

SPECTRUM

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at California State University, Fresno

FRESNO STATE

Discovery. Diversity. Distinction.

SPECIAL THANKS

California State University, Fresno
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A Book Barn
William Saroyan Society
Department of English
Fresno Poets' Association
Henry Madden Library
The Normal School: A Literary Magazine
Philip Levine Prize for Poetry
Fresno Area Council of English Teachers
Master of Fine Arts Program in Creative Writing
San Joaquin Literary Association
Chicano Writers and Artists Association
Hmong American Writers' Circle
Dramatic Arts Association
Polly Brewer

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LETTER FROM THE DEAN

Dear Young Writers' Conference Participants,

Writing is the cornerstone of the formation of the individual — it's an expression of the self that is reflective, philosophical, and transcendent. In the act of writing, we affirm a thought produced by the confluence of space and time — a thought, and a moment in time, which will not ever repeat again. The act of writing an idea simultaneously provides us the opportunity to create a thought that evolves with time — every time we read a poem, a novel, or short story, a new element arises, along with a new perspective on life.

As young writers, you have the opportunity to work with the best creative writing faculty. After all the lessons and discussions, though, it is your own personal insight into our world that will appear on the page; it is this insight, this unique experience, that has produced your very own consciousness and that will fuel your literary production. Tap into this vision, be proud of who you are as young writers, and enjoy the art of writing your thoughts.

Your English teachers are instrumental to this process of emotional and academic growth, because their energy, time, and dedication to their noble profession facilitate the genesis of your inspiration.

This conference is one of Fresno State's prized partnerships with our region's secondary schools. It is a model of how university and high school faculty can collaborate to promote writing as an art form that impacts and enhances every single professional field.

I wish every one of you a fun and exciting day full of learning and creativity. I am very pleased that the College of Arts and Humanities is a collaborative partner in your educational journey of self-discovery.

Here's to your bright future!

Dr. Saúl Jiménez-Sandoval
Dean, College of Arts and Humanities
California State University, Fresno

LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

Welcome, Student Writers, to our 36th Annual Young Writers' Conference.

As essayists, poets, playwrights, and short story writers, you may claim a place in a community of Central Valley authors. Today you will interact with some of the English Department's outstanding faculty members and most accomplished graduate students. Our faculty members routinely publish in some of America's finest journals, so I hope you will make the most of this chance to talk with them and imagine the way that you, too, will contribute to making Fresno a place with a continuing reputation for creativity and social engagement.

A special welcome as well to the dedicated and accomplished high school teachers joining us here today. Your energy and enthusiasm have been essential in developing and nurturing the talented young people we see here today. I and my fellow faculty members owe you special thanks for preparing these talented writers for their future careers, careers we hope will include their return to our University classrooms in years to come.

The Young Writers' Conference presents us all with a yearly reminder of how vibrant the diverse culture of our Central Valley can be. Welcome, then, to this celebration of what you have already accomplished. Seize the opportunity this day will afford you to challenge yourself and thereby develop your talents and your dreams.

Dr. Lisa M.C. Weston
Chair, Department of English
California State University, Fresno

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AWARDS

PRESIDENT'S AWARD

Rachelle Rodriguez, Sanger High School: Untold Story of the Librarian

DEAN'S AWARD

Floriberta Sario, King City High School: Dreamer

WILD ABOUT BOOKS AWARD

Duncan Wanless, Edison High School: Encyclopedia Autobiography

WILLIAM SAROYAN AWARD

Daniel Buller, University High School: The Bell in the Room That Was Not Always Black

CHAIR'S AWARD

Hannah Swiecki, Mariposa County High School: A Beginner's Guide to Deconstructing the Stars

FRESNO POETS' ASSOCIATION AWARD

Salma Vasquez, Chowchilla High School: Forever

HENRY MADDEN LIBRARY AWARD

Samantha Park, Liberty High School: Not Always But Often Enough

THE NORMAL SCHOOL AWARD

Rachel Gokay, Los Banos High School: The Five Stages of Grief

AWARDS

PHILIP LEVINE PRIZE AWARD

Julieta Ortiz, Porterville High School: I'm Really Bad at Expressing Myself So I'll Write a Poem Instead

FACET AWARDS

Claire Gorham, Mariposa County High School: Igneous Rocks or Emotional

Isabel Plumb, Edison High School: Excerpt from 'Dissident Chronicles'

MFA AWARD

Miranda Adams, Mariposa County High School: Afro Deity

SAN JOAQUIN LITERARY ASSOCIATION AWARD

Allen Hover, Redwood High School: Ode to Japedo

CHICANO WRITERS AND ARTISTS ASSOCIATION AWARDS

Julieta Ortiz, Porterville High School: A Little Town Called Home

Darlene Torres, Fresno High School: Shaky Day

HONG AMERICAN WRITERS' CIRCLE AWARD

Ger Thao, Edison High School: Remember

DRAMATIC ARTS AWARD

Haley Ruth Spencer, Tulare Union High School: The Audition

AWARDS

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Valerie Najera, Porterville High School: Finding the Light

Samantha Park, Liberty High School: 'Goodbye Letters'

Tiana Barajas, Mission Oak High School: Until the TV Came

Liam Mirise, Redwood High School: Warning Label

Ashley Carrillo, Hoover High School: The Wrong Dance Step

Manal Hussein, Riverdale High School: Dear Best Friend

Avery Girard, King City High School: Long Socks

Celia Thao, Hoover High School: Identity

Fatima Guzman, Dos Palos High School: Roots of Life

Leslie Ochoa, Porterville High School: The Date

Vespy Trejo, Sanger High School: Wandering Wonders

Diana Sanchez, Riverdale High School: Mea Umbra

Samira Abed, Edison High School: An Avocation for Sentimentality (In Limited Doses and with a Physician's Discretion)

Maya Vannini, Edison High School: The Mixed Bag

Madison Stitt, Mariposa County High School: The Sun Takes Shape

SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY WRITING PROJECT TEACHER AWARDS

Julia Rose-Padilla, Porterville High School

Janina Schulz, Edison High School

UNTOLD STORY OF THE LIBRARIAN

RACHELLE RODRIGUEZ

President's Award

With shaking fingers, a man reaches for his cell phone and dials three simple numbers. After an infinite amount of time, a woman answers formally, "911, what is your emergency?" He takes a breath and unsteadily says, "My name is Ignacio Mendoza, the head librarian of this county. Please send me help."

"What is the problem?" Ignacio hesitates before answering, "My books have come to life!" He hears an annoyed sigh and click at the other end of the line. Frustrated, he slams his phone down on the carpet with worry stretched on his face. He hears a thump and crash below him, and that worry instantly changes to fear. He huddles over to one of the hidden bookshelves and inserts himself in between the shelf and wall. As he does so, a bookshelf on the opposite side of the room collapses with muffled steps following. The fallen bookcase reveals a hidden passageway the culprit had taken. The thing takes very small and painfully slow steps while making a low mumbling sound. It drags its feet against the carpet and grunts constantly. Ignacio risks a peek at it and swears silently to himself at the identification of it. A man with ragged clothes, no shoes, scars marking his face, and two nails in the sides of his neck walks across the room of the library. As soon as the very authentic Frankenstein leaves the room, and Ignacio recovers from his shock, he springs from his hiding place to the passageway left open. He enters the ancient looking passageway with stone carved walls and creaking wooden floors. The endless straight passageway finally comes to an end that leads into a darkened room. Ignacio enters with hesitation and goes over to the power box. The lights suddenly lighten the room to reveal that it is, in fact, his laboratory. But instead of odd shaped glasses filled with strange and unknown liquid, books align the shelves around the room. Similar to a scientist's laboratory, this one seems as if the experiment had tormented and single-handedly destroyed the lab. Pages, bindings, and books are scattered across the aluminum floor. Book cases are beat down on the floor and askew. Some of the lights overhead are struggling to do their job. The man with a once-comical expression of fear now has the most perplexed look of all. Ignacio stands where he is while running a trembling hand through his sleek black locks. He begins muttering to himself about the cause of this catastrophe when he hears a quiet thump in the corner. Ignacio ducks under the desk with one eye searching for the source of the

sound. His eyes widen when he sees a book flopping, under its own will, on the floor. It flails like a puppet by an invisible string, and Ignacio can think of no reasonable expiation. Suddenly, the book lies completely still. The cover flies open and pages begin flipping themselves at an incredible speed. Once again, it stops abruptly, but begins shaking disturbingly. A bright glow illuminates from the book as something emerges from the solid pages. A young girl with ginger hair pulled into two pigtails pokes her head out of the book. She gracefully climbs up onto the aluminum floor. She wears a blue dress clearly from older times and ... radiant red heels that sparkle. Once she pulls herself out, a bark erupts from the book. "Oh, I am so dearly sorry, Toto!" she says as she pulls out a small furry dog. He barks happily and curiously begins sniffing the room. Dorothy stands up and debates with herself what to do. She seems to be very confused what she is doing in a laboratory instead of walking the yellow brick road. After a great deal of time, she decides to exit and find civilization. When the clicking of her heels cannot be heard, Ignacio takes a deep breath of relief and leaves his hiding place once again. He scurries out the his laboratory, out the ancient passageway, and out his library into the busy city. Ignacio begins aimlessly wandering around the city, getting stares from everyone he passes by; he presumably doesn't know that regular human beings aren't accustomed to seeing a usually professional man that suddenly looks like a relative of the Einstein family. Ignacio stumbles around the city until he gives up on his idea of running away, and he sits against the wall of a store. He buries his head in his knees and rocks back and forth until he hears something. The television in the store display behind him is making a public announcement, and Ignacio's face drains of color when he sees what happens.

The cameraman is hiding behind crates on the corner of a building. The reporter is telling the watchers in a hushed voice of the characters scaring off people in the town square. It zooms in on a plump cat with purple stripes on its pink fur. The cat turns to the camera's way, and the camera drops to the ground from shock. In the few seconds it was visible, one can clearly see the smile that stretched from ear to ear. Ignacio thinks back to a common phrase said: "Her smile stretches from ear to ear like the cat in Alice in Wonderland." The scene is then switched to a man with no head chasing shoppers on his intimidating horse, a human bodied creature with a black robe and pale white face waving his wand shouting, "Lord Voldemort has returned!", and finally, a woman with a coat made of Dalmatian fur with one side of her parted hair white and the other black, inside a pet shop harassing all the customers and dalmatian puppies.

Ignacio is brought away from the tv screen displaying the damage he has caused when a police officer grabs him by the shoulder and turns him around. He is pressed harshly against the wall while the officer says gruffly, "Are you Ignacio Mendoza?" This officer looks back at his policeman companion who nods in confirmation and he continues. "Sir, we found suspicious evidence of activity in your ... work space. We would like to ask you some questions at the station." Ignacio squirms and squirms against the build of the police officer without very much effect. He breaks down suddenly and whimpers, "But I didn't do anything wrong!" Suddenly, the weight of the officer is pulled away and Ignacio sees a giant before him throwing the officer to the side. The

giant gives Ignacio a small smile and says, "There you go, my friend. Do you happen to know where Viz̃zini is, for his bitterness toward me will never end."

Ignacio recuperates from his shock, again, and interrupts, "Who are you?"

The giant guffaws loudly and says, "Why, I'm Fezzik! And I really must find my boss, oh wait, here he comes!"

A short man with a slightly bald head and raging expression stomps over to Fezzik, bellowing, "There you are, you slobbering, blundering idiot! We've lost time, because of you; the man in black could be anywhere at this point," the man turns to Ignacio and his already angered face becomes redder as he continues, "And you! Thanks to you, we don't know where the heck we are! We've lost our princess."

Viz̃zini takes in Ignacio's clueless face and begins screaming, "Inconceivable! How do you not remember why we are here? You summoned us, 'friend!' Do you not remember what happened last night when you were down in the dumps? No wonder I'm the smartest and wittiest person I'm alive. Come along, Fezzik, you rhyming imbecile!"

And with that, the two men were gone. Ignacio, however, stays glued to his spot as he recalls what occurred yesterday. He remembered being at the bar, men in black hoods coming in, harassing him, his friends watching the show, laughter, and pain. He had ordered one too many drinks, he supposed, and Ignacio left the bar to his only comforting place: the library. Ignacio turned on the tv, and he watched Aladdin for a bit. He remembers crying on the carpet floor, asking for a genie like Aladdin, and wishing for someone real. Someone who would be a good friend and hurt his enemies. No human being has any depth, no piece of their heart is pure, he had found out, so who better to fill that position than ... book characters? No, Ignacio shook his head, dismissing the thought, but he found himself coming back to this explanation. Suddenly, his face turned to the color of a sheet of paper when he thinks of the men at the bar. He took off running quickly to the bar, knowing the men would be there. Ignacio turned the last of the corners to the bar when he saw the bar in flames. Several windows were shattered, and the roof was absorbed in flames. Fire trucks and police cars lined up along the sides of the bar; three men were lying on the ground being taken care of inside an ambulance. Ignacio moved closer to get a closer look at them: one man whom Ignacio remembered had hair yesterday was now completely bald with the exception of a pair of antlers, another man is doubling over in pain from a mysterious injury, and the last man has lost his ears in replace of prodigious cat ears and paws. The first man tells the officer with a shaking voice that a woman with a mix of black and grey hair came into the bar, looked around, spotted them, and came stomping over to them. She defined herself as Bellatrix Lestrange, a loyal follower to 'the Best Wizard' ... and Ignacio! At this, Ignacio let out a sharp scream that attracted their attention; the police officer looked at a clipboard he was holding, back at Ignacio, and ran over to him. In a quick move, the police officer had Ignacio on the floor with his hands behind his back.

"Ignacio Mendoza, you are hear by arrested for some reason, we aren't really sure yet,

probably for suspicion.”

Ignacio closed his eyes, and for some reason, he accepted this command; he didn't attempt to struggle. Maybe it had to do with the fact that he had seen two teenage girls watching him. One had a complicated braid in her hair with a bow over one shoulder, and the other girl was dressed all in black with, if his eyes did him right, a tattoo of black birds on her chest. Ignacio was almost certain that these women gave him the thumbs up and a friendly nod, and he knew immediately he was going to be okay.

I close the book and take a sip of water waiting for my children's reaction. My youngest one, a girl with a button nose and two pig tails, cries out, "That's it?" I chuckle and look over to my son whom is staring at me wondrous eyes, "What was the point of this story?" I take out my famous bag of candy that brings the children back to their senses. After they each get a Kit Kat, I begin an explanation, "Yes, I had the very same reaction when ... I had read it. It doesn't leave so much a cliff hanger, just a wondering thought about what happens next. I prepared my own epilogue for when I read it to you little monsters. Here goes. Yes, book people are very unique but so is every person on Earth. They eventually realized they were no longer in their book, and they accepted this. Although most of them found a way to get back to their story with extreme insanity, some of us ... I mean 'them' have actually adapted to the life here and have solved the differences that made them unable to live here in the first place. Some are identified as the greatest mysteries today. Take the Lochness Monster for example. After it had been released from its own nonfiction book, it fled to Lochness Lake where it is still known today. It wasn't real to begin with, but it is now. The same thing goes for the Yeti, Big Foot, aliens, and the Chupacabra. And Ignacio was freed from jail after Artful Dodger helped him escape."

"Papa, did you say some are still around today?" the boy asks intrigued. I get up from the couch and walk towards the kitchen. Before turning around, I give them an evil smile and hiss, "Of course they are. But I, unlike others who can't help their appearance, stopped living in the past. In a previous life, people knew me as Mr. Hyde."

DREAMER

FLORIBERTA SARIO

Dean's Award

Me llaman “Dreamer”
Pero no es porque sé soñar
Indocumentada también es uno de mis títulos
Pero no soy un criminal

A corta edad me he ganado la vida
Fuerte y luchadora como mis papás
Conozco el cansancio muy bien
Pero no me sé rajar

Me he educado igual que ustedes
Y tengo metas que alcanzar
Entre una de ellas está
Que me dejen llamar el ilegal

He crecido en la misma tierra que ustedes
Pero sigo siendo humillada
Me pregunto ¿por qué?
Y me esfuerzo para levantar mi mirada

No me avergüenzo de quién soy
Ni de dónde vengo
Porque ahora mi futuro está aquí
Y yo también tengo derechos

No soy de allá porque me fuí
No soy de aquí porque no nací
Pero para mí, mis patrias son dos
El rojo, el azul, y el blanco con las estrellas
Y el verde, el blanco, y el rojo con el águila sobre ella

En la noche me murmuro a mí misma
“Sé que triunfaré”
Y mientras lloro en silencio
Sé que mis miedos venceré

Soy una Dreamer pero no por lo que piensas
Soy soñadora por creer en mis propias metas
Sé que lo imposible lo lograré
Porque al fin de cuentas
Estamos en el U.S.A.

* * *

They call me “Dreamer”
But it’s not because I dream
Undocumented is also one of my titles
But I’m not a criminal

At a young age I’ve made a living
Strong and feisty as my parents
Tiredness know very well
But I do not know slitting

I have educated like you
And I have goals to achieve
Among of them is
I no longer call illegal

I grew up in the same land that you
But I’m still humiliated
I wonder why?
And I try to lift my gaze

I’m not ashamed of who I am
Or where I come
Because now my future is here
And I also have rights

I’m not there because I went
I’m not here because I was not born
But for me, my homeland is two
Red, blue, and white with stars
And green, white, and red with the eagle on it

At night I muttered to myself
“I know I will triumph”
And while I cry in silence
I know I will overcome my fears

I'm a Dreamer but not what you think
I am a dreamer for believing in my own goals
I know you'll make it impossible
Because after all
We are in the U.S.A.

ENCYCLOPEDIA AUTOBIOGRAPHY

DUNCAN WANLESS

Wild About Books Award

Bookshelf

I'm very proud of my bookshelf. It's right in front of my desk, so I stare at it a lot and every few months I'll get this manic urge to redo its entire organization. I remember being eight and sitting in the middle of my room, stacks of books around me, staring at the sixteen empty shelves I had just created and wondering how long it would be before I finished reconstructing it with a new perfectly designed organizational scheme. There was another day in elementary school where I was home recovering from the flu and bored to death so I went through the shelf and made sure I could remember the plot of every book in it. If I couldn't, I speed-reread it as quickly as I could then continued on. Since I accumulate books at an inhuman rate, I have to do a purge every once and awhile, where only the books with greatest personal significance remain alive; in my mind, it's like a bizarre literary Hunger Games, where I'm the old white guy whose name I forget. As of the latest Book Census, the shelf holds 217 books exactly. This is the current organizational model, which I'm very proud of:

Biographies/ Histories	<i>Harry Potter</i>	Tolkien	Used binders/ journals from school
Great novels	Greater novels	Religion	Reference
Classics	Britain	Stephen Lawhead	King Arthur
<i>Calvin and Hobbes</i> and other comics	Novels I liked but didn't love	Books from my mom	My brother's books

Business

My rarely-seen Uncle Jeff came to stay at our house for a week or so when I was five years old. I would later learn that he had been

struggling with various addictions (among them heroin) and was in and out of jail, which is why we didn't see him often, but five-year-old me (and my three-year-old brother) completely idolized him. He formed with the two of us the (ingeniously named) Nunya Business, a top-secret organization. I still have the drawings and schematics the three of us made: one of a secret tunnel we were going to cut in my bedroom wall behind the bookshelf (so my parents wouldn't know it's there), one of a massive treehouse mansion that would function as Nunya Headquarters, and an "official document" (which is to say, written in pen instead of crayon) swearing us to lifelong commitment to the Business. I like to think Nunya has now assumed a legacy similar to that of the Bavarian Illuminati—a mysterious secret society no longer formally in operation, but which may or may not control world affairs.

Chlorine

One day in kindergarten my mom was given a flyer advertising a swim club that was fairly close to my house. They had lessons for anyone old enough to swim across the pool, and my mom thought it would be a good idea for me to try it out. I did, but only on the condition that my friend went too. She said she would, so the next Monday I showed up at Fig Garden Swim and Racquet club in my little swim trunks only to find that my friend was nowhere to be found. I was not faint of heart, though; I bravely got into this strange pool with a bunch of strange kids and bravely tasted the strange taste of chlorine and bravely watched my mom walk away. I bravely cried the rest of the lesson. To this day I credit that promise my friend made (regardless of the fact that it was never fulfilled) as the primary cause of my long and semi-illustrious (depending on your standards of what qualifies as "illustrious") swimming career.

Crying

I'm not a very emotional person, but I have cried multiple times in my life. The most prominent examples I can remember are:

- When I started swimming (see Chlorine, above)
- When my uncle and grandpa died
- When my autistic bunkmate told me the story of how his best friend died at camp freshman year
- When the hobbits are reunited at the end of *The Return of the King*
- When President Bartlet gives Charlie a copy of the Constitution in the final episode of *The West Wing*
- At the end of a program I did in Kansas the summer after

sophomore year (we had a very emotional closing ceremony and communion on the last day)

- When my dad and I were walking around the neighborhood when I was three and we found someone's escaped pet tortoise and it terrified me

Gazebo

When I was in Monterey I once sat on a pile of bird poop in a gazebo. Since then, I've always thought they're kind of useless structures. I'll take a bench under a tree any day.

Money

For most of my mother's childhood, my grandpa was an economics professor in the Bay Area. I remember being nine or ten and going with him to the deli one day to pick up lunch for my family. He's not a super talkative guy, so we rode in silence for a few minutes until he asked, out of nowhere, "In school, do they teach you why money has value?" I said I didn't, because I was in the fourth grade and my only experience with money so far had been in the form of quarters and the occasional dollar bill I got to buy a snack or something. So for the remainder of the car ride (both to the deli and back) my grandpa went on to tell me all about the gold standard and the Federal Reserve. At one point he used the scene from *Mary Poppins* where everything goes crazy in the bank as an example of interest and the banking system. I've yet to use this fascinating (and a little beyond nine-year-old Duncan's level of understanding) information, but that's probably because I haven't had much more interaction with bills over \$20 than I had back then.

Prostitutes

I'm not a big fan of poetry, but the strongest urge I've ever had to write some came to me sophomore year when I was riding with my teammates Lauren, Sam, and Michael to practice after school. We were driving down some dusty road near the railroad tracks lined with motels when I noticed a young woman standing in front of one of the seedier ones, hands on her hips, staring at the road confidently. She was quite pretty, dressed in a white tank top and shorts. In my naiveté, I had thought it slightly strange that she'd be out there in the middle of a hot Fresno day, just standing. Lauren had also noticed her, however, and she made a comment about how sad it was that we have prostitutes like that. That revelation shocked me. I remember looking back out the window in surprise and I swear (though perhaps my brain has dramatized this) I made eye contact with the woman and she smiled at me. Regardless of the details, something struck me very strongly about the prostitute.

I'm still not entirely sure why, but the confidence with which she stood, her smile, and Lauren's reaction have all blended together to create a very striking image. It made me reflect a lot on prostitution and the beliefs people have about sex in our society.

TV Characters, Top 10 Favorite

1. President Josiah Bartlet — *The West Wing*
2. CJ Cregg — *The West Wing*
3. Josh Lyman — *The West Wing*
4. Toby Ziegler — *The West Wing*
5. Sam Seaborn — *The West Wing*
6. Charlie Young — *The West Wing*
7. Donna Moss — *The West Wing*
8. Abigail Bartlet — *The West Wing*
9. Tyrion Lannister — *Game of Thrones*
10. Adrian Monk — *Monk*

My television experience is not broad, but it is obsessive. I'm currently on my third watch-through of *The West Wing*.

Unchecked, Boxes I Always Leave

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian Indian
- Black or African American
- Chinese
- Filipino
- Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish
- Japanese
- Korean
- Native Hawaiian
- Other Pacific Islander

Vomit

I went to England with my grandma when I was nine for two weeks. We arrived at Heathrow in the late afternoon, then promptly hopped on a

taxi and spent four hours touring Windsor and Buckingham, Expectedly, I was a little overwhelmed. I hadn't slept in roughly twenty-four hours (save a brief power nap on the plane) and eventually I had to ask my grandma if she could take a break from telling me about George IV so I could rest a little. We went into a pub and had some lemonade, then headed to my aunt and uncle's house where I promptly collapsed. The next morning, we were up at six to walk to the train station for more touring, but not before, slightly nauseated and exhausted, I was essentially force-fed an enormous breakfast by my aggressively hospitable uncle. We walked two miles, hopped on a train, and embarked on one of my grandma's whirlwind tours of everything interesting in London. I tried my best to enjoy myself, but I gave up — or at least, my stomach did — all over the sidewalk in front of Big Ben. Our tour was regrettably cut short, but I think that's one of the stories I've enjoyed telling most often over the years, usually with a good bit of embellishment.

THE BELL IN THE ROOM THAT WAS NOT ALWAYS BLACK

DANIEL BULLER

William Saroyan Award

In the room where no one lives, there is a bell. The bell sits alone on a china cabinet collecting the small particles of dust that flit, here and there, across its surface. It is only a small bell, painted white and blue with the swirling cheese like patterns of eastern Holland. How the bell came to the room no one really knows, but it sits here none the less, waiting quietly as the forgotten rays of sunlight push their way through the silent blackened shutters of the cracked window into the forgotten room.

The room was once inhabited.

Despite what some may think, it used to be a beautiful room filled with the lush scent of Persian coffee and flowers from the forests of Brazil, framed by paintings of grand scenes from the west coast of Africa to the Northern tip of Spain. The room used to see people, passing slowly through its foreign wonders, Turkish mugs sitting proudly along with glorified Greek vases depicting scenes from Homer. The room watched proudly as guests tread on luxurious carpets from the Orient, beyond colorful in their rich hues, and, here and there, sat on plush red lounges of deep red silken pillows and causally watched as the lazy mid-afternoon sun played its song among the brilliance within the rooms elaborately decorated walls.

The bell wasn't really for decoration.

Unlike all the other things in the room, the dark mahogany furniture brilliant bronze statues and ivory lamps, the bell actually had a purpose, a job one might say. Every so often the bell would be rung, by some odd guest or another, and when the bell rang a small, neat, kind hearted young girl would come to tend to whatever was out of order, a shattered

glass of French wine, a spot of spilled Cafè Dolce on the carpet, and so forth. She would come, the patient thing that she was, and diligently clean, wash, scrub, polish, and otherwise return every thing in the room to its pristine condition. And so it was, day in and day out, as the long as guests filled the room with cheerful chatter, which was almost constantly, the bell would be wrung.

Of course, the was the day the bell wasn't wrung.

You see, one day one of the aforementioned guests had a bit too much to drink. This happened on occasion and there were procedures in place if this was to occur. But as the guest was being escorted to the kitchen, for a world renowned cure for the ailment known only to the butler of the house, a lamp was tipped over. Then the drapes caught fire. Everyone was in a panic, shuffling pushing their way out of the room. No one stopped to quell the fire, no one stopped long enough to think that the fire could be extinguished by simply stomping out the red drapes causing no further harm to anyone. No one thought. They simply left the room, to concerned for themselves to care about the kind glass vases and Brazilian flowers. The staff ran in as soon as they heard, but by then, it was too late. The room watched, in horror, seeing all its wonders crack and blacken under the harsh heat of the fire. Before long even the faculty gave up hope for stopping the inferno. The smoke drove most of them out, coughing and sputtering into the night, onto the lawn where all the guests had gathered. But, the young maid was not to be seen amongst them.

She was one of the last to hear of the conflagration in the room, and when she came to see what could be done, the others had already begun to clear out. She saw the bell.

As the room went up in smoke the bell had seen it all, the paintings, sculptures and the plush furniture, all burning. The carpets and woven fabrics from all over the world, burn. The exquisite wine glasses and artfully decorated decanters, and even the very walls, burning. And the bell was sad. All this beauty, lost. Burned.

Thinking quickly, the maid ran through the hot flames, past ivory elephants and jade figurines, weaving around gold filigree Italian furniture and paintings of every size and color. She ran to the small, plain table in the corner. She picked up the bell. And she left.

Many years past, and one day the maid returned to the blackened room. After the fire ivy had grown through the cracked windows, and had spread across the floor. The maid crossed the room and placed the bell on the table. It seemed right somehow.

Over the years people forgot the room and the wonders it held, but the bell never forgot. It sits there to this day, watching patiently as ferns over grow what was once a beautiful room, and one day, the bell noticed something. Out of the pile of ashes that used to be a famous Rembrandt something was growing. A small yellow flower. Filling the room with a new kind of beauty. And so the bell watched. Waited. And it is still there.

Waiting. As the silence fills the ashen space with the light, filtering through the cracked window in the forgotten room.

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO DECONSTRUCTING THE STARS

HANNAH SWIECKI

Chair's Award

The stars speak to me.

I ignore them often enough, but they whisper. They tell me to be safe, tell me they will keep me safe. I trust them, most of the time. But on nights when the world is a sinking weight in my chest, the stars outside my window whispering of the times to come, I cannot bring myself to love the way their words curl into my mind like wisps of smoke. Sometimes, I'm not sure I believe in the sky.

The moon pulls the tides like it pulls me from my dreams. I'm always tired, except for at night, which I think means I'm nocturnal. It reminds me of a cat, curved dark eyes with slices to see through. The moon pulls the tides like a puppet on strings, the rolling waves all made of paper bags and sewing thread. I listen to it crinkle, and the stars speak softly over it. Tonight, I do not believe them, but I never doubt the rustle of the tissue waves against each other. I can hear them when they touch the sky. It is said that the ocean is blue and so is the sky, but now, both are black. It is like peering into the rabbit hole, wisps of smoke coming up to greet me as the sky sings above.

When midnight feels too heavy, I find the ocean. I find the moon wherever I am. It always exists, even when I don't. If I find them, I can usually find the strength to breathe. If my shoulders still slope under the weight of my puppet strings, I have the sense to get lost in a town too small to even breathe in. I know every stone and every twig in this place, but it's still easy enough to forget. I don't try to get found until I find the moon. But most nights, I don't need to. Most nights, I still believe in the sky.

I do not believe in the sky right now, but I know it is there, the same way I do not truly believe in myself, but still, I am. When the sky feels like a rabbit hole, the moon finds a home in my hollowed chest and I can always, always find it there. The stars aren't speaking with me right now, and we didn't end on good terms, so they may never talk to me again. This lack of conversation in the night sky is uncomfortable, to say the least. But when the moonlight gleams from the bars in my chest, I can see that all they ever had to say is written in the lining of my skin. The stars were never there, and I never had to believe. I am the stars. I have always had everything I needed.

FOREVER

SALMA VASQUEZ

Fresno Poets' Association Award

Inspired by Pablo Neruda

I am not jealous
of what came before me.

I do not care for the one with
beautiful blue eyes,
or the one with
a talent in breaking your heart.

I do not care
for the one who has had
your heart for centuries,
or for the one who
you swore you'd love forever.

I do not care
of who you used to be,
Or the things you did.

The only thing I care about
is this moment with you,
we shall always be
you and I.

NOT OFTEN, BUT ALWAYS ENOUGH

SAMANTHA PARK

Henry Madden Library Award

Sometimes
I hear the world calling

The leaves bristle against the frame of my window
Scathing away at uprooted memories
The sky falls onto the roof of my mouth
Blowing starry breath into the blisters buried underneath my rotting
tongue

Sometimes
I hear the world calling

Billowing breezes waltz with rainstorm clouds
Vomiting lightning bolts
Onto my cracked porcelain skin
Just to keep the idea of me alive

Sometimes
I hear the world calling

Sometimes

Sometimes
I don't hear anyone calling

THE FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF

RACHEL GOKAY

The Normal School Award

1. Denial.
2. Anger.
3. Bargaining.
4. Depression.
5. Acceptance.

Those stages might be true for some people, and they may experience all the stages, but for me, they were different and there were only four. Daydreaming, depression, depression, and finally, acceptance. I did not have denial, I might have been angry, but that melted into my depression and daydreaming. The only possible reason for not having denial was because I liked being realistic. I did not bargain, because it seemed too risky and most likely improbable. For even in my grief, I knew that everyone must die one day and nothing in the world could bring them back.

1. Daydreaming

I often went to “another world” or be “spaced out” after the death of my grandfather. Even though I was nine years old, I had a unique gift for imagining horrible and nightmarish stuff. The daydreams mostly seemed to distract me from reality, but the truth was that it actually brought me further into understanding the concepts of real life. You know, the basics. Like flesh falling off my face, family getting murdered in front of my eyes, and the most reoccurring character of horror himself, Chucky. In these dreams, he would kill my family, torture and kill me, and then casually take a sip of some unknown drink that a classic cool killer like himself would do. I know these daydreams and thoughts sound demented and grotesque, but rather than thinking of me as a sick

sadistic person, you can blame the day they had started: July 10th, 2008. The day that my grandfather died.

“Oh, he’s gone.”

“What?”

Those were the far and distant words of the only conversation I held that day. I was sitting on the old milky brown stained couch in my cousin’s apartment, softness cushioned me as I was straining to hear my cousin’s words. My face was full of snot and tears after I figured out those words meant, which took me less than one second. I already knew that my grandfather was dying from pneumonia, but I didn’t think it was going to kill him, especially not during the summer I was visiting Los Banos. I wouldn’t forget the way my cousin told me. His response made me think of the loss of humanity in the world, which is certainly on the decline today. I at least thought that my cousin would say comforting words instead of three cruel, short words.

My grandfather was basically my role model, other than my father. His name was Wayne “Tex” Owens. My grandfather was probably the best at being a grandpa. Since I only visited California every other summer due to money issues and living in Pennsylvania, he would send me letters that were written on the pages of a yellow legal pad. When I did visit California, my grandfather would take me fishing, crack walnuts open with a hammer, and take me out to the Sportsmen’s Club. We were at the Sportsman’s almost every day since he was a handyman and member of the club. He’d let me drive the tractor or the lawnmower around for a bit before I crashed into anything because I was at least 6 years old. I usually sat with my brother on the tractor, due to the busted seat and my legs that were too short to reach the pedals. My grandfather was loved by the Sportsmen’s very much and when he died, they put a memorial plate out by the shooting range, his favorite place to relieve stress.

“My favorite memory of him and me was the time we went fishing in Pennsylvania. After we got the boat set up, we went to the middle of the lake, where I told him something.”

“Grandpa?”

“Yes, dear?”

“I have to go pee.”

“Here’s a can.”

“I had to go pee in an apple juice container, also in the middle of a com-

munity lake. It didn't help the fact that two older fisherman whizzed by on a boat laughing. I was embarrassed, but that memory taught me that I was going to have more embarrassing moments like that in my life, but not necessarily with pee."

He was the only grandfather I had known. After his death, I had my grandmother left, and she was empty and cold after he left, which was a change because it wasn't the woman I once knew. She'd stop eating, which caused major weight loss, and she wouldn't get out of the bed, which caused bed sores to crawl and spread on the lower side of her back. After realizing that she never did come back from that state, I also realized that grief has major effects on people, in the present, past, or future.

2. Depression

Just over a month after my last trip to California, August 16th, 2008, Thomas Francis Gokay, my father, died in a quad accident. I was nine years old. I would definitely say that my depression kick-started immediately after my father died, but it didn't affect me until I was older. My depression started with thoughts of death mostly. But the funny thing was, it was never me dying. It was everyone I ever loved. Getting shot, cut, strangled, ripped open, and usually with an annoying antagonist who killed and tortured them.

You might think, "Wow, that's messed up dude, you need to get help." And I did need help, but I didn't get any. I made it through by myself and I never told anyone about it, besides my wonderful mother who didn't believe me at all and still doesn't to this day. I don't know why, but I think it's because she didn't want to pay for help or therapy, which was okay with me because I survived on my own, but I just wanted her to believe me. I still find it ironically funny because she doesn't think I had depression. She is the greatest mom anyone could ask for, but she has a hard time believing that I was so heavily affected by the loss of several family members throughout the years, especially the deaths of my grandfather and father. I don't know the exact reasons why she won't believe me, but I think she doesn't want any more stress put upon herself, and probably wants me to be strong for both of us. After all we've been through; we still maintain a best friend relationship till this day, even if I mess up.

My father was a strong and great man. We had a good relationship, except for the times I got into trouble for usual kid stuff. We made so many memories in the time we had together. He would take me fishing,

hunting, and surprisingly, driving. Okay, not really driving, but he'd let me hold onto the steering wheel while driving with his knee. My father was possibly the biggest role model I had, I wanted to be so much like him that I even tried to pee outside because I saw him teach my brother. I got in trouble for that. I love my father.

On the day he died, at roughly 4:00 in the evening, I got permission to spend the night at my friend's house, who lived one street down from me. I quickly said goodbye to my father, who was leaving to go somewhere with his friend, and to my mother. After spending a good three to four hours at my friend's house, the phone rang. My friend recognized my phone number and handed it to me. It was the call that changed my life.

"Hello?" I said, clutching the phone to my ear after hearing laughter, or maybe crying.

It was my mom, sobbing, "Rachel? Give the phone to your friend's mother."

"Eh? Mom? Why? What are you doing? Are you laughing or crying? Was it a funny joke?"

"Just give it to her, no more questions!" she said between sobs.

"Okay."

I just was a confused nine year old that night who had been watching TV and, until I arrived at my house, I had no idea what was going on. But when I saw the police lights shining through the dark sky, my heart broke into millions of pieces. I knew he was gone.

My father died of suffocation. He was riding a quad on the road for a while, but when the community security saw him, they gave pursuit. After a couple of minutes, my father lost them, but when he sharply turned the corner of a street, he lost himself. The quad flipped over and he was trapped underneath, which slowly suffocated him just in time for the neighbors on the street to notice.

3. Depression

The 6th grade was not the greatest time of my life. Actually neither was 7th or 8th. Basically middle school was a socially awkward and difficult time for me. The classes were hard, but my situation was dragging me into a pool of despair.

I was in a grief counseling group for the first two years of middle school, which was super boring. It did not help me at all. The teacher for one year was the cruelest teacher I had ever met, and she automatically did not like me enough to give me a chance. The grief teacher or counselor for my first year had blond hair with nasty streaks of brown, she was also tall, a little obtuse, and had the nose of a witch. The other teacher for the final year of the counseling group was super-duper nice. The grief teacher or counselor for my final year had short, stubby brown hair, he was also short, skinny as a twig, and had eyes the color of wood. He had given me chances to express myself, make jokes, and helped me clear up some of my regrets. Polar opposites, you could say. The group ended up being just an excuse to get out of class, and it worked pretty well.

The people in each year of group counseling weren't friendly, except during my second year, when the people weren't too bad. The first year of counseling was the one that actually made me want to die. It was complete hell.

"All throughout the year, I never made a single joke, so near the end of the year, I made a joke about crayons. I was looking at the crayon color names one day, since we were coloring in the group and I was the loner in the corner. I thought the names for the crayons were ridiculously funny and weird, so I decided to make a joke about one in particular. Bahama Blast Blue."

"What is blue and likes to melt?"

"Popsicles!"

"Nope."

"What is it then, Rachel?" glared the teacher.

"This crayon!" I held it up so everyone could see.

Glares and snickers filled the room, and the teacher told me to "quiet down."

I went back to my crayon coloring for the rest of the time, but when we left for lunch, I heard someone say, "That joke was so bad, it probably gave me cancer."

Let's just say that I cried for hours that day when I got home. I at least thought it was funny to get a couple laughs.

The second year was somewhat fun, we made crafts, did worksheets with markers, and talked about funny stories. The second year of coun-

seling made me feel a little better, but I thought I didn't need it, I kind of liked being alone. That was basically my 6th and 7th grade. So by 8th grade, when I was all alone and listening to upbeat depressing songs like "Pumped Up Kicks" by Foster The People, it was the center of my depression.

I cut a couple of times, but the cuts weren't deep enough to scar. I was a complete novice. Looking back, I know I did it because I honestly wanted to feel relief from the pain. Once I realized that hurting myself more wasn't going to help me, I stopped. I decided to put my depression elsewhere, so I ended up with books. I will always love books because a single reason. They make you feel absolutely better by making you imagine the look of each character, the reassuring feel of the binding and paper, and they make you feel almost every emotion. Books helped me overcome many different things, mostly avoiding time with my family conversations, but each and every book that I read, they make me feel at home with myself. My thoughts were also changing with each book I read as well and they made my daydreams grow bigger, brighter, and better with each passing moment. By the time I was in 9th grade, my depression slowly diminished with the help of newfound friends and books.

4. Acceptance

My life so far has not been the greatest. I will admit that I have had good and bad times, but I know those are what make up our lives. Memories, emotions, and yes, even people. My life has a purpose, if that's what you want to call it. I was born to die. And I die to live, which means that if I get depressed again I will accept that I am who I am because of it. Most of my life will be based on this statement. I picture myself at one hundred years old, telling younger people to live like they want to.

"Do it!" I will rasp out as I settle in my worn down hover-chair, ash reduced chair, or plastic wood chair. (The future will probably either be advanced, destroyed, or be the same, but with a declining economy and environment).

The loss of my grandfather and father in my life will always be a part of who I am, as have the experiences that have occurred because of them. When I was nine, my whole world was barely hanging on a thread, but I had my dreams, and my whole life ahead of me. 9th grade was the happiest time of my life. Having people to hang around and laugh with killed my depression and brought out my happiness. Yes, I cried at night during the 9th grade because I was afraid of losing my friends, but I

realized that it's okay. You will always have memories of people, even if they leave you. I know that my heart and my memory will remember the bad times in the middle of the night, but I also know that those feelings of love and acceptance makes you want to make more experiences, good, or bad. It is the same feeling when you have a loss of something, or someone. Losing someone you love, or admire, doesn't have to be a great or bad experience, because either way, it makes you want to experience more. To live.

I'M REALLY BAD AT EXPRESSING MYSELF SO I'LL WRITE A POEM INSTEAD

JULIETA ORTIZ

Philip Levine Prize Award

I'm somewhere between embarrassing and traumatizing.
I lack every single word known to human nature that evokes any possible central source of intelligence
I have 10 fingers and I'm bad at introducing myself as just a person
I have to be extravagant, no, terribly extravagant.
I have to say my skin is palliated with approximately 282 shades of beige;
Layer upon layer, the brush that created me smooth, round, and cheap
I have to say that when I talk, I talk so fast that my mouth gets ahead of me sometimes and my tongue gets hurt in the process
I have to say that when it comes to expressing myself in person around people that I shrink
I shrink into the atom I once was and hope and pray that when I return I will be as big as The Big Bang
And everyone will argue about whether I'm real or not because I made that much of an impact

Sounds lame doesn't it?
Sounds lame that I merely can't just exist.
That I merely can't allow myself to be just a 7 letter name and a kid with a dream.
This was the first home humanity has lived upon and for hundreds and thousands of years
my ancestors have scooped it up in the palm of their hands and said that beyond every hill they will fill their hands with the berries many say do not exist, that they will produce light from the sunrise at the edge of their feet no matter who laughs in their face and they will carry themselves and the contents that make who they are in the hunch of their backs as they explore the barks and stones of nature's greatest feat, unaware of the path they have carved for me

unaware of the sentimentality I had latched onto them
and they left behind fingerprints that I now use as map marks
But their endless shifting and tracks have died
and I am the next in line to continue this path
so you can see why I can't leave who I am at just a bunch of letters and
an idea

Because right now I may be taking the next evolutionary step into the
claustrophobic corners and nomadic life of the people before me
and I'm going to be uncomfortable but hey back then nobody even
knew what a home was
they only knew their bodies,
and we have forgotten this, we believe everything in the world has al-
ready been done so we don't try to do anything new
we define ourselves by our race, by our accomplishments, by our gender,
by words already said and defined in a dictionary you can find just about
anywhere
and we allow that to be it,
we allow ourselves just to be anywhere

Hi, sorry. I forgot to start this off with a greeting, but
I'm somewhere between embarrassing and traumatizing
I have 3 word conversations usually
and I remember moments better than I remember people
I don't know how to introduce who I am to you because I like to play
with the idea way too much and I like to believe I'm unexplainably
unique
I don't know who I will be but I practice saying different nouns in front
of the mirror of what I'd like to be
Strong
Valiant
Happy
Vacant
words already memorized and known,
words that somehow still mean different things to different people,
words that aren't it yet.
Sorry, I'm being dramatic ain't I?
And the urge to stop and run is filling my lungs because I don't want to
be finished
because I'm in an act of progressive growth
and the heart is quite vast and I won't be able to explore it all in one go
so in 20 or 40 years, you'll find me leaving my last fingerprints for who-
ever's coming next
because I learned that the tracks stop at the tunnel
and beyond the tunnel is everything that I still have to explain.
Everything that sums up just about everything I am.

IGNEOUS ROCKS OR EMOTIONAL

CLAIRE GORHAM

FACET Award

[SCENE: Two emotions, OVERDRAMATIC and CONTEMPTUOUS are sitting near each other, studying.]

OVERDRAMATIC: WHAT? SINCE WHEN CAN IGNEOUS ROCKS BE PINK?

CONTEMPTUOUS (to audience/herself): Since ever. Idiot.

OVERDRAMATIC: I am literally NEVER GOING TO GET THIS. This is WAY TOO FREAKISHLY HARD.

CONT (still to herself): I am going to punch her.

OVERDRAMATIC: I HATE THIS. I HATE IT SO MUCH. ALL OF THIS SUCKS. ALL OF YOU (gestures around stage) ARE HORRIBLE PEOPLE.

CONTEMPTUOUS (still to herself): Then why don't you leave?

OVERDRAMATIC: OH my GOSH. I am NEVER GOING TO UNDERSTAND THIS. THIS IS LITERALLY THE MOST DIFFICULT SUBJECT EVER. (starts almost crying) HELP!! (buries their face in their hands.)

CONTEMPTUOUS (Finally addressing OVERDRAMATIC): Can you not? Seriously, you're disturbing everyone in the library.

OVERDRAMATIC: SHUT UP. Shut. Up. I am having A DIFFICULTY. THIS PROBLEM IS GOING TO LITERALLY KILL ME. I AM LITERALLY DYING. (wails in distress)

CONTEMPTUOUS: Um... you're obviously not dying and all you're working on is... (looks at cover of OVERDRAMATIC'S BOOK) "the various colors of igneous rocks." Seems like it would be pretty simple, really.

OVERDRAMATIC (obviously shocked): IT ISN'T. Look, I understand that someone of your LOW INTELLECT might not be able to comprehend the INCOMPREHENSIBLE COMPLEXITY of igneous rocks, but SOME OF US have to PASS GEOLOGY so that we can SAY THAT WE HAD STRAIGHT C's in HIGH SCHOOL when we apply to COLLEGES.

CONTEMPTUOUS: Straight Cs? Really? You think that's going to get you into a good college?

OVERDRAMATIC: YESSSSSS. I am LITERALLY the BEST STUDENT IN MY SCHOOL. So HA. Look at this PAPER I had to write to even get INTO Geology. (hands CONTEMPTUOUS a SINGLE PAPER) It's GREAT, isn't it!

CONT (holding the paper as one might a dead rat): No. No, it's really not. This is a single piece of paper. All you wrote on it was "I really want to learn about rocks." And you spelled half of it wrong.

OVERDRAMATIC: Those are ARTISTIC CHOICES. It took me LITERALLY FOREVER to write that, you PIG! Give it BACK.

CONTEMPTUOUS: Why would you want to keep this? In fact, why would you even want to be in Geology?

OVERDRAMATIC: WHY NOT? Geology gives me a chance to EXPRESS MYSELF as the BEAUTIFUL PERSON THAT I AM. (strikes dramatic pose)

CONTEMPTUOUS: Okaaaay. Fine. Here's your stupid "paper".

OVERDRAMATIC: OH my GOSH. I just got a PAPER CUT. I am BLEEDING TO DEATH. I AM LITERALLY DYING. THIS IS THE END. (falls to the floor, clutching her finger) Say something WONDERFUL AT MY FUNERAL. I'M GOING, I'M... I'M... GOING... (dramatic sigh, lies down on the ground)

CONTEMPTUOUS: Yeah, as if. (nudges OVERDRAMATIC'S side with her foot) In fact, I'm just going to go. The library is boring, anyway. (to the audience) Hey, if she wakes up, tell her I said that geology is (mocking OVERDRAMATIC) "literally" the most boring and simple subject in existence. (exits stage L)

OVERDRAMATIC: (slowly rising): Is she gone? (beat) YESSS. The library is MINE. NOW I CAN PAINT IT LIKE AN IGNEOUS ROCK. Just let me go get my BRILLIANTLY COLORED PAINT. (Laughs evilly while running off-stage R)

Curtain.

EXCERPT FROM 'DISSIDENT CHRONICLES'

ISABELLE PLUMB

FACET Award

Matty had never been good at knowing when enough was enough. His entire life people told him that it would land him in trouble someday. He hadn't doubted it, not since the day the well-dressed men came knocking at their door to deliver condolences to Matty and his father.

Thirty years ago — back before Matty was born, back before the First Invasion, back before the formation of the United Earth Protectorate that they would come to call the gov'ment — a plane had crashed in the middle of nowhere.

It was a cargo plane carrying nuclear waste, and although only the lone pilot died, the crash left a huge tract of land uninhabitable. The authorities at the time quickly fenced it off, supplementing their limited trust in the rational human response not to venture into areas declared toxic with occasional patrols.

This all happened about a mile outside of a particular piece of nowhere called Greenfield, population of 15,000. The town where Matty grew up.

The older folks — when they could be sure that the gov'ment wasn't watching- used to tell the local legend, the story of an alien space-ship crashing and government agents in black suits and unlicensed trucks coming to cover it up.

Matty and his friends — well, all of his friends except for Alex, who clung to every word they said- used to laugh at them. Everyone knew that the First Invaders were the first aliens to step foot on earth. All aliens ever did was try to invade, and conquer, and destroy. Besides, why would the gov'ment try to hide the existence of aliens from anyone?

When they were thirteen, he and Alex used to sit on the ground by the fence and talk about going over it. Alex wanted to prove to him that there were aliens on the other side, to just climb over and show him that nothing bad would happen, show everyone.

Matty would never let her. Even if she was right and the radiation didn't kill her, the aliens would. Just like they killed Matty's mother.

Except since he was his mother's son, and had inherited not only her big brown eyes but also her stupid, stupid audacity, he couldn't resist a challenge. And when Alex kept telling him that he only refused to let her go because he was scared, and that if he didn't want to follow her, she'd just go alone. ... Well, he couldn't let that happen.

Matty's father had caught them before he'd actually made it over, had physically plucked his child from his half-finished ascent up the fence and sat him down in their old truck, had driven both of them home and yelled the whole way about how they should know better, how Matty should know better. How he'd land himself in real trouble someday.

Well, it looked like that day had arrived.

Twenty-four year old Matty opened his eyes to bright lights and a stinging pain in his upper arm. Memory rushed back in a tidal wave of fear edged with outrage. The meeting. He'd been set up, and not by whom he'd expected. It had to have been the gov'ment. Had DeLuca sold him out? That wouldn't really surprise Matty, but it didn't make the effects any less unpleasant.

He was sitting in an interrogation room, bound to a metal chair. On the other side of the obligatory table sat the man from the coffee shop. On Matty's side of the table, looming over him and holding an empty syringe was ... Dr. Lee?

AFRO DEITY

MIRANDA ADAMS

MFA Award

She was the afro deity. She wore a crown of curls. But when her kingdom fell, her crown was replaced. Like nooses, her hair choked her. Wrapped around her. Threatening to suffocate her. She pulled trying to free herself. Pulled only to suffer more. With every tug she had less air. Less hair. Eventually the nooses thinned. But she was never free.

ODE TO JAPEDO

ALLEN HOVER

San Joaquin Literary Association Award

The art of the slam has made me realize that I can finally let out all of those deep dark emotions that I could never very well express to others. I feel it has made me ascend into a certain nirvana, and it smells like teen spirit whenever I have an idea rolling off my fingers into my pencil that makes every intricate movement into simple and complex feelings that I can now assign a sense of self worth. Worth, what is worth it to us? what is assigned a sense of value that we feel needs to be above all else. For some it's a personal possession, others it's somebody who has given more than they care to indebt towards others, for me... it was my turtle, may army green little turtle named Japedo. With a burning hatred in his slow beating heart towards my Beagle, who would constantly harass him, every time Indie got close to him he'd retreat into his shell like a soldier in a fox hole getting ready to surprise the enemy, but sadly Japedo was the soldier who signed up because he needed free college tuition and would go awol for five days just because he saw the enemy running towards him, with it's tongue sticking out and nails clacking on the granite floor. Japedo was a lover, not a fighter.

But I bet if he could, he would've gladly stuck a lighter up my dog's esophagus and down her throat, and damaged her insides just as much as she damaged his outsides, his shell was filled with tiny bite marks that had subtle resemblance to bullet holes in an old tattered wall in Afghanistan, his whole body was a war zone, that could never be rebuilt like the streets of Iraq or the desolate landscape of Baghdad. All Japedo could do was sit inside of his shell and wait for it all to pass like the kid who would starve every lunch because the class bully haggled him for his money. That same thought undoubtedly went through Japedo's head as it would've that kid. ... This too shall pass. ...

And you know what? Japedo was right, because one day my family decided to send Indie away to another family and Japedo was finally left alone, never to see again, I guess he was like the soldier from nam' who'd

come back with PTSD and stories to tell generations of generations to come. Sadly this was not the case, because one year later Japedo left his legacy behind in my backyard where I held a makeshift memorial service for him, I even whistled taps for him. Because to me he died a hero's death, he survived everything that came towards him. He probably thought for sure that dog would be the death of him, but no ... loneliness was the ultimately demise of Japedo, I knew deep down he missed Indie but his cold blooded soul had hardened and he felt no need to show emotion in his old age. Only hatred, war does things to a turtle, it makes you see things he wouldn't have recommended but I know Japedo lived a full life, because that turtle was a total badass. I honor his memory to this day and that turtle will forever be in my heart. Rest in peace Japedo, you'll never be forgotten. ...

A LITTLE TOWN CALLED HOME

JULIETA ORTIZ

Chicano Writers and Artists Association Award

My sophomore history teacher once said, “You are born to leave this place.”

My heart didn’t flip, but it most certainly stirred.

Narrow highways and orange trees align the pathway home
dry grass and dirt fields lay under the scorching sun waiting for the
mercy of God to pour rain upon their dried limbs

Dogs howl late at night their crying stirring the silence that seems to
awaken the entire town

Lovers hold hands as they cross cracked sidewalks that won’t see a
fresh face until another 8 years due to budget cuts

Shops in town closing around 10 and opening at 9

Parks abandoned midday because all the kids have outgrown their
rusty bicycles

You see when my sophomore history teacher said we were destined to
leave

these were the first images to pop into my head

like the first unedited, uncensored words you say to someone who has
just insulted your favorite song

these, too, aren’t beautiful

these, too, aren’t thought out properly

In the moment we seem to forget all the good and merely absorb the
happening

We are unable to scan through the photobooks at the top of our
closets that contain these same shops,

these same parks,

these same streets

plastered on with our smiles

Many may say if given a second chance that this town isn’t where they
want to be

And it's true, I myself find that when I close my eyes that the back of my lids create a soft glow of New York's city lights and I can't help but dream of foreign places and foreign people that would entrance me and when I open my eyes I am hit with the reality of where I am and I sigh and go out and spray the lawn
but when you're left alone for over an hour with such a beautiful view of the sky you begin to age
and you begin to realize
and you begin to appreciate
this little town you call home
in our nurturing, simple valley.

SHAKY DAY

DARLENE TORRES

Chicano Writers and Artists Association Award

Every day I go to the nearest convenient store on Saturday and Sunday morning to work and I read the magazines on the dusty, vandalized shelves. After doing this for almost a whole year the owner offered me a job. He said to me “You’re a woman now, make yourself useful. You can’t just sit around all day. You work for me now. Okay?” I was almost too stunned by his direct language; he was very intimidating, and strong. I just nodded, and even after all this time as an employee of what he calls his “pride and joy” of a shop, I just nod yes to everything that man says.

I don’t care for the pay, I make way less than everyone else here, but I don’t really mind. I’m still only here for the magazines. My parents shut me out from the outside world so much, and all for the mere reason that I am a girl. The magazines are my only realistic look of what the world is really like. The women are so bold and brave; it doesn’t even bother me that they are mostly nude. If anyone were near, I’d automatically shun the pictures away. Their skin is very pale, like Abuela’s flan. They are so thin too. It’s all so unreal. Looking at these images I imagine the glamour in their lives; the fiestas, the boys, all the money, being adored by many. Then I start to remember going to my cousin’s birthday parties and being introduced as “la mas gorda”, like I was never in the room. It makes me think of the taunting of school boys, it never really ended until my chest had developed.

Every day this woman comes into the store to buy the biggest can of beer in stock. Every time she enters there’s an invisible dark cloud right above her curly red hair. It reeks of liquor and perfume, the kind that all elderly elementary teachers seem to wear. She is beautiful, but you couldn’t tell by staring at her once. I have studied her and compared myself to her. I almost always do this to everyone, but I don’t know why. It’s almost like some type of animal/human nature, kind of habit. Around 12:30 I go back home and I am bombarded by my parent’s questions about how youth group went.

“What did you learn today, mija?” asks my sheltered Mother.

Of course I have to lie to them, because I stopped going to the catholic youth group about two years ago now. I have replaced youth group with a weekly update of the love lives featured in People magazine at the corner store.

I begin to set up the table with my mother and sisters for dinner. To no surprise we are having beans, rice, and carne ... again. I'm not one to complain because I'm grateful that we even have food, I see homeless people all around this neighborhood. It just kills me that we have to eat the things that brought me to be the size I am, over and over.

I can hear the phone ringing and I have to race everyone in the house to answer it because I know it is for me. The rest of my family are total cavemen, they never leave the house and cringe at the sunlight.

“Hello?” I ask.

“Hey, hey, it's Thomas. I need you to come into the store tonight, Angie is a no-show.”

I never knew that my boss' name was Thomas. I respond with a nod then realize we're speaking over the phone, so I lightly just say “Okay.”

I make my way back to the kitchen and everyone is staring at me, waiting for the summary of my phone call. I just stand there, and I can feel my face beginning to cook under the relentless eye contact.

“Mija, you're redder than an apple, you okay?” asks my father.

“It's more red Dad, I think.”

“What?” His response along with his facial expression terrified me. It looked as if he was about to beat me to a pulp, just like mother.

“Nothing, but, um, I'm feeling really sick, can I just go to bed?” I respond as calmly as possible.

“Yes, go.” I could tell he was upset and wouldn't bother to talk to me for the rest of the night. My mother was just giving me this disapproving look, and I understood it. It plainly said “You should know better.” I guess I'm just an idiot; she's the perfect example of what happens when you speak up to a man.

I fit the frame of my bedroom window just enough to sneak out. I dress as warm and conservatively as possible. It is not a good neighborhood for a girl to be out at this time. What if someone tries to attack me? How

will I defend myself? I feel so powerless at times. It's only a block.

Just one block of urine stained concrete acting as mattresses for the homeless. Just one block of being cat called, though I am just a young girl. Just one block, which adds up to about five dark alley ways. Just one block, which means about ten minutes for my mind to play out every possible outcome of this one block.

I can see the sign that reads "Tommie's Liquor," what an ironic name for my personal place of safety. I'm about seven steps away from the door when I see my favorite customer, the red headed lady. This time she's not wearing her over stuffed coat. She has on a studded mini skirt that goes to the middle of her thighs, a lacy pink tube top that perfectly accentuates the curvature of her body, tall black heels, and her usual over the top makeup. In my family we were taught that real women were shaped like mountains. In this case, she was the Grand Canyon, and the womanliest woman I have ever seen. I cannot stop staring at her, my feet just won't move. It is as if she is a new specimen that my brain has to analyze. She is almost as curvy as the women in the male audience magazines that I pretend to not look at. She catches me looking at her, and my brain then forces my body to rush into the store.

I grab my uniform and as I'm changing I realize that I'm a sweaty, disgusting mess. I do my best to avoid the vulgar bathroom mirror. As I head out to the register, I grab a magazine on the way to calm my nerves. As I'm debating between Kate Upton on GQ or Elle, a pair of plastic hot pink nails falls on the counter, one right after the other, creating an untimely rhythm. I look up and it's the red headed lady. Oddly, she's carrying a cup of coffee and a stick of beef jerky, instead of her usual. She pays for her items and it's dead silent.

"So, what's your name?" She asked. Her voice was surprisingly firm.

I look down at my name tag, which reads "Ida," it is a long shot that she will believe that is my name, but I decide I'm going to tell her that anyways. Thomas gave me an old name tag because he said my name was nothing and it would be a waste of money.

"My name is Ida," I say, barely loud enough for the two of us to hear.

"I know, your name isn't Ida. Don't be shy."

"How would you know that?"

"I used to work here," she answers. "That was my name tag."

I just nodded in response, as usual.

“How about you come outside, and we talk?”

I followed her across the street from the liquor store where I had seen her at the beginning of my shift. There was a group of five women standing in a diagonal line, whistling at cars, and practically howling like hungry wolves. It was strange; it was like they were taking the male role that I found so disturbing just a couple minutes ago. It was easy to identify who was who because they were all a different ethnicity, but their culture was all washed out by dysfunctional American values.

The red headed lady’s name was Ida. She said she was Irish, born and raised in Ireland until she was nine years old. It was hard to believe because everyone in this neighborhood was nothing special, and if they were, they left this place.

“You know, in Ireland we at least fit in. When I came here, I was seen as an alien. I was treated as if my freckles and red hair were some kind of physical disability that people tried to avoid, but they were actually open about it.”

She stared at me, staring at her, and I turned my head away from her empty, blue eyes. I turned my head to check on the store, and she grabbed my face forcefully by my over sized chin.

“You don’t talk much, do you?”

“No, not really, I do not find a reason to,” I reply.

“Well, let me tell you something,” she said as she let go of me. “Never stop talking, okay?”

Once again, I just nodded, and she laughed. Her laugh was completely soothing. Hearing her laugh was like taking a huge whiff of a honey-suckle, it could fill an entire room with a sweet, aroma, but it was unexpected because it originated from something that you wouldn’t identify as a flower by its looks. In fact, her entire personality was like that in fact. I didn’t expect her to be so genuinely kind and smart.

I decided to ask her the question that was eating at me the most. “How did you end up where you are today?”

“In high school, my 10th grade year, I began to just stop going to my classes. I couldn’t handle the pressure of school. It wasn’t just because English was hard learning; I had already known some English because my family was extremely dedicated to coming to America for a better future, mostly for us. I would get teased for my accent and wild hair, it killed me that I couldn’t hold my tongue and tame my hair.”

I liked her hair; it was what made her identifiable in this town. Everyone is the same shade of brown, from head to toe. She no longer had an accent either. I didn't completely understand.

"One night I snuck out of the house to run away. I ran into this beautiful, dark, man, literally. He grabbed me by my arms and just stared into my eyes. He let go of me and asked me where I was coming from and if I had a place to stay. He seemed genuinely considerate. It took me awhile to answer. I was focused on how tall he was, he was the first person I met here that way taller than me, besides my family. I started to wonder if I was even still in town. How far did I run? Should I have gone back? He led me to his car, and we drove off."

"Weren't you scared that something bad would happen to you?" I asked.

"I wasn't actually. When we were in the car though, he looked at me and started to laugh. I thought that he was probably making fun of me like everyone else who met me. He caught the glare in my eyes and he said 'Chill now, I was just laughing at how scared you look. You look like a little puppy-dog, ya know?' I didn't say anything in return, so he turned the radio on. He put on Marvin Gaye and he said that it was his favorite. He started to sing along with Marvin but in no way could he match Marvin's notes. So, then I laughed at him."

I watched her lips the entire time she spoke, and I noticed her smile at the memory. The dry cracks of her red lipstick began to show, and it was the first time I had seen her teeth. They were dirty and a few were missing. I almost cringed at the sight of it, but it was a beautiful experience to see a real smile on her. It was refreshing, like sitting in a meadow, watching the light ski through the layers and layers of clouds.

"I had some nice times with him, you know? Yet we had so many bad times, I still don't know how I feel about him," she said.

Her facial emotion totally changed and she began to speak very shakily.

"He had beaten my accent out of me, because he said the customers didn't like it. It took awhile to get rid of it, but I did. He wasn't so sweet anymore; he stopped calling me his 'Puppy-Dog'. He brought young girls in all the time, who were just like me. I haven't been here this whole time just because of him, I love my girls too. We were all different from the rest of the people here. We were all misfits, by race and gender. We couldn't be the girls that everyone else here is and that brought us together because we all felt the same pain, and we had all been through most of the same problems. From bullying, day dreaming, being beaten, you name it. None of us have left; we still stick together to this day. You can always find us together every night at work, right here."

I began to cry and it grew silent. I told her I had to go and I began to walk back to the liquor store. I felt dizzy and my enormous thighs felt heavier than usual. My feet would barely move, but maybe this was all in my head. There was no room for thinking in a head like mine; full of contradictory thoughts and unrealistic fantasies that would never really exist.

When I opened the register there was no money, somebody had robbed the store when I was talking to Ida.

I ran out to where they were and I yelled “Did you guys see anyone leave with a bunch of money? The store was robbed.” I could barely catch my breath, that was the most I’d run in months. They all laughed at me and began running, except Ida. She stared at me with a blank face for a couple of seconds and then started running right behind the rest of them. I ran to the phone in the store and tried to dial 9-1-1, but my hands were shaking, my whole body was shaking.

“9-1-1, what’s your emergency?”

I felt my legs give out and my body landed with a thud on the stained tile. I was able to choke out a few words “They took the money.” I felt steamy tears racing down my cheeks, like a broken faucet in my home that was too expensive to be fixed; therefore avoided and left broken. They were warm, and were redder than an apple, my dad was right...it was redder, not more red. How could he be more smarter than I am? He’s just a greasy old man who can’t contain his temper and searches for peace in a bottle of spirits. Or, is it smarter? Or just more smart? I can’t remember.

The faces of all those racially mixed prostitutes when they laughed at me continued to pop in my head. They knew I was weak, that I was just a stupid little girl. They took advantage of me. What kind of world do I live in where women attack women?

The sound of a siren was near and I ran all the way home because I knew if my family found out I would not live to see the next day. When I got home, I began to pray, but not to God. I gave up on him, my heart is too sore to ask for things that I know will not come, from a sanctuary for the weak. This time, I prayed and wept to Eve.

I got on my knees and knelt next to my bed, hands crossed. “Why Eve? Why did you eat the apple? Why did you let a man in disguise control you? Why did you let your emotions take over?”

It was then that I realized from the beginning she was controlled and created by a man. That no matter what she was obeying and disobeying

a man. She didn't curse me, it was fate, but why didn't she just leave and start her own life? There were no dangers, the lion and the sheep, slept next to each other.

My mother stepped into my room and asked "Mija, are you okay?"

A question I was used to hearing,

"Yeah, Mom, just praying."

"That's my girl!" She patted my back like I was a pet, and walked out of my room.

REMEMBER

GER THAO

Hmong American Writers' Circle Award

Five years old
I had two homes—
One in a crowded village
with neighbors right next door;
Another more peaceful up on the hills.

The second one was often
lighted by the sun
Seeping through the bamboo walls
with thin, warm shafts of light.
The ground spotted with sunny dots
Through the dry thatched roof.

Never leaving my sisters' side,
We walk between the guava trees
Through dark green leaves looking for
The fruits with pink flesh.

We follow the wide dirt road
With the whispering wind behind our backs,
Then pounce on the high stacked hay
With the waving sunflower by its side.

Down the path, now narrow,
She and I pick nameless flowers by the roadside.
The memories remain faint,
And the past feelings I desire most.

THE AUDITION

HALEY RUTH SPENCER

Dramatic Arts Award

SCENE 1

SCENE: *A man and woman sit at the kitchen table, each reading the paper and eating breakfast.*

(Enter their thirteen-year-old daughter, Jacqueline. Her hair is total bedhead, and she wears pajamas. She marches into the room dramatically, standing at the head of the table, and waits for her parents to notice her. A few beats pass, enough for the audience to be slightly uncomfortable.)

JACQUELINE: Clears throat loudly.

MOTHER: Oh, good morning, dear.

JACQUELINE: I have an announcement. *(Pronounces her words in a clipped, theatrical, vaguely British voice.)*

MOTHER: And what would that be?

JACQUELINE: I am going to break the age-old barriers of gender roles at my audition for the school play after school today.

FATHER: *(Without glancing up from the paper)* That's nice, dear.

JACQUELINE: *(Sputters incoherently for a few seconds)* Nice? NICE? I AM ABOUT TO CHANGE THE COURSE OF CREATIVE HISTORY, AND ALL YOU CAN SAY IS NICE?

MOTHER: Calm down, Jacqueline. Don't yell at your father.

JACQUELINE: *(Pulls at the sides of her face, letting out a huge, exasperated sigh)* I LIVE WITH PHILISTINES, I SWEAR.

(Jacqueline turns and stalks out of the room, muttering under her breath.)

FATHER: Have a nice day at school.

MOTHER: And good luck breaking the barriers of society! Don't forget your lunch!

(Stage blacks out.)

SCENE 2

SCENE: *An empty stage, lights on. There is a table set in front at the stage. Mr. Hart, a tired-looking middle-aged man, sits at it with a stack of papers and a pen.*

MR. HART: *(Looks at paper in front of him, groans.) Aside:* Oh, no. *Out Loud, Calling Out:* Jacqueline Sampson?

(ENTER JACQUELINE, WEARING BIG, CLUNKY, COSTUME JEWELRY AND DRAMATIC EYE MAKE-UP. WALKS HAUGHTILY TO THE CENTER OF THE STAGE.)

MR. HART: Okay, so first, I need to you—

JACQUELINE: *Cutting him off:* I will be auditioning for the role of Hamlet.

MR. HART: Uhh. ... I don't think—

JACQUELINE: *In a snotty, expecting tone:* What, is there a problem? *(leans in)*

MR. HART: ... Yes.

(Jacqueline laughs in an extremely dramatic, sarcastic, fake way, throwing her head back. Mr. Hart shifts in his chair uncomfortably.)

JACQUELINE: Wow! Of all people, Mr. Hart? The drama teacher is a chauvinist pig? I thought people like you were supposed to be liberal!

MR. HART: What?

JACQUELINE: *(Misinterpreting his confusion)* It means you're intolerant. To women. Just because I'm a girl doesn't mean I can't play Hamlet. Anyone could, if they have enough talent. And I do. But you pigeonholed me to be Lady Gertrude, or *Ophelia* *(says second name with contempt, like it's a swear word)* just because I'm not your preferred gender. FYI, the theatre is androgynous. Unless, to people like you, that only applies to men playing women.

(She stops the take a breath, and Mr. Hart takes the opportunity to cut in.)

MR. HART: Jacqueline—

JACQUELINE: No, don't try to convince me that Ophelia, is honorable. She's weak, and I. Want. HAMLET! You're sexist, so you'll probably give the role to some idiot, lunkhead boy, but I'm going to give it my all. Maybe I'll teach you a thing or two about *real* theatre. I am going to read for Hamlet, no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Is that clear?

Mr. HART: *(Sighs, rubs his eyes under his glasses.)* Jacqueline, the play we're doing is "Annie"

(Blackout.)

SCENE 3

SCENE: *A few days later, Jacqueline's mother is sitting at the kitchen table in the afternoon.*

(Enter Jacqueline, throwing her backpack on the floor buffily.)

MOTHER: Hi, honey. How was your day?

JACQUELINE: *(Sitting at the table, slumped in the chair.)* We received our parts for the play today.

MOTHER: Oh? What did you get?

JACQUELINE: *(Mutters the answer inaudibly.)*

MOTHER: Pardon?

JACQUELINE: I GOT ORPHAN GIRL #3, ALL RIGHT? NOT EVEN ORPHAN GIRL #1. MR. HART IS SUCH A BIGOT.
(throws her head on the table, sobs loudly.)

MOTHER: *(Pats her daughter's back.)* Maybe next time, dear.

(Blackout. THE END.)

FINDING THE LIGHT

VALERIE NAJERA

Honorable Mention

I woke up to shouting and my sister's shivering body next to mine. I didn't realize how tight I was holding her till her small hands tried moving mine farther apart. The horrific things he'd yell and she'd respond with were words that too often made me question my own existence. Finally, I worked up the courage to leave my sister's frightened body there to make sure she was okay. The moment they realized my eyes were open they began to argue more aggressively.

"Tell her what you did with him, how this is your entire fault," he yelled, his eyes were pitch black. I tried to tell myself that it wasn't him. Ignorance is bliss. She simply stood there too embarrassed to speak. He had taken something from us all; joy.

The next morning it wasn't shouting that woke me; it was the sirens. They'd finally come to free us from his disease.

He was gone, but the sadness had stayed. The scent was in the cold air. He lingered in her dead eyes. Somehow I knew that what had happened would leave the biggest scar of all.

Some say your parents' love is the first you'd be exposed to, but not for me. I didn't always wake up to yelling; sometimes it'd be glass breaking. The darkness that flowed through our house was loud, and the pain and despair were everlasting. Even when he was gone or pulled away from her, his presence was still there. Like a shadow through the night moving from room to room. There's nothing that could make me forget the hollow eyes, her pleas for help, and my weeping sister. No one so small and innocent should be exposed to a disease so ugly. Innocence is often times taken for granted, given to people who don't deserve it. He didn't deserve it. I saw things that made my soul grow faster than my body. I'd seen too much to ever let myself forget, I forgave but never forgot.

It had been 8 months since he'd been home. His arrival made her anxious, she hadn't forgotten nor had she forgiven him. However, we were just happy that he'd be home.

But happiness is only temporary and an aging soul never stops. It's almost like a snowball rolling down hill once you start you can never stop. Whether my dad was home or not, as I grew older my days grew longer. Colors didn't seem to pop anymore; everything was grey. My dad had been home and things were getting better, but my insides were black. Nothing made me happy and I felt numb, like I was robbed of my childhood.

I was fourteen when I finally saw the real picture of things and no one understood the scars I gave myself. Soon I didn't know anything but sadness; it consumed my life. I woke up and went to school. The cycle continued on for months until finally someone thought to wonder if I was okay. Of course I denied a hint of sadness but there was evidence left on my wrist and places naked to one's eye.

No one suspected a thing. I had become the phoniest person I knew. The evidence on my skin was almost comforting; that was the moment I knew I also had a disease. I was obsessed with putting it all on myself, touching it when they had dried. There was no way to change my mind, and it had become the only thing I could think of.

Then one day, a girl I barely knew saw what I was obsessed; she saw all my secrets and lies. That day was the beginning of the snowball; I had ruined everything. I hadn't seen her eyes sad in years. I was the cause of her pain it wasn't him — it was me. We talked about our feelings and all that bullshit but there was one question that had gone unanswered. Why? The truth is I hadn't had the slightest clue as to why. It just became an obsession. How do you explain that you were a coward? After that day they had taken precautions, I wasn't to have my own privacy. Privacy is a privilege they said.

Months passed by and October had come, robbing me of any warmth left inside my cold hollow body. I didn't have a hand to hold and for a while that was okay but then things changed. There was a loneliness that surrounded me. When one day I bumped into her. We soon became friends the best of friends. I was able to see color again things didn't always feel grey. I was happy but the happiness didn't last. I had someone to hang out with, and someone who I could call in the middle of the night. I thought we had everything. Turns out we had nothing. She left me; the wind had taken her away from me. She left me with no explanation; I was standing there with open wounds once again.

I just wanted to escape what my life was but there was no escaping. Life isn't fair so why would I be an exception. I often thought that maybe if I were more secretive, maybe I wouldn't be here today.

I was so small with so many things to do, to see, and heartbreak to feel from my first love. Unfortunately my first heartbreak was not from my first love but from my family. There had been a time when I blamed everything on him but it wasn't just him there were so many other things. This darkness started to come to light. It was almost as if the lights were off and one by one they kept getting turned on shed a whole new light to my world.

Through all my sadness and pain, I finally started to go through recovery, and I had help from the most powerful unseen force there could ever be. Things started falling in place. There had been color, and nothing was gray anymore. I finally overcame my obsession. I reached the joy that I was missing for so long. I finally got to forget the harsh reality my life was growing up. Our family is together and whole. That sadness has vanished and took all its being with it. We finally became whole.

'GOODBYE LETTERS'

SAMANTHA PARK

Honorable Mention

“Dear Depression,

I would appreciate it if you didn't stick your hands into the sockets of my eyes. It really hurts you know. Untangle your poisonousness veins from the very tissue of my skin so I can peel the catacombs of your cells off of me. Please, I beg of you. Give me room to breathe. I have cradled you inside of me for far too long now. Our skeletons are too tightly interwoven. I see you in every step, every move I make. The slow, lethargic thrum of our bodies pulsating and resonating against one another sends shivers down my vertebrae. I am no longer myself. I can see your shadow in the reflection behind the glassy, gleam of my eyes.

Tell anxiety that she has horrible morning breath. Maybe if she would clean her mouth without breaking the roots of every uttered sentence into a fractional stigma of 'Please don't leave me,' then it would be okay.

Once, she was shattering to pieces. Right in front of him. He was only forcing, only taking, and never giving. No. I promise, his hands were expressions of love, not misdemeanor. It was embarrassing, to say the least, when she started to shake my internal organs. I still have the scars. She never forgave him, so then, how can I forgive myself?

You need to understand, people are afraid of diseases, and you are a plague. Can't you see? I am hurting. You make me want to die. That's what you want, isn't it? But, if I die, that means you do too. ... I love you, I really do, but please let me go.

— Happiness”

UNTIL THE TV CAME

TIANA BARAJAS

Honorable Mention

Humming while eating was necessary.
The rug was always lava,
Except for when it was a Sarlacc.
Blanket forts were castles and
Hideouts from the dog.
Chicken for some reason was Quankens.
The trees were ladders to Sky City.
The Kraken was hiding in the pool.
Frogs were made of money and
The person with the most was the richest.
Pillows were made for hitting people.
Cabinets were good hiding spots.
The grapes from the grapevines were bombs.
Petals is what made the seed soup the best.
Until the TV came.

WARNING LABEL

LIAM MIRISE

Honorable Mention

If there were to be around me a sort of
fence,
or sign cautioning others
It probably be more of a wall,
with a
sign tacked on saying “Private Property,”
With old, layered concrete laid higher than a skyscraper
Tried and tested by years and years of storms.
With a polite doorman,
instructed to inform visitors
that,
yes, we are pleased you’ve come, but
sadly visitors are only allowed
in the foyer, not the estate proper.
Please,
maintain a polite distance
Enjoy the gardens and the other pretty things
Outside.

THE WRONG DANCE STEP

ASHLEY CARRILLO

Honorable Mention

Do you remember I'm your baby girl? How could you push me out of your world?
— Demi Lovato

Step One: Pick a love song

As we danced to “I’ll Be There,” I felt his enormous hands gently covering my tiny four-year-old hands, placing me on his feet that were three times my size so I wouldn’t fall off as we danced. As my dad stepped side to side, I felt secure, and protected. A light wind blew my pin-straight hair, while my head rested on his beer belly covered in tattoos, his sweaty skin pressed against my face. Our steps matched the beat of the music. I looked up and saw him looking right back at me with tears in his eyes, knowing his little girl would soon be growing up. He was usually so hard on me, raising me like I was in the military, always saying don’t cry soldier. But that day my dad picked me up and held his little soldier, and for once I felt like his little girl.

Step Two: Step left

Growing up, my father was a big part of me he was my everything. I was mortified when I found out my dad was on drugs. By the time my mother told me, he was too far into the addiction. He had made a wrong turn that he didn’t want to fix.

Step Three: A step back

The itch to have it. He picked drugs over his own daughter. As I grew older I witnessed my dad drinking, noticed he wasn’t sleeping for days at

a time, and saw him become dangerous and violent towards my mother. The high doesn't last forever and that's what people need to understand. These "good feeling pills" or "rubber band shots" don't make it better, they ruin your life, kill your body, and destroy your family.

Step Four: Spin

That was the last thing I thought my father would do. I always wondered why he was in the back shed that I wasn't allowed to go near. I was confused. Questions raced through my head: Why would you even think of that? How could you? Did you realize that you might not see me grow up if this gets worse or if you die? Did you ever ask yourself if your daughter was going to forgive you?

Step Five: Step right

I tried offering to help him, but he didn't want the help. My dad is full of lies I tried to give him chances but all he did was lie and say he's going to change. Do all drug addicts do that? I wish there were people who could understand my pain in my heart.

Step Six: Step back

My world was turned around. I had mentally and emotionally lost my father and he didn't even care. I blocked everyone out of my life. The feeling of not being able to keep a single meal down or getting yelled at because I couldn't gain at least 3 pounds. Dropping a pants size every week. Coming to school I came to school and said I was fine but really I wasn't. I covered everything up because I didn't want people at school to see how I was behind closed doors.

Step Seven: Step forward

The past few years have been rough. I have succeeded, I have failed, I've been knocked down. The person I am today is not the person I was back then my mind set has grown and I've become stronger. The dark shadow behind me trying to bring me down every time I think of him is finally gone.

DEAR BEST FRIEND

MANAL HUSSEIN

Honorable Mention

One of the realest
Always got my back
More than family
No one can change that

Keeping it one hundred
Never having doubt
Been through everything
Always the same route

You know you're my A1
No one can replace
Been there since day one
Always making space

Never leaving my side
You're my ride or die

LONG SOCKS

AVERY GIRARD

Honorable Mention

I learned
How to dress myself
From my mom.

When I was little,
She would always dress me
Because I didn't know how to.

In first grade
I started to dress
Myself.

But it was sixth grade
When I started to dress
Like everyone else.

Then, as a freshman
In high school
I found my own style.

I wore long socks
Weird belts, suspenders
And nerdy shirts.

I still do wear them
And I still stand out,
But I have more self-confidence.

It was hard
To dress myself
As a kid.

And it was tough
To find
My own style.

But thanks to my mom
For helping me in the beginning,
It is much easier for me now.

IDENTITY

CELIA THAO

Honorable Mention

I am the second generation of my people,
and this is the hard part.
This is the part where my tradition starts fading away.

This is the part where they call me white-washed
because I wear my jeans and T-shirt instead of wearing
the black and blue long sleeve shirt
with hand-sewn designs shaped like snails,
and coins clinking around the waist
of my white heavy skirt that can't resist
the black charcoal stain from the morning fire.
They called me white-washed
because when it is 6:00 in the morning,
I pat white powder on my face, gloss my lips,
and run downstairs to eat my bowl of cereal
to get ready for what my ancestors risked
their lives for, an education,
instead of for breakfast
before a long hot day in the rice field,
plucking rice from muddy sand,
sweat rolling down the sides of my face.
They call me white-washed
because I let another language colonize my own.
So, *kuv yuav hais lus Hmoob*.

Mus rau lub tsev kanm ntawn thaib yuav zoo, they say.
But how can I be good when the kids at school say
“Hey Chinese kid, do my homework for me.”
I am not Chinese!
I am not your homework slave!
I am not whatever you want to call me!

It doesn't matter what I am.
What matters was his name was "Tou"
and you called him a Chinese boy.
What matters was you picked on "Lee"
and you called him a Chink.
What matters was you weren't better than those people.
What matters was you didn't even have
the respect to ask for a name, or a story

like the ones my grandma has told me
about the Hmong refugees
while teaching me how to sew snail-print designs
next to the night lamp where she sits,
her glasses slipping down her nose,
sewing the white heavy skirt I will only wear once
to celebrate the Hmong New Year in our new homeland
with many other Hmong relatives from different cities,
with the same stories to tell,

stories of those brave men
who fought in the Secret War,
and made it here to America in 1975,
after endless nights
of running through the jungle
for their lives and children's lives,
the roars from their stomachs,
so exhausted they could vomit,
bullet sparks shooting in the air
half asleep while running on their feet,
a mother's dead body with half her clothes on,
lying on the dirt floor,
the crying baby next to her desperate and hungry,
still nibbling on his mother's breast for milk.

I am the second generation of the Hmong people,
And now I know
this is not the hard part.

ROOTS OF LIFE

FATIMA GUZMAN

Honorable Mention

Everyone has characteristics that define who you are and makes everybody different. Some people could have an extremely chirpy attitude. Other's have a dormant character that let's them be pushed around by people because they won't stand up for themselves. Then there are those people who have a strong character. Of Course there are more than just these types of characteristics but only one describes me the best. Although there are many adjectives that describe me, they all come together to form my strong character. I am stubborn, yet open minded; shy but outgoing with those that are closest to me. I am also defiant, competitive, aggressive, and tough. All these adjectives are what make me who I am today, so too do branches make up trees.

An individual could be similar to a tree. Both come from a single seed and grow up to be adults. And over the years the individual goes through certain events in their lives that make up their 'branches'. I remember when I was in Oro Loma, I was about six or seven years old, I fell towards the ground while jumping rope. My knees, shins, and palms were cut open and bleeding. Since it was lunch time and I lived less than a mile away from school: Lidia, the school nurse, called home to see if anybody was there to come and calm me down. I recall being in pain and sobbing hysterically for my parents. I also remember not letting Lidia get anywhere near my cut since I wanted my parents there with me. Lidia soon got off the phone and told me that my father was on his way and he wouldn't take long to get to school. After several minutes, my father walks into the office and sees me sitting in one of the three chairs that were leaning against the wall next to the door. He stands above me and once he's fully facing me, I launch into my story while still crying but softer this time. After I tell my father what happened, he sits in the chair next to me and carefully places me on his lap. Once we were comfortable, my father told me that I was a big girl and big girls don't cry.

Thinking back to it now, while I'm laying down on my bed staring up

at an empty ceiling, I realize that I might have taken that comment a little too seriously. A lot of parents pull the card of ‘big girls don’t cry’ on their children to get them to either stop crying or calm down, but it doesn’t have the same effect that it did with me. Perhaps it was the fact that while Lidia was cleaning my cuts, my father kept saying that I was such a brave girl for holding in my pain. A couple years later, I had a burning feeling in my stomach: it felt like someone had stabbed a knife in my stomach and was twisting it around. That entire day I carried around this awful pain but I went on with my day like nothing was bothering me. When I got home, I told my parents about my pain and told them how I was holding in my pain. My father just said that’s my girl and my mother gave my father a look and then got up off her chair and started to prepare me some food. To this day, I’ve been able to conceal my pain and not let others see when I am in pain.

I like to think of myself as a tough girl that goes through life with humor and takes one step at a time. In my family, pain has always just been a psychological factor. We don’t really go to the doctors unless it’s a severe condition, or if my mother doesn’t have any remedies for your sickness. If you were in any sort of pain, physical or emotional, then the only thing you could do was hold them in. Although my mother was a good listener for emotional pain, she was also very judgmental and critical. She’s a very blunt woman who will say what she wants to say even though it could possibly make you feel worse. So, being in a family who didn’t know how to tolerate people who were in pain, I had to learn how to mask my emotions and develop some kind of immunity to pain. In fact, I succeeded in that task. For the emotional pain I found humor was a really good cure; and for the physical pain I learned that you should always brace yourself for pain, so when it does come you won’t feel the pain as much. After the fiasco in the office, I wasn’t afraid to do things that could end up with me getting hurt since I knew I would be able to support it. To this day, pain doesn’t stop me from doing the things I want to do. Ever since then, I learned how to be tough, aggressive, and developed my deviant behavior.

I’ve never been a troublesome child outside of home. I know I might not be the best daughter at home, but although I have trouble following orders; I don’t have trouble respecting others. I know when I’m about to cross a line and how far I could go with my deviant attitude. I’d like to think that neither my mother or my father had anything to do with my deviant behavior, but in a way they are responsible for it. Not because they brought me up like that purposefully, but because of the way my father wanted us to act at home and the way they brought him up.

My mother’s parents were extremely poor. They slowly bought terreno in Mexico and my grandpa build a house for my grandma, once the house

was finished they moved in together and had nine children. Since my grandparents were too busy working and couldn't afford hiring a nanny, they allowed their children to roam around El Refugio Paredones freely. As long as they didn't get into any type of trouble, didn't do anything rash, and didn't hang around the wrong people they wouldn't get the wrath of *la chancla* or *el fajo*. My father's family, on the other hand, was nothing of the sort. They were a little more well off financially and a really religious family. All twelve of the children living under my grandparents' roof had to be obedient and respectful. In my grandparents' household, what the man of the house said had to be done immediately; no questions asked. My grandparents woke up their children at an early hour for them to do the chores. Once they were done with the chores they were given and they didn't talk back nor disobey either of my grandparents, they could go out of the house. As long as that place didn't have anybody from the opposite sex, wasn't too far from home, and you didn't go anywhere else besides where you said you would be. Before leaving the house, my grandparents had to know exactly with who and where you were going. And since the pueblo of Acatic is considerably small, everyone knew each other and rumors spread faster than wildfire. So if you lied about where you were going and someone saw you out and about on the streets, that person would instantly know who you were and they would go tell your parents your whereabouts. If that were to be the case, my grandparents would severely punish their son or daughter for lying.

This one time, my family went to Mexico for Christmas break, and my parents, my brother and I went to visit my grandparents. My brother Luis, he's the third oldest out of my nine siblings, announced that he was going to the *maquinitas* while all of our family including my grandparents and my aunt were sitting in the living room. My mom gave my brother a couple pesos to go spend and he left to go play. About an hour later, someone knocks on the door and my aunt goes to open it. My aunt talks to the person on the other side of the door for several moments. My aunt walks back into the living room with an angry expression on her face. She tells my grandparents that someone saw my brother walking around town with a *muchacha*, rather than being in the *maquinitas*. Once my grandparents heard the news, they were angry at the audacity my brother had to lie to them and to disrespect them the way he did. Another tense hour went by before my brother came back from his little trip and when he did, he was immediately thrown into the pig house in the *cochera*.

My father is just like his father. The idea that what the man of the house said had to be done immediately no questions asked, was deeply imbedded into his head. Out of all my brothers and sisters, I'm the most

troublesome one. Of Course my other siblings were too, but they all grew out of that phase. Since my father lived a sheltered life, meaning that they never went out of the house unless it was to go to church or completely necessary, my father wanted to do the same with his children. For as long as I can remember, my father never took us out of the house, so I wasn't used to seeing a lot of new faces. Thanks to that, I'm extremely shy and awkward around people I don't know. But a plus to that shyness, would be that I became a competitive person. Being coped up with the same people everyday without so much as a new face, meant that we knew practically everything about each other. We knew each other's strengths and weaknesses. So we became really competitive with each other to try to be better than each other. Since there wasn't anything else to do at the house, my siblings and I would play any type of aggressive sport. Me being the youngest of the bunch, meant that I had to prove myself to my older siblings. So every time we played, the game would last forever because all my brothers became extremely competitive and aggressive with each other.

I sit up in bed and move the windows curtains aside to see the magnificent tree that stood tall a couple yards in front of my window. The tree appeared to be so strong with its thick trunk resistant to any type of weather. It seemed not to mind being in one single spot for all those years it has been alive. Taking all types of conditions at once but never once revealing any kind of emotion. It's branches make a unique pattern that no other tree has, just how every person in the world is unique. Everything or something could make a person who they are, but sometimes what makes up a person is nothingness. All those 'branches' make us who we are, and it's up to the individual to figure out what those branches are for them.

THE DATE

LESLIE OCHOA

Honorable Mention

Was she running late?

Alan sits down hunched at a table. His hands were hidden between his legs, shoulders pushed up. He looked like a child who had just been put on a time-out.

He finally built up the courage to raise his head and look around to see if his date had arrived. There were couples sitting together, talking, laughing, which only made him feel even worse. With each passing moment, Alan could swear that looks of pity were coming his way. Always an anxious one, he was. That being because he was the only one sitting alone. But then he noticed he wasn't. Sitting in a table in front of him, a man in a black trench coat was staring out the cafe window, his arm resting on the table. He looked bemused. Was he also waiting for someone?

Alan allowed himself to study the man for a bit. He looked, about Alan's age, in his late 20's. His fingers were tapping impatiently on the table, as so did his leg. He was wearing all black. His hair was a dark brown, loosely pulled back behind his ears. Only a few strands of hair fell to cover his eyes. Maybe he was waiting for someone. But then the man suddenly turned around, catching him staring. Alan flushed a bright red before ducking his head down to look at his suddenly much more interesting hands. They were shaking, although it wasn't cold.

After a few minutes passed, he risked another glance at the man. He was now smiling as he looked back at the window. Embarrassment showered over him, and if even possible, he turned a brighter red. The man must have thought he looked ridiculous. He wanted to go home, but he couldn't. He wasn't used to being out in places like this; he wasn't used to being out at all. The only reason why he was here was because he had met a girl he came to like, more even, love.

Leslie and Alan had been texting for a few months now. Never before had they know what they looked like and this will be their first time actually seeing each other in person. To say Alan was excited would be an understatement. He didn't care how she looked. No matter how plump, skinny, or whatever her race or skin color was, he wanted to be with her for who she was. But she was running late, or at least, that's what Alan tried convincing himself. He couldn't bring himself into admitting she was not coming, but after hours he completely gave up. He wanted to go home.

Alan took a sip of his coffee. It was cold. He didn't seem to care anymore. As he pulled out his wallet to pay for his drink, he heard a deep voice speak to him.

"Mind if I sit here?"

Alan raised his head to look at whom the voice belonged to. At that moment, he swore every ounce of blood he had in his body shot up to his head. His mouth had gone dry.

The man that was sitting in front of him moments ago was now smiling at him, one hand on the seat in front of him. Alan was desperately trying to find the words but nothing seemed to come out of his mouth other than nonsense. He swallowed hard before choking out a few.

"What- are- doing- you?"

Alan felt more ridiculous by every passing second, he felt hot. The man grinned, taking it as an invitation, and sat down. Alan didn't know whether to say something or not. Initiating conversation was not one of his greatest talents. His fingers started to twitch, and he couldn't bring himself to do anything but stare at the moment.

"Are you waiting for someone?" said the man looking rather comfortable with himself, like it was absolutely normal to start a friendly conversation with any random stranger. Alan desperately wanted the man to leave.

"Y-es, erm, well, um ... I don't. ..." For the love of god, why couldn't he talk, and what did this guy want? He didn't have to tell him anything.

Alan closed his eyes tight, before clearing his throat and speaking again. "Yes," he finally said, though his voice was still quivering, slightly. "And she'll be here at any moment now, so, if you please, I'd prefer it if you left," He lied. Alan knew she wasn't coming, and for some reason, he felt that the man also knew, too, by the facial expression he wore.

He leaned to the side to look behind Alan, before looking outside the window. "I don't see her," He sat down smugly down into his seat.

"But I'm sure she'll be here any second now," Alan assured him quickly.

"I guess I'll have to wait and see for myself, then," The man crossed his arms over his chest, eyes incredulously scanning through the small cafe, a hint of amusement in his tone.

"You're not planning on staying here until she arrives, do you?" Alan asked nervously.

"When she arrives, I'll leave."

"You can't!"

"And why is that?"

"Because- because," Alan was desperately trying to look for a reason, but he couldn't think.

"Because...?" The man wasn't smiling, but Alan knew that he desperately wanted to.

"Fine," Alan gave up, and slumped down in his seat, like a child.

"Perfect!" He said in triumphed. "Besides, we can't have you staring at other people," He grinned, making Alan redder. Before Alan could explain himself with more stuttering, the man was looking around ardently. "Waitress! Yes, two coffees, please, thank you."

The coffee came quicker than expected. Then man took his cup into his hands, while Alan just stared at him, scanning for anything suspicious.

"Do you always make everyone's first impressions of you this direct?"

"What can I say? The element of charm comes naturally to me," He shrugged, before taking a sip of his drink, then waving his hand dismissively. "Now, tell me about this girl. How did you meet her?"

Alan said nothing. He didn't have to tell this man anything if he didn't want to. He crossed his arms over his chest, sulking that he had to spend such a wonderful evening with this man.

"Ah, don't mope. I'm sure she'll come around," said the man taking another sip of his drink.

Alan couldn't help it anymore, "Why are you here? What do you want?" he blurted out too loudly. The cafe suddenly grew quiet and then Alan

soon regretted yelling at the man. He was looking down at his cup, in a way that made the guilt eat him alive. And then, after a moment,

“Is it such a crime to try to talk to someone?” The man said almost to himself. Then he stood up before saying: “I apologize for bothering you.”

Everyone was staring at their table. Alan didn’t want this; he didn’t want any of it. Before Alan could stop himself, he had already reached for the man’s coat.

“Wait!” he said “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to — look ... please don’t leave.”

The man turned to look at him for a moment before finally turning back and sitting down. When the whispering finally seemed to stop, he spoke again.

“I shouldn’t have yelled at you like that. I’m sorry —”

“It’s fine.”

It was silence from there. The man went back to staring out at the window while Alan was shifting uncomfortably in his seat. He was debating whether he should start another conversation or stay quiet.

“Y-you know, the coffee here is great.”

The man’s eyes shifted to look at him.

“Who knew?” he continued.

Alan flinched as the man turned fully towards him. He looked at him with pure disbelief.

“You didn’t even touch the coffee I bought you.”

“Oh, well ...” Alan was trying to think of an excuse, but before he could think of anything, he was startled by a laugh that was coming from the man in front of him. He had one hand clutching his stomach and the other hand was on the table when he leaned over to rest his forehead on it, laughing uncontrollably. Alan was confused. Had he done something funny?

“You’re not very good at conversing, are you?” The man said, as he was calming down from the laughter.

Alan sat staring at him for a moment before he too started to giggle.

“I guess not.”

The two began a conversation about absolutely anything and everything as long as they stayed in each other’s company. Alan admitted to himself that maybe he was wrong about this man. Though he was a bit forward, in the end they started to become...friends? Should he say? He didn’t know, but whatever they were, it was fun to finally talk to someone.

“I’m sorry, I completely forgot to introduce myself. My name’s Alan,” He said as he offered his hand to the man.

He smiled, reaching over to shake his hand. “My name is Alan.”

“Excuse me? Did you say your name was Alan?” A voice interrupted.

“Ah, yes!” Alan said, looking at the woman with interest. “Are you ...?”

“Yes! I thought I had missed on our date!”

Alan stood up quickly. “No, no, not at all!” He said offering her his seat.

The man stood up himself and started walking away when Alan called after him.

“Where are you going?” he said.

The man turned to look over his shoulder. “I did say when your date arrived I’d leave,” Then he turned around and left out of the shop without another word. Alan almost felt sorry. He didn’t want him to go. But then again his date had finally arrived even though she arrive terribly late. He turned around and sat in the seat the man was sitting in before.

“It a pleasure to finally meet you!” he said.

The woman smiled. “As am I,” she said. “I’m sorry I came late. I must have kept you waiting.”

“Not a problem. It’s fine, really,” It wasn’t fine, really. Being an hour late was not okay.

“Traffic was crazy, and my sister wouldn’t leave me alone.”

“You’ve never mentioned you had a sister,” Alan said.

The girl paused, looking confused.

“What do you mean? She was the one that planned this date. You are one of her friends, right?”

And now it was Alan's turn to be confused.

"No, no. We met through text,"

They stood staring at each other for a moment before Alan asked another question,

"Isn't your name Leslie?"

"No, it's Tiffany!"

* * *

After they let the realization sink in, Tiffany apologized and left Alan to sit at the cafe table. Without another word, she left the table and quietly waited for her date at another table.

Alan eagerly leaped up from his table and ran out of the cafe.

Alan had somehow caught up to the man. He doesn't recall the last time he was any happier than he was right at this moment. He tried calling his name, but he still didn't know it.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Hey, you!"

Multiple people had turned around, along with the man. He looked at him with a heart-warming smile.

"Alan, you're back," then he frowned. "But that was much too quick. What happened?"

Alan couldn't help but laugh.

"Turns out her date was also named Alan."

"Seriously?" The man laughed, too. "I guess Alan's a pretty common name here."

"Yeah, I know right."

The weather was chilly out and as they walked together, their breaths were visible in the air. He liked the feeling.

"Hey, speaking about names," Alan began. "I never got yours."

The man's eyes glance to look at Alan for a moment before he smiled.

"Leslie."

WANDERING WONDERS

VEPSY TREJO

Honorable Mention

Alice's curiosity was no mystery. If she was ever to find a poem or story laying around, she would take it up to her room and spend the day reading it, making comments to herself about what she read. Her plans would usually be interrupted, for she would be pulled away so that she may attend her French lessons, or work on history or mathematics. In the end, however, Alice's overactive imagination would prove to be too much for the young girl to handle. She would give in, only to later be lectured for falling victim to temptation. The scoldings would fall upon deaf ears, but perhaps it was for the best. After all, it was Alice's curious nature that lead her on one of her most curious adventures yet.

To make it perfectly clear, it is not the best idea to simply hand a child a book and say "study it". It is not the best idea to encourage a child to leave off to the river to study their new book. It is not the best idea to encourage Alice to have fun with her learning by letting her imagination run wild with this new book. In simpler words ... Alice's parents aren't the best when it comes to the subject of child care.

"How does one expect one to stay in all day to study when the sky looks as it does? The books shall not change, but no one can assure that the sky shall be so blue, or the wind so fresh as they are today. The books keep their shapes and the words do not change. It's only the day that may never be exactly like the one before it, don't you believe so?" Alice spoke to herself. Dinah had learned to ignore the little rambles, but she continued to give a 'meow' every now and then to reassure the child. Snowdrop and Kitty went on entertaining themselves by fighting. Alice would watch them roll around the grass, holding close the book she was told to study- a book based completely on how one may improve their grammar, how one's words can be manipulated in order to convey different meanings to one's chosen audience, how one may use those same words to portray different views in one's writings- and how dreadfully boring it all was!

“Oh Kitty,” she went off again, “You must understand how tiring it all gets. Why, you don’t have to worry about studying. You were born a cat, and don’t have to worry about learning to read, or learning how to twist your words as to seem smarter than you really are! The only thing expected from you is for you to look cute- which you always do- as you run around with your every day kitten life. Mum says to have fun with this book, but what fun is a story with no plot, with no characters, with no twists or bumps in the road? Oh Kitty, I worry that she may have me grow up, for all these books she keeps giving me are terribly formal, awfully factual, and quite boring! You know what that means, don’t you? I’d have to leave my imagination behind to accept real life responsibilities!”

While Alice ranted, the furry creatures began to zone out, sitting perfectly still. Dinah’s attention was no longer on the safety of her precious children, and the kittens had quit their squirming as they found a funny new object worthy of their attention. Their eyes were now focused on a large balloon- yes, it was most definitely a balloon- coming closer and closer with every second. Alice, now finishing her rambling, seemed to notice her cat’s sudden change in attention, and she grew a little concerned.

“Well, I do not plan to grow up yet! I still have my imagination! We can still play pretend! Let us play pretend. Pretend ... Pretend this book is not about grammar, but a tale of our own funny little adventures. We can mold this book in any way we please. We will have to share it of course, but it would seem more fun in that way. And ... no? You still seem rather distracted. ...” Alice gave a sigh, seeing how her little friends were not taking their eyes off the strange figure in the distance. By this time, she had had just about enough of it. “What are you staring at with such — oh ... That’s rather odd. ... It’s a hot air balloon!” she cried, dropping her book. Alice watched the balloon with great interest as it came down for a landing, falling like a leaf falls in autumn. It was made from multiple different color rags- green being the most common of the bunch.

In the basket was a strange old man. He held on tightly to the brim of a slightly worn out top hat with one hand, using his other hand to pull on a cord that was connected to the balloon. The girl watched the man with great interest, wondering how he was able to control such a grand creation. She had never seen a hot air balloon up close before, and the man didn’t seem to hold any inhuman abilities. ... Well, not from where she was standing. He was pretty short- not that much taller than Alice- and he seemed pretty anxious. He wasn’t like anyone the girl had seen before, which only added to her interest. Alice slowly made her way towards him, being careful as she knew better than to run up to strangers. Though she was curious, she wasn’t quite ready to completely shrug

off the lectures she had received on ‘stranger danger’ — at least not yet. The balloon was about a foot off the ground so she was able to see him pretty well, but it was not enough to satisfy her.

“I don’t believe we landed in Kansas ... not even California ... it doesn’t seem we actually landed in America,” the man spoke, his voice low, “We’re probably no where close to San Francisco.” Alice gave a giggle at the man’s confusion. He was heading for America? In that thing? Boy, that’d be quite a sight! Though ... he didn’t seem to share the child’s joy. The man let out a sigh and decided to take a better look, worrying poor little Alice quite a bit. He seemed friendly enough from where she stood, but what if he thought her to be a thief? No, she mustn’t get caught. She got down on her knees, though she was pretty sure she would be caught just as easily this way, and began to crawl towards the man and the basket.

Alice’s fear of accusation soon came to an end soon enough, for the man’s observations were cut quite short. A small series of squeals come from within the basket, and his attention was turned back there. He looked into the hat in his hands with a small scowl — he looked rather annoyed. “Oh hush! It’s not like you could have done any better!” he huffed, tossing the thing to a corner of the basket.. This only caused more squeaks and squeals, but he seemed to ignore them.

Alice tried hard to not laugh at the man’s strange ways. “Would you look at that, Dinah? He talks to himself as well. And there’s definitely something in that hat of his, something alive!” Alice spoke softly, turning around to look back at her precious pets. Dinah was sitting in the same spot she was left in, licking her paws, but the kittens were nowhere in sight. “Kitty? Snowdrop?” Alice called, her voice cracking. She scanned the area in a panic, trying to locate her lost kittens. She didn’t believe they could have gone far, but she had forgotten to remember that they also had a curious nature- one that may one day grow to surpass her own.

It took a minute or two, but she found her eyes settling on the man’s basket. It was still only about a foot or two above the ground, but something had been added to it. A little white figure crawled on the sides of the basket, seeming to be racing a little black speck. “Kittens! Has Dinah taught you nothing?!” Alice scolded in a squeaky voice as she went off running to them. The man, by this point, seemed about ready to take off again.

“It seems we must be getting back to Emerald City now. Ozma will no doubt be disappointed, but I rather face her than stay here. ... I can’t shake the feeling that someone’s watching me,” he spoke to himself,

now messing with a funny valve. The balloon began to rise, which cause the girl to jump in fright. Alice gave a squeak and put all the energy she had into closing the last few feet between her and the balloon- and her sweet kittens!

The kittens had payed no attention to the girl's lecture- their focus was on finishing their little race. In a matter of seconds, they had managed to crawl into the basket, surprising the strange little man. He scooped them up in his arms and spoke softly to them, saying something Alice couldn't quite hear and the kittens didn't seem to understand. It didn't matter to either of them, Alice planned to be reunited with them soon enough! With a leap, the child grabbed onto the side of the basket, trying her best to pull herself up as the balloon took off.

"Don't worry Dinah! Let mother know that I shall be late to dinner! Sister ought to set out some food for you later!" Alice called out to her cat on the ground. The little old cat meowed as she watched her owner fly off, and the man in the basket now faced Alice for the first time.

"Oh my," he gasped as he gave the child a hand, "It's like meeting Dorothy all over again!" Alice gave a small smile at the man's words, letting out a small squeak as she was pulled into the basket. Once in, she gasped for air, giving her kittens a sort of glare. The kittens paid no attention to the girl, for they were too busy watching the strange man. It took only a few moments for the girl's curiosity to drive her to look to the man as well- for he was pretty unusual.

"I knew I wasn't going crazy!" the man began again, sounding a bit like an excited child, "Perhaps I should introduce myself. My name is rather long, so I shortened a rather lot. You may call me Oscar, or, as many people do, Oz. It is a pleasure to meet you, miss. ...?" Oz gave Alice a kind smile as he awaited an answer. Alice continued to stay silent, giving him a judging look. He seemed nice enough. ...

The girl gave a sigh and looked to her kittens as if they had the answer. They once again ignored her. Snowdrop looked as if she was preparing to pounce at the man's shoes and Kitty had decided to do a bit of... investigating. The small black kitten walked over to the hat that the man OZ had thrown aside earlier. She peeked inside the funny top hat, giving out an excited meow at seeing what was hidden within it. A series of grunts and squeals was the response she was given. Alice shook her head and decided to ignore the kitten's call, turning back to Oz. "Alice ..." she spoke after a few moments of hesitation, "My name is Alice."

MEA UMBRA

DIANA SANCHEZ

Honorable Mention

*“Stars, hide your fires;
Let not light see
my black sheep desires.”
— William Shakespeare*

I never understood how a human could surrender its body and soul to darkness willingly. My mind never understood how humans could abandon their humanity to turn into atrocious beasts capable of horrible deeds. I never understood until now that my courage has become allied with darkness, and my pure heart has been corrupted by the shadows of wickedness. I, who used to bathe in the rays of the warm sun, have willingly surrendered to dwell, body and soul, with a demon. I now stand confined to the horrors of the shadows. The beautiful sun rips my flesh apart and no longer caresses me like it used to; only shadows and moonlight touch my pale skin now as I search for the answers to my cure – the search to cure my immorality and wickedness. I am an Umbra, a demon born from a human body pure of soul and brave of heart.

Allow my wicked tongue and alluring voice to enthrall you with my wretched story. Allow me to explain the events that led to my curse and destroyed every ounce of humanity left within me.

* * *

We had been chosen to become part of the hunters, part of the sacred society of hunters of her ladyship Artemis, the goddess of the moon and the hunt. She had conscripted us for our courageous hearts and pure souls to form part of her army of hunters and huntresses. Having no relations with other humans, I had decided to join the hunters, and that’s where I met him, Asger, the man who was to become my loyal companion, my friend, and later on, the only person whose betrayal hurt more than the loss of my humanity. As time passed, he became indispensable in my life, a constant that I did not want to lose in the chaos. He became

the rock to my erratic behavior, and I was his raging storm. He was two years older than me and more sagacious, where I was foolish and naive.

As a huntress, I knew the moment would come when I would be required to show my worth, and I had been ready for it. We both had been. The goddess had sent us both into the forest to find the glass coffin in which a cursed one resided, a man cursed to eternal slumber for having enraged the gods with his beauty. The task was simple, find the coffin and awake the cursed Endymion.

In times of war, no one is indispensable – family will turn on each other, loyalties will shift, and stratagems will be utilized to ensure victory. I thought our quest was just that, a hero's quest, and that I was another simple huntress. I never expected to become a pawn in the violent war the gods of Olympus had incited with their negligible arguments.

* * *

“Come on, hurry!” Asger urged me on as we both sprinted through the forest, my heart palpitating wildly beneath my rib cage.

“They are getting closer.” I breathed out as I forced my feet to move nimbly and gracefully through the forest floor, making sure that no twig was disturbed and no fallen branch scratched my delicate skin.

“I know.” He growled beneath his breath stealing a glance my way. His eyes made my heart drop to my stomach as I did not see fear in them, but a sea of utter darkness. “I will hold them back.” He breathed in exasperation.

I clenched my jaw and I forced my feet to run faster by taking longer strides, exertion slowly taking over my body. “I will not leave you behind.” I snapped angrily as a branch slapped me in the face, slashing my skin and leaving a small trail of blood from the center of my cheek to the other side of my face. “I won't. I would rather die.”

I heard him growl slowly as my steps and my heartbeat began to grow erratic. Twigs snapped under my feet and branches tore my skin apart as we ran. My goal was to get ourselves away from the shadow men and hags that had engulfed the forest in an unexpected ambush. I looked at him, sadness and guilt darkening his beautiful features – his sharp green eyes and his chiseled jaw.

“Then we will have to fight.” He replied flatly as if his words were part of a well-written script. He pointed at a hill just a few yards ahead. “We have to get the upper ground.”

I nodded as I hurried close behind him, my heart slowly collapsing from the toil of running away. As soon as our feet touched the soft and musky ground of the small hill, Asger pointed his bow and arrow at the distance. His eyes narrowed, and his attention focused entirely on his surroundings.

I unsheathed my scythes and bent my knees, my back against Asger's, and my eyes focused on the distance as a high pitched laughter echoed through the woods sending shivers down my spine.

"This was getting too easy, wasn't it?" He asked as we moved back, away from the shrill laughter.

The laughter repeated itself, followed by a chorus of shrieks and hisses, making me bare my teeth. I wasn't going to let the demons take Asger from me without a fight. I felt the darkness slipping through my pores before I even saw it. My skin crawled and my stomach tightened as the forest began to grow dark with a thick, ebony fog.

"Hags." Asger growled as the air carried a sweet yet pungent scent our way.

A dark silhouette flung itself at me as I swiftly decapitated it with my sword. The shape dissolved itself before my eyes and into the dark fog surrounding Asger and me.

"And demons." I breathed as Asger growled and flung himself into the dark fog, his bow shooting arrows into the hearts of the shadow men.

I allowed my throat to holler a battle cry as I followed my friend and companion into the dense fog. My sword moved quickly and efficiently decapitating the shadow men. My feet moved surely on the ground as I twirled through the battleground ridding myself of the darkness. I felt a hag's sharp nails digging into my skin as I plunged my sword into the heart of a demon; the hag's cold and slimy tongue licked my neck and whispered in my ear tales of sorrow and pain. I was paralyzed; the hag's venom had already made it into my bloodstream. I felt her cold hands brush my face as her nails slightly grazed my skin, small trickles of blood traveling down my chin as the wicked hag licked her lips, savoring the moment before she killed me.

I summoned my strength as the hag drew closer to me, her bald head inching toward my nostrils. I growled as I threw myself at the beast. My muscles ached and burned as I used the fight within me to reach down toward my boot and extract a small pocketknife, a gift Asger had recently given me for my eighteenth birthday.

“AHHH!” I yelled as I used all the energy I had left to stab the hissing hag in the heart. The hag still struggled under my weight as I shoved my fist into her chest and extracted her heart in one quick motion.

The hag stopped moving and I struggled to get on my feet, my eyes searching for Asger who fought off demons graciously without breaking a sweat. My eyes slowly moved toward the path leading to the glass coffin of Endymion, the cursed one; the hags and demons were not protecting the path but attacking us – we were the targets. They didn’t care about Endymion or the quest. They wanted us.

“Asger. ...” I whispered as my feet began to lose balance and my head began to swim, the hag’s poison slowly making its way to my heart. “They want us. ... They —”

A shadow man, a demon, flung itself at me and tackled me onto the ground. I kicked and screamed as I struggled to fight him off with the energy I had left, but the demon managed to possess my body as I breathed in its scent.

“Aslaug!” I felt Asger’s hands shaking me violently as I struggled to open my eyes, a real pain slowly consuming my body. “Can you hear me?”

His voice sounded far away as if he was trying to talk to me from the other end of the forest. His image seemed blurry in the focus of my eyes, as a ripping pain burned my heart.

I screamed in agony as he attempted to help me to my feet. I began to shiver uncontrollably as I felt the venom swimming through my bloodstream, turning me into a primordial host.

“Aslaug,” Asger called out to me as I whimpered on the ground like a wounded animal. “You need to stay strong, okay? I’m not going to lose you, not today.”

In anguish I felt his arms around me carrying me back to the barracks. I cried out in pain until my throat was raw from screaming, and even then I could not stop.

“Please, just let me die!” I pleaded between cries. “Please kill me!”

I heard Asger growl in impotence as he struggled to get us home. I could feel his pain and his anger seeping into my bones as I fought off the demon inside of me with no luck to rid myself from it.

“I’m so sorry.” I heard him whisper more than once as he carried my

limp body through the forest. “I’m sorry, Aslaug. I will not let you die, kardia mou.” He growled angrily. “I’m not going to lose you.”

Kardia mou. My heart. His words swam inside my head alleviating some of the pain consuming me like a wildfire does a forest.

They want you. The demon inside of me whispered maliciously. You will become their perfect pawn, their queen in the games of war.

“Listen to me, Aslaug.” Asger’s deep commanding voice echoed in my ears as pain stabbing me in the sides made me twitch uncontrollably. “If you want to live, you are going to do as I tell you.”

I nodded my head just as a fit of coughing began to seize me. “She is coughing blood.” I heard someone whisper. “We don’t have much time.”

You will become an Umbra. The voice chuckled with glee. Mea Umbra, my shadow, a mythical demon born from the innocent.

“Aslaug. ...” Asger’s voice sounded so far away, as if there was a world separating the two of us. Soon the darkness took over. Pain awoke me as it tore through my body. I stopped fighting the demon and allowed the darkness inside of me to consume and join the light within.

“Aslaug.” Asger sighed as my body began to convulse, my eyes rolled back and my back arched as I screamed in torture. I slammed back on the bed as my nails nimbly began to tear off chunks of my own flesh.

“Don’t.” I heard Asger plead as I frantically tore myself apart. A cold voice stopped Asger from running toward me as I tore myself apart.

I felt my shoulder blades burn as the skin began to peel off. I stumbled on the ground and ran toward the forest. I fell on my knees as an excruciating sensation ripped through my body, and a pair of black wings arose from the wounds where my shoulder blades had been. I felt myself stand up, my feet unsure on the ground, as I looked back at Asger.

“I’m sorry.” He whispered, as a cold tear ran down my cheek.

“I’m sorry too.” I whispered, as I flung myself at him and very slowly tore him to pieces, making him experience my pain in flesh and bone.

Asger knew I was just another pawn in a senseless war, and he died for it. As I waited for the hunter patrol to finish its first shift in what was once my home, I allowed the cold forest air to caress my black, feathered wings.

Let's chain them all. Make them all slaves. Make them pay for what they did to you. The demon whispers slowly. Part of me feels empty and disgusted by my actions and emotions, but I'm no longer human. I'm an immortal demon, an Umbra. And as I lock eyes on my first objective, my wings ache with longing to chain Artemis and the Gods in the end of the seven seas, Tartarus.

*“Look at how single candle
can both defy
and define darkness.”
— Anne Frank*

AN AVOCATION FOR SENTIMENTALITY (IN LIMITED DOSES AND WITH A PHYSICIAN'S DISCRETION)

SAMIRA ABED

Honorable Mention

Despite prevailing opinions to the exact opposite being Muslim is not hard. It is about forgiveness and mercy and most of all love. And love is never hard.

When I was a child though I never knew this. In fact, I never even knew I was Muslim. I grew up with an Arab Muslim father and a White Agnostic mother who never really mentioned anything concerning our religion until I was in fourth grade, when I was quickly removed from my public school and sent to a small, private, Muslim school up until High School. For me this was a definite culture shock-to that point I had happily celebrated Christmas and Easter, sang hymns with other kids at recess, and considered Jesus God. But now, everything was different. Girls were expected to cover themselves, we knelt our heads in prayer in-between classes, and instead of Jesus everyone prayed to Allah.

The school itself was strange too. Most of the teachers were parents who had no teacher training or even college degrees, just adults with free time who wanted to help. The students too were strange; most of them spoke Arabic or at least knew each other from the Mosque- (in contrast, I didn't even know what a mosque was till 6th grade) or at least had parents that were both Muslim and it soon became clear that I was the odd one out.

And here's where I learned that Islam is about love.

Even though, they had no reason to, even though it was harder to help me than to let me fumble along reading a translated version of the Quran and mimic the complicated prayer process as best I could, people united to help me. My science teacher let me learn at my own pace, and take all

the tests in the first month so I could spend the rest of the year focusing on my Arabic. My Quran teacher (who doubled as our sheik) patiently answered all of my ignorant questions that everyone else already seemed to know the answer to. My friends helped me figure out how to put on a hijab. And, while I was still different, I was at least loved.

From then on, since becoming Muslim for real, I learned how important it was to help, to love others. Logically, unless we help others then we ourselves can never expect to be helped without falling into a fallacy, and I am nothing if not a strict logistician.

Thereof, I understand completely the irony of advocating for sentimentality when our natural instincts are to shun the weak and defenseless to guarantee our own safety. And, I also understand the irony of a Muslim advocating fervently the existence of a mindset which has the underlining message that evolution is not only real, but probable considering our natural tendency as human beings to compete. But I also understand that I don't care about any of those things.

What I do care about is caring. It seems quite clear, through my (albeit limited) experiences that the more I was loved and cared for and accepted the better I felt and the more my capacity for love and affection grew too. Regardless of how we choose to express our more tender emotions of love and compassion it seems clear to me that they must be expressed in some form. For me, being Muslim (and all that it entails) was the easiest, the simplest, the thing that I loved most. But for others, such emotions can be expressed through whatever proverbial device allows them to accept others like I was accepted, whether it be religion, or charity, or even something mundane like watching TV together. The simple point is that we need love to survive. In limited doses though — of course.

THE MIXED BAG

MAYA VANNINI

HONORABLE MENTION

Growing up of mixed race is just as it sounds — a mixed bag. On one hand, diversity is an interesting trait to possess and often comes in handy. On the other, cultural threads are thinner, and are often tugging at each other, trying to compete for which one will receive the most attention.

For me, my Pakistani side has always dominated my white side, in my mind and arguably in my looks as well. I'd like to say I have a concrete answer for why this is, but I really don't. Geographically, Pakistan is almost a world away, and Pakistani culture isn't as readily available as white culture is, so it's not as if I just fell into it.

Since as long as I can remember I have been attracted to the warm sounds of Urdu, to the bright fabrics of shalwar kameez. Maybe I felt a maternal connection, but I'm sure that I've subconsciously pushed my white side to the back burner from as young as eight years old.

Even though Pakistan runs through my veins every day I have not been there since I was seven, the growing violence too big of a risk that my mother is not willing to take. So the relationship I have developed to the country and to the culture has been a twisted one. I have seen the country from the outside, I have seen all the problems and corruptions in the government. But I have also seen the culture from the outside, and as much as the stereotypes advise against it, I constantly find myself wanting to be allowed in.

And to some extent, I have been, in good ways and bad. Because after all, can you even claim your "colored" identity if you only have privileges and never have to face even a hint of the struggles your people have endured? I have learned some Urdu and I own shalwar kameez; at the same time I have often been held accountable for the acts of the Taliban, and I once was asked if my family was hiding Osama Bin Laden. But

despite this I never hesitate to acknowledge my privilege, from my pale skin to my American upbringing. I know that my minimal melanin puts me out of the way of colorism, and that I am so lucky to have never had to grow up questioning the water coming from the tap.

Some may say I have erased half of myself, throwing it away and marking it as useless. I see this as needlessly pessimistic, because I have simply grown like a sunflower, searching constantly for the light of the sun. And I found that light within my mother's family and culture. I have sifted through the mixed bag.

THE SUN TAKES SHAPE

MADISON STITT

Honorable Mention

The sun is rising
Rising above the oceans
Rising above the rugged Rockies
Above the shining golden brown plains
Awakening the large, bustling East coast cities
The sun rises slowly, little by little, over everything
Suddenly, the sun is above the world, like a heat lamp
Shining down on people sweating under its deep fever
They work all day and as the sun begins to droop
They begin to play, relax, talk, eat and drink
As dusk hits, they retire to their beds
And before they know it
The sun is rising