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In partnership with

**WNDB**<sup>®</sup>

weneeddiversebooks.org

# Writing Creative Awards

2025 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.

Thirty-two 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 \$3 million dollars in scholarships to public high school students for original poetry, memoir, fiction and drama, spoken word, and Banned Books Prompt 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 \$60,000 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).

## 2025 SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS—1<sup>ST</sup> PLACE AWARDS

### JAMES BALDWIN AWARD FOR FICTION

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Fiction .....	Mahnoor Qazi, <i>Eternity</i> , Golden Valley High School, CA

### FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AWARD

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Book Bans Prompt .....	Sarah Escobedo, <i>Unveiling the Silence: How a Banned Book Gave Me a Voice</i> , Lopez Early College High School, TX

### MICHELLE OBAMA AWARD FOR MEMOIR

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Personal Essay/Memoir .....	Bailey Terrett, <i>5 Minutes</i> , Toms River High School North, NJ

### AMANDA GORMAN AWARD FOR POETRY

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Poetry .....	Laila Asberry, <i>To Build a Better Black Woman</i> , Cleveland School of Science and Medicine, OH

### MAYA ANGELOU AWARD FOR SPOKEN WORD

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Spoken Word .....	Jaylen Hughley, <i>Black Education in America</i> , Oxon Hill High School, MD

### NEW YORK CITY ENTRANT AWARD

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Fiction .....	Emmet Schickele, <i>Stoop Dinner</i> , Hunter College High School, NYC

### HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
Advanced Learning Academy, TX .....	Liliana Shoaf, <i>Recurring Dream of a Moving Mass of Kids</i> , Poetry
Al Brown High School, NC .....	Brianny Sanchez-Lopez, <i>The Irony of Ashes</i> , Freedom of Expression
Bayshore High School, FL .....	Agatha Nascimento, <i>The Enchanted Nook</i> , Fiction
Brooklyn Technical High School, NY .....	Jaden Ho, <i>A Space Invasion</i> , Fiction
C.D. Hylton High School, VA .....	Wen An Sok, <i>I Once Saw a Fish</i> , Memoir
Cambridge-Isanti High School, MA .....	Addison Snow, <i>The Hand That Feeds</i> , Poetry
Carver Center for Arts and Technology, MD ..	Dahvnee Pettiquoi, <i>Under His Eye</i> , Freedom of Expression

## HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
Cedar Shoals High School, GA .....	Annie Johnson, <i>Elegy for an English Teacher</i> , Poetry
Charles Herbert Flowers, MD.....	Devin Holt, <i>Echoes of Silence: A Story of Finding My Voice</i> , Memoir
Charles W. Baker High School, NY .....	Sadie Ward, <i>Wings</i> , Poetry
Crocket Early College High School, TX ....	Ben Robenalt, <i>The Pilgrimage</i> , Fiction
Dallastown Area High School, PA.....	Rylee Torgesen, <i>A Few of My Favorite Things</i> , Fiction
Dayspring Academy, FL.....	Emily (Sage) Solis, <i>LGBT Power Book Bans</i> , Freedom of Expression
Dayton High School, KY .....	Addison Clifton, <i>The Aroace Autopsy</i> , Poetry
Dos Pueblos High School, GA .....	Alex Ortiz, <i>Stay with Me, Dear</i> , Fiction
Edgemont Junior Senior .....	Le Wang, <i>How to Disappear</i> , Poetry
Elite Scholars Academy Early College Magnet, GA .....	Oscar Del Amo, <i>The Almond Tree</i> , Memoir
Enloe Magnet High School, NC .....	Neil Patel, <i>The Mundane Messiah: Eugene vs. Life's ...</i> , Fiction
Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School, MA.....	Sofie Linn, <i>Intertwined, Sewn Together</i> , Fiction
Frank Sinatra School of the Arts, NY.....	Isabella Hirschman, <i>Censor Me</i> , Poetry
Gatlinburg-Pittman High School, TN.....	Aidan Patenaude, <i>Once in a Lifetime</i> , Memoir
George. C Marshall High School, VA .....	Isabel Elliot Ortega, <i>An Exploration of Love</i> , Poetry
Great Crossing High School, KY .....	Olivia Lambros, <i>Crawl</i> , Fiction
Hamilton High School, WI .....	Madison Wagner, <i>Where Do We Go from Here?</i> , Fiction
Hamilton Township High School, OH .....	Bhagvat Patel, <i>Freedom in Words: The Impact of "The Hate U Give"</i> , Memoir
Hammond High School, MD .....	Sophia Tran, <i>Fly</i> , Fiction
Har-Ber High School, AR.....	Adrianna Lewis, <i>Baked and Buried</i> , Poetry
High School of Fashion Industries, NY.....	Parker Thomas-Hamlin, <i>My 2 Spirits</i> , Memoir
Hunter College High School, NY .....	Sophia Ghantous, <i>Victoria</i> , Fiction
Irvington High School, CA .....	Francis Luo, <i>Aubade to Grass and God and Sea and Country</i> , Poetry
Irvington High School, NJ .....	Oluwademilade Seyi-Idowu, <i>The Lagos Inheritance</i> , Fiction
John Randolph Tucker High School, VA....	Tyler Koshy, <i>Lessons Learned Between Laugh Tracks</i> , Memoir

## HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
La Canada High School, CA . . . . .	Addison Lee, <i>Satsuma &amp; Kyoho</i> , Poetry
La Jolla High School, CA . . . . .	Emma Weibel, <i>Big Red Poppies</i> , Poetry
Lafayette High School, KY . . . . .	Ryan Eby, <i>Wolf 1528F</i> , Fiction
Larchmont Charter School, CA . . . . .	Naomi Farkas, <i>Ode to Los Angeles Public Transit</i> , Spoken Word
Lee M Thurston High School, MA . . . . .	KeAnna Mills, <i>How to Network: No Borax No Glue</i> , Poetry
Legacy of Education Excellence (LEE) High School, TX . . . . .	Alexandra Borrego, <i>Pillar of Fire, Pillar of Tres Leches</i> , Poetry
	Vonn Frey, <i>The Mister Cotton Show</i> , Fiction
Life High School Waxahachie, TX . . . . .	Nadia Allen-Penn, <i>The Hate U Give</i> , Freedom of Expression
Maiden High School, NC . . . . .	Merrill Finney, <i>A Liberating Kind of Grief</i> , Fiction
Mark Morris High School, WA . . . . .	Vaugh Price, <i>The Drowning Girl</i> , Poetry
Marshwood High School, ME . . . . .	Isaiah Perodin, <i>Corazon Duro</i> , Fiction
Marvin Ridge High School, NC . . . . .	Kate Coffin, <i>The Things I Carry</i> , Memoir
Marysville Early College High, OH . . . . .	Cole Eppstein, <i>Love and War</i> , Memoir
Mechanicsville High School, VA . . . . .	Hanhan Wang, <i>Fortune Cookies and the Future</i> , Memoir
Murry Bergtraum High School For Business, NY . . . . .	Janira Xavier, <i>The Outsider</i> , Memoir
Nacogdoches High School, TX . . . . .	Rose Phillips, <i>How If I Was Your Girl Made Me A Woman</i> , Freedom of Expression
North Atlanta High School, GA . . . . .	Caeley Ellinger, <i>The Silencing of Readers</i> , Freedom of Expression
North Kansas City High School, MO . . . . .	Enzo Garcia, <i>Wild Rose</i> , Fiction
North Penn High School, PA . . . . .	Chloe Yordy, <i>Metamorphosis</i> , Fiction
Olathe Northwest High, KS . . . . .	Elizabeth Crain, <i>Manicure</i> , Poetry
Orofino High School, ID . . . . .	Daizy Nelson, <i>The Spark of Knowledge: How Fahrenheit 451 ...</i> , Freedom of Expression
Pewaukee High School, WI . . . . .	Zahra Dhoondia, <i>A Wispy Black Hand</i> , Fiction
Prairie High School, IA . . . . .	Asia Russell, <i>The Pages of My Life: Embracing the Unexpected</i> , Memoir
Riverside High School, VA . . . . .	Grace Widjaja, <i>What is "Writer's Block?"</i> , Poetry
Rockdale High School, GA . . . . .	Taylor Booker, <i>Balancing Acts: Faith, Family, and Finding My Path</i> , Memoir

## HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
Salem High School, VA.....	Iliana Martinez, <i>Always Has Been and Always Will Be</i> , Fiction
Sam Barlow High School, OR.....	Ella Trickel, <i>Persepolis</i> , Memoir
Santa Monica High School, CA.....	Liliyn De la Cruz, <i>On Being No Sabo</i> , Memoir
Seminole High School, FL.....	Clarence Ta, <i>Persepolis</i> , Freedom of Expression
Socastee High School, SC.....	Shrinil Patel, <i>The Chicken Nugget that Changed My Life</i> , Memoir
Southwest DeKalb High School, GA.....	Nicole Craig, <i>Brains and Beauty</i> , Spoken Word
Stivers School for the Arts, OH.....	Jasper Martin, <i>Compulsive Apophysis</i> , Poetry
Stuyvesant High School, NY.....	Madeline Berberian-Hutchinson, <i>Tour of America in the Passenger Seat ...</i> , Poetry
	Maegan Diep, <i>From Glass to Sand</i> , Poetry
	Arielle Eber, <i>Mom Please Stop Making Me Plan Your ...</i> , Poetry
	Jared Lee, 竹升 ( <i>jook-sing</i> ), Poetry
	Jenna Wong, <i>My Mother is Afraid of Drowning in ...</i> , Poetry
	Sabrina Xu, <i>I Think That's Ok</i> , Memoir
Troup County Comprehensive High School, GA.....	Travonte Cheeks-Vines, <i>Trials of Willie</i> , Memoir
Valor College Prep, TN.....	Sydney Platt, <i>The Best Way Out Is Through</i> , Memoir
Vandegrift High School, TX.....	Devyn Kirk, <i>The Paradox of Expiration</i> , Memoir
Warren Early College, NC.....	Shakira Bryant, <i>My Struggles with UC</i> , Memoir
Wayne High School, NE.....	Vanessa Fernandez, <i>Beautiful Life Taken of Jalen Duncan</i> , Poetry
Wellesley High School, MA.....	Audrey Sau, <i>Broke College Student: The Apex Predator</i> , Fiction
West Bronx Academy for the Future, NY...	Raely Camilo, <i>No Longer</i> , Memoir
Westside High School, SC.....	Tyler Hunter, <i>My Blood Leaves Stains of Purple</i> , Freedom of Expression
Westwood High School, TX.....	Eera Gour-Gupta, <i>Generational Dreams</i> , Poetry
William H. Taft, TX.....	Jasmine Pena, <i>The Cathedral of a Sealed Fate</i> , Fiction
William H. Turner Technical Arts Senior High School, FL.....	Janiya Dixon, <i>Bound by Shadows</i> , Fiction
YES Prep Gulfton Secondary, TX.....	Mursal Safi, <i>Between Soil and Sky</i> , Memoir





# *Mahnoor Qazi*

FICTION

## **Creative Writing Mantra:**

*"Creativity is a muscle; it can only grow if you use it consistently."*

## **My Hobbies:**

Reading, writing, piecing together OSINT, cooking,  
and going on long walks.

**College I Packed Up For:** UC San Diego



# *Sarah Escobedo*

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

## **Creative Writing Mantra:**

*"Desires are already memories." –Italo Calvino*

## **My Hobbies:**

Listening to music and podcasts, playing sports, traveling,  
and playing guitar for my dog, Blue.

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



# *Bailey Terrett*

PERSONAL ESSAY/MEMOIR

## **Creative Writing Mantra:**

*"Either write something worth reading, or do something worth writing."*

*—Benjamin Franklin*

## **My Hobbies:**

Singing, acting, reading, crocheting, traveling,  
and of course writing!

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



# *Laila Asberry*

POETRY

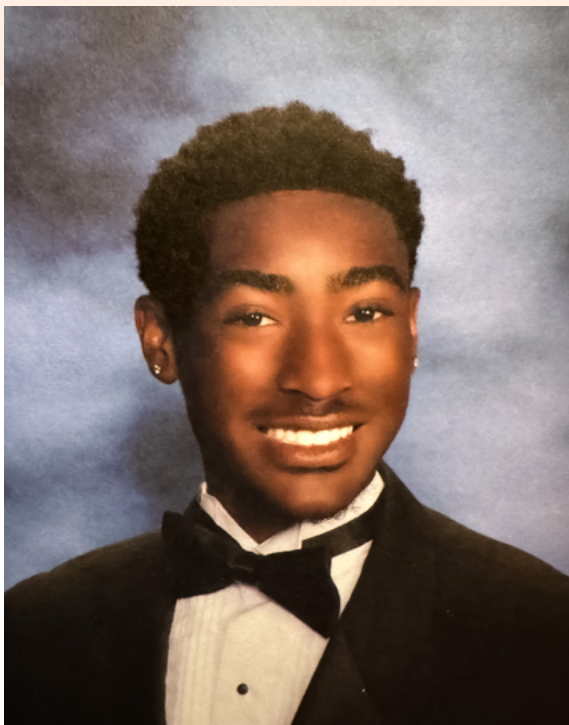
## **Creative Writing Mantra:**

*Never read directly before writing unless you want your words to be thinly veiled by someone else's.*

## **My Hobbies:**

Crocheting, reading, writing, exercising.

**College I Packed Up For:** Case Western Reserve University



# *Jaylen Hughley*

SPOKEN WORD

## **Creative Writing Mantra:**

*The gift to imagine is the ability to create.*

## **My Hobbies:**

In my free time, I enjoy modifying my car, exercising, playing soccer, and writing stories.

**College I Packed Up For:** Louisiana State University



# *Emmet Schickele*

NYC ENTRANT

## **Creative Writing Mantra:**

*Follow your gut.*

## **My Hobbies:**

Music of many varieties, and also theater production, strategic games.

**College I Packed Up For:** Oberlin College

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*by Madeline Berberian-Hutchinson*

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“Under the Hackberry tree, time passed differently. The cries of children quieted, the ash-torn sky paled, and the air no longer hurt to breathe.”

—Mahnoor Qazi



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## First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

JAMES BALDWIN AWARD FOR FICTION

# Eternity

*By Mahnoor Qazi*

Golden Valley High School

He used to throw rocks at me from the top of a dying Hackberry tree. At first, I found it a nuisance—he was like a monkey incessantly poking fun at me for its own inhumane sense of humor. Soon, though, it became a tradition. He would throw a cracked pebble at me, I would throw a burnt stick in return. He would hang from the swinging branches, his hair disheveled and face covered in dirt, and I would giggle through my crusted eyes.

Under the Hackberry tree, time passed differently. The cries of children quieted, the ash-torn sky paled, and the air no longer hurt to breathe. Together, he and I would laugh at how a little boy was caught robbing a bakery or how an old man tripped while carrying a gallon of water. Our youthful ignorance shielded us from woe, and we made sure to protect it in return.

One day, he took a break from the banter and sat with me against the tree.

“My name is Andam,” he smiled, his stained teeth welcoming me.

I returned his gesture with a toothless smile. “My name is Tabana.”

He pointed at my hands with dirt-crusted nails. “Why do you always carry that book?”

“It was my Baba’s.”

He threw a branch as if it were a pebble skidding against a river. “But you can’t even read English.”

My ears burned. “But I know my alphabet! And I’m learning to read!”

"Really?" His emerald eyes grew wide. "Can you teach me? I want to read too!"

I scoffed as I looked at the wilted book's cover, an ashy white face stared back at me. "You wouldn't be able to learn."

He scrunched his tanned nose. "Why?"

"Because a *Bizo* can't read!" I giggled and fell back on the dirt, the tree's dark root cushioning my bruised neck.

"I'm not a monkey!" He let out a grunt as he walked to the other side of the tree.

A minute passed.

Two minutes.

The scent of iron and burnt wood filled my lungs.

"I'll teach you to read," I said, raising my hand up to measure the lead-like clouds with my thumb.

"Really? Promise?" In a second he stood above my head, blocking the gray from overshadowing me.

"Promise."

He jumped around the tree, dirt staining the crimson shoes he stole from a girl who by then was long forgotten. It was of more use to him than to the unwanted corpse, our ignorance seemed to preach. I stood up and dusted the bottom of my shalwar to join him in his skipping. I don't remember how long we skipped for, but by the time our calves started crawling with fire ants, the crimson sun had set over the horizon and the stars hid behind the smoke.

\*\*\*

For the next three weeks, I etched the letters A through G in the dirt around the Hackberry tree, telling him to trace it with his own bent stick.

"The rest of the letters don't matter," I told him, "These ones are the most important."

"Why?"

My pale cheeks burned. "Because I said so!"

He sighed and picked at the dirt with his stick. "Okay."

I stomped to the other side of the tree and drew a crooked F with the toothed stick in my hand.

"This is an F. It looks like a serpent with two heads, see?" I added two pairs of eyes to the heads of the letter.

He giggled, his voice sounded like a flowing river. "You're right! A serpent!"

By the fourth week, Andam grew tired of writing the same letters in the dirt from sunrise to sunset. "Let's do something else," he said with his hands crossed over his chest.

"What do you want to do?" I half-heartedly listened as I pretended to read my book, the squiggly letters jumping up at me from the pages.

"Let's go into town, I'm hungry."

"I have no money."

"It's okay. Bread kaka will give us some." He looked down at me, his leafy eyes filled with resolve.

I caved into his suggestion, his confidence seeping into my own soul. That was the first time we left the Hackberry tree together.

He skipped across the rubble-torn town, past the aunties who told us to slow down and the uncles who laughed at our youth. I followed him with a toothless smile plastered across my face, gravel jumping into my shoes with each passing step. Time had sped up once we left the tree and the crimson moon that we hid from had found us.

We climbed up a mountain of broken cement walls and metal poles, the gray chalk staining our faces as we wiped the sweat from our brows.

"Kaka? Kaka!" Andam called out.

No answer.

"Perfect!" He held his hand out to help me up. "Hurry, before he comes back!"

My face scrunched. "What do you mean?"

He pulled me towards a hut made of silver scrap metal and ashy brown wooden pillars. He looked around, his head perked out like a lemur. I followed his gaze.

A baby's hungry cry. An old man's choking laughter.

"Come on," he whispered.

I followed him inside the narrow hut, my nostrils flaring at the salty scent that filled the air. My eyes darted around to find the source, my stomach's screaming turning me rabid.

"Hey!" A deep, hoarse voice called out. My heart jumped.

Andam pointed to a folded red cloth in the corner of the room.  
"There!"

He stuffed the cloth into the fold of his shirt with his left hand and pulled me with his right hand. "Hurry!"

My mind has protected me from the guilty memories of how we escaped, but we managed to safely hide in the back of an alleyway littered with plastic bags and cardboard boxes.

Andam caught his breath and stared at me, his chameleon eyes sparkling under the scarlet moon. He began to laugh, his cackle shaking the birds out of the shadowing trees and my heart out of its concrete confusion. I watched him, anger clearly plastered on my face.

His chortles quieted. "What?"

"You stole from them!" My heart shook, "There was a baby!"

His eyebrows bent into two upside-down V's. "So? We were hungry. I found food! You should thank me!"

I shook my head, anger burning in my throat. "It's a sin! You cannot steal!"

"Allah stole my Mama! Allah stole your Baba! Allah is the biggest *shaytaan!*"

My voice choked, "Don't . . . don't say that! They're in heaven now, they're happy!"

"God made us steal! He starved us!"

I was silent. I wanted to protest. The righteous words of the elders whispered in my ears. *Don't be ungrateful. Don't question Allah's will.* The voices choked as he unwrapped the scarlet cloth, revealing four flatbreads folded in half.

He raised one to my face. "Eat Tabana, while it's warm."

If only I had slapped the bread out of his hands. My hunger shouldn't have mattered. I shouldn't have—

I quickly shaded the flame of my ignorance from the gusts of thought. I received the bread with shaking hands. He patted the dirt, urging me to sit next to him.

My lips wavered. "Thank you."

I sunk my teeth into the lump of flour, the warm salt drying my throat. My tears followed the curves of my cheeks and found their way into my mouth, satiating my thirst. I was an animal.

*My ignorance cracked.*

\*\*\*

Winter had found its way into our isolated village with a numbing breeze that forced Andam and I to burn branches from the Hackberry tree. The tree itself slouched down in the wind, its thirsty roots softening.

Andam's voice had started to deepen and he was less playful than before. He was always going on about how the government had failed us—about how God had failed us. During his rants I would pretend to understand, agreeing with his words as I rubbed my hands together against the burning wood.

"We deserve better, Tabana!"

I nodded.

"We're treated like animals! Mothers, fathers, children, all murdered because of their selfishness. And Allah? He just watches us; he watches as our children starve, he watches as our people are sold off," he spat, the snow crackling at the warmth. "Why must we sit back?"

I nodded again.

"Stop it, will you! You don't even understand anything."

My ego ached, "I do too! I understand everything, but you can't fix anything."

I watched the fire, the flames flickering against the wind. His emerald eyes seethed holes into the side of my skull. He sighed and kicked at the snow.

"I will. I swear, I will."

I looked at him out of the corner of my eye, shaking my head, “Sit down or you’ll catch a cold.”

If only I had stopped him then, maybe we would still be throwing pebbles at each other under the Hackberry tree.

\*\*\*

Three weeks later, he ran to me waving a rifle in the air. “Tabana, look! Look!”

I watched him, my face scrunching as I blew warm air into cupped hands. “What? Why—”

“I’m joining the rebellion, we will take down the mustamir, we will take back our land!”

He pulled me up with his free hand and spun me until the snow under my feet melted to reveal a gray layer of mud.

“What?” I pulled away from him, “You’re going to fight?”

He nodded, his eyes sparkling. “I’ll be gone for a few weeks, wait for me. They said it will be quick, the occupiers don’t know we’re coming.”

“No Andam, there are thousands of them! You won’t be able to—”

He cupped my hands into his. “I’ll be okay.”

I pushed him away. “No! You’ve gone crazy listening to those revolutionaries!”

“Please Tabana,” his eyes shined, “let me do this. I promise I’ll safely come home.”

My heart ached. The slushed snow poked through my tattered shoes. His confidence had once more infected my soul, reinforcing my ignorant arrogance. “Take this.” I handed him my wilted book, the pale face on the cover bidding me goodbye.

His stained teeth cradled my heart. “When we meet again, we’ll be free!” He spun me around once more before jogging out of sight—where time moved faster; where the sky was darker.

\*\*\*

The crimson sun peeked out from behind the darkened clouds and thus came spring. I tried to visit the Hackberry tree every day, hoping to see Andam run to me with a stained smile plastered across his face,

but life had moved on from our careless games. I needed to survive, I needed money, so I started working under an older Aunt at a tea shop for 30 cents an hour. After being coerced by the Aunt, I ended up joining a hostel with twenty other orphan girls around my age, funded by the mosque.

The hostel was sincerely harrowed. Cries of women echoed through the damp corridors every night—desperate, grief-stricken. The few women who had not succumbed to the empty sorrow told me their husbands, who had gone out to fight the colonizers, would come back home with missing limbs or deep burns from the phosphorus gas that was used exclusively to burn our people from the inside out. Even if they miraculously came back in one piece, their minds were not there. They were more violent, like spooked bulls.

Despite their anguish, the women never stopped praying.

Anxiety seeped further into my soul with each day Andam was gone. The women's boundless faith soon merged with my anxiety, making me believe my worries, my woe, and my pain would all end if I prayed. I began to visit the Hackberry tree before the morning prayer and after the nightly prayer, desperate to see Andam's curly hair and glistening eyes.

*The flames of my ignorance flared.*

\*\*\*

It wasn't until the next winter he came back. It was a Friday; no one worked on Fridays. The sun had just risen, enveloping our village in a pinkish hue. His shadow was more sculpted than before but I recognized his shagged hair and long legs. Once he came under the protection of the Hackberry tree, I could see his stubble and acne scars.

"Andam!" Tears filled my waterline as I stood up to greet him. "Thank God you're okay, I thought . . . I prayed for you every day, Andam. I'm so happy you're here!"

"Tabana," he stared, his eyes gray under the budding light. He was distant, as if looking at me through the ripples of a river. "You waited."

"Of course."

He stared for a while longer.

Fire ants crawled over the distant hills. Thunder rumbled.

The sound of a horn.

Andam's eyes watered, leaving muddy streaks across his face.

"What is it? Why are you crying? We're here together, there's no reason to cry."

His voice cracked. "Tabana, I'm so sorry," he fell to his knees. "Please forgive me."

"Andam stop it, you're scaring me!" I tried to pull him up, but the guilt that glued his forehead to the floor fervently latched onto his soul and pushed me away.

The ants grew bigger. The thunder turned into the stomps of feet.

He looked up at me through bloodshot eyes. His blue lips wavered, "They're coming. We couldn't shake them off, they followed us. If I had known . . ." His voice grew thin, "I'm sorry."

I looked at the hill once more. The ants had morphed into men; the thunder became the hooves of horses.

*The flame of my ignorance went out.*

My hands shook—with fear or anger I did not know. "Stand up, we must hide."

He continued to hold my feet for forgiveness, his deep weeps shaking my soul.

"Stand up!" The back of my hand struck his cheek, needles poking at my frozen fingers with the impact. "Stand up!"

His tears crystallized as he looked up. The stomps grew heavier; villagers cried.

He grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the Hackberry tree. Cold air singed my lungs as I followed him over the hills of garbage and past the walls of bodies.

Villagers ran around like scurrying mice. A woman shushed her baby with a wet cloth over its head. Children hid in overfilled garbage cans.

Andam pulled me towards the alleyway we once ate flatbread together in. He held his arm over my chest, as if it could protect me from the screams of mothers and cries of children. I covered my ears,



desperately praying for mercy. Boots clicked on the dirt around us, firecrackers going off with each step. The crimson moon seemed to laugh at our despair.

"No," I whimpered, "I prayed, I believed. So why?" My breath choked, "God, why?"

Andam shifted, clasping his hand over my mouth to muffle my cries.

A pair of boots stopped in front of our alleyway and shot at the boxes we hid behind. I held my breath. Andam squeezed my shoulders.

Another shot went off. I felt Andam loosen his grip on my shoulders, hands shaking.

"If only I had known." He stood up, lips pursed with resolve. "Stay here, no matter what happens."

"Andam!" I let out a gasp.

His gray eyes looked down at me with an anguished gaze that made God seem so small, so insignificant. He picked up a cracked rock and handed it to me, trembling fingers lingering over mine. "I'm sorry."

I watched him walk away, my protests muffled by my own sobs.

One. Two. Three shots. The sound of a body hitting the floor.

\*\*\*

I didn't leave that alleyway until the sun set and rose and set again. Wails echoed in the distances. My stomach gripped. The scent of iron filled my lungs. I felt my legs pull me up and walk me towards the mouth of the alleyway. A body with shaggy hair laid on its back, verdant eyes staring up at the crimson moon. Rouge stained its forehead and chest like a spreading curse. In its hands, a wilted book rested. The pale woman on the cover watched me with dark, pleading eyes. My legs took me past the body. They took me past the lifeless children, past the crying mothers, past the lost souls. Past the dead village.

They stopped at the only standing trunk. I waited desperately for the Hackberry tree's embrace, but time did not slow, the sky did not pale, the wails did not quiet down. The cold whipped my face. Branches cracked in the wind. Eternal woe enveloped the wilted village.

If only. If only. If only.

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“The wood was weak from fire and as I fled down the steps they broke. When I reached the bottom landing there was nothing left behind me but flames.”

—Emmet Schickele

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## First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

NYC ENTRANT AWARD

# Stoop Dinner

*By Emmet Schickele*

Hunter College High School

It was nobody's fault, in the sense that it was very much my fault and that I am to blame. I'm the one that ran down the stairs, wishing I had finished counting to 7 . . .

She lived across the hallway and had a small doormat that said "SMILE," and when I passed it I would instinctively follow the command. It was hard to find her doing anything else; on the rainiest of days she would beam at everyone who passed by her and stroll down the street in her navy blue shoes. She lived across the hallway and would say hi whenever we left at the same time. She would ask how I was and all about what had happened since the last time, and I would ask the same. One day in late June she showed me her garden out in the little yard behind the building, where she grew tall stalks of greens and vines that crawled around wooden poles, and she offered me a fresh tomato off a stem. I cooked up a sauce with it and soon we were eating dinner out on the stoop of the creaky wooden building.

Those are the days I like to remember. The days where we sat in the shade of our small, rustic apartment building, watching the people walking down the street and talking about stubborn Ms. Merral who lived downstairs or how dry the wood of the walls was getting. We would laugh about her doormat and the hydrant in front of us that someone had painted to look like Snoopy. Sometimes I would look into her eyes and realize I was smiling more than I ever had before. We would sit out on the stoop until the sun dipped low and the sky turned as blue as her shoes, then we would say goodnight and agree to do it again the next day.

The floor creaked outside our doors; a careful, considerate squeal whenever one of us stepped on it, and the other could hear the noise from their side of the door. When I heard the wood sigh I would jump up and hurry out the door to greet her, then we would walk down the stairs. I think she knew. She would step into the hallway and then wait for me, looking at her doormat. So I did the same, and she would always appear. Sometimes I would count the seconds, 1... 2... 3—and I could hear her getting up, walking over. 4... 5... 6... and the door would open. She always appeared by 7. We got to know when the other was home each day so we could coordinate our dinners without ever making the plan. In the evening I would creak the floor, she would open the door on 7, and we would walk together down the stairs and out into the sunlight.

She showed me the tattoo on the inside of her right arm of a spotted butterfly emerging from a cocoon. She said it was a temporary tattoo and that it would wear off after a few days except that she reapplied it every morning. “There is permanence in impermanence. It’s sort of comforting, don’t you think?” I didn’t quite understand but I said I liked it and her smile grew just a little. The next day I found a small stack of paper pieces with a caterpillar pattern slipped under my door, so I put one on my left arm to show her that evening. We laughed about it and touched our arms so that the tattoos were next to each other, and we stayed that way until the stars came out.

October arrived quietly, in the form of a whispering breeze and crackling brown leaves. Her tomato plants out in the garden grew weary on their stakes and bent towards the ground to sleep. Every morning I put on my tattoo, and in the evening I walked into the hallway where the floor creaked and waited 1... 2... 3... 4... 5... 6... 7 until she came out of her apartment. We sat listening to the blowing wind and talked about Rufus, the local stray dog who used to bark whenever someone walked by but now just laid his head on the ground and moved his eyes to watch the people passing. We talked about work and how the stairs were getting old and weak. She laughed and said I could fix them in my spare time, but I didn’t really get the joke. Then we went silent, the sun set sooner than it used to, and we headed inside to avoid the cold, mumbling something about next time.

There were days I decided not to reapply my tattoo. I would be sitting at the table with a cocoon image in hand, and I would start to

think about little things, like how she would talk with a mouth full of food or the way she laughed at jokes she didn't understand. On those days I would forget about her blue shoes and her kind smile, and start thinking that the whole tattoo idea was just silly. I would drop the cocoon onto the table, and in the evening I would hide the tattered image on my arm, sitting a few inches farther away than I used to.

I bought a squash from the market and cooked up a little dinner for myself in my old oven. There wasn't enough for two, and I had had a long day already, so when she creaked the floor, I pretended I wasn't there, making no noise until I heard her steps alone on the stairs. Then I ate my squash in silence and regret and looked at the tattoos collecting dust on the table. The days grew shorter, the cold grew stronger, and one day the tomato plants fell to the ground, unable to stand up.

The night of November 26th I went to sleep wondering why I couldn't smile and if I even enjoyed dinner on the stoop.

Winter came early. It arrived the morning of November 27th, at 9:32 am. It arrived in a blast of heat that surged through the building and made Rufus start barking for the first time in months. It arrived in smoke and a loud crackling noise that woke me up and pulled me to my feet. Flames wrapped around the dining room table, over the desk and chair. The fire screamed and I ran; I grabbed my computer and a photo of my mother and father, then rushed through the door as the last of the caterpillar tattoos shriveled up in a cocoon of smoke.

I leapt into the hallway. The doormat was burning. Flames licked the walls across from me. My foot stepped and the floor creaked. Suddenly I was aware of how loud the fire was, and how quiet my footsteps were. I shouted her name. 1 . . . 2 . . . Flames rose from the doormat, and I was scared. Scared to step towards the flaming door. Scared to even stay where I was. 3 . . . I shouted out again. *Always wait until 7*, I thought. I bent my ears towards the fiery door and couldn't tell what I heard. 4 . . . Maybe she had already left. 5 . . . Rufus the dog howled outside. The flames crackled. I could feel the heat pushing me away. Before I reached 6 I was flying down the stairs. Wings sprouted from the ink on my left arm, pulling me back towards the doormat while my feet ran away. I tumbled down the stairs, cursing at myself for not waiting. Was someone screaming from above? Or was it just the whine

of smoke? The wood was weak from fire and as I fled down the steps they broke. When I reached the bottom landing there was nothing left behind me but flames. I burst through the front door as sparks flew and charcoal fell.

Every plank was burned up. Every single one. The fire truck arrived as the roof sank into the third floor. They pulled on the fire hydrant painted like Snoopy, twisting their bodies trying to open the valve, but it wouldn't budge. Ms. Merral screeched at them to do something, just do something already, and flames rose from the first floor windows. Rufus stopped barking and walked to the curb, where he lay down with eyes reflecting red and orange. The sky filled with smoke and eventually the firemen stood still. We watched, silent, as flames rose out of the first floor windows and black ash fell across the garden.

When the first floor had become a heap of charred rubble, the chief firefighter stood where the porch used to be, saying how the wood in the walls had been dry, and I remembered what summer was like. The firefighters patted us on the back then drove away. Ms. Merral shook her head and walked off mumbling about insurance. In the end it was just me and Rufus watching ashes float to the ground, wondering if she had left early that morning, if the sounds I had heard in the building were real, or what would have happened if I had waited just a few more seconds.

I'm walking down the street today. It's spring and I don't have a place to go. I'm a butterfly trying to get back in the cocoon, searching for blue shoes. Twice a day I pass by Rufus the dog and the mound of dust where there once was a house. I walk over to where the garden was, and I dig my fingers into the dirt trying to find tomato seeds. I go to the dust pile, the house, and I stand on the mound where we used to live. Some days I sift through the stone and dirt looking for a drawing of a cocoon or a pair of blue shoes. I try to imagine the day it ended, wondering if she had left without me or I without her. I try to make the charcoal creak beneath my feet. I close my eyes and there's an arm touching mine, another person sitting next to me on the rubble porch. I keep my eyes closed, and I force myself to smile. 6 . . . 7.



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“Because when we lose access to books,  
we lose access to our humanity.”

—Sarah Escobedo



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## First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AWARD

# Unveiling the Silence: How a Banned Book Gave Me a Voice

*By Sarah Escobedo*

Lopez Early College High School

A world without books is a world without voices: silent, stifled, and stripped of the stories that shape us. Books carry the power to transport us, challenge our beliefs, and make us feel less alone. Yet, in the face of rising book bans, this power is under threat. Among the books that have faced censorship, J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* stands out as one that profoundly impacted me. For me, it was more than just a novel, it was a mirror reflecting my struggles, an anchor for my individuality, and a call to defend the freedom to read.

J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* has been a target of controversy since its publication in 1951. Frequently challenged for its use of profanity, themes of rebellion, and perceived promotion of immorality, the novel has been banned in schools and libraries across the world. Critics often label its protagonist, Holden Caulfield, as a negative influence on young readers due to his defiance of societal norms and frequent questioning of authority. However, these very qualities are what make the book so powerful and relatable for those navigating the complexities of adolescence. In a world that demands conformity, *The Catcher in the Rye* offers a rare voice of honesty, reminding readers that it's okay to feel lost and to resist the pressures of fitting in.

When I first read *The Catcher in the Rye* during my sophomore year, I felt an immediate connection to Holden. Like him, I often struggled with feelings of isolation and disillusionment. Growing up as a first-generation Mexican American in a low-income immigrant household, I often felt caught between two worlds, one shaped by my family's sacrifices and cultural values, and another that demanded I

conform to societal expectations. Holden's candid voice, filled with frustration and vulnerability, felt like my own inner dialogue brought to life. He didn't have all the answers, but he wasn't afraid to ask the tough questions, and that gave me the courage to do the same.

Holden's disdain for "phoniness" particularly struck a chord with me. In a society that often values appearances over authenticity, I found solace in his refusal to conform. Growing up, I often felt pressure to present a polished version of myself, especially in school, where I had to balance my cultural identity with the expectations of fitting into American norms. Holden's critique of societal "phoniness" reminded me that it was okay to be different, to question the world around me, and to hold on to my individuality despite external pressures. This realization was transformative, especially as I navigated the challenges of high school and the uncertainty of my future.

The book also opened my eyes to the importance of mental health. Holden's struggles with grief, depression, and loneliness resonated with me in ways I hadn't expected. At the time, I was grappling with my own sense of inadequacy and a fear of failure, especially as the oldest child in an immigrant family. I felt the weight of expectations on my shoulders and often pushed my feelings aside to focus on being "strong." Seeing Holden confront his emotions, however imperfectly, helped me realize the importance of acknowledging my own struggles and seeking support when needed. It made me feel less alone and gave me a deeper understanding of the need for compassion, not only toward others but also toward myself.

Beyond its personal impact, *The Catcher in the Rye* taught me the importance of defending the freedom of expression. If I hadn't been given the opportunity to read this book, I might never have found the courage to embrace my true self or to challenge the barriers that hold others back. Book bans rob people of the chance to encounter stories that can change their lives. The very themes that make books controversial—identity, rebellion, questioning norms—are the ones that help us grow as individuals and as a society. Without these stories, we would be stuck in a world of conformity, unable to challenge the assumptions that shape our lives.

Censorship silences the voices we need to hear most, often those that challenge the status quo. Reading *The Catcher in the Rye* opened my eyes to the importance of these voices, not only in literature but

also in life. It reminded me that books don't just tell stories; they shape them. They give us the tools to understand ourselves and the world around us. Holden's story inspired me to not only embrace my own individuality but also to advocate for others to have the same opportunity to read freely and without judgment.

As a first-generation college student, navigating both the expectations of my immigrant family and the pressures of a predominantly non-Hispanic academic environment, I've realized how essential it is to preserve the freedom of expression. Many of the books we read in school, like *The Catcher in the Rye*, challenge us to explore difficult questions, test boundaries, and engage with controversial ideas. These are the books that shape our understanding of the world and of ourselves. If these books are censored, we lose access to the ideas that challenge us to grow.

Book bans are not just an attack on literature; they are an attack on our ability to think critically and empathize with others. The freedom to read is a cornerstone of self-discovery and societal progress. Stories like Holden's teach us to value authenticity, to question norms, and to find beauty in imperfection. These lessons are especially critical in a world that often feels divided and disconnected. As we face challenges like immigration, racial injustice, and economic disparity, it is essential that we allow for the free exchange of ideas through books.

The lessons I've learned from *The Catcher in the Rye* have stayed with me throughout my life. From understanding the value of being true to myself to recognizing the importance of mental health, Holden's journey has shaped the way I navigate the world. But more importantly, it has taught me that our right to read must never be taken for granted. Every book, especially those that challenge us, has the potential to change lives. When we start banning books, we are not only silencing the authors; we are silencing ourselves.

In the face of book bans, we must celebrate the power of stories to transform lives. *The Catcher in the Rye* changed mine by teaching me to value authenticity, embrace individuality, and fight for the freedom to read. As readers and thinkers, we must continue to protect the stories that challenge us, comfort us, and inspire us to see the world, and ourselves, in new ways. Because when we lose access to books, we lose access to our humanity. Books are not just tools for education,

they are vehicles for self-discovery, empathy, and social change. We must fight to protect the freedom to read, not just for ourselves, but for future generations.



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“Black women are all purpose, like flour.  
There’s a black woman for every situation.  
Which will your factory make?”

—Laila Asberry

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## First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

AMANDA GORMAN AWARD FOR POETRY

# To Build a Better Black Woman

*By Laila Asberry*

Cleveland High School of Science and Medicine

You want to  
assemble a  
black woman.

In an automated factory.  
Her kind will be mass produced by the  
trillion.  
It's hard to know.  
Whether you shall start from her  
regal head,  
or  
war-torn feet.

It's hard to know,  
how to start the formula  
of success.  
Whether you will make her  
a war veteran,

with scars and battles  
and something to fight for.  
Or whether you will make her soft, elastic  
and bendable to  
your will.

Black women are all purpose, like flour.  
There's a black woman for every situation.  
Which will your factory make?

The science behind her  
must be studied.  
Because fabricating a soul,  
is not easy.  
Especially building it  
to be broken

Maybe, she will be  
built with  
**interchangeable parts.**  
So when one breaks,  
another  
will replace her.

She must be  
created.  
And it must be done  
carefully.



There are already too many broken black women.

Too many failed experiments.

She must not become another.

Not her weaponized disobedience.

Not a willful mind,

with needs, or thoughts, or wants.

Not anything human.

Black women are fragile.

Extremely easy to break.

But not in the same sense

as glass.

But in the sense that it takes one time.

And their structure is recomposed.

It is ready for heartbreak,

and mistrust,

and the evil of the world.

They evolve, because

their permanent build is

fragile.

It's amazing, really.

A temporary blueprint.

ever-changing, always shaping.

always being built.

It'll cost you a lot to  
tear her apart,  
and craft her in your image.

Let's brainstorm  
so you can get the formula right.

### **HER ARMS**

will be tied,  
because she would otherwise use her hands for revenge.

### **HER FEET**

will be pierced,  
because she will tiptoe around the battlefield that is the factory.

But not too well, we want her ready for the real world.

### **HER BREASTS**

will be soft,  
because this world is built on the mouths of greedy men,  
that don't know they were fed on black milk.

### **HER HIPS**

will be wide,  
like a mount for a horse.

### **HER THIGHS**

will be defined,  
because they need to be too distracted to hear her voice.

## HER HEART

will be soft,  
because a soft heart can't tell the difference between bad intentions  
and affection.

## HER EYES

will be closed,  
so she can't read through the lies.

## HER LIPS

will be swole,  
so you can steal her voice and her songs . . . your creation's creations.

## HER WOMB

will be controlled,  
because it's a cost-effective savings method.

## HER LEGS

will be long,  
to give her strides that will reach and reach and reach, to close an  
unclosable gap.

And her

## ASS

will be large,  
as a source of entertainment.

You will have to wear gloves,

and masks, to block out the  
toxins.

On a warm summer day  
by the river,  
a new specimen  
will be created.

You want to  
assemble a  
better  
black woman.

**except . . .**

You will make dozens  
and  
dozens  
and dozens  
of prototypes.  
And they will all  
fall flat.

Because your perfect  
black woman might have her  
long legs, and  
rough feet, and  
kissable lips, and  
thick thighs, and

fragile heart, and  
wide hips, and  
big ass, and  
empty womb, and  
soft breasts,  
but

you will never make her  
perfect.

## SOMEWHERE

In your  
factory a  
completed black woman  
lies.

Though, completed  
is a funny way to say  
broken.

You have stripped  
her of all her  
defining characteristics  
and are left with

a perfect, big hipped  
big bootied, big breasted  
husk.

You have  
gentrified her, like the  
hoods you take  
from us.

To you, she was  
nothing more than  
a machine that needed  
to be  
fixed.

I ask you.  
What about the soul?  
What about her  
character?  
What will you do about  
her imperfectness?

She is convoluted and  
special.

For reasons you can not  
comprehend.

Please.

TELL ME

again, that you want,

to build a  
“better”  
black woman

and  
I will tell you  
she already exists.

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“Have you ever wondered how fast love  
can turn into grief?”

—Bailey Terrett



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## First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

MICHELLE OBAMA AWARD FOR MEMOIR

# 5 Minutes

*By Bailey Terrett*

Toms River High School North

Have you ever wondered how fast love can turn into grief? I don't have to think long about that question because I already know the answer is 5 minutes.

### 1 minute for your phone light up

I woke up early on August 5th excited about my first day of band camp. The theme for that day was "Section Colors" and my section chose green shirts with little goats on them. I decided to call my mom so we could chat while I got ready, but she didn't pick up. I assumed she was asleep because it was so early in the morning, and carried on with my day. I packed up my backpack with water and sunscreen and hopped in the car.

### 2 minutes to step into the hallway

My dad called me on my way to the school, he was always eager to tell me about his plans for the day. Today it consisted of getting breakfast and sitting on the beach, because it was finally his day off. We talked for a couple minutes about band camp until I arrived at the school and had to hang up. I was ready to meet up with the rest of my section to take pictures and talk about all the exciting things for this season.

### **3 minutes to answer the phone call**

After I arrived at the school I realized that I forgot all the snacks my mom bought me for band camp at home. I sent her a message because I seriously could not believe that I could possibly forget another thing she needed me to do. I walked inside and the entire band was sitting scattered around the band room. Our band directors started playing a concept video for the performance we would be doing this year. The theme of the show was “Unwanted,” so it had a bunch of scary music and visuals. My section was definitely the most excited because we were the ones that got to dress up.

### **4 minutes of listening**

Shortly after the video ended, our band director started to speak to everyone, which was when I realized my phone was lighting up in my pocket. I knew I wasn’t supposed to have my phone out while they were speaking, but the only people that usually call me were family, so I decided to check. It was a call from my sister, which I declined, and sent her a message asking what she needed. She responded immediately with “It’s an emergency, please pick up,” so I excused myself into the hallway.

### **5 minutes to process the news.**

My phone only rang once before my sister picked up the phone. She said in short hasty breaths that she was outside, and she needed me to come out with all of my things. I agreed, grabbed my backpack, and let the directors know that I needed to leave. I quickly left the building where I soon met both of my siblings, and where they proceeded to tell me the most heartbreaking words I had ever heard. We got into her car, and I began to process what had happened today.

My dad, who was on his way to pick up his beach chair,

My sister, who just dropped off her daughter at daycare,

My brother, getting prepared for his day at work,

Me, anticipating my first day of band camp,

And my mom, who passed away early that morning.

It only took one 5 minute phone call for my world to be completely flipped upside down, but what matters the most is how it affects you.

Which is why I'll take 1 minute to deny

2 minutes for anger

3 minutes of bargaining

4 minutes for sadness

and finally 5 minutes to accept it all, and move forward.

Because that's what my mom would have wanted.

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“The black man with the restrictions  
put upon him has his communication  
and social skills stripped from him.”

—Jaylen Hughley

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## First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

MAYA ANGELOU AWARD FOR SPOKEN WORD

# Black Education in America

*By Jaylen Hughley*

Oxon Hill High School

A young black man walks to the door of his favorite university they say "You aren't good enough." His skin is a discriminant to deter him from attending his dream university. The shade of his skin overweighs the achievement of his grades, which leaves a mark of failure contributed by a belief of false behavior.

They relate intelligence as evidence as reasoning of this man's treason for his oblivion to his skin, which is a feature of their analyzation of his application of rejection to their estate.

With no education the man flees to find means of comfort to be able to provide for his young son which is the seed to a younger generation with the hope of declaration of liberation of equal rights.

In an attempt to find means to carry his young seed, he precedes to local emporiums in a plea to find employment with no edification to generate prosperity. Rejected for being illiterate, they state "You can't work here."

They use education as an equivalent to correlate his work habits as an excuse to create false impurities to limit his social authority.

This constant dilemma is proof of a reason why black men over any other race triumph in unemployment and are subjective to unfair cultivation of their education.

The black man with the restrictions put upon him has his communication and social skills stripped from him.

What good is any man that can't communicate their plea to be free?

With no way out he's turns to the task that promises him easy money, He joins a group that's founded on dope, which ignites a constant loop for black men in America; all founded on the limitation of education.



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“Bella hummed in response, her mind finally giving into blood loss and dreaming of green clouds. Wonderful green clouds and bodies broken from the raw horror of living.”

—Iliana Martinez



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## Honorable Mention

JAMES BALDWIN AWARD FOR FICTION

# Always Has Been and Always Will Be

*By Iliana Martinez*

Salem High School North

It's not real.

That was the message scribbled on a napkin in blue ink that was placed inside Bella's to-go box. She only found it the next day when she opened the box for lunch. The words stared at her and she stared back. A strange feeling settled in her stomach. The strangest part about that strange feeling was that Bella knew that she shouldn't be getting strange feelings.

She considered reporting it; anything suspicious or unusual must be submitted to the closest Authority according to Article 2 Section 25 of the Greater Constitution of the Greater United States of America.

Bella turned to the flag that sat in the break room. Every room of every building had one; she even had one in her bedroom at home. Bella considered her options, getting lost in the dark blue X of the flag. To soothe her mind, she counted all thirty stars and when she reached the thirtieth, she tucked the napkin inside her shoe.

"Bella!" Mr. Davis barged into the break room, a vein popping from his forehead. "Your five minutes are up. The phone is ringing and I think it might be for me."

Article 3: The basic guidelines of the Greater American woman. There are no sections, only a glorified bullet list. No woman shall surpass the age of twenty unmarried. Women are to have a minimum of three children by the age of thirty, according to the J. Tru version of the Christian Bible (the most accurate and the official Bible of the

Greater United States). A woman shall be a housewife; if a woman wishes to work she may be an assistant or secretary with five minute breaks at the end of every two hours . . . to name a few.

Bella returned to her desk and put her headset back on, drowning out the chatter of men in front of her. "Hello, my name is Bella. Thank you for calling J. Tru Advertisement Company. How may I direct you?" She said all this with a smile plastered on her face, knowing the man on the line couldn't even see her.

As expected, the man wanted Mr. Davis, her supervisor. Always right, the men. She transferred the call—vocally of course, the phone had no buttons—to Mr. Davis and waited for the next call.

Her desk was bare, save a small desk toy with the company's logo inscribed on the side. The napkin in her shoe suddenly seemed gargantuan. What if her flat fell off? Her tights tended to make her flats looser. Bella's leg bounced anxiously. There were no clocks in the office, so she stared at the phone.

Her commute was always thirty minutes. Article 2 Section 5: Every citizen must not carpool and shall be issued the Tru XeLOn gas powered car. She's told Donny that her drive takes thirty minutes, but seeing as he barely agreed to let her work, the extra long commute didn't make it any better. Bella drove through the suburbs, every house and street looking exactly the same. She didn't have time to change, so she ran into the house and started on dinner.

Donny was in the living room nursing a beer. "The guys are coming over tonight," he said, his eyes not moving from the blue screen.

Bella didn't respond. She knew what would come of it. Donny had been bringing up children since they were married two years ago, and his friends always spoke of their new babies. His patience was starting to wear thin. Bella was surprised he had even waited. Other wives weren't so lucky.

She felt a strange feeling again, one that she didn't want to name, as she removed that night's casserole from the oven. Women were supposed to want children, but Bella just . . . didn't. She hadn't even wanted to get married. This was all kept to herself, of course.

She left the casserole on the table and began to head upstairs when Donny stopped her. "Why aren't you eating with me?"

"I don't feel well," she lied, surprised at her own behavior. Women don't lie to their husbands.

"You're not having your . . . female week, are you? I want it to be tonight."

Bella suppressed a sigh. "I told you, I'm not feeling—"

"My choice," he interrupted. His words were so sharp she almost flinched. "It's my choice," he repeated. "Always has been and always will be."

She briefly closed her eyes, recalling their schooling as children. Literature of any kind was contraband and to be destroyed by the nearest Authority, so school consisted of long lectures. No notes—no one knew how to read or write. In school, it was a mantra taught to young girls: my body belongs to my husband.

"Of course, Donny," Bella finally said, trying to smile. "I'll be waiting."

She later found herself lying on her bed, holding the napkin. No one knew she could read. Clearly, someone did know, or at least suspected. It's not real. What wasn't real? How was this person able to write? Bella tried to determine who would have slipped the napkin in her to-go before deciding that it didn't really matter. It was a mystery nonetheless. Or a warning.

Bella tucked the napkin in her underwear drawer. She heard the men downstairs leave, so she got in bed and waited for Donny.

The next day began as it always did; Bella woke up first, prepared her husband's clothes, and made him breakfast (a good wife starts the day by caring for her husband). She put on her work clothes: flats, tights, a too short skirt, and a blouse that was cut too low (a woman must always dress to the benefit of men).

Bella removed the napkin from her dresser and stuffed it into her purse. A good wife didn't keep secrets, but here she was with the second biggest secret of her life.

". . . how may I direct you?" At work, Bella realized that she was bored. A woman must always remain enthusiastic, but she was bored. Maybe, she realized, she had always been bored.

Amidst her pondering, another call came in and Bella barely

registered it before the man began yelling at her. "Let me direct you!" She chimed, putting the phone on hold. Bella cleared her throat a couple of times before answering in a deep voice, "This is Mr. Jones, how can I help you?"

Bella could barely keep herself from squealing. She was assisting a customer for the first time in her life. Women never took up leadership positions. Yet here she was, providing a customer with the information he needed to make a decision later on.

She hung up, still grinning, the thrill of breaking the rules pounding in her chest.

"Very nice, Bella," Mr. Davis said, appearing in front of her. "You know I love to see that smile of yours. You know, I don't believe what the others say about you. Your appearance isn't primitive. I find dark hair rather . . . appealing."

Bella fought back the urge to frown. Mr. Davis leaned over her desk, eyes falling down her blouse. An agonizing minute went by before Mr. Davis returned to his desk.

"It's not real," she said to herself out loud. She struggled to make sense of the meaning. "It's not real or is it not right?"

During her five minute break, three men she barely knew cornered her by the breakroom, a hungry look gleaming in their eyes.

"It's not right," she told herself again as she sat in her car, not wanting to go home. She had tried to fix her hair and brush makeup over the bruises on her arms, but nothing seemed to work. Bella's nerves were shot, anxiety wrecking her body. Another strange feeling. Could women feel anxious according to Article 3?

Bella cackled, black tears creating highways on her cheeks. She laughed until her belly hurt and her face was red. "None of it fucking matters!" She exclaimed, getting out of her car. She wasn't going home. Bella didn't ever want to go home again . . .

"Como todo un boricua, en mi pecho tenerte," Bella whispered. She walked on the side of the road, rubbing her arms. She'd lost her purse somewhere. "Puerto Rico, yo me siento latente."

It was an old rhyme her mother would tell her in private. She said it was the reason that Bella didn't fit within the masses of blonde hair and blue eyes. Said that it was history.

"History of what?" Bella had asked.

Her mother shrugged. "I don't know."

"... Pues boricua me hiciste hasta la muerte." Bella felt that there was something missing along the roadways. Beside the asphalt was a concrete floor that stretched for miles into the city and beyond. Wasn't there supposed to be something that ran along the roads? Or maybe the roads ran through them? Everything was so ... straight. All her life she had been told that the symmetry of the Greater U.S.A. was natural and good, but she couldn't shake the feeling that it wasn't.

She continued thinking about her mother, who died suddenly at forty years old. Ellen always seemed to stand out, both figuratively and literally. Always used to say how lucky she was to find a husband despite her looks. Ellen was the only other person Bella had ever seen with dark hair and tan skin.

Towards the end of her life, Ellen became hysterical, spouting nonsense. The last day she was alive, Ellen grabbed Bella by the shoulders and said, "Don't believe it."

Bella stopped in her tracks and found herself looking to The Wall. According to the History of the Greater U.S.A, The Wall had always been there, and nothing was beyond. On the off chance that's false, if there was something beyond The Wall, it would keep the Greater Americans inside free and happy. The world ended at The Wall. Flags with their comforting X's lined the flat top. Barbed wire covered the concrete structure. Signs warned civilians that the world ended there.

"It's not real," Bella breathed, her feet moving on their own accord. "There's more."

She walked until it was finally dark, lights from the inner city brighter than the moon.

She placed her hands on the barbed wire, relishing the way it cut into her skin. Bella was mesmerized by her own blood. Sure she bled as any other woman, but she had never been cut before. Hospitals were reserved for the elite; the lower class lived in a constant state of baby-proofed protection.

Bella began to climb, her tights tearing away. Jagged cuts ripped open on her legs.

Behind her, red lights flashed faintly and an alarm began to grow in volume, cutting through the night's normal stillness. Her flats eventually fell off and the soles of her feet bore the brunt of the barbs.

Her hand slipped, painfully pulling open a vertical tear on her forearm that exposed a pulsing vein to the night air. All the pain felt good. The scratches on her face dripped blood into her mouth. Something about it felt right—to be hurting and in pain, disgusting and disobedient. She tore away her skirt and blouse, leaving her nearly naked save undergarments under the washed out sky.

"Women may not expose themselves in public," Bella growled, fighting lightheadedness. "Women shall be docile and submissive!" A barb cut right above her eye and she yelped in pain.

"Article 7 Section 2; all those who do not match the Ideal Race shall be eradicated!" Bella paused her climb, her heart slamming against her ribcage. Her mother didn't die suddenly. She simply didn't match the standards.

Down below, trucks with blinding headlights screeched to a stop. Red lights throbbed like a beating heart. "Please stop and allow us to escort you down," an automated voice blared.

"Under Amendment 49, citizens may not—"

"Shut up!" Bella screamed as the voice droned on. "Shut up!" Fury burrowed into her stomach as would a parasite. She latched on to the flat top of The Wall and pulled herself up with a groan. Bella swung her legs up and rolled on to her back, panting heavily. Sweat cooled on her body and she shuddered.

"... your husband is worried. Please allow us to escort you down."

Pain finally caught up to her as the adrenaline wore off. She whimpered and forced herself on her side. The automation wouldn't cease and Bella could hear men organizing to get her.

Her heavy pants calmed and she finally saw it. Right behind The Wall was a dirt wasteland. Oil rigs were scattered through the landscape. But, as she forced her eyes to focus, beyond the barren land, lit by the terrible city lights, she could make out something new. The silhouette of a towering, asymmetrical structure sat against the

backdrop of the sky. What seemed like white paint coated the peak and stretched to the middle. Below it, clouds stood tall. Only they weren't clouds, that much she knew. The twisty and gnarly "clouds" appeared to be dark green. Were they natural or had they been constructed?

Bella stared and stared as she bled out, an understanding crashing through her. It brought tears to her eyes. It wasn't real and it never was. Life was not meant to be as it was. She could feel it in her gut, a pull to the green clouds. That was real and that made sense.

Women weren't meant to be second class, always under the control of men. People like her mother, people who didn't fit "the mold," deserved to exist. The real world rested out there, far away from concrete jungles and rules that delegated her every move. No more Donny, no more secrets, no more five minute breaks. Freedom was right there in front of her, not behind.

"Mrs. Greene?" Bella barely registered her married name. Women weren't referred to by their last name. Often, Bella forgot she even had one.

There was a man on a ladder; an Authority, she realized. She turned her head slightly to see him better.

"I want to be free," Bella whispered, tasting blood on her tongue. "I want to be free."

"You are free," the man assured. "Everyone in the Greater United States is free. Always have been and always will be."

The memory of Donny saying the exact same thing sent a shiver down her spine. Bella shook her head, a tear trailing over her nose and down her cheek. "This isn't freedom. This isn't real." She managed to look the man in the eyes. "Will you take me there?" Bella half gestured in the direction of the green clouds and the odd structure. "It looks so beautiful."

The man maneuvered her gently, holding her in his arms. "We will take you there," he agreed, signing to the others below to lower them down. "Everything will be as it should be."

Bella hummed in response, her mind finally giving into blood loss and dreaming of green clouds. Wonderful green clouds and bodies broken from the raw horror of living.

“... as always, the weather is perfect in our God-blessed country. To all our Greater viewers out there, don't forget: this is freedom.”

The television shut off, leaving Bella to stare at her reflection on the screen. Donny held the remote in his hand. Their daughter Ellen slept soundly in her rocker by the couch. Ellen made a great name for an unwanted girl. What a strange thought that had been.

“You should've made a boy,” Donny said, a beer in his free hand. “Is that so difficult to ask?”

Bella kept her eyes trained on the television as Donny yanked her from the couch and smashed his mouth against hers. Donny broke the kiss and grumbled in her ear, “This time you'll make me a boy.”

Slowly, Bella's lips twitched into a smile that didn't reach her eyes. “Of course, dear. Anything you want.”

Article 7 Section 4: Any citizen so bold to become rebellious is to be reeducated and eventually reintegrated into society once they are deemed fit.





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“The lack of literature leads to a shallow existence where people don’t have the tools to question or understand the world around them.”

—Daizy Nelson

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## Honorable Mention

### FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AWARD

# The Spark of Knowledge: How *Fahrenheit 451* Changed My Perspective on Books

By Daizy Nelson

Orofino High School

**Title:** *The Spark of Knowledge: How Fahrenheit 451 Changed My Perspective on Books*

**Description:** This creative entry explores how *Fahrenheit 451*, a banned book, profoundly impacted my life. Through Ray Bradbury's powerful dystopian narrative, I reflect on how the novel reshaped my understanding of free expression, the dangers of censorship, and the crucial role books play in shaping both individual thought and society as a whole.

**Inspiration:** My inspiration for this entry comes from how *Fahrenheit 451* challenged my views on censorship and the importance of preserving knowledge. Despite its controversial themes, the book ignited a passion for defending free access to ideas and deepened my appreciation for the power of books to inspire change.

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Reading *Fahrenheit 451* was an experience that deeply altered my relationship with books. Ray Bradbury's chilling portrayal of a world where books are burned in an effort to suppress knowledge and maintain social control had a profound impact on me, especially as I began to think about how censorship manifests in the real world. Initially, I was drawn into Bradbury's dystopian world by its stark premise—a society that bans books, limits free thought, and enforces conformity.

But as I read on, I began to see a parallel between Bradbury's fictional society and my own experiences, living in a world where certain ideas, books, and voices are actively suppressed.

Growing up in a Mexican household, books and stories were more than just entertainment—they were a bridge to understanding my heritage and my place in the world. My family often shared stories, not only from our culture but also from the broader world, teaching me that stories are essential to preserve history, spark ideas, and connect generations. These stories, many passed down orally, are like seeds that shape how we view the world and our roles within it. *Fahrenheit 451* deepened my understanding of this by showing how powerful storytelling and the written word truly are. In the book, the act of reading becomes an act of rebellion against a society that seeks to destroy individuality and independent thought. In Montag, the protagonist, I saw the struggle many people face when forced to confront oppressive forces that try to silence them—forces that still exist today.

Bradbury's novel made me realize how easily access to knowledge can be stripped away in a world where censorship reigns. When I first read about Montag's role as a fireman—someone who burns books to uphold the status quo—it seemed like a distant, surreal concept. But as I continued to read, I saw how the burning of books was more than just a physical act; it was an attempt to destroy the foundation of free thought. The society in *Fahrenheit 451* doesn't just burn books—it actively destroys the critical thinking and questioning that come with the ideas within those books. The lack of literature leads to a shallow existence where people don't have the tools to question or understand the world around them. This idea resonated with me because I knew that books are often the first targets in any effort to control a population.

This made me think about the present-day climate surrounding book banning and censorship, particularly the removal of books from schools and libraries that deal with themes of race, gender, sexuality, and social justice. Much like Bradbury's dystopian world, where people are kept in the dark through the elimination of books, there are real-world attempts to limit access to ideas that challenge the status quo. When books like *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison or *Maus* by Art Spiegelman are banned, we are denying future generations the ability to understand important aspects of history and human experience.

Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* made me realize how important it is to protect books and the freedoms they represent—not just for ourselves but for those who come after us. It became clear to me that when we allow censorship to grow, we risk eroding our ability to think critically, to empathize, and to engage with the world in a meaningful way.

What struck me most about *Fahrenheit 451* was the personal transformation of Guy Montag. In the beginning, he is a compliant member of a society that burns books, yet as he begins to read and question, he realizes how much of his life he's been denying himself. Montag's journey from a book burner to a seeker of knowledge mirrors the way I began to see books—not just as tools of personal enrichment, but as vehicles for social change. His awakening underscored the critical importance of questioning everything, even the seemingly mundane or accepted norms. It is through books that we are given the opportunity to challenge those ideas, and in doing so, we push society forward. Montag's story reminded me that knowledge is not passive—it demands action, reflection, and sometimes, rebellion.

The novel ignited a passion in me to defend the freedom to read and to resist any form of censorship, especially when it seeks to limit access to diverse perspectives. The power of literature to shape thought, to provoke action, and to reflect our shared humanity cannot be overstated. Books are more than just pages bound together; they are the key to understanding each other, our history, and the world we live in. Reading *Fahrenheit 451* made me see the importance of defending not only the books I love but also the ideas that challenge me. I now view every book, whether banned or not, as an essential piece of a larger puzzle that helps us understand the complexities of the world.

Ultimately, *Fahrenheit 451* opened my eyes to the fragility of free thought and the essential role of books in protecting that freedom. It reminded me that, just as Montag fights to preserve knowledge in a society that seeks to destroy it, we must continue to fight for the right to read, to learn, and to engage with ideas. Books, especially those that challenge us, hold the power to ignite change, and I will always stand by the belief that no book—no matter how controversial—should be silenced.

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“I wear the name but do not know the culture my tongue is broken.”

—Addison Lee

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## Honorable Mention

AMANDA GORMAN AWARD FOR POETRY

# Satsuma & Kyoho

*By Addison Lee*

La Canada High School

mandarins  
blossom in home go round and round  
I trust the notes chew on the flesh sweet in both  
the heat then spit skin out careful and the cold  
packed not to stain napkins with dark plum colored juices and  
peeled sweet but chew on skin gently  
their taste becomes bitter, haunting for long moments after peels  
fall choke on seeds for fleeting happiness apart  
unending maybe you will spit me out easily  
tasting salt scars from crawling on the jagged ground breaking  
I saw you bite in and smiled so maybe  
sweetness is something locked away and to be earned underneath  
bare skin limbs starvation scraped my knees crying  
desire more, more, more but now bruised and battered heart  
knows the unfading craving for the foreign imperfection home  
that is crafted out of shattered rough tones but  
victim to fears that you might still see within  
me the hidden sours unbeknownst to hope that grows on trees  
tall I wear the name but do not know the culture my tongue is broken like  
young babies except my innocence has long since escaped me  
ancestors dying cannot help but spit out bitter pleas let me feast on  
what i already know before i choke to taste the  
sugars

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“My culture is     the culture we never speak of,  
voided from conversation”

—Alexandra Borrego



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## Honorable Mention

MAYA ANGELOU AWARD FOR SPOKEN WORD

# Pillar of Flames, Pillar of Tres Leches

*By Alexandra Borrego*

Legacy of Education Excellence (LEE) High School

I am not my body.

My body has faded to a ghostly pale

It has faded from the bronze

I was blessed with I was blessed with feeling of difference

But, is a blessing that from above or that from below

Am I blessed from a waterspout that will help me grow  
and bloom

Or, am I blessed from a fire devil that will tear me down until I  
am not longer my mind

I am not my mind.

My mind is clouded with difficulty

Such difficulty that I have to bless myself with patience

Patience, that I may not have

To bless myself with patience is to insult myself

I insult myself to pounds of tres leches, my own delicacy

Why must I insult myself with a delicacy? I mustn't have a brain.

I am not my brain.

My brain has faltered into a drenched cake

A drenched cake I once loved

I once loved the delicacies I had

Love is more than delicacies

Love is pyrogenic, inducing a fever of hunger

The hunger I feel is to love beyond the delicacies, beyond  
the traditions

Beyond what my thoughts or

feelings could induce

I am not my thoughts or feelings.

My thoughts and feelings focus on external things

Focusing on external things is hearing the squelch of this cake

And the squelch of this cake hurts more than the authenticity of a  
pyronado

How authentic is, a pyronado?

Is it as authentic as the boring, old tornadoes

Or, is it as authentic as a culture we never speak of

My culture is the culture we never speak of, voided from conversation.

It feels as rare as the pyronado

It feels like is has mushed into a drenched cake of milk

It feels like I've been lifted into a feeling of Altschmerz

Altschmerz, which means to experience weariness with the same old issues that you've always had.

This feeling is my DNA.

I am not my DNA.

My DNA is a feeling

A feeling that relates to a weather

A weather that is the opposite of a food

A hot, dangerous tornado and a moist, drenched cake.

What a way to lose myself

A way to lose myself to a world where I don't want to conform, I don't want to conform to a weather or a food

I want to conform in this difficulty of me.

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“Years of taking care of others have prepared me to take care of myself in a way necessary when the general public believes you should not exist.”

—Parker Thomas-Hamlin

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## Honorable Mention

MICHELLE OBAMA AWARD FOR MEMOIR

# My 2 Spirits

*By Parker Thomas-Hamlin*

High School of Fashion Industries

Contrary to popular belief, I was not born in the wrong body.

No, I am not an alien, nor was I involved in a freaky Friday mishap at birth. The “born in the wrong body” rhetoric is just the usual description following, “What does being transgender feel like?”. However, this is false. Let me tell you why.

Growing up, I was taught an apparently unconventional lesson on queerness. My mother taught me the importance of transgender people, reflecting most Indigenous communities’ morals, including mine. In dominant western societies, masculine and feminine principles have been physically manifested into culture and the way we express ourselves. We are provided with two options from birth, girl or boy, which defines our path from there on. This concept of masculine and feminine balance is important in both colonial and Indigenous society, but is shown in different ways. Indigenous values emphasize the importance and divinity of these two spirits in one being. In my culture, transgender, or two-spirit, people have been held to the highest respect because of their knowledge of love and caretaking.

Imagine the culture shock when I learned that post-colonization America hates queer people. This hate began to manifest towards me the more I interacted with society. I have hated being trans. I have believed that I was born in the wrong body. I have believed the policymakers, I have believed Fox News, I have believed the political sheep.

Then I remember:

2008, in my toddler years, I repeatedly set my fellow toddlers' sippy cups upright. 2011, my brother was born, and my hands needed no guidance to support his neck. 2013, I learned to read, and every night following, my brother fell asleep to the sound of my voice. To be happy as a trans person, it is necessary to understand sacrifice, to learn through tragedy, and to take care of yourself and community. Years of taking care of others have prepared me to take care of myself in a way necessary when the general public believes you should not exist. There is no such thing as a stagnant identity. I am only two different people according to society. In reality, I am only forced to think about myself and my identity because I am different. Most people spend their whole lives not knowing themselves.

So, I don't wish to be born a boy anymore. I cherish the experiences that make me who I am, just how my mother taught me growing up. My presence and knowledge of identity reflects onto those around me. My knowledge of breaking gender barriers helps me transcend barriers in life as a whole. I've never left the country, I don't speak every language, but I know how to braid hair tight and neat. I know how to layer flavors of salt and spice in dinner like my grandma, and your grandma, too. I know how to tend to a wound. I know how to be a shoulder to cry on. I know how to not just love the world, but myself. For that, I am worldly, as my two spirits are a gift. I was born in the right body.



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“It’s Christmas Day. I feel my eyes flutter shut, and my heart slows. Grief, with all its iron-cold chains, is liberating in this moment.”

—Merrill Finney



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## Honorable Mention

JAMES BALDWIN AWARD FOR FICTION

# A Liberating Kind of Grief

*By Merrill Finney*

Maiden High School

It was below freezing in Manchester, Vermont that night. Snow had fallen; the crisp, sparkling surface penetrated by small and large hands alike, embracing the surge of unusually cold arctic air. Snowmen and abandoned sleds lined Franklin Avenue, patiently waiting for their owners' return the next morning. Twinkling lights reflected upon the ice-frozen ground, each house with its own array of colors and characters. The D'amore household was no different. The silhouette of the home hemmed with warm, jeweled lights, accompanied by the bright wire deer that lay in the yard. A tree filled with sentimental ornaments could be seen through the front window, right beside the door. Inside, an exhausted father sat on the couch crudely wrapping last-minute presents, a task that usually was completed days before. The seat next to him, normally filled with warmth and kind words, was frigid and empty. Upstairs, children lay in their beds, attempting to sleep through the night.

Dante found himself restless, tossing and turning under his duvet. No amount of blankets, or lack thereof, could provide him comfort. His pillow was too stiff and too flat, and his clock ticked so loud he could feel its gears turning in his own mind. The painted eyes of his baseball figurines followed him as he rose from his bed once again, the fifth time this evening, and slowly opened his door. The floor popped below him as he crept towards the balcony lookout to the foyer below. He sat down on the top stair and observed the still scene of his mother's Christmas village from above. Everything seems so peaceful down there, he thought. The painted people stand delicately in position, speaking in groups or caroling around the village. They huddle in their

painted sweaters and mittens, with red noses and the faux snow modeled intricately around them. The village was the last decoration his mother set up before she returned to the hospital that year, and she had not been home since. Dante and his siblings, Katie and Richie, visited with their father when they could, but she wanted to spend this Christmas Eve with her parents. Dante found no solace in sitting on the stairs staring at the village, only a longing to be somewhere he wasn't. He made his way back to his room and settled in his bed. After some time, his breath began to slow, and his eyes fluttered shut as he entered sleep. The clock read midnight.

Downstairs, the village sat quietly. In a moment, quicker than an instant, blind to the unbeknownst eye, the clock tower within the village began to tick. Time, for the rest of the world, was still. But for the small town of Eromad, the seconds had only begun . . .

I'm falling. I'M FALLING. I'M FALLING. Wind rushes past my cheeks and into my ears, the pressure building and releasing as I drop lower and lower. Not even a minute ago I was in my bed, and hell, I'd finally been able to go to sleep. Now I'm falling into an unknown abyss. This is great. The air is frigid and sharp, I swear I feel it cutting my skin. What looks to be . . . snow? It's falling all beside me. This has to be a dream. I knew I shouldn't have eaten so late. Now I'll never be able to rest easily. *Damnit Danny*, I think, *Can't catch a break even while you sleep*. Suddenly, the falling subsides, and I land on my back in the powder ground below. I choke on my breath, struggling to find my airway again. I am flat on the ground, in ice-cold snow. *Did I just fall out of the window?* I hear people talking in the distance, lots of people. I gather my breath and stand up, fumbling and almost falling on my face, then realize my clothes aren't *my* clothes. I'm wearing a thick wool jacket, brown pants, black leather boots with intricate silver buckles, and gloves. For a moment I'm upset because I liked my Montreal Baseball jersey and plaid pajama pants, but now that I feel how cold the air is down here, I'm glad I have what I'm wearing.

I realize this isn't my street. I brush the snow out of my hair, a few curly brown strands coming with it. I look down a path of perfectly laid cobblestones, into what is only the most beautiful town I've ever seen. The buildings are adorned with Christmas wreaths and bright red

bows, and lampposts line the pathway that leads to a bell tower. Groups of people scatter the area, with interlocking arms and red noses. I walk towards the bustle, the warmth of the village embracing me as I approach the Bavarian-style buildings. The brown roofs are covered in inches of snow, and icicles drip from the gutters creating spires of clear matter. Cobblestones crunch beneath my feet as I walk by a red and gold wooden sign that reads:

*"Welcome to Eromad! All Are Welcome, None Are Forgotten"*

*Kinda tacky.* I look past the sign to see an all-too-familiar scene. *No, this can't be. That candy store, and that boutique . . .* A shocking realization graces my mind. I am standing at the edge of Mom's Christmas village. I walk towards the crowded square, bustling with people dressed in long winter coats and colorful knitted sweaters. I recognize every building instantly. The candy shop to my left, decorated with painted icing windows and peppermint swirls, with a gingerbread door to match, was the first addition to the village. I can see cracks in the door frame, and the oxidizing copper door handle turning a light turquoise after years of use. Inside, children dressed in church wear and pea coats gaze upon the rows of sweets, towering above them with thousands of options. Across the street sits the library. I was only two when mom bought it, it's been fifteen years since then. The exterior belongs in an old Victorian town, with elaborate gold detailing and green shingles on the roof. The bay window at the front displays stacks of books amid a snowy winter scene. Residential homes sit between shops and street corners, each with its own elaborate wooden detailing and earth-tone exterior coloring, poinsettias sitting outside almost every front door. Every building amazes me with lines of lights and wreaths upon every wall. I walk until I cannot anymore, passing groups of caroling villagers singing *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen* and *Joy to the World*. I pass bakeries emitting scents of a childhood dream and shops surrounded by curious onlookers, window shopping to pass the small amount of time left before Christmas day. I stop in front of the church I recognize from when I was a child. I used to sit my action figures inside the village, pretending they lived there. I remember one year, I played too rough, and the church building fell to the ground. I was terrified that Santa would never forgive me for breaking the Christmas village but mom did. She always did. I sit outside and finally reflect on what I have just

experienced. In the background, a church service begins, with *O Come, All Ye Faithful* radiating through the organ as people file through the huge wooden doors. They seem to not notice me at all, I guess I blend in.

*How long has it been at home, is time the same here? Well, I guess that depends. Is this technically home?* I sit and ponder these thoughts until I hear noise in the near distance. I turn and look behind me, and a sleigh with an older man sitting in the driver's seat is drawing nearer. The horses are jet black; Fresians. My mother's favorite. The sleigh stops next to me, and I notice the intricate detailing on the reigns. Golden bells line the red leather, leading up to a wooden maroon body that makes the sleigh. I remember the day mom bought this piece, it was the last addition to the village. The man stops the sleigh in front of me, the bells ringing as the horses settle. He looks at me, but slightly misses my eyes.

"Hello?" I motion my arms to bring attention to the area around me. The man slides over to where I am and opens the door to the passenger seat. I notice his eyes are cloudy and barely open. *He must be blind.*

"Come, we must ride. There is not much time left." His voice is hoarse, it reminds me of an old wizard or prophet in fantasy movies.

"Left for what?" I ask.

"I cannot explain, but I can show you," he instructs. I figure I will take anyone who recognizes me in the slightest, and this man seems to know what to do with me, so I take his offer and walk towards the sleigh. My boots crunch in the snow as I walk up to the sleigh and climb the golden metal detailing up to the seats. I sit down, the cold leather freezing my lower thighs. The man takes the reins and directs us down the cobblestone street, the sleigh bells dancing as the horses traverse the bumpy terrain. We pass a row of residential housing, the half-timbered homes lit by the gentle glow of candles hung on the ice-trimmed windows. Garland hems the wooden beams, with mistletoe and Christmas flowers woven in like an intricate hand-crafted scarf. Each house is stained with a base of beige, red, or brown. The horses trot steadily through the road, and into the snow as we exit the village, passing an old postman's office. I look to my right as we pass the square blue building, watching the postman lock the

front door and dim the flame inside the lamppost. He looks up at me, his brown mustache covered with a bit of snow, and smiles sadly. I try to smile back, but a sudden wave of guilt and melancholy falls over me. As the sleigh passes him and enters a deep forest, thoughts race through my mind. *How long will I be stuck down here? Is it Christmas Day yet? Will dad notice I'm gone before the morning?* I remember seeing him, exhausted on the couch, a shadow of grief sitting next to him where mom should be. Then I start to think about mom. I have entered a spiral slide, a million miles long, and I'm racing down toward the neverending bottom. *How is she now? Is she too cold? Does the hospital ambiance bother her? Is her TV set to Channel 6? Did she eat dinner? Has she eaten at all? Is she sick again? Is she better? Will she ever get better?* The old driver shakes the reins, signaling the horses to quicken their pace. We fly through the forest, snow falling all around me, stinging my skin as my thoughts hastened. I look behind us, and all I can see is the faint glowing light of the clock tower. I feel out of place as if I do not belong to my own skin. Every part of my body, from my hair to my feet feels illicit. *What if she never comes out of the hospital room? What would Dad do? What about Katie or Richie? What would I do if she was gone?* A new thought graces my consciousness, one I never dared to recognize before. Instead of just a thought, it becomes a harsh whisper.

**“What will I do when she’s gone and I don’t have to deal with it all anymore?”**

I forget to breathe. My heart skips a beat. The harsh wind becomes silent to my ringing ears. And then all of my composure, kept pristine and perfect for seven years since mom first entered those hospital doors, comes crashing down as an old, decaying oak tree would in a violent thunderstorm. Hot tears flow out of my eyes and into my jacket. My face turns red as I feel the sleigh stop in the middle of the path, snow flying all around us like dancers on a stage. I try to wipe my face but the tears are never ending. The man speaks for the first time since we left the village, his raspy voice slicing the silence of the cold winter’s night.

“I have shown you what needs to be shown. Do not dry your eyes, child. It is alright to let go every once in a while.” The old man grunts as he exits the body of the sleigh. I watch him as he walks around the side, feeling for the horses, guiding his way to me. He fumbles with the

latch for a moment, and I reach down to unlock it for him. The tears begin to subside.

"Thank you, Dante." He says, in a kinder, more gentle voice than he had spoken with before. It reminded me of how Santa Claus sounds in movies, a loveable grandfather figure who always knows what to say. *Wait, I never told him my name. Why is he letting me out?* He motions for me to come down, and as I step into the powdery snow I ask, "Why are we stopping here? And how did you know my name?" The man chuckles as if I said something foolish like a kid would.

"I have already told you, you have now seen what needed to be seen. Your journey ends here. Follow the path, do not lose sight of it. Goodbye, Dante, I hope this Christmas treats you well. Tell Jenny I said hello."

*Jenny? Jenny? Mom's name. How does he know mom's name? How does he know?*

The man is already back in the sleigh, and he motions for the horses to dash on. This is the coldest, cruelest, and most confusing night I have ever found myself in. I reach out my hand, desperate for an answer to my growing list of questions. I begin to cry again.

"How do you know! How do you know? Sir, please! How do you know!" I scream. The snow blizzards around me, the flakes piercing my skin like hot irons. My yelling bears no edge against the torrential winds that progressively blow me back against the path that fate has left me on.

Tears race down my face as I continue to beg for some semblance of an answer to any of the questions that race in my mind. *How did I end up here? When will I go back home? Why do I feel this way? Why would I ever feel this way? How did he know my name?* I realize there is no use in wishing for the sleigh to come back. No use in finding answers to questions that aren't meant to be asked. The water falling out of my eyes begins to freeze, like a waterfall in the winter. My face is ice cold, lined with frozen teardrops. I turn towards the newly formed path and begin to trek through it. Wooden fence posts decorated with mistletoe and holly lead up to a cabin. I remember this cabin. We used to come here when I was little. The last time I was up here, it was just

me and mom. The log home brings me back to a simpler time, a simpler life. The glowing light of the fire inside grows brighter as I approach the stairs. The old wood creaks as I step up, my boots crunching in the snow and ice. On the cabin's door hangs my mother's favorite wreath, a garland of pine needles entwined with eucalyptus and red berries. I reach the oak door, weathered from so many years of love. I breathe in, and out. In, and out. In, and out. I push the door open and see my mother sitting in a white wooden rocking chair in front of the fireplace.

For some reason, one I cannot explain, I do not run to her. It is as if all my worry, stress, and turmoil from the depths of my guarded childhood left my body entirely. I have been transported back to a time of peace, with no cancerous thoughts plaguing my mind. I walk to her side and sit in the chair adjacent to hers. The fire cracks inside the stone-lined fireplace. Family photos and memories bottled in thrifted items line the mantle above. A Christmas tree stands in the corner, glowing with hope, brightness, and an odd sense of bitter-sweet conflict. Mom's eyes are closed, and she is breathing slowly. Her head is covered in a wrap, sewed by her mother. She opens her eyes as I settle into the chair, taking a red crochet blanket from the woven basket beside me and cocooning myself, attempting to regain the warmth of my body. She looks towards me and smiles.

"Danny." She says, and that is all it takes for me to crack, again. Tears spill from my eyes, overflowing and overwhelmed.

"Mom," I say, my voice choking as a sob stifles from my throat. Mom rises from her chair, careful not to stand up too quickly, and motions for me to grasp her hand and follow her. I take it, my eyes still shedding water. We walk in silence upstairs, to where the bedrooms are. The stairwell is lined with photos of our trips as kids, with and without extended family. Some include just me, Katie, and Richie, playing in the snow or jumping in the lake nearby. One only includes mom and dad, posing without kids many years ago when they first bought the cabin. We reach the top stair and turn to the right, the carpeted floor cushioning our feet as we walk to my old room. Star Wars posters line the walls, and the bedding is still the same navy blue as it was when I was a kid. Mom sits down, and I sit beside her. She looks at me, dries my still-flowing tears with her hand, and says,

"Tell me what is wrong." I look her in the eyes, the faded green color still holding on after years of rigorous medical treatment. I open my mouth and stifle my words.

"I—If . . . if I tell you what is wrong, it will become true. I can't . . . I can't let it become true." I sniffle through, struggling to keep a coherent sentence. Mom looks at me with wise eyes and a motherly smile.

"I did not raise you to keep secrets from me, Danny. Whatever you have to say, true or not, tell me." I breathe in deeply, accepting that she'll never take "no" for an answer.

"Since you got sick, I can't help but wish it all just went away. Not just the cancer, but the questions. And the stares. And the 'I'm sorry's.' And the hopes and prayers that everyone seems to whip out when something terrible happens. And when they told you it was terminal, everything just became even worse. Sometimes . . . I sit awake at night . . . and think it would all stop if . . . if you . . ."

"If I died." Mom finishes my sentence for me. I look at her with misty eyes, confirming her words to be true. She smiles at me, and not a trace of sadness or regret hides in her expression. "Let me explain something to you, Danny. How you rationalize in your hour of struggle is not who you are. It is how you are adapting and reacting to the busy, confusing, unfair world around you. You are not your anger, nor are you your shiniest moments. You are made up of so much more than your frustration over the continual loss of your mother. You are my son, above anything else, and nothing can change that. You are the kindest, funniest, most extraordinary person that I could ever ask for. When I pass, your father will do his best, but you will need to be strong. Katie will try to stay home, but you know your sister, she needs to be out in the world to find her way of coping. And Richie, bless him, he will need support from everyone. But you are also allowed to grieve. Do not let yourself miss out on the experience of grief because you are scared it will change who you are. These experiences shape you and change you, but it will always be the same amazing Danny in the mirror. It is okay to let go of something that was never meant to stay in the first place."

I stare at my mom with teary eyes. We do not speak, but our eyes communicate in ways our words cannot. She takes me in her arms,



and we lie down on the bed. I rest my head on her chest and listen to her breath. In, and out. In, and out. In, and out. She scratches my head, just like she did when I was little. I cry softly this time. I feel grief stronger than I ever have before, but differently this time. I can hear *In the Bleak Midwinter* echoing through the snowy forest. The church has let out. It's Christmas Day. I feel my eyes flutter shut, and my heart slows.

Grief, with all its iron-cold chains, is liberating in this moment.

The late summer of 1990 in Manchester, Vermont was sweltering. The cool air had stuck around until the end of May, carrying the memories of winter with it into oblivion as school let out and vacations commenced. Franklin Street was lined with sprouting flowers of many species, including hydrangeas, lilies, and daisies. Every front porch was adorned with spring-colored outdoor furniture, light woods, and woven patterns. The D'amore household was different.

Inside, boxes were stacked around the room, labeled with a graduated child's name. Above the brick fireplace, two new items found residence on the mantle. The first was a photo featuring a boy posed in a cap and gown with his siblings, the gold framing reminding the family of the best of days. Next to it, a small white and blue porcelain urn sat. It holds the remnants of memories from a lifetime of happiness and compassion. Cold, empty shadows lingered no longer. Sunrays illuminate the living room, and specks of dust fly gently around the warm area. Upstairs, a snow globe rested inside a moving box, housing an undisturbed family of five sitting on a cabin porch. Surrounded by snow flurries, they are eternally together.

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“Satrapi’s voice showed me that stories aren’t for entertaining purposes alone, but they’re actually for resistance, connection, and transformation.”

—Clarence Ta

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## Honorable Mention

### FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AWARD

# Persepolis

*By Clarence Ta*

Seminole High School

When I first picked up *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, I was drawn to its stark, black-and-white illustrations and raw honesty. What I didn't realize was how this graphic memoir would forever alter the way I view identity, freedom, and resistance. Satrapi's story is a deeply personal account of growing up during the Iranian Revolution that opened my eyes to a world I previously had only heard about in disjointed news stories and oversimplified headlines. It taught me the power of stories to bridge divides, humanize struggles, and inspire change.

*Persepolis* follows Satrapi's journey from a spirited child questioning authority to a young woman struggling with oppressive forces around her. In her inimitably quick-witted, sometimes heartbreaking narration, I traveled with her through her childhood in Tehran while her world changed literally overnight. She was veiled, not allowed to go to co-ed schools, and had family members sent to jail. Satrapi's life was as removed from mine as any other I had read of, yet her experiences resonated with me as much as any thoughts on identity, resilience, or what it means to fight for what you believe in.

What struck me most was how Satrapi captured the contradictions of her life with such honesty. She expressed her love for Iran, despite her anger at the regime. She embraced her family's heritage but questioned its societal restrictions. These contradictions felt profoundly human, and they resonated with my own experiences navigating cultural expectations and societal norms. Satrapi never feared the unpleasantness of truth; instead, she gave me a reason to love and embrace complexity.

The narrative, in the form of a graphic memoir, made an absolutely new dimension to the impact of the story. These were not just illustrations, they were a language themselves—something evocative, which no words can do. I remember one panel vividly: a row of veiled women with hollow, expressionless faces as Satrapi described the suppression of individuality under mandatory dress codes. That single image stayed with me, making me think about how societal structures can erase not just freedoms, but identities.

But *Persepolis* wasn't just a story of oppression. It was also one of defiance and hope. Satrapi's rebellious spirit—whether it was in listening to forbidden music, speaking out in class, or seeking freedom through education—reminded me of the importance of standing up for what matters, no matter the cost. It taught me that even small acts of resistance, like telling your story, can be revolutionary. In the case of Satrapi, to write *Persepolis* was a reappropriation into writing-as-identity, which even systems constructed to silence her could not take away.

As I read, I began reflecting on my own freedoms, ones I had often taken for granted. I thought about my right to express myself, to challenge authority, and to pursue an education free from censorship or fear. *Persepolis* made me realize how much I owe to the stories of those who came before me—stories like Satrapi's, which remind us not only of the fragility of freedom but also of its immense power.

The banning of *Persepolis* in some schools and libraries feels like an assault not only on free expression but on understanding itself. For me, this book challenged me to see the humanity in struggles removed from my own but concurrently reflect on the universality of those struggles. The very qualities that make *Persepolis* transformative—its honesty, its confrontation of difficult truths, and its unflinching depiction of oppression—are precisely what makes it such a threat to those who seek to ban it.

To me, *Persepolis* is not a book; it's a bridge. It connected me to a world I didn't understand and reminded me of the responsibility that I have to protect and uplift diverse narratives. Stories like Satrapi's don't just reflect life; they shape it. They challenge the status quo, inspire empathy, and remind us of the resilience of the human spirit. In today's climate, where censorship threatens to silence these voices, the lessons of *Persepolis* feel more urgent than ever.

*Persepolis* didn't just change the way I think about the world; it changed the way I see the power of stories themselves. Satrapi's voice showed me that stories aren't for entertaining purposes alone, but they're actually for resistance, connection, and transformation. Now, every time the news pops up that some books have been banned, *Persepolis* comes into my mind and the numberless hearts it has touched. I think about the stories yet to be told. And I know that somehow I can help keep those stories free to inspire the next generation.

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“This loving makes me feeble. I put it on  
and take it off again.”

—Madeline Berberian-Hutchinson

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## Honorable Mention

AMANDA GORMAN AWARD FOR POETRY

# Tour of America in the Passenger Seat of Your Jeep (in Which I Realize I Will Die Here)

*By Madeline Berberian-Hutchinson*

Stuyvesant High School

Where we are going the telephone poles look like crucifixes: confident,  
flat planks that could teach my limbs  
something about control. The cables lie low.  
Egg yolks sizzle on the pavement. The mist evaporates  
before it reaches our chins.

I scratched away at the chrome of your car door. You had shepherded  
me here.

As we follow the interstate you put names to  
faraway canyons                      and valleys  
they are yours, their emptiness arouses you. Your  
favorite part of my body is the strait where my skull recedes into the  
flesh of my neck.

This loving makes me feeble. I put it on  
and take it off again.

It was a dry heat on the expressway.

The dry heat my father had dreamed of in his retirement. The kind of  
dry heat that is plastered on souvenir mugs and baseball caps.

I stretched the roadmap taut around my thighs  
to keep them from melting.

I pressed my finger against our route spiraling upstate—in that  
moment

I swore I knew everything about displacement.

But I don't know where you are now.

I don't know which kind of masculine desire  
binds your torso. Each of your inhales splinter  
mine. It will never be the same

I'll never be homecoming.

It will never be the same.

Cicadas seem to scream at me to stop; you screamed at me to stop—  
Each sound descending into a familiar liturgical buzz

My fat calves pressed against the dashboard the impact



stretched my lipstick across my cheek. Something rips  
at my side—my skin is dry baked clay  
and shrapnel teeth.

It all seems to crumble in our vicinity.

I prayed to the God of endings (she did not pick up the one way  
telephone, the cables were cut)

You emerged untouched unscathed unbothered—This I did not pray for  
And then you were holding me—This I did not pray for  
My blood still turns brackish in your palms  
Whitened flesh, rings of pink twist around your fingers  
Seven streams of regret flow from all my crevices

If I bleed out on the side of this road, in your halfway  
heterosexual arms, can I still go to heaven?  
Will I still see my mother? Will my body stay warm?



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# Writing Creative Awards

Laila Asberry

Madeline Berberian-  
Hutchinson

Alexandra Borrego

Sarah Escobedo

Merrill Finney

Jaylen Hughley

Addison Lee

Iliana Martinez

Daizy Nelson

Mahnoor Qazi

Emmet Schickele

Clarence Ta

Bailey Terrett

Parker Thomas-  
Hamlin



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