xu*

Scripps Ranch High School

Nai-Nai's eyes crinkle like a sleepy cat's as I rub shampoo into her hair. She tugs on my arm. "Yin-lan, where have you been? You haven't visited me in so long." Her chapped lips stretch into a pout. *Crack.* A rogue drop of blood runs down her chin, then blossoms into a Georgia O'Keeffe poppy as it melds with tepid water. I sigh and empty the tub into the sink. Two streams of water flee from the rim, bleeding into each other like the colors of sunsets. For a moment, I stand there mesmerized, flashing back to when Nai-Nai and I skipped rocks at the beach: her face cast in the pink glow of the horizon, our yells to each other lost in the roaring wind. Back then, the tides drank in all of my confessions without a word of protest. But, they never told me they had a price. I reach out, smoothing the wrinkles around Nai-Nai's eyes. She looks up at me, foam clouding her obsidian eyes, ebbing and flowing like those fluctuating tides. I close my eyes and turn away. I don't tell her that my name isn't Yin-lan.

Half a lifetime ago, Nai-Nai was born into blistering sunlight and rice paddy fields, the only girl in a family of six boys. Her mother labored for hours upon her birth—burlap sheets soaked in blood, the gasping breaths of a dying woman echoing weakly off mud walls. She instructed her three-year old son to suffocate the baby. But in a stroke of luck, Nai-Nai's aunt came by that day. She rescued the purple-faced baby muffled under a blanket *and* an upside-down stool, somehow, still stubbornly clinging on to life by a fraying thread. As Nai-Nai grew up, she wore her father's patience down to the same

thread, stretching his limits with her wild flights up tree branches, tongue sticking out defiantly, a pair of bony legs swinging off the sides like a ticking pendulum.

On dewy mornings, Nai-Nai let the family's cow loose into the plains. She'd pull his head down by his front horns and scramble onto his spotted back. Hours later, she'd tumble onto the soft grass, eyes tightly shut in peaceful sleep, a creased book flung a few feet away. She claimed both the sky and the ground as her own, but fate refused to let her get away with it. Eleven years old, she burned with a high fever that would plague her health for decades. For ten days and ten nights, she fought insanity with nothing but sheer willpower. She saw her dead grandmother by her bed, brushing off the strands of wet hair plastered across her forehead. *Be like water, my love*, the puckered mouth rasped. *A steady stream of water can pierce through the toughest slab of stone*. On the mosquito tarp above her bed, ghostly figures danced about in a frenzy, their faces turned toward the sky. Their arms flailed about in perfect synchrony, reaching for the elusive hand of God. Fat raindrops twitched on their slithering tongues. They shivered as they fell onto the cracked mud floor.

We're watching a war film, Nai-Nai's favorite movie genre. She was a child during World War II, so she remembers little. Yet, she said she had always been attracted to the meaningless profundity of war, although it was paradoxical. The suspense invigorated her; it made her feel like she was truly *alive*.

The light from the TV screen is fuzzy at the edges, drowning in a sea of darkness. Nai-Nai's hand pats mine to the rhythm of the pattering rain in the scene. I curl by her side, pretending I'm six again, lying beside her and falling asleep to her even breaths. Up and down, up and down. On the screen, a soldier falls, his blood mixing with the pouring rain. His green cap tumbles onto the ground and lies forlorn in the lamplight. His lover runs to him in tears. She bends down close to him and listens to his last words. "You must . . . deliver this to the commander." Nai-Nai squeezes my hand, eyes misted over with tears. I hand her a tissue, eyes passive.

"Nai-Nai," I say softly, "Do you think his sacrifice was worth it?"

She pauses to consider. The tears dry on her sunken cheeks. "I

don't know. In our lives, there will always be something that swallows us whole. Love, patriotism, anger, what have you." She waves her hand in the air like she's perusing through invisible scenes of someone's life. "But when we die, it's all gone. I think that maybe it'd be like falling into a kaleidoscope the size of the moon, becoming one of trillions of tiny plastic shards. It'd hit you then that we're all just a smudge of ink on a yellowed page. That the creation of the human race was in the careless flick of fate's wrist. Maybe today, fate regrets it." She scoffs, then sways unsteadily. Her eyes scrunch into crescents, but they're clearer than they have been for a long time. "What kind of society do we live in for war to be just another page in the newspaper?" She waits for a response, but I'm silent, thinking of the photographs of Syrian refugees in *Times* magazine. I see their gray faces and lifeless eyes, becoming one with the smoke-filled sky. The picture of their willowy figures slouched against inscribed boulders and broken stones burns itself into my mind—a vision of ruins upon ruins. I imagine myself there, clothes torn and hanging loose from emaciated shoulders, choking on dust . . . I shiver, even though the heat is on.

Nai-Nai doesn't notice. "When I die, put me somewhere nice. Surround me with so many trees that I get sick on all the fresh air. But not so many that sunlight can't get through. I still want to feel a little warmth on this old skin."

I shake my head. "It's too early to say that. You have the heart and appearance of a 29-year old, Nai-Nai. Too much energy for an old woman."

"Ah . . ." Nai-Nai beams, but she coughs to hide it. She wags a finger at me, pretending to look stern. "Don't you try to sweet-talk an old woman. You know we believe in things too easily."

"And when I die, don't you cry for me either." She makes a disgusted face. "You look so ugly when you cry. Your swollen eyes and splotchy red face are not the sight I want to see at my funeral." Nai-Nai bursts out into a buoyant fit of laughter, a little crazy and a little wild, but that doesn't make me love her any less. We're silent as the ending credits roll.

Chopsticks clink against a cracked brown table, digging into mounds of brown rice. I shift in my chair, fingers tracing the edges of

a stain, the only remaining trace of seven-year-old me's fascination with the flow of honey from a bottle. Now that I think of it, I guess I was a romantic by nature—always too easily swept off my feet by sweet gestures and saccharine lies.

I feed Nai-Nai a spoonful of rice porridge. It dribbles down the corners of her lips. I scramble for a napkin to dab it off. Nai-Nai smiles at me, almost angelic, if not for the gap between her two front teeth and the brown marks that wrap around them like barbed wire. I scrape my bowl absentmindedly. Push it to the center.

"I'm done. I'm going to get some water real fast, and then I'll be back." I know she doesn't like being alone.

Nai-Nai screeches from behind me. I turn back towards her, hairs rising on my neck.

"What's wrong?"

"Ni zen me mei chi wan?" Why haven't you finished eating? She taps the edge of my bowl with her chopsticks, a crease appearing on her brow. She only changes to Chinese when she lapses.

I stride back to her hurriedly and smooth the wrinkle out with my fingers. She claws at me blindly, her eyes unfocusing. "Who are you?" She shoots up from her chair, the floor creaking beneath her.

"Why are you in my house?" She grabs a frying pan from the counter and points it at me defensively. Her mouth stretches into a taut line. I sigh. Not this again.

"I'm Yin-lan. Your daughter." I say slowly, careful not to make a sudden move. The faded pink scars on my arm demonstrate the consequences of that well. I step towards her slowly, my throat constricting. "We were just eating. You were telling me not to waste food." I gesture to the table. The two bowls of rice porridge, one empty and one partially full, are silent proof of my words. See? Just two people peacefully eating dinner, they say.

Nai-Nai relaxes and sits back down again. "Yin-lan." She murmurs to herself. "I remember." She bites on a strand of peppered hair and looks up at me like a child, caught red-handed while stealing a cookie from a closed jar. "I'm sorry. I must have forgotten." She says sheepishly, nervously straightening the hem of her shirt. I try to hide my involuntary sigh of relief.

I spoon porridge into my mouth, my stomach wearing thin at the seams. I'm certain that someday, I'll burst into a pile of honeycomb shards, my blood running into golden streams of sticky, translucent honey. My skin would peel off in wrinkled layers, just like that of those nuclear scientists at Chernobyl. After I watched that series, I was convinced that it was how the world would end. Not with a bang, but with a whimper, the precious skins of a trillion people all sliding off like cheap nylon socks. Black, white, yellow, pretty, handsome, ugly—those words would all become worthless. We'd all be exposed. I'd be laughing until my last breath. "I knew (insert name) was evil! Just look at this skin, rotting from the inside out." I keep eating, but only taste cardboard.

Nai-Nai places her chin in her cupped palms, elbows resting on the table. "Zhe bu jiu hao le ma." That's better. I smile in appeasement, but it feels more like a grimace. Nai-Nai doesn't notice; she's already off in her own world.

"Remember when you were little? I barely had enough money to feed you three, especially after your dad passed away." I nod, playing along.

"Your brother would always complain about the smells that came from our neighbors' houses. He would ask me, 'Why do we have to eat rice and vegetables all day while they roast meat?'" She traces the lines on my palm. Her fingernails leave small indents behind, like afterthoughts.

"I yelled at him to get out of the house if he continued to look down on our family," she tsks slowly, "but then I stood for an entire night selling movie tickets to earn a dollar and buy some meat. The night I brought it home, your brother's eyes were glued to his bowl. He devoured every bit of it. Even licked the oil off the bottom." She places her palm on the side of my face. "For us, fruits were always a delicacy. When you were sixteen, you clutched an apple like it was the most precious thing in the world." She sighs. It sounds like the puff of a faraway train, lost in the Chicago fog. I stare at my reflection in her cloudy eyes, then turn my head away. I could never take her place. Nai-Nai's hand falls away.

"I owe you all so much," she whispers.

I close my eyes. "No, you don't. You gave us all you had." My voice

trembles at the end. I desperately want her to know that's what I've been wanting to say for a long time. But in the end, I was too late.

Nai-Nai frowns. She blinks rapidly, my image rippling in her hazy eyes. Could this be . . . ?

But, the moment passes. I slump in disappointment, making up some flimsy excuse to go outside. I stand out in the snow, never feeling as lost as I do now. She can't remember me or anything after her husband passed away, three decades ago. Nai-Nai had always said I looked like Yin-lan: her youngest daughter, forever lost in a building fire. I was born the same year she died. They said if not for my birth, she might have given up on life. The baby, born of ashes and smoke, saved her. She made herself forget by spoiling the little girl rotten. That time that little girl came home crying, she told her that she would beat the hell out of the person who made her like that. She proceeded to stage a scheme to let that person taste the sting of humiliation (a can of itching powder, a swap of gym clothes, and voila). But what I will remember forever was when she grasped my shoulders and pinned me in place with her diamond-faceted eyes. She said she would always be here for me. I almost believed her.

I sprint aimlessly down the sidewalks. The streets blur around me. Snowflakes melt and run into my eyes, but I don't stop until I'm in front of the Cloud Gate. There's no one here. I run my hand along the smooth surface of the structure and walk under it. I look up. A raven-haired girl stares down at me from the curved surface. She's crying, mascara running down her face. She's tired of pretending to be someone she's not, for people who never cared about her. She's mourning all the lost chances to say things as herself, to the person who did care. I tear my eyes away from her and take a deep breath. Nai-Nai will worry if I don't get back soon.

I trudge back, melting snow seeping in through my sneakers. Maybe she doesn't have to remember me, as long as I remember her love—the things she did for the girl who walked down the school hallways in a pair of six-dollar corduroy shorts and cried at night because she so desperately longed to be someone else. *God, she looks like a boy. Just look at those clothes! And to think she believed she could be one of us. Those eyes—they're so small that you can't even*

*see them. I'll bet you five dollars that when she squints, they just disappear. What's with that dumb accent? Go back to where you came from.* She once thought that if she tried hard enough, she could change their minds. She had never baked anything before, but for them and him especially, she burned herself making brownies and cut up her fingers when chopping up apples for a pie. Nai-Nai teased her, "Who are you making this for? Who could possibly be so special that my little Hannah would be willing to do this all by hand?" She winked, a sly smile playing on her lips. "Ah, I know. Must be a boy."

I wish I could go back and tell that girl that none of them deserved her. I'd say to her, ignore the disarming smile of the boy you think you're falling for. Don't lose yourself in his sea-blue eyes. Push him away before he shows you that condescending smirk on a face that suddenly looked so unfamiliar. You thought there was finally someone who got you, the real you. He recited to you the Shakespeare sonnet that you loved—"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"—and that was all it took for you to let your armor fall. You thought he would save you from the abyss. But all along, he had only been their Trojan horse, meant to push you farther into the darkness. *Did you actually think I was serious? It was all just part of a dare. They were right; you can't be more lame.* It made you want to do exactly what they told you to—burrow your way back to China. But you can't and you won't. Because even though you'll feel sick for days, crying to Taylor Swift songs and naively wondering which part of it, if any, was ever real, you'll recover. You'll remember, every moment of every day, the hours absorbed into tiny words in large textbooks, wanting to make those decade-old sacrifices worth it. She gave away everything to bring you here, to give you a better future. The least you can do for her is make her proud. You'll tear up at the sight of her standing there at your graduation, pointing at you in your red robes, voice hoarse with excitement, "That's my granddaughter right there. She's graduating summa cum laude."

In the winters of the 1950s, Nai-Nai ran barefoot on crystallized snow, toes frostbitten when she arrived at school. She would sink her frozen feet into the nearby spring, certain that she was in heaven, if she ever believed in such a thing. Snowflakes tickled her eyelashes as she vowed to get a job in the city and finally escape the writhing

leeches that crawled up her legs as she bled into the flooded rice paddy fields, afraid to leave and afraid to stay. Decades later, on a blustery Chicago morning, I stand outside on the porch, Nai-Nai's hand-knitted scarf caressing my neck. The sound of Nai-Nai's slipper-clad feet pattering on the wooden floors slips through the cracks of the door. I rest my hand on the metal door handle, and then look back. The fog shifts in the distance, revealing a patch of city lights under a bright blue sky. The wind whispers of freedom, drying tears into new beginnings.





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“To you, it tastes like soft avocados, so ripe that the flesh slips out of the skin, and a hard, bitter winter melon, and maybe a little like plump raisins, so sweet your mouth waters when you finish.”

—Arianna Steadman

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## First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

NYC ENTRANT

# Food for Thought

*By Arianna Steadman*

Hunter College High School

If you split open my skull like a watermelon, or pried it apart like a pomegranate, you would find some delicious thoughts. Pulling the tissue like tender meat, you would nibble on some morsels of knowledge you found there. Oh! You would exclaim, I didn't know giraffes had purple tongues! (Or perhaps you knew that, and wrinkled your nose at the aftertaste of old news and let someone else have a bite.) In the left hemisphere of my brain, you would dine on my native English language with Mandarin phrases as a garnish. To you, it tastes like soft avocados, so ripe that the flesh slips out of the skin, and a hard, bitter winter melon, and maybe a little like plump raisins, so sweet your mouth waters when you finish. You don't like the taste; the unnatural words curl on your tongue. (Or maybe you do, because that's all you've ever tasted or because it reminds you of your mother's cooking and her smile.) You move over to the other half of my brain, and you think it looks like a chestnut, brown and wrinkly and sticky with sweetness. It doesn't taste like that to you, though, instead it's like the smoke that comes off fried dumplings, or the smell of wet newspapers you used to wrap fresh fish in. And you are confused, because this is no hearty meal. It is an elusive one, where the flavors are faint and slip down your throat so quickly you can barely taste them. The

reason is this: you have found the place where I keep my memories, like a little jar hidden away at the back of the pantry. You take another bite and feel sand sticking to your fingers, cool ice cream dripping down your hand and the hot sun warming your skin. You smell the perfume your grandmother used to wear, and feel the chocolate squares she made melting in your mouth, rich and sweet with an aftertaste of longing. You hear the crunch of gravel under your feet, and taste lemonade and the sweet and sour flavor reminds you of the girl with pigtails who sat next to you in every class at school. My memories are yours now, and you decide to take a few and leave the rest behind. Perhaps a young boy will come after you and pluck a memory of hope that dissolves like an airy meringue in his mouth, or maybe an old woman will rummage to find a memory of anger that makes her mouth burn with the taste of pineapple and charred toast. (Or maybe my mother will come with fluttering fingers and find my happiest memories with her, that will only taste like sorrow with bitter remnants of grief.) But now you are finished with my brain. What else is left to pick apart? You have saved the best for last, as one should do when eating a good meal.

Pluck the heart out of my chest like feathers from a goose. The golden egg must be cracked open, and you do so with care. Here is the true food that sustains the soul, steeped in my unfiltered feelings for centuries. You break open my heart, which splits apart like a gourd. Bring the bowl to your lips and taste my soup of emotions. This is not a mild soup, like the fleeting memories that wisped away. This soup is heady and overwhelming and scorches your mouth and fills your lungs with something you cannot define. (Although your brain cannot define it, your heart can. It is love.) You feel it sink into your bones, a

healing broth that restores and strengthens. Drink again. There is something under the surface, an underpinning of sadness and hope mixed together that is light and heavy in your throat all at once until you are forced to swallow and it bubbles in your stomach. That is the tricky thing about hope and sadness—they arrive together, but while hope longs to rise and flutter like a delicate, sugar-spun butterfly, sadness sits like a stone and melts into a thick molasses that makes you sink. While you ponder this juxtaposition, you take a third and final sip. It burns your throat, and, coughing, you realize that it is a lump of anger and jealousy and hatred that has not been mellowed by the other emotions, or even mellowed by time. This swallow of soup makes your eyes water and your lungs choke on smoke. The anger grips your brain with cold, piercing fury, the jealousy slips into your eyes and mouth and colors your vision and twists your words, and the hatred sparks a fire in your heart that burns and roars and cannot be put out. These emotions linger like an old sickness and leave scars where they have clung to life, to your life. You lift my gourd-like heart to your lips to drink again, desperate for anything else that can numb the fiery pain, like contentment or sleepiness or even hopelessness that would be a yawning black chasm to swallow you whole. But there is nothing left—you have drunk my heart dry, and it falls from your hands as you try to recover. But do not worry, you will recover. As the sky darkens to blackberry night and the stars gleam like oyster pearls, you will lie down on your back and take a few deep breaths to steady your own heart. And then, like you always do after a good meal, you will fall asleep with a belly full of food and a heart full of feeling.

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“Verses that carry the harmony amid a symphony of summer cruises become a capsule that delivers sweet reminiscences of melting twist-cones and wind-swept hair.”

—Amaya Hunt

## Burden of a Blessing

*By Amaya Hunt*

Maquoketa Valley

It is not often that you find yourself appreciating a moment while you are in it, nor coming to the realization that you are living in a memory. It is not till the snapshot of time has slipped away with the August breeze; it is not until the birds cease to chirp, drawing with them the laughter that curls from your lips; it is not until the moment the water recedes from beneath your feet. It is not until these minute moments of time that you realize your presence belongs to the past. It's upon this awareness that you awaken from the monotonous routines of daily life.

You make haste to encapsulate each moment with the soft brush of your eyelashes against one another; you embark on an endeavor to cast a net over a kaleidoscope of memories, vowing to hold each one close to your heart and remember it forever more. Verses that carry the harmony amid a symphony of summer cruises become a capsule that delivers sweet reminiscences of melting twist-cones and wind-swept hair. Rivers that roll through the cavities of the land beg of stories to be told, each of the turns in Mother Nature's veins breathing out recollections of sun-kissed cheeks and envelopes of warmth and water.

There are few who have the reward of living in the present and implanting memories upon every moment.

There are millions who have the relief of existing just to be—no fretting of forgetting, for they are not aware that they have anything to forget.

Then there are the unfortunate few, like myself, who can't seem to forget no matter how hard they try.

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My mother grew up as a lake rat, her dirty-blond hair highlighted by the dirty water of Lake Delhi. Her roots on the lake were planted deeper than the murk of the rock quarry that the lake flowed through, and no matter how far away from home she dared to venture, she felt her ties keep her in place. For even when we roamed the bluffs of Wyoming or scoured the sea floors of the Dominican, she would feel the Midwest close a fist around her body, tugging on her heart.

She would end the day gazing towards the horizon in the direction of home, her veins running cold as the water let her know it was time to return. If I am steady enough to be as still as the waters in the early mornings before the sun has even yawned, I can still hear her familiar admittance.

“The water is calling me.”

I have never been baptized before, nor do I ever foresee myself doing so. But on the day the Fates pushed my family in the direction towards the Holy Water of my mom’s past, I began to feel the familiar beckoning. I became purified by impure waters that caressed my skin, molding my body and soul into its memory.

Inside the hollow molds, memories of you began to take shape.

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I can no longer venture upriver against the currents to the quarry without the hollows of your laugh wafting through the trees, brushing glimpses of our past masquerades against my eyes. I see our little dingy of a boat, barely keeping itself afloat amidst the spirals of waves we have whirlpooled together in the middle of the endless abyss. I can still catch your words on the tip of my own tongue, the rounding and curving of your mouth imitated by my own as you called out, “How long until you think we can tip this thing?”

I had clung for all that was holy onto the side of the boat, feeling as if there were wings spreading themselves out in our wake, carrying the boat at heavenly speeds.



"Give it a couple more minutes, and I'll bet we'll be as good as gone!"

In the vividness of the moment, I had thrown my head back and whooped and hollered with the delight of a careless child. My nose had watered as the sky had darkened, the moon and her stars claiming another night in early May, eagerness for summer just on the horizon.

Looking back, as your laugh had cracked and cackled across the barrens of the rock quarry, I should have taken it as a sign for the impending storm just beginning to brew.

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I can no longer dodge the beams of the Hartwick Bridge, weaving threads of bubble blankets for the fish below without knitting memories of you into my mind. Almost like clockwork, the grey structure looms ahead just when I am least expecting, pointing towards the sky at a 45-degree angle, pointing me in the direction of something I can see but not quite reach. I see your hands point towards the bridge, your pointer finger (or as mom remembers it, "sausage finger"), begging me to take the dive off of the overpass with you.

"Why are you shaking so much, Amaya?" There had been an edge to your tone, a gentle roar informing me that I wasn't allowed to say "no." You had begun the expedition up rocky ledges, clambering towards the calling of the bridge.

Although I was never forced, I had still seemed to follow you everywhere as if I were a lost puppy just looking for direction. So I had lied through my teeth, feeling obligated to play my role as the partner-in-crime. "It's just anticipation, that's all," I had muttered, though a small part of me knew that this was going to be a story in the making, a moment that I had only seen lunatics in movies conquer.

When you had glanced at me out of the corner of your eyes, I was emblazoned by the golden lighting of your brown irises. Your dark hair had shimmered, and sun-kissed highlights illuminated themselves across your features; freckles popped and bleached hair flickered.

I can still see the moment you clambered atop the barrier of the bridge, the mid-June rays glimmering in a torrid wall behind you. I witnessed as you bore your own cross, spreading your palms to the sky and tilting your head up to meet the warmth of the sun.

I still relive the split seconds when you leapt, defying gravity by rising into the sky before hurdling to the water below. I would still swear that when your arms spread, I caught a fleeting glimpse of wings.

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I can no longer float, pretending as if I am a lily pad anchored in Snake Cove, without recollections of wasting away the offerings of July days at your side. I find myself slipping into a mold every time I pass this particularly wide yawning of the lake, the open span of Snake Cove beckoning me into a familiar hug. Your proclamations still ring clear in my ears, ordering me to waste away the days with you.

“Please tell me you don’t have to go to work today. You’re a child. You deserve to live a little.” Again, the sausage finger would point at me, scolding me to be less responsible.

“Floating in one spot like a dead fish is not living.” I had argued, but trying to reason with you once an idea had implanted itself in your head was like trying to ski without a rope in your hands—and we both knew how that ended.

So as the world began to fall apart amidst the rage of a pandemic, we had found ours beginning to come together. You and I slipped into a comfortable routine, our hours blurring into one long line of a kodak-encaptured summer. We didn’t even notice when June turned into July.

Located in the eye of a hurricane, all that we were aware of was the upheaval of the rest of the world as ours carried on as normal .

I would give my life over and over again, just to settle into the haven of lazy summer days at your side. I would give my life over and over again, just to find myself floating like a dead fish with you in Snake Cove again.

I know it’s quite awful to admit, but I have a creeping feeling of envy that you get to relive those moments.

I always felt as if the Fourth of July rose as the peak of the summer timeline, the day that everyone anticipated the most. The heat drove everyone to the lake in flocks, the chaos of the day spurring moments that would either be lost to notorious drunken stupors, or put on a pedestal until the time came to recall those infamous tales of “remember when . . .”

However.

I can no longer speculate this epitome of summer without your life flashing before my eyes.

For on the third day of the seventh month of the two-thousand and twentieth year, I traversed downriver on the treacherous waters with you to the Rock—to our spot.

In the delicate dawning of day, before the sun has even opened her arms for the world, I can still feel the heat of your eyes on mine as you had gazed at me, your tag-along. You glanced at the Rock, then back at me; then at the Rock, then back at me. I could sense that the overhangs beckoned you to climb the heights to its peak; they had urged you to be dauntless and take the leap back down to the rush of the lake. So as the boat rocked back and forth beneath our feet, dancing over the waves below, I became a bystander to your epitome.

The emblem that your voice had left on my heart, ears, and soul shall be with me for as long as I live.

“Amaya, are you coming with me?”

May I someday come to peace with my response.

“No.”

And so you had begun to climb.

For on the third day of the seventh month of the two-thousand and twentieth year, I sat back and bore witness to the last flourishes of your essence. I heard the barrage of propellers against liquid relief, mimicking the roar of a storm, and I felt a weight pull at my stomach, the pit of an awful feeling taking root.

Yet you climbed higher.

In the moments when I began to realize that something truly awful was impending, I watched you take up position on the cusp of the cliff. I watched you take stance on the cusp of your eighteenth year, spreading your arms wide to the world laid out in front of you, to the water ready to welcome you home below. In the slivers of seconds that followed, eons of my innocence and naivety were taken from the palm of my hand, and the world began to weep.

For the moment you spread your arms on top of the Rock, your wings had already begun forming. Your muscles contracted, carrying out their due-diligence and executing their crowning performance. I bore witness as you launched into the sky and buried yourself in the waters of the lake below.

For on the third day of the seventh month of the two-thousand and twentieth year, I was blessed with the burden of seeing the water kiss you on your cheek and call you home.

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As the world is coming together again, I find mine still falling apart.

I am patiently waiting for the day when I will no longer feel burdened with the weight of your memories, nor be swallowed by waves of sorrow that capsize under the density of your presence.

I envision a subsequent time when I may find the lake a place of comfort and all that I have before me, rather than a constant reminder of all that I have lost.

I imagine that you heard mother's words in your final moments under the gravity of the water above you, the blanket of water molding your soul into its memory for eternity. I imagine you heard her familiar words and admitted to their yearning.

I imagine the water whispered in your ear: "Teige, I am calling for you."



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“You look at the stars as if they are the most beautiful things You have seen in Your short life.”

—Evelyn Jesky

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## Honorable Mention

### POETRY

# On Being Blinded

*By Evelyn Jesky*

Ida High School

naïve child,  
you have so much to learn  
and some of the lessons will be  
unkind  
to say the least.

You spend all night gazing at the  
stars through the  
window, craning and contorting to see  
the constellations that lie  
beyond the window frame, and wake  
in the morning with  
circles under Your eyes.  
child, you're hurting yourself.

all through the winter, You pause  
by the back door and look  
up while the air numbs  
Your nose and the snow melts and  
seeps into Your socks  
and Your toes become so  
numb that You  
stumble.  
child, you're hurting yourself.

in the heat of high summer, the  
grass itches Your back and Your limbs  
become covered in bug bites while You lie  
in the yard in the dark.  
mother calls  
—come inside—  
and You do not listen.

You look at the stars as if they  
are the most beautiful  
things You have seen in Your  
short life.  
there is wonder in your eyes, and we  
are worried.



the days become  
months fade to  
years,  
and now You run from the  
cold and You complain of the  
heat and Your window is  
closed  
firmly covered by curtains  
at night.  
child, we warned you.

You do not stay awake  
to look out Your window  
anymore.  
You do not step out in the cold  
to watch the stars.  
You do not lie barefoot in the yard  
to look  
anymore.

girl, you're hurt.

when did you stumble?

we did not see it.

was it when it became torture  
to rise from bed  
after staying awake too long

or when it became impossible  
to walk when the snow froze  
Your feet to the ground

or when sleep did not come  
because the bites hurt too badly?

we told you that you would end up  
hurt and yet you did not  
listen.

You stayed  
awake and  
You stayed  
in the cold and  
You stayed  
in the heat while mom called.

now mornings are torture

and You cannot walk

and sleep does not come

and it's Your fault.

whose else would it be.

once there was wonder in Your

eyes but now they are

dark

woman, your eyes do not

see.

You know,

but You do not know

when they became

Blind

because You can't remember when

You fell

either.

---

“She’d attached a TARDIS-shaped charm to the keyring with the joking hope that it would be able to teleport to her whenever she needed it, but really, it reminded her of her father.”

—Dana Blatte

## Reconstruction

*By Dana Blatte*

Sharon High School

The house tried to eat Nomi every day.

When she woke to the sun in the window above her desk, she also felt teeth circled around her pale wrists and ankles like manacles. It wasn't painful—more like the affectionate gnawing of a cat seeking companionship—though Nomi peeled back her sheets sticky with that week's heatwave to display pinkish indents lined up on her skin, matching the teeth of an unnamed jaw.

Nomi dragged herself to the mirror. She rubbed ointment on her wrists and ankles, softening the marks. The house was just lonely, she told herself, though that was its own fault, and Nomi would never fully forgive it for swallowing her parents.

"I'm going out," she informed the wall, which was still hot pink from her childhood. At sixteen, she had contemplated painting it the color of a winter breeze. She even drove to Benjamin Moore to compare paint samples and mounted the contenders on the walls. Then the walls had shuddered and seeped around the samples, absorbing them. So, Nomi kept the pink. And the childishly aesthetic fairy lights, and the floral mezuzah crooked on her doorframe, and the ceramic flower fairy sculpture she had painted for her tenth birthday and named Star. The house wanted her to remain young. Often, Nomi did too. But she was a high school senior now. She refused to be held prisoner any longer.

Nomi's first problem, however, was that she couldn't locate her keys. She'd attached a TARDIS-shaped charm to the keyring with the joking hope that it would be able to teleport to her whenever she

needed it, but really, it reminded her of her father. Of first-edition comic books and mugs emblazoned with physics puns. When he would blare the sci-fi channel until her head turned to static.

Nomi's second problem was that she suspected the house had hidden her keys on purpose.

"House," Nomi said sternly, tapping her foot and crossing her arms. She wended around the front floor, ignoring the dishwasher's red light beeping at her to be emptied, the napkins limp with sauce from Thai takeout two nights ago, and the compost bin that hadn't been cleaned in more than a week. "House!" Nomi shouted, slapping her palm to the wall.

The wood rippled like the face of a pond.

Nomi shuddered even though she had been the one to wake it. She would never grow accustomed to its sentience.

"Keys," Nomi demanded. The wood burbled. "Keys, or I'll storm out, sell this place, and leave the new residents to prise apart the secrets in your belly."

They both knew how the outside world worked—Nomi from shying from it, the house from eavesdropping on the news channels Nomi watched religiously to remind herself she was only one of many problems in the world. Besides, the police wouldn't accuse the house of murder when they peeled the floorboards and gagged at the protruding bones. They'd pepper Nomi with questions. Do you live alone? Are those your parents? Did you do this to them?

Nomi hated questions. But the house loved Nomi in the same way a mother bird loved its offspring until they learned to emigrate. It didn't want new residents. It wanted Nomi. And a part of Nomi yearned for it back.

Finally, the house caved to her anger. A hole yawned in the center of the wall, silver gleaming from its pit.

Sighing, Nomi reached in, grasped the metal keyring, and yanked. The wall rushed upward, lapping at her still-fragile wrists.

"Shhh, shhh, it's OK," Nomi hushed as she wrested her arm free. The house was as possessive as Nomi had used to be with her stuffed animals. "I'm just meeting a friend. I have a friend, you know. But I won't be long."

The wood rustled—the house’s version of a sigh—but it subsided. Nomi walked out of the front door without a thank-you.

She slid into the driver’s seat of her father’s beat-up car, twisted the key in the ignition, and pumped the gas.

Nomi blasted air conditioning until goosebumps prickled her arms. Earning her driver’s license was one of the last milestones her parents had witnessed in her life, and she made sure to exploit the privilege. *I could make my threat real*, Nomi suddenly mused as she passed the ramp to the state highway. *I could drive into the horizon and the house couldn’t chase me*. She had her phone, a wad of cash stowed in one of four cup holders in the backseat, and an aunt who lived just a few towns over. Plus, Nomi could pocket a sizeable sum of money if she sold the house and transferred its emotional dependency to someone else.

But Nomi was a coward. She didn’t swerve onto the entrance ramp. Instead, when she braked at the dented stop sign erected at the end of the street, she skimmed the text message lighting her phone screen, remembering the other relationship tethering her.

CHIAMAKA: i’m parked. where r u?

There were no police cars perusing the intersection, so Nomi swiped to respond.

NOMI: coming. one min

For the past three weeks, Chiamaka had engaged in a military-grade method of attack that entailed sending Nomi requests to hang out every hour. Nomi had disregarded them all—people exhausted her—until Chiamaka threatened to implore her neighbor, the chief of police, to perform a wellness check. Nomi was a legal adult, but she couldn’t risk others burrowing through her belongings. If they tipped their weight on the wrong floorboard or toyed with the wrong off-kilter painting frame, the house would retaliate. It treated itself like a museum, a memory of when everyone inside had been alive, and it

saved no empathy for those who violated that sanctity. Worse, the police would realize that Nomi's parents had died quietly in the night and never left, that Nomi's aunt had never offered financial support, that Nomi couldn't even complete her college registration forms without pulling salt from her eyelashes.

The car behind her honked. A middle-aged woman with dark sunglasses erasing her eyes leaned out the window, her palm poised to trigger the sound again.

Nomi turned without checking either direction for oncoming vehicles. Cars packed the parking lot by the lake, but Nomi instantly recognized Chiamaka's. The bright pink and yellow flowers hand-painted on the hood made it near impossible to miss.

For a moment after she pulled into the spot, one wheel lodged over its faded white border, Nomi observed her friend as if she were a stranger. For example, Nomi hadn't confessed her inability to commit to college, nor had she requested to utilize Chiamaka's charismatic way with words when drafting—and promptly deleting—*Hello, I'm your niece and I exist!* emails to her aunt.

Chiamaka glanced upward. When her eyes alighted on Nomi's, her dark cheeks split into a smile like a cored plum. Stiffly, Nomi unbuckled her seatbelt and ran to hug her best friend.

"How are you?" Chiamaka asked softly as they stepped apart. Striped purple-and-white socks bordered her off-white high-tops. "Graduation already feels so distant."

Nomi shrugged. "The same." It came out without the edge of humor she'd planned. It was funny, though, since her current escape plan consisted of scrolling through course catalogs without registering for anything and stalking classmates' social media pages without interacting with them. College was infeasible. The house would miss her, and Nomi would miss lowering her ear to the floorboards and pretending she could hear her parents' skeletons chatting about the weather, or politics, or PTO scandals.

Chiamaka laughed as if Nomi's joke had succeeded.

The middle-aged woman with no eyes glared from a few spots over while she unloaded toy shovels and Ziploc bags of frozen green grapes from her trunk. Her children wobbled around her, paying no



attention to the two older girls.

"Let's sit," Nomi said uneasily. She led Chiamaka to the bench farthest from the throngs of beachgoers. Oak trees shaded them from view, dimming the vicious sun's heat. "How's your job?"

Chiamaka worked at a chronically understaffed Chipotle a few towns over. She hated her coworkers but still guarded the staff bathroom while they smoked. *I have to be loyal*, Chiamaka said when Nomi advised her to report them, and Nomi couldn't argue without being a hypocrite.

"I quit," Chiamaka admitted.

"What? Why?"

Chiamaka shrugged. "Does it matter? I quit."

"What about college?" Nomi asked, thinking of the messy stack of bills in her car. "Don't you need money?"

Chiamaka jabbed Nomi's shoulder. "You better not be thinking of giving me any charity. Save it for yourself. For college."

Nomi scuffed the sand with her shoe. "I'm not sure I'm going."

Chiamaka elbowed Nomi. This time, the gesture wasn't teasing. "Unacceptable. As your best friend—and sole friend, if we're being brutally honest—it's my responsibility to ensure that you get out of this small, insular town before it eats you alive."

Nomi snorted. She wasn't worried about the town, of all things, eating her alive. But she couldn't disclose that without disclosing everything else—the bodies, the walls, the masochism in continuing to sleep among them at night.

"Yeah, yeah, I will," Nomi lied. "Now be quiet so I can listen to the waves."

The waves in question sucked sand into their bellies every time they breached the shore. Young children shrieked like birds when they dipped their limbs in the water and realized that it was still cold, that nature didn't change as fast as their whims.

True to her word, Chiamaka bit her tongue, even when Nomi rose, wandered toward the flock of swimsuit-clad young children, and bent to submerge her hand in the water. It was cold.

"Nomi," Chiamaka called when Nomi froze and the children began to titter. "You're scaring the children." She said it lightly, but she was right. The suburban mothers jumped to herd their children back to the safety of their folding chairs and water coolers. They were probably already gossiping about the dark-haired teenage girl with no family. And look how she turned out, they would say, and they would be right too.

None of them loved her as the house did. Or as much as Chiamaka, who was standing next to Nomi and holding the shapes of words in her mouth so it looked like they were deep in conversation. And Nomi's parents, who had loved her before they loved others enough to sneak to them at night, and throw lampshades, and refurbish a second master bedroom. Before the house had started spotting the floor with holes, rows and rows of mouths, that eventually gulped them down before they could separate for good. Before they could ruin Nomi's life.

"Nomi," repeated Chiamaka. "You're scaring me."

Nomi startled. "Sorry," she stumbled. "I have to go. The house needs me."

She hurried past the mothers who didn't trust her and into the parking lot, where she hopped into her car and tore toward the exit before Chiamaka could even round the corner. A few seconds later, new text messages furiously interrupted her phone screen.

CHIAMAKA: nomi why did u leave??

CHIAMAKA: r u ok???

CHIAMAKA: pls stop driving i'm worried

Nomi didn't loosen her clutch on the steering wheel until she rolled into her driveway.

NOMI: sorry sorry i'm ok, just taking care of something

Then she powered off her phone and buried it in the pocket of her sweatpants. Next, Nomi studied the house. The blue paint flaked

beneath the front overhang, and the chrysanthemum bushes that marked the leftmost boundary of her lawn needed pruning. Nomi hadn't been caring for the house properly. No wonder it was angry.

Subtly, the front door shifted. Nomi squinted.

It shifted again, as if preparing to split open and scream.

Nomi sprinted out of the car. As soon as her feet ascended the three steps that fed the driveway to the front door, the door swept her inward, where she tripped to her hands and knees.

"I'm here," she shouted. Sand trailed behind her heels like bread-crumbs from a fairy tale. "You can calm down now." The floor did not calm down. A floorboard splintered off to snake around her ankle and bite her.

Nomi yelped and scrabbled at the wood, touching the pink-tender puncture marks that bloomed underneath. "That hurt," she said, a little shocked. She readied herself to take another step, but the floor coiled again like a viper. Nomi splayed her hands. "I know I mistreated you."

The floor smoothed, briefly calming. Before Nomi could contemplate moving deeper inside, the wood receded in the center, replaced by a dark pit that burrowed through the house's foundation.

Nomi gulped. She understood what rested at the bottom. She had marked the site of it with tape as soon as her parents died. Naively, she had planned to dig them out. But then Nomi busied herself with replacing the shattered lampshades and the upended bookshelves and the refrigerator of rotting food. She rode the bus to school, pored over homework at the marble countertop in the kitchen, laughed around Fruit Loops at Chiamaka's house in the mornings. Simply put, Nomi's life went on. Eventually, she stopped striving to save her parents at all, and she started blaming herself as much as she did the house.

"I don't want to look," Nomi whispered. She wanted to curl in the backseat of her car and cry. She wanted to order ice cream—French Vanilla, no sprinkles or sauce—with Chiamaka and confess.

Instead, the hole grew until its circumference grazed the four corners of the room. The couch with the missing beige cushion fell in, along with a reel of cheap string lights and Nomi's blotchy elementary

school family portraits. “I don’t want to look!” Nomi repeated, except it became a confession, a ragged “I don’t want to stay. Please, let me leave.”

The shadows exposed crisscrossed wooden beams and gleaming white lumps. Nomi couldn’t look but she had to. She did. “Thank you for protecting me then,” she managed despite the sour taste of her own lips, “but I am going to leave.” Nomi fumbled for the power button on her phone. As the house rocked to the side, almost tipping Nomi into the shadows, her fingers flew.

NOMI: chiamaka pls come get me rn. at home

Unlike Nomi, Chiamaka checked her messages frequently and reacted promptly. She was probably already speeding toward Nomi. Nomi had never been more grateful for her close-quartered neighborhood.

“What do you want?” asked Nomi. She lifted her chin, if only so that her gaze couldn’t accidentally flit to the hole. To her parents. “I’ll bury them properly. I’ll beg my aunt not to sell this place. I’ll visit whenever I visit Chiamaka. Can we make that deal?”

The house answered immediately. The floorboards knitted together, covering its innards, and it ceased its rocking, allowing Nomi’s legs to steady beneath her. Despite her horror, Nomi stretched her arm to stroke the nearest wall. The wood softened, thick and warm like honey.

Two fists pounded on the front door. “Nomi! Nomi, if you can hear me, let me in.”

“Let her in,” Nomi instructed the house. It obeyed so suddenly Chiamaka toppled through the entrance, landing on her bare palms with a hiss. Her brows furrowed.

“Are you OK? What’s the emergency?” Apparently, there wasn’t one. But Nomi couldn’t trust the house not to renege on its gentleness.

“Drive first, talk later,” gasped Nomi.

Wordlessly, Chiamaka stood, ran to her car, and coaxed the engine to life. Nomi lagged behind her, pausing halfway down the front steps.

"I'll be back once I figure some things out," Nomi promised over her shoulder. While Chiamaka fiddled with the car settings, Nomi patted the doorframe. Heat simmered in the wood. "Thank you. I know you were only trying to protect me. But they wanted to get divorced, and I didn't want them to, and then they died because I thought it would be easier than enduring them apart." Nomi felt lighter, even dizzy. The house was silent.

So, Nomi inhaled, pulled the door shut, and retreated to the car where Chiamaka waited with her black eyes wide and her lips pursed. Pop music streamed inaudibly from the speakers.

Nomi buckled her seatbelt and tapped three digits on her phone's pop-up keyboard. She had already figured one thing out: it was time to see her parents. What age—and Nomi's childish desire to preserve her family by any means necessary—had done to them.

Meanwhile, Chiamaka maneuvered onto the state highway, glancing briefly at Nomi as her phone whirled, the sound quickly breaking for Nomi to make her request.

"Hello? 911?"

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“I am from humble beginnings And  
triumphant endings.”

—Kiana Maria Roman

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## Honorable Mention

### SPOKEN WORD

# I Am From

*By Kiana Maria Roman*

High Tech High School

I am from a place you have never heard of.  
I come from a world unknown to your commoner ears  
I am a descendent of Puerto Rican blood and flesh  
Flesh that tore at the works of a poor government  
Hands that carried kids to America  
Hearts that broke in the face of gentrification  
I am from Colombian soil  
Its rich coffee beans sprout from the ground  
I am not from war and violence  
They may be a part of the air  
But I am not the air  
I am the soil it compresses into

I am nothing but loved  
My parents brought joy and family  
To kids who had no one but each other  
My rice grains and adobo\* seasoning fall into your palm.  
My eyes come from the honey that drips from your lips  
Honeycombs are more rigid than I could ever be  
My determination comes from the moon  
It rises when the sun throws it down  
Therefore I continue to get up after they push me down.  
I come from the coquis\* in the trees  
That you wish would shut the hell up

My caramelized skin comes from the sunset on days you wish  
lasted longer than 24 hours  
On days you wish you could see the sun for one more second.  
I come from the salsa beat you hear on Saturday nights when you  
hope you  
brought comfortable shoes because the night is still young.  
My lashes spring like the bedsprings in the mattress my  
grandparents and his  
siblings shared in the Caribbean heat.  
My heart comes from the love I have for some people  
I could write a book about everything I've been through  
But my heart knows that my time can be better spent.

My thick hair comes from stories upon stories of Spanish women who  
wanted more  
More rights  
More respect  
More understanding  
And my thick hair is done telling stories of oppression  
Because equality has been waiting for us.  
For far too long.  
And who knows how much longer it will tremble at its knees waiting  
for our arrival

I come from the manzanilla\* in your period relieving tea.  
I come from taking the long way.  
My blood doesn't know shortcuts  
Only long roads that lead  
To more obstacles.  
I am from a place you can never stay.  
My island has no water  
For your thirsty heart.  
Therefore,  
If you choose to stay  
It will be at your own risk.  
I come from hardworking veins.



I come from true love.  
A tale unlike Cinderella  
But a tale that comes from  
two kids in love that never looked back.  
I am from humble beginnings  
And triumphant endings.

I am not from a fairytale.  
I will not make your dreams come true.  
I will not kiss the frog and hope for a prince.  
I will have trials and tribulations.  
And I will not be your average princess.  
But I will be by your side  
Which is something not many average people can do.

I am the salt in the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea.  
I am not sugar.  
I will not be a sweetener to your Americanized coffee  
But rather a kick in your bland environment.  
I am from public speakers.  
You will never see me silent.  
If something bothers me, you will be the first to know.

I am not your perfect dream.  
I am the confusing nightmare that keeps you up at night.  
The one that makes you think more than you ever could,  
I will make you think.  
And I trust you with everything I've got.  
But always remember that I come from something you will never know,  
A world you will never see,  
And a universe you have yet to hear of.

**Key:**

Adobo: a form of seasoning

Coquis: national frog of Puerto Rico

Manzanilla: Chamomile

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“Does he know too? The way that bleeding  
isn’t always depleting? The rusty stains.”

—William Madden

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## Honorable Mention

### POETRY

## Him

*By William Madden*

Norman High School

September rain-soak, head  
soaked with  
the quiet heartbreak of a fantasy.

Smoke in his eyes, smoky eyes in  
a dirty mirror and  
Who told him to be  
so pretty?  
(He wears glory like a thrift store t-shirt, rank with  
hot-pavement passion,  
and sings—  
a growled, lip-curling melody  
dribbling down his chin,  
lyric cadence choked on the throb of  
queer heartbeat continuation.)

Does he know too? The way that bleeding  
isn't always depleting? The rusty stains

in my underwear  
are the life I've been denied:  
sitting stagnant, constant scar.

I didn't know he was me when he entered my mind,  
All conviction and schoolboy shorts,  
I said, *hello boy*. I know now

and it hurts. (In other words,  
he's my  
personal bloodstain—  
shattered glass  
camera flash  
stampede  
avalanche  
terror-driven speed  
towards a fire-bright freedom)  
And I can only  
apply pressure to the wound,  
hope not to bleed out  
before I arrive.



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“Wiping sweat from his brow, he glowered at the spiky green weeds threatening to push out of the ground.”

—Anika Koul

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## Honorable Mention

FICTION & DRAMA

# The Chicken Story

*By Anika Koul*

Pennsbury High School

The old man drove the head of the shovel into the dirt, breathing heavily through his mouth. The steady, dull thud of the shovel died in the dry summer air, barely floating past the perimeter of the field. Above his head, the midafternoon sun bled into the empty sky, scorching the land and his body so that his shirt clung to the sweat of his back. Sweat threatened to drip into his eyes, making it hard for him to grip the shovel. He spat hard into the dirt, cursing the dusty soil that spewed out pebbles with every blow of the shovel. It had once been his dream to live in such a place: situated high on the top of a gorgeous mountain, surrounded by the fruits of his labor and a beautiful family. But now . . . he ground his teeth. Calluses screamed bright red on his hands and his arms ached with the effort of driving the shovel into the dirt, again and again and again. It wasn't as though he cultivated crops for a dearth of profit, no, it had been years since he'd needed to scramble for a living. He liked to tell himself it was for the satisfaction of raising a living thing to maturity. More than anything, though, it was to stave off the boredom and solitude which encompassed the jejune life he lived.

Wiping sweat from his brow, he glowered at the spiky green weeds threatening to push out of the ground. He trudged toward the persistent green specks for a closer examination, sighing in exasperation. How was it that he had to break his back to coax food from the ground, yet weeds shot up from the driest soil like water from a spring? Throwing the shovel aside, he stormed out of the field. Shovel or not, the weeds would just come back up in a few weeks. He stalked off towards the shed, hoping that he still had some weed killer left. God forbid he had to take a trip down the mountain to buy some in town.

However, just as he reached out to grab the handle of the shed door, a sudden movement caught his attention. He snapped around, glaring around for the umpteenth disturbance in his miserable day. His eyes landed on the foulest creature he had ever seen: a plump chicken peered around at him, perched atop the barrels of his grain crop. The chicken blinked superciliously at him; the old man swore he could see the cocky grin in its beak. Its eyes unnerved the man—they seemed too much like human eyes, too large in its small feathery head, too soft and effeminate. Never breaking eye contact, the chicken lowered its head to eat another piece of grain. To eat his fresh grain was one thing, but for the chicken to eat it with alacrity while completely aware of the man's dissatisfaction . . .

In a blur of white fury, the old man surged at the chicken. The old man did not even feel the perpetual ache in his body; all he could feel was the desperate drive to wrap his hands around those infuriating white feathers, to rid himself of the aggravating creature once and for all. His gnarled, blistered fingers closed tightly around the chicken's fat, luscious neck as it squawked indignantly. Feathers flew in all directions and the chicken screamed against the old man's hands. With a frustrated grunt, the old man muffled the chicken against his shirt, trudging towards the house and ignoring the sharp pricks of the chicken's beak and talons.

There was an old fence by the house that squared off what had once been a chicken coop. The fence was near threatening to fall apart by the posts, yet it held as he threw the chicken into the enclosure and slammed the gate closed. The chicken hit the ground in an unceremonious burst of feathers before straightening up and eyeing the old man scornfully.

He slinked back to the shed, finding the weedkiller under a layer of cobwebs. As the sun made its way to the horizon, the old man kept spraying the field with a generous amount of poison, forgoing the shovel on the ground. He could hear it. The infernal clucking and faint tread of the chicken in its coop. He stood in the field, now shivering in the early evening air. It would be so easy. So easy to just lob the head off the chicken and eat it for breakfast. His mouth watered at the thought. How long had it been since he'd gotten a good bite of meat? Yet even when he finally resolved to turn in for the night, he merely glanced at the axe as he put away the shovel and empty canister of weedkiller. He just couldn't get the eyes of the chicken out of his head.



The man woke the next morning, a few peaceful hours of sleep under his belt. He smacked his lips wetly as he slowly became aware of a jostling outside his window. The sleepy fog in his head dissipated as he remembered the chicken, the stupid chicken with its too big eyes. Grumbling irritably, he rose from the comfort of his straw mattress, and shuffled to the window, finding the chicken strutting around the enclosure; when he poked his head out of the window, the chicken snapped its head and froze in its tracks, boring into the old man. It had the same, self-righteous, cocky look in its eyes as when it had eaten the man's grain. What an enigma. The man had successfully captured the chicken, and was about to prepare for its final defeat, what could the chicken possibly be so imperious about? Then the man's eyes fell on a small white object nestled in the dirt. The man blinked the crust out of his eyes to descry what seemed to be—no, it could not possibly be—an egg? His mouth hung open in a limp, toothless O. The chicken cackled from its corner in the pen, satisfied that it had given itself value.

The old man pursed his lips as he bent over the window sill and snatched the egg from the ground, grimacing at the filth that coated the shell. He rubbed it against the faded cotton of his shirt and he turned to walk into the kitchen. Turning the egg over in his hand, the old man hummed thoughtfully as he dropped a pan onto the old iron stove and turned the heat on. It would be foolish to kill the chicken for one meal if it could provide him a meal every day. In fact . . . the old man grinned to himself, cracking the egg into the pan with an angry sizzle. What better use could the chicken give than to provide him nourishment for the rest of its miserable life? With practiced ease, the old man turned the liquidy scrambled eggs onto a slightly greasy plate. The smell of cooked eggs filled the kitchen and the old man couldn't suppress a chuckle. What fortune had befallen him!

When the plate and pan were cleaned and drying by the sink, the old man hurriedly put on his work clothes and walked outside. The chicken paused in its strutting, peering at him reproachfully. The old man merely snorted and leered at the chicken. If she resented him for stealing her egg, well, that was too bad for her. He moseyed to his barrels of grain and grabbed a handful, letting a few glossy grains fall from the weathered folds of his palms.

The chicken watched him intently as he approached the gate. She

seemed to understand his intentions, because she scurried up to him and blinked up at him expectantly. He let the grains fall into a scattered mess on the soil and he watched as the chicken greedily cleaned the ground of the grains. What a stupid animal. The man laughed, and turned away from the pen, ready to face the day's work.

"Thank you, kindly, dear, dear sir."

The old man nearly screamed as his heart jumped into his throat, pounding wildly. He whipped his head around frantically, looking for the owner of the voice. No one was supposed to know he lived here, and even if they did, no one cared enough to trek up the mountain to visit him. Warily, he backed up into the fence, ready to run at the first showing of the sorry man who dared creep up on him . . .

"Dear sir! Dear sir! Down, down, down here!"

It couldn't possibly be . . . The old man slowly cast his eyes downward and peered at the chicken. She peered back at him. Those unnerving brown eyes. Too big in its head. Too much like human eyes. She opened her beak.

"Let me thank, thank you again," she said. The old man gaped. The chicken's voice was squeaky and thin, lilting up and down much like a flying bird. Her speech was garbled by the persistent ticking of her beak, but it was loud and clear. "I must admit, must admit, I was quite surprised when you stuffed me, me, me into this pen yesterday. I thought for sure, for sure! You were going to eat me."

"O-Of course not," the old man breathed, finding himself unable to speak the truth. The chicken ruffled her feathers and the old man swore he saw her smile.

"Wonderful, wonderful," she said. "I do wonder, do wonder indeed, just where you took my egg? It's quite the glorious egg, quite the egg indeed, I was just wondering if I could have it back?"

"I . . . I took it inside," the old man said. Dimly, he wondered why he was speaking to this chicken, as if it were capable of intelligent thought or worthy of his time. The sun was creeping ever upwards above the horizon; it would soon be scorching hot and terrible to work under. "For safekeeping. Something could happen to it if I left it outside."

"Oh, that makes sense, yes it does," the chicken said thoughtfully,

prancing around in place. "I must thank you again, again for your kindness to me. I am truly, truly, truly in your debt."

Mouth dry, the old man could only nod, utterly dumbstruck. He found his mouth would not open, nor did he have anything intelligent to say to the chicken. Instead, he backed away and all but ran to the shed, grabbing his tools and bolting to the fields, pointedly avoiding looking at the chicken and her pen. As the sun passed through the sky, he could hear her talking to herself, always in that scrambled yet perfectly intelligible speech. Mindless, pointless things like the cleanliness of the pen and the tidiness of her feathers. He thought she sounded much like a quintessential housewife, concerned only for vain and hackneyed matters.

Yet a part of him liked hearing the noise. It certainly beat the monotonous thud of the shovel in the dirt, as he continued to pull weeds from their everlasting spring in the field.

It became something of a habit for the old man. A nice, codified routine. He would wake up each morning, say a curt good morning to the chicken, to which she would respond with some meaningless drivel about predatory animals in the night, or the chill of the pen, and *oh would you please, please give me something warm for the night?* Like clockwork, an egg would be nestled in the dirt and he would wipe it off and eat it for breakfast. All the while, the chicken continued to cluck, loud and indignant. The summer passed like that: the chicken giving him an egg while he put up with her complaining and moaning. He felt proud for tolerating such an unnatural creature. What a loud and insensible thing it was. But the eggs were good.

Then one day, early in the fall as the air was beginning to crisp around the edges, the old man was struck with an idea. As he fed the chicken, he felt that his stomach was not quite full. One egg was simply not enough for him anymore. He watched the chicken sullenly eat the grains and wondered if he could possibly squeeze a second egg from her. Yes, a second egg wasn't much to ask for. After all, he kept and fed and raised this chicken. It was only fair she gave him more in return.

So that evening, when the sun had fallen below the trees, the old man gathered a handful of grain and showered it into the pen. The chicken eyed him skeptically, before sauntering to the grains and

quickly eating it all. She clucked at him, expressing her thanks in that clucking, bumping vernacular of hers, but the old man brushed it off and opted to stare at her greedily. Yes, that fat, white, glorious body would provide for him, satisfy his needs for as long as he wanted. With a hum, the old man dusted off his hands and went back inside, gleefully imagining a glorious breakfast of two eggs instead of one. Perhaps it wouldn't be much, but he couldn't help but yearn for the excess of his early years, those days working tirelessly from 9 to 5. He deserved two eggs. It really wasn't all that much to ask for.

It really wasn't.

But the old man knew something was wrong when he woke the next morning and heard nothing from the chicken. No clucking, no complaining, no whining. Nothing. Panicking, he rose from the bed and hurried to the window, throwing it open to peer into the pen. He feared that the chicken had not been lying when she screamed about animals in the night, that he would find nothing of the chicken except a pile of white, snowy feathers. His panic slowly abated and quickly turned into anger, however, when he spotted the chicken sleeping in the corner of the pen. And no egg in sight.

"You lazy animal!" the old man roared out the window. The chicken started and jumped to her feet, casting about wildly for the old man. She saw him in the window and frowned unhappily. Her beak started moving up and down frantically, but the old man could only hear the rushing blood in his ears as he stormed out of the house and threw open the gate of the pen, slamming it shut behind him. "Where are my eggs?!"

"Your eggs? Your eggs?" the chicken squawked, ruffling her feathers indignantly. "What do you mean, you mean your eggs? Those are mine! Mine! Mine!"

"No, they were never yours!"

"Mine! Mine! Mine!"

"Everything you have is mine!" the old man screamed. He couldn't bear the chicken's raging; it was a stupid animal, just a stupid animal. "I give you food and shelter, but you can't even give me anything in return! You ungrateful, irritating, troublesome animal!"

"You've been eating my eggs! My eggs!" the chicken wailed,

throwing herself to the ground and beating her wings. Dull, brown streaks clouded the white of her feathers. "I thought you cared! I thought you loved me! But you're just a bad man! A terrible, terrible . . ."

"Shut up!"

"Terrible, terrible, terrible, terrible . . ."

The old man shrieked in frustration and grabbed the chicken, wrapping his hand tightly around her neck. She continued to scream, even if it came out garbled and strained. He stormed to the shed and threw open the doors. On the wall, next to his shovel and rake, hung the axe, its sharp blade shining dully in the early morning air. The chicken suddenly stilled, like someone had removed batteries from a small toy.

"What are you, what are you, what are you . . ."

"If you can't give me eggs," the old man snarled, grabbing the axe and ignoring the chicken's renewed screams. The weight of the axe felt good in his hand. Comforting. "I still need to eat breakfast."

"No, no, no . . ."

The old man brought the chicken to the wood block he used for cutting wood. Splinters and wood dust covered the ground, and as he lowered the chicken to the wood block, her frantic movements blew the splinters into his eyes. He spat angrily into the ground.

"No, no, no, no, *no* . . ."

"SHUT UP!" the old man screamed. The chicken's voice faded—or maybe it was just the angry heartbeat in his ears—until all that fell from the chicken's beak was panicked and confused squawking. Lilting and squeaky clucks filled the air and the old man vaguely wondered how he could have ever thought such a horrible creature could speak intelligible words to him.

Those cursed eyes swiveled in the chicken's too-small head and pierced straight into the old man's soul. A stupid, stupid animal.

And so uncannily human.

There was a horrible, gut-curdling scream; the old man later realized with his sore throat that it had been his own scream. He lifted the axe and all seemed to still as he felt the weight of the axe head hover in the air. The chicken stared up forlornly, prematurely freezing

as it watched the old man. Almost as if daring him to do it. Then he brought the axe head down and it snapped the head clean off the chicken's body. Blood splattered into the air, onto his face, onto his clothes, like juice bursting from the tight skin of ripe fruit. He'd never killed livestock before, so he marveled as the body of the bird continued to flail about, blood oozing from the stump of its neck and staining the feathers and an unnaturally bright red. People often spoke about how birds would run around even after their heads were cut off. No one talked about how much *blood* there would be. Or about any kind of awful tremor that now shook his hands as he set the axe down and picked up the damp corpse of the chicken, walking back towards the awfully silent house to eat her for breakfast.

The next morning, the old man rose from his bed and put on his work clothes. The pan and a plate sat on the countertop, but he ignored them and headed outside. There was nothing for him to eat anyways. No eggs. No meat. He picked up his shovel, shivering from the biting cold of the morning air. His hands were cracked and dry, and the blisters on his hands had broken into a painful web of split skin and red leather. He drove the head of the shovel into the field, pushing past a thin layer of dead weeds. The gate of the pen creaked in the wind, but he determinedly kept his eyes trained on the soil. His stomach growled but he drove back thoughts of warm, fluffy eggs and greasy, juicy meat. No, better to just keep working. The sun hung high in the sky, its rays doing nothing against the cold. And there was nothing, nothing except the old man and the dull thud of the shovel in the dirt.



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“But here I am. Here I stand. I’ve made it this far, still I don’t think you understand, that failure is not an option for me.”

—Irumva Joselyne



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## Honorable Mention

SPOKEN WORD

# Failure

*By Irumva Joselyne*

Central High School

War. Grenades. Death. Tears.

A story that almost every African parent knows way too well,  
fleeing for the sake of their lives—

War. Grenades. Death. And fear.

Way before i was born,  
my siblings & parents fled  
at the sound of mourning  
and at the scene of blood stained corners.

A refugee camp in Tanzania became their new home—  
and there I was conceived.

I might've not known it back then,  
but oh how lucky,  
oh how lucky i was.

From the moment i escaped my mother's womb,  
my parents nurtured me,  
catered to me,  
rose me up & flew us 9,000 miles over

to the land of possibilities,  
the land of opportunities,

the land where my dreams weren't just dreams  
and i could be whatever i deemed.

oh how lucky,  
oh how lucky,  
I am.

you see, my grandmother couldn't obtain an education  
and because circumstances didn't allow my mother could never really  
chase her own dreams.

spending nights out in the city,  
selling Afro centric merchandise so that I could sleep,  
so that I could eat;  
I was a very sick child,  
& everyone around my mother was convinced,  
that soon enough i'd be put to sleep.  
But here I am. Here I stand.

I've made it this far,  
still I don't think you understand,  
that failure is not an option for me.

since circumstances prevented my ancestors from dreaming i  
decided to be a dreamer.  
because of the sacrifices & sufferings of my parents,

the sky cannot merely be my limit  
it is simply only the minimum.

I am the vessel,  
that will live out the dreams of my mother,  
the ambition of my grandmother,  
the courage of my ancestors,  
I am. And i will

I didn't come this far to only come this far.  
my parents didn't leave all they knew &  
rebuild their lives from the ground up  
just for me to be average.

i've been given the expectation  
to succeed,  
to exceed,  
to reach the mountain peaks that my forefathers could not reach.

Therefore.

Failure.

Can never really be an option for me.

---

“Do we ever get a say in any matter? What do the numbers, the probabilities, the chances mean, really, when all we are going to get in the end is a yes or a no.”

—Amy Dong

## The Monty Hall Problem

*By Amy Dong*

Hinsdale Central High School

Here is a famous mathematics problem: you are a contestant on a game show, and the host gives you the choice of three doors. Behind one door is a car. Behind the rest are goats. You pick a door at random, say #1. The host, who knows what is behind each door, opens one of the doors you did not pick, say #3, revealing a goat. He offers you a choice: to switch your choice to door #2, or stay with your current selection.

Being a mathematician, you know that upon choosing door #1 from three unknown doors, you had a one-third chance of revealing a car. After the host opens one of the doors, the chance that #1 contains a car stays at one-third, but the chance that #2 contains a car rises to two-thirds, since the host has revealed the goat behind door #3. So, you choose to switch.

The host opens door #2 for you. A beautiful, sleek Ferrari gleams red under the studio lights. The audience roars as you take home your prize.

—

... Being generally unversed in all instances of math save for the few glimpses of high school algebra that you remember from a long time ago, you know that you have two choices. There is the door that you have picked, plain as day, and the door that lies a few feet away. You decide that you would rather regret the choice that you didn't make, rather than the one that you did. You choose to stay.

The host opens door #1 for you. There is a goat chewing grass, its hooves slightly dirty and it's fur slightly brown. You choke down your disappointment, but it comes bubbling back anyway.

—

... You know that you have two choices. There is the door that you have picked and the door that lies a few feet away. The host is smirking sweetly, as if he can see the lack of cogs running through your brain. There's a tremble to his widespread arms that you did not see when you picked door #1.

There's something about his smile that pisses you off. You smile at him back, and choose to switch.

The host scowls as he opens door #2 for you. You cherish the distaste in his eyes more than the sports car in his door.

—

... Being a mathematician, you know that the chance that #1 contains a car stays at one-third, but the chance that #2 contains a car rises to two-thirds. So, you choose to switch.

The host opens door #2 for you. As you stare face to face with the goat that has been revealed, you realize that at the end of the day, probabilities mean nothing more than the floor that you stand on.

—

... The host opens door #2 for you. It's a car. Sort of. The hood is sort of busted up and there's no roof—and not in the stylistic way. When you start it up, the engine groans and there's some sort of horrible scraping sound that vibrates beneath your feet.

The host smiles at you, next to two goats that look better cared for than your new ride. "We've never said that the car was the prize."

—

Here is a famous mathematics problem: the host of a game show is giving out raffle tickets for a one in a million chance to compete for a prize car. You buy a ticket just for fun, and buy another few for your sister. At the end of the day, nobody wins, and no one learns anything.

—

Here is a famous mathematics problem: you are a contestant on a game show, and the host has just revealed an infinite amount of doors. Behind one door is a car. Behind the rest are goats. You are asked to pick a door at random. The host, who knows what is behind each door, opens every single wrong door that you had not picked, leaving only your original choice and door #33500.

You switch to #33500 immediately and score yourself a car. The host scratches his head sheepishly.

"I guess we didn't really think that one through," he laughs awkwardly.

—

Here is a famous mathematics problem: you are a contestant on a game show, and the host gives you the choice of three doors. Behind one door is a car. Behind the rest are goats. You are asked to pick a door at random.

Here is something the host did not account for. You have always been a naturally indecisive person. You ponder your options endlessly, and you doubt yourself before you can confirm your choices. You ask your friends to choose your hangout locations, and you ask the waiter to recommend your dishes. You don't get invited to truth or dare games anymore.

"Please, make a choice. Any choice." The host pleads with you under the studio lights. Most of the audience has left. His TV time is dwindling. The producers are shaking their heads.

You bite your nails anxiously as you weigh the consequences of door #1 to door #2 to door #3. You feel eyes all around you even though there are none.

When the host himself finally leaves, out of a job and out of a studio, you stand there alone. You and your three unopened doors.

—

The host shows you all three of the doors, in the end. You stand in shock as three identical cars stand, gleaming in a row.

"It's all for the drama, anyway." The host mutters, lighting a cigarette backstage. You stand by him, silent. "It's the season finale. You happened to get picked. Everyone likes underdogs, right?"

You glance back beyond the curtain. The crowd is screaming for you, as people begin to clear out. There is still confetti on the ground, and the janitorial staff is having a field day.

"Oh." Is all you say when the host hands you the paperwork. You owe him money, for the publicity, he says.

"I hope you understand." He says, rising tiredly. "We've been giving out too many goats. Budget cuts, you know?" You do not. "Maybe we can get you something secondhand. How about a nice Toyota?"

—

Here is a famous criminal law problem: to whom do the charges for the murder of a game show host apply to? The contestant, or the goat?

—

The host sits down tiredly. "There is no prize," he tells you evenly. "There never was. There is only an outcome, and it will never matter."

"That's too bad," you tell him instead. The lights are down, and you can see that there never was an audience either. Just you and the stage, and some prop doors that can't even open. The host's makeup looks pasty and smudged without the glare of the studio lights. You suddenly feel tacky, in this suit.

You leave the studio, suit and all, and stroll down to the nearest pet store to adopt yourself a prize instead. You elect to name your outcome Cotton. Cotton nuzzles your palm affectionately.



—

“Would you like something to drink?” you ask instead. His posture is stilted, and even though he smiles to the audience, you know those eyes that look like a drowning man.

“Uh?” He blinks at you, startled. No one ever offers him anything, after all. Not even a goat.

“Like, tea, or something?” You gesture vaguely with your hands. He’s still standing next to the three doors, hands still outstretched, as if frozen. He really might be. “Something warm? Hot chocolate? I don’t know.”

“Are you,” the host gestures sort of tiredly to the door, “not gonna to pick something?” He’s putting on the airs of reluctance, but the shift in his brow and the slant of his mouth betray his real desperation for something other than television glamor.

“I think,” you reply softly. The microphones won’t pick this up. “You need it more than me.”

—

“Was there ever a choice?” whispered the game show host as the lights begin to dim. “Do we ever get a say in any matter? What do the numbers, the probabilities, the chances mean, really, when all we are going to get in the end is a yes or a no. Did you ever have a chance to win, when the world itself has been playing against you? What a foolish decision, to come on such a show. Did you know, darling? That we were already doomed from the beginning? Did you already know that it wasn’t ever the matter between the goat or the car, but the matter of whether we even got to pick one or the other?”

—

Here is a famous mathematics problem: you are a contestant on a game show, and the host gives you the choice of three doors. Behind one door is a car. Behind the rest are goats. You pick a door at random, say #1. The host smiles, and goes to open it.

"Aren't you going to ask me if I want to switch my choice?" You ask, flustered. This is not how the story goes.

"Oh, darling." The host turns to you, eyes wide and camera-ready. Their hair is slicked and plastic, and their smile is more menacing than you remember a few minutes ago. You can no longer see the edges of their facade. "You've made your choice, already."

"But—" you begin to protest. You have planned out every possible outcome, until this one.

"Foolish mortal," the host snarls under the studio lights. "Why would you ever make a decision without fully committing to it?"

Door one opens. There is a goat, but its eyes are far more predatory than you remember them to be.



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1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019  
(212) 782-9348 FAX (212) 782-5157

[creativewriting@penguinrandomhouse.com](mailto:creativewriting@penguinrandomhouse.com)

[social-impact.penguinrandomhouse.com/creativewriting](https://social-impact.penguinrandomhouse.com/creativewriting)