

SPECTRUM

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FRESNO STATE

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College of Arts and Humanities

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San Joaquin Valley Writing Project

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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 37th 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.

I would like to extend 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

Gursimran Kaur, Fowler High School: I am drowning in an ocean of my own fears

DEAN'S AWARD

Yasmeena Sulaiman, Mariposa County High School: Chaos

WILD ABOUT BOOKS AWARD

Alex Ayala, Fowler High School: The Tale of Kronilios

WILLIAM SAROYAN AWARD

Alexandra Arroyo, Tulare Union High School: Monster Under the Bed

CHAIR'S AWARD

Claire Gorham, Mariposa County High School: Push Through

FRESNO POETS' ASSOCIATION AWARD

Mariela Velis, Los Banos High School: Breathing Night

HENRY MADDEN LIBRARY AWARD

Daniela Orozco, King City High School: Home

THE NORMAL SCHOOL AWARD

Arzan Kermani, Los Banos High School: Thanksgiving

AWARDS

PHILIP LEVINE PRIZE AWARD

Felicia Zhornitsky, University High School: a day in the tobacco fields

FACET AWARDS

Maya Vannini, Edison High School: Fractions of a Whole

Emery Haller, Fowler High School: Dead Prosperity

MFA AWARD

Amayrani Reyes, Mission Oak High School: The Never Ending Bucket

HMONG AMERICAN WRITERS' CIRCLE AWARD

Ger Thao, Edison High School: In Time

FRESNO WRITERS AWARDS

Samantha Park, Liberty High School: A Eulogy For Our Love

Julieta Ortiz, Porterville High School: The Story of the Stuffed Elephant My Dad Bought Me Almost 10 Years Ago

SAN JOAQUIN LITERARY ASSOCIATION AWARD

Carolyn Allen, Los Banos High School: Freeing a Falcon

CHICANO WRITERS AND ARTISTS ASSOCIATION AWARDS

Elizabeth De Azevedo, Tulare Union High School: Just a Moment

Lluvia Salas, Tulare Union High School: Brown with a Hint of Orange

AWARDS

DRAMATIC ARTS AWARD

Duncan Wanless, Edison High School: An American Carol:
Two Plays in One Act

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Harpreet Nijjer, Fowler High School: Untitled

Yisel Tapia, Dos Palos High School: Untitled

Lizzette Cuevas, King City High School: I Am an Artist,
My Face is My Canvas

Stella Velez, Sierra High School: Smoke and Feathers

Vivian Aila De La Cruz, Kerman High School: The Little
Old Lady from Pasadena

Giovanni Romero-Ito, Mission Oak High School: I Welcome You

Jenelle Carlin, Edison High School: The Queen of the Night

Sebastian Greer, Los Banos High School: A Reflection of Time:
a Zuihitsu

SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY WRITING PROJECT TEACHER AWARDS

Erin DeGough, Los Banos High School

Miranda Kuykendall, Fowler High School

I AM DROWNING IN AN OCEAN OF MY OWN FEARS

GURSIMRAN KAUR

President's Award

I am drowning in an ocean of my own fears.

My ocean was meant to be beautiful. My ocean was meant to be diverse. My ocean was meant to be accepting and free. Instead, my ocean pulls me under, into a sea of racial injustice and social disparity. Instead, I lose my breath to the creatures around me -they revel in my pain. Instead, I am sinking to the bottom of this ocean, where I've always been told I belong.

I was born in this country, specifically in Flushing, New York. I don't remember much of what life was like in New York. When I was younger, I thought I had memories of my life there, but as I've grown older, I've realized that those memories were fabricated from the stories my parents told me of what life was like when we lived in New York. Those events may have been real, but in my world of memories, they were pure fiction. All I know is that shortly after the September 11th attacks on the World Trade center, my parents left New York City. The City that accepted them as immigrants when they came to America to make a new life for themselves in the 1990s. The City that gave them a home when the country they loved was wrought by a corrupt government and a genocide against their people. The City that saw their skin color and their clothes, who heard the thick accent in their voices, and saw the enemy they so craved to personify. My parents left this City because they could no longer stand to see everything they loved turn against them in fear.

Do you know what it's like to be ostracized by your own people? Do you know what it's like to be nine years old and see on the news that people are protesting the election and inauguration of a president whose skin color is only a few shades darker than your own? Do you know what it's like to be fourteen years old and researching the rape and murder of

a young woman in India, a young woman who could easily have been you had your parents not moved to a country that promised them safety and freedom? Do you know what it's like to be told to "go back to India" when you're ten years old by someone who judges you based on your skin color and your skin color alone? It feels like hot tears rolling down your face in the dark of your bedroom. It feels like quieted sobs screamed into pillows so your parents won't hear from their bedroom. It feels like smiles of broken dreams, and eyes the color of hope lost. It feels like knowing you will never do anything. That you will never be anything. That you are nothing.

I felt variations of these things everyday growing up, but all around me, people discussed the dissipation of racism. People talked about the fact that Hollywood was becoming more diverse, and how the fight for equal representation was finally being taken seriously. And I took their word for it, all the while refusing to read books where the main character was a colored woman, *because colored women couldn't be beautiful*. All the while, I wrote my own stories, writing what I imagined life would be like as a beautiful white woman instead of writing from my own experiences because *nobody wants to read about someone who doesn't matter*. All the while, I tried to pull away from my culture. My skin color. My identity. It took me years to realize that the reason I did this was because I had learned -rather, I had been subconsciously taught- to hate myself. I was taught to hate myself by a society that lauds diversity, but continues to only depict men and women with a certain skin color and body shape as being beautiful. I was taught to hate myself by the countless movies and TV shows that told me that my only role in society is to be the Indian sidekick that showed me that I wasn't destined for a happy ending.

To this day, I am still learning to accept myself and my identity as a colored woman in a country that is determined to hate me. Every day, I swallow the insults and ignorance of those who will never have to experience the pain of being judged every waking moment of their lives. Every day, I am stronger and more independent and more beautiful than the day before, and every day, I show the world that I am a force to be reckoned with.

My ocean used to be my nightmare. My biggest fear was conforming to what society thought and expected of me -of drowning in a sea of irrevocable darkness. But the tides are changing. And I am growing. My ocean becomes that of a nation, and all around me, there are people teaching me to use my voice. This isn't just my sea. This isn't your sea. This is *our* sea, and either we can, each of us, drown in an ocean of sorrow and pity ...

Or we can learn to swim against the tide.

CHAOS

YASMEENA SULAIMAN

Dean's Award

In such a state of calm you could almost deceive me into believing that you were nothing but the comforting lull of the sea, gently rocking me to oblivion. That you weren't the 5 o'clock hightide. That I didn't know you were coming and still ventured out onto your shore. That I didn't get swept up into your painful, obliterating waves. That I would never be slammed onto the ocean floor over and over and over again. That you'd never make me struggle for air.

But you did—you do.

You were not calm. You were not smooth and serene. Not comfortable. You were chaos; unpredictable and wild. Dangerous and uncontrollable. Beautiful. The way you sat at this moment, exuding an aura of content that didn't match the restlessness of your soul, betrayed your very being. All these people in this restaurant were being fooled; you had mastered the ability to make your broken pieces reflect an array of alluring colors. Their lingering eyes couldn't help but travel to your form, which was big and overwhelming but dark and calm. They couldn't see you like I could. They couldn't see the caginess in your eyes or that the stillness of your shape was due to the tenseness of your shoulders and not the tranquility of mind.

Your shoulders, which you carried high and strong, confident and imposing like cliffs battered by the ruthless waves challenging them. They held the weight of the world; your dark and twisted world. They were the force behind your actions, the power behind your will. The seemingly insignificant muscles connected to your hands. Hands you see painted with hurt still, no matter how many times you've run them under a stream of guilt and forgiveness. Hands that pull pleasure from my lips with the same passion they fight. Your hands hold all of my broken pieces together.

Even your hair was unruly. Dark and long, the messy strands fell to your stubbled jaw. The same hair covered your face often, driving me insane with an ache to touch you and sweep them away. That same hair would find its way to shielding your eyes; the deep blue 5 o'clock hightide encompassed in two smouldering eyes. Even your strong, capable nose was beautiful. Everything about you was hard and unyielding, and below the oddly attractive feature curved a perfect Cupid's bow, rejoicing in its namesake's craft. Your sinful lips that spoke of demons yet never released them held behind them a wicked tongue capable of waging war, and yet your hands had been hardened to finish it.

Nothing about you was content. The way you now rolled a napkin between your fingers attested to this. Your feet, too, slid under the table, caging my smaller ones, and held me in place like you thought I'd leave. You were always grasping for something just outside of your reach, trying to attain what you didn't know. Maybe that was why you were so untamed; you fought without a tangible intent. I used to hope that one day you'd realize that I was your brilliant shipwreck and not the useless debris at the bottom of your untouched floor, that I would be enough to settle your hungry riptides; however, I now realize that I cannot give you the peace I can only suspect you crave. You strive to convince yourself that you can live without chaos, but you cannot fool me. You thrive off of it. You make it beautiful.

You made chaos predictable.

THE TALE OF KRONILIOS

ALEX AYALA

Wild About Books Award

“Daddy? What are gods?”

“Where did you hear about that?” He looked up from his desk, wrinkles lining his forehead as he raised his brow.

I shrunk away from his gaze. He had never given me such attention before. “I heard other children praying and I asked?” His gaze wasn’t angry or surprised, instead he hid a smile behind his stern exterior.

He gently and stressfully moved his glasses from the bridge of his nose and placed it on the crisp paper in front of him. “You won’t understand unless I tell you the whole story.” I didn’t know it yet but that was a phrase which would later become my hallmark. He took a deep breath and he started, his voice seemed to change and spoke to me for the first time as a father.

Before mankind and primordians there were twenty-two gods and goddesses, all siblings, with unimaginable and insurmountable powers. They all lived in their own plane of existence, where thoughts and ambitions reigned supreme. All the gods had relished in the activity of creation. Using their combined powers, they created a mortal plane, outside their celestial dimension. Eleven gods had created an infinite, vast, empty space that would serve as the sandbox for all the deities’ creations. The other eleven created entire spans of stars to fill the infinite void.

They created multiverses that spanned the unending space. However, they were unsatisfied with what they created. There was nothing to gain, nor lose, should the multiverses be erased. Instead of creating more multiverses, they decided to create something more sophisticated than simple rocks or light-producing stars. They selected many planets and brought to them the gift of life as the gods knew it. They created planets

of large grasslands, vast oceans, barren deserts, and towering mountains with their tireless hands and thoughts.

However, every god had created worlds differently, based on their individual perception of beauty and perfection. One god suggested to pick one specific planet and to use all their powers to create a truly perfect world. The twenty-two gods and goddesses morphed the terrain with scrupulous precision to fit every inch of creativity each god and goddess had. The planet they created they named Kronilios, after the god Chronos, who suggested they create the planet. Then the goddess Tsukuyomi, the eldest of them all, remarked that a beautiful world deserves a labor force to preserve its perfection. Ten of her siblings disagreed, pleading that the creation of anything else would spoil the perfection they meticulously created.

These ten were ignored by the other twelve. To further their point, the twelve gods and goddesses named themselves as the gods of light, and their ten siblings the gods of darkness. The twelve gods then created wildlife and animals that would scurry around the world in their own natural way, primordials. The ten gods, in order to sabotage the project of their siblings, decided to imbue a select group with unnatural power and a predatory hate towards one another. The power would spread like a virus and eventually the only goal amongst the animals that came in contact with it would be to attack another.

The gods of light were dumbfounded, until their eldest sister once again suggested to imbue the rabid animals with a sense of reason and to, in effect, make them evolve. The gods accepted her suggestion, yet she deliberately refused to participate in the process. The eleven imbue every rabid and hostile animal with the power to reason. However, the animal's feeble minds could do little understand complex reason compared to the simple hatred they were imbued with before.

The gods of light were forced to transform the animal's bodies to be more similar to the gods themselves. The gods labeled them as primordians, the second generation of "animals" and the first generation of people. The gods looked at them with disdain, feeling they solved the problem but were unsatisfied with the product. In order to gain satisfaction, the twelve light gods decided to strip the bestial characteristics from half the primordial population. The extrasensory and extraordinary attributes were taken alongside the physical traits, creating the first group of humans.

The gods felt horrified with what they created, they felt the humans were failures. The light gods abandoned the humans and immediately turned their attention to the primordians. The lone eldest sister, that had

been prominent in evolving life, left her eleven siblings and tended to the humans alone. She watched as the light gods pampered and spoiled the primordians with blessings, gifts, and even supernatural powers to those who gained the gods' favor. Tsukuyomi turned to the humans under her wing and granted them the power to think and care for themselves. She imbued the characteristics of selfishness, righteousness, duty, and morals, into the human population.

Suddenly, the light gods saw the humans thriving on the land without their assistance. They demanded from Tsukuyomi the method of which she cared for the humans. She refused to divulge her secret. In anger, the light gods pondered what they would do next to help the primordians grow. They all looked to Chronos, who simply ordered to give them the power to evolve. Eventually and naturally, they would ascend to the capacity of the humans.

They fulfilled his orders then asked what to do with Tsukuyomi. Chronos loved his sister dearly and wished her no ridicule from their younger siblings. "Leave her be", he stated. However the ten gods disagreed with his forgiving nature and forcefully banished Tsukuyomi from their celestial plane. Chronos objected, but knew he could not do anything to stop them. The dark gods left the celestial plane after Tsukuyomi, eventually inducting her as their leader.

The dark gods took refuge on the moon of Kronilios, creating their home and palace in the craters that dotted lunar landscape. The light gods were terrified, all except Chronos. They pleaded him to create a permanent portal to which they may access, should the dark gods decide to twist Kronilios. Chronos abided and created a portal within the sun. From the sun, the light gods watched and waited for when the dark gods would act.

In their absence, the world the gods struggled so feverently to preserve began to destroy itself. The humans and primordians had begun conflicts against one another and used the ancient power imbued within them from the dark gods for combat. They used the energy of hate within their souls to create their *arma-animae*, an invisible barrier which protects them. With adept use of the energy, people could use their soul as a weapon or to enhance their physical attributes. Masters were able to use their soul to manipulate the souls, minds, and bodies of others.

With these as their weapons, they waged war across all fronts. Tribes of primordians fought against villages of humans, some had been neighbors for several years. The conflict had made entire kinds of primordians extinct and the brightest of humans were slain indiscriminately. The light gods were at a loss, they couldn't stop the fighting between

their creations. Their blessings were misinterpreted as instruments of war and righteous crusades bathe the land in blood. Tsukuyomi, now affiliated with the dark gods extended an offer. To bring a mutual enemy to the field so the two may release their anger for one another on something else.

While the light gods questioned the offer, Chronos persuaded the rest to accept the offer. Tsukuyomi ordered her little brother and right-hand man to create an evil creature bent on attacking only the primordians and humans. The brother, Impion, did so without question and manifested his energy into the form of an animal. Giving it white bone-like armor, to discern it from the other animals, and the intent to bring nothing but destruction across the land, the first ira was born. Impion gave it the power to spread its corruption to other animals and people.

Nearly decades later, at the war's climax, the ira had suddenly appeared en masse on Kronilios. Destroying both primordial and human cities in a pattern to confine resistance in the close proximity of one another. The primordians and humans issued a peace treaty amongst each other and fought the ira, pushing the corruption back and regaining their territory. With unity on Kronilios, Chronos ordered the immediate recall of the ira.

Impion heeded the call, as per Tsukuyomi's request. For the next few generations, peace lasted until once again social tension sprouted in the cities. The progressive leaders during the war time had long since passed, and the new untamed and undisciplined children took the stage. Largely secular, the people no longer relied on the gods for blessings. Technology and automatons dominated the battlefield, ruthlessly decimating both sides of the war. The light gods, however, had carefully watched and studied Kronilios.

The light gods went to Chronos and advised him to order the release of ira once again. Chronos would hesitate in his decision, carefully watching as he did. Before he entirely thought of a solution, Impion came directly to Chronos. He offered to create ira stronger than before to decimate the factories of the automatons as well as to only scare the two populations into submission. Chronos thought more, allowing the war to escalate toward mutually assured destruction between the two participating parties. Chronos allowed Impion to send ira once again.

Impion sent the ira in great numbers, the same ability to spread its corruption through contact with other animals. Impion, however, did not have the best interest of man in mind. Instead he went to Tsukuyomi and spoke to her, arguing that the recall of ira would pose more problems than solve. He insisted that he give the ira the ability to reproduce

by themselves and remain so they may forever threaten the two groups should they forget their ceasefire. Tsukuyomi refused, but Impion would live up to his later title as the trickster god.

He offered a compromise that the ira would be enhanced to evolve themselves, so they may pose a better challenge against the humans and primordians as time goes on and their numbers dwindle. Tsukuyomi agreed and Impion imbued every ira he had already created the ability to adapt and evolve. The ira then appeared on the battlefield, making short work of the machines and factories producing them. The humans and primordians decided to train troops once again to fight the war, seeing the ira no longer attacked people. However, the ira evolved quickly and swept through battles like a storm. It seemed apparent that ira were attacking only when the humans and primordians attacked one another.

They initiated a protocol to enclose their armies into a single area, surrounded by boundaries to restrict the ira's ability to intervene. These arenas would contain the armies until the last person in the rival army was killed. The ira, however, grew in power and bided their time until they could amass the strength to demolish the arenas. Chronos saw the humans and primordians begin to band together once again to battle the ira. Several more years and the armies were combined, a joint force to destroy the ira.

Every day the army swept the forests and lands of all ira they could find, but the next day more would be found. The ira had evolved to reproduce and soon overwhelmed the combined might of the humans and primordians. Chronos demanded the ira be restrained, but Impion refused. He planned to attack, but Tsukuyomi intervened, ordering Chronos to restrain himself.

Tsukuyomi saw that allowing Impion to let ira adapt was a mistake, one she needed to fix. The light gods, on the other hand, refused to accept Chronos's untimely submission. They urged him to create a force to combat the ira, to "protect the people from the power of darkness". He agreed, but only should they limit the number of emissaries. They agreed on four, which they later chose to be two primordians and two humans, one of each gender. Bestowing upon them great powers, weapons, new names they shall carry as their titles, and a single mission; to destroy all ira.

The first was Arrio, second was Nezhiah, third was Pandora, and fourth was Mabuz. These four would single-handedly push the ira back with their combat prowess alone. Their mixed ancestry brought a sense of unity between primordians and humans, furthering progression to a more equal and fair world. "The Four Knights", they were called, and

they displayed the holy power of the light gods to force the ira from encroaching the lands. The knights, however, refused to remain the servants of the light gods and effectively regained their autonomy.

The light gods pleaded to them through their dreams to complete their mission. The leader of the four knights, Mabuz, had refused. The light gods offered each of them more god-like power and immortality, only should they continue to fight ira and continue to be the emissaries of light. They all agreed and were granted power far beyond their wildest dreams. Honoring their deal, they pushed the ira back to whence they came, finding that they infinitely spawned in the shadows when the light was gone. In order to defeat the ira, they looked towards the original source of ira.

They tracked a source of darkness to a mountain peak, where a warrior named Perditrix prayed for a challenge from the gods. At the arrival of the four knights, Impion appeared before the knights and warrior. Their combined might was enough to overwhelm the god. The warrior had dealt the killing blow, ending the hard fought battle. Impion's body release a great deal of dark energy, engulfing the warrior. The four knights quickly used their powers to seal the energy away in the mountain, saving the warrior from death in the shroud of darkness. The warrior bid farewell and left, satisfied with his feat. The four knights, however, knew now the sources of darkness and ira.

The four knights used their power to fly to the moon, the acropolis of dark gods. The crystalline lunar throne was empty and the gods were gone. The four knights approached, only to be caught in a trap orchestrated by the ten dark gods. A battle commenced, ending with the crushing defeat of the four knights. Tsukuyomi along with her nine dark brethren begun the process to destroy the four knights.

The four knights had yet to use their trump card. They combined their powers to use their special ability. They drastically drained the powers of the gods with the "Seal of the Four Knights". The ten dark gods were left powerless and the four knights took the chance to destroy them. Giving up their immortality, they used their godly power to self-destruct and entirely annihilate both the ten gods and shatter one side of the moon the dark gods called home.

The fractured moon stood as the monument to the legend of the four knights. Despite their sacrifice, the ira never ceased to spawn and continued to terrorise Kronilios. The abundance of power held the shattered pieces of the moon with its other half, however several pieces fell as meteors to the planet. In the craters, crystals imbued with the four elements would be found, bearing similar elemental power the four

knights once wielded. The crystal was later named testra and found to grow in the craters of the moon's debris. Testra became the single most important entity of Kroniolos, as it became instrumental to pushing the ira back. Time had proven that ira had become stronger, yet also that testra had grown in potency and numbers, multiplying faster than the humans and primordians could harvest it.

The other light gods, now believing they are the only group of gods, watched carefully. Chronos ordered the creation of a second generation of knights, one whose title may be passed on through the generations. He demanded that the power remain dormant, only to awaken should the ira press too harshly into settled lands. Otherwise, only one knight should ever be awake at any given time to control the ira situation alone. The gods followed without question, the only direct order Chronos had made without hesitation.

The light gods also created a second moon to reassure Kroniolos that they were secure, and that the gods had not forsaken them. Chronos sat upon his lumen throne attentively, passively watching. The warrior that helped fight against Impion had achieved immortality through unknown magic, proclaiming himself a new god. The gods suspected a problem to arise, but instead he became a hermit upon the peak of the mountain of which he fought.

The civilization spread all over the world, barely hindered by the ira. The continents of the planet were renamed after the self-proclaimed hero-god and four knights: Panduan; Nehlas; Maburas; Arrius; and Perditra. The world progressed on for several thousands of years. The ira evolved, as did humans and primordians who held each other as brothers- and sister-in-arms.

There were many training schools throughout the land, but soon four academies for advanced battle tactics had emerged, in honor the four knights. The first to be built was Drake Academy, said to be built upon the forest land which the knight Arrio had once lived. The second was Ouroborus Academy, constructed near the ancestral land which Mabuz originated from. The third, Siren Academy, emerged on the same continent as Drake, however much farther in the western desert where Ne-ziah had been when she was chosen as one of the knights. The last, Cerberus Academy, was built in the cold harsh north where the knight Pandora's family had last inhabited.

An era of long term peace had proceeded, surprising as it was to the light gods. The soldiers that trained at the academies became younger as time passed, making the academies more a school than anything else. Almost all graduates became Paladins, those who would fight the

ira like the knights did before them. Occasional pseudo wars would be waged for racial independence, either by the humans or primordians but never a huge war like the two first wars of Kronilios.

The gods swore to occasionally watch the now mundane world of Kronilios in case for danger. Chronos, however, never left. He knew better than his siblings that no amount of finite power could surmount the omnipotence they all wielded. He waited for the day that his siblings would return. For when the knights, and perhaps his brethren too, would be needed to combat those they once called family.

“Did they ever come back?”

“I ... don't know.” His voice was uneasy. My elderly father ... his grizzled features shone in the candlelight. His blackened shadow was darker than most, plastered against the wall by a dying blaze's light. His weary eyes were burned into my memory. I sensed a hint of regret, melancholy, anger behind his sleep-deprived gaze.

MONSTER UNDER THE BED

ALEXANDRA ARROYO

William Saroyan Award

I'm the best there is. I have been the monster under the beds of thousands of children, and have just been assigned to a new case.

Case: #567,203

Child: Sarah

Age: 9

At exactly 8:00 p.m I appeared under Sarah's bed, excited to finally get a new case after my last charge got too old to have a monster under his bed. All I could see as the door opened was two small feet approaching the bed, followed by the feet of her mother wanting to tuck her in and kiss her goodnight. After the humans said their farewells, her mother turned out the light and closed the door. After a few minutes, it was my time to act. As I crawled out from under the bed, I outstretched my black wings that almost took up the entire room. I stood to my full height of seven feet as I stared at the child lying on the bed. I was a rather impressive monster, with two long horns protruding from my head, dark red skin, and bright red eyes that could see the darkest secrets hidden within a person's soul. I began slowly scratching my claws along the end of the wooden bed frame, seeing the child lightly stir. I then began to quietly whisper her name. The child began to sit up, not yet turning to me, so I continued to whisper her name. And that's when she finally spoke.

"Are you a monster?" she asked.

"Yes I am," I said still in a whisper.

"They call me a monster too," the child said catching me completely off guard. She then turned to me for the first time, not at all disturbed by

what she saw standing in front of her. That's when I saw that most of her body and half of her face had been damaged beyond repair. Before I could stop myself I asked, "What happened?" The child was shocked for a moment, as if she had not expected me to be so gentle, but she soon recovered from the mild shock.

"My mom and dad came back drunk one night, they paid the babysitter, and then went into the kitchen. I heard the noises of pots and pans clanging together from down the hall. They then stumbled into their room and went to bed. My parents were drunk pretty often so I learned early on how to take care of myself. But that night what they didn't know was that something they did in the kitchen had started a fire. I woke up coughing and crying, I had no idea what to do. I went into the kitchen to see if I could stop it, but that was a mistake because by then the flames had reached the ceiling and a chunk came crashing down on me. The piece had my body and half of my face pinned to the floor. I screamed and screamed, and that's when I heard the shouts of my parents calling my name.

When they finally got the chunk of ceiling off of me, I was already slipping in and out of consciousness. I can't remember what happened after being rushed into the ambulance, but I woke up in so much pain two days later at the hospital. My parents had minor injuries that would heal over time, but as for me, I had permanent damage. My parents were so disgusted with themselves, that they vowed to me they would turn their lives around and never touch a drop of alcohol again. So we moved to a new town to try and get a fresh start. People always ask me what happened, but I didn't want to relive those painful memories, so I just didn't say anything. But other people just thought I was being snobby so they assumed that I was born this way." The little girl finally took a deep breath, and said in a voice just above a whisper, "And that's how I got the nickname MONSTER."

By now the child was looking down at her hands, with fresh tears stinging her eyes. The child tried to hold back her tears, but no longer could. She cried silent sobs, which were the worst kind, because the ones who cry silently to themselves are the ones who put on a smile to hide the real pain hidden beneath. I approached the girl cautiously, and pulled her into an awkward hug. When I realized that she had not flinched away from my touch, I relaxed and held her a little tighter. She wrapped her arms around my waist and buried her head into my arms, letting her sobs become a little louder.

After she had calmed down, I wiped the renaming tears from her face and said, "People will try to forever hurt and put down the things they do not see as beautiful or normal, but you must always remember that

you are beautiful inside and out no matter what anyone says. I will never leave your side, because I am your friend and your monster under the bed.” The child smiled for the first time since we met and said, “I have never had a friend before.”

“Neither have I,” I replied. And with that, I knew that this friendship would last until the end of time.

PUSH THROUGH

CLAIRE GORHAM

Chair's Award

The school is huge. It's full of people who stare at you, and you wonder if they stare at all the new kids like that, or if you reek of anxious former homeschooler; of fresh meat. It's your first day of ninth grade, your first day of public school. You find one of your many cousins, because in this small town you're more likely to be related to someone than not. You two talk about how nervous you both are, and then you reassure each other. Last night, you gave yourself a pep talk. People were going to like you; they were not going to make fun of you. But this morning, all of that is gone. There are *so many people*, and so many of them are your age, and so many of them seem to hate you. You are suddenly terrified that you're not going to have any friends. Friends have always mattered a lot to you, and being without them is one reason you wanted to go to public school in the first place, but *oh, god*, if you'd known what the first day was going to be like, I don't think you would have fought as hard to be there as you did. You want the academic challenges, and you want the extra-curricular activities, but you want to go home. You want your mother.

Yes, I remember being you, Freshman-Year Me.

Look at me now. I'm a senior, I have a group of the best friends that anyone could ask for. I've found myself; I wear black, dye my hair, and shop at Hot Topic like I'm a 12-year-old going through her seventh-grade emo phase, and *I love it*. I've had my heart broken so many times by so many things, and I am so much stronger than I ever thought I could be. I've grown apart from some people, and I've grown so much closer to so many more.

It turns out, Freshman-Year Me, that none of those people hate you. Some of them might think you're a little weird, but most of them are weird, too. You'll find your place. You will find love, and lose it, and find it again. You will fight some dragons but you will slay them all. I know you're scared, and I know you want your mother. I want mom, too, and

I have her, and so do you. She and dad are always there for you. My point is this: It gets better. I promise. You have the academic challenges and you succeed, you excel at extra-curricular. You might not get the part of Cinderella, but you make the best Wicked Stepmother your hometown has ever seen. But it's not all sunshine and rainbows; I wish I could tell you that I'm perfectly happy, but there are still some people whose opinions I care about more than I should, and I'm riddled with depression and anxiety much like any other teenage girl.

The truth is, deep down, I am still a little bit terrified. I'm going to go start a new chapter of my life away from this tiny school in this small town full of wonderful people, and I'm more nervous than I've ever been in my entire life. But I'm going to take a lesson from you, and that lesson is that I can do this. I've been through this before, and I came out okay. You were terrified that first day and many days after that, and I'm apprehensive now, but just look at me, soon to graduate at 17, just like dad, as valedictorian, just like grandma. Going to go to college, just like mom, and going to persevere and make the best of life through it all, just like you.

Just like me.

BREATHING NIGHT

MARIELA VELIS

Fresno Poets' Association Award

The wind is rising, the sun's flame about to be extinguished.

The crescent moon shining brightly through the frozen canopy of icicles clawing down.

The Snow Owl shifts from claw to claw, ready to dive.

Its vision sharp as the darkness descends down on the snowy, silvery forest.

It stretches its broken wing, testing its strength and pain. It is endurable for now.

This is life, it is survival in a world where unexpected things happen.

Hurting or not, the Snow Owl is to continue its soaring odyssey.

Breathing means alive, it means the night is to be explored until dawn.

Every other creature is sound asleep, unaware of the shadowy being soon to be soaring with the stars.

Diving, the Snow Owl spreads its wings, screeching into the cold night air, soaring into the breathing night.

HOME

DANIELA OROZCO

Henry Madden Library Award

I can feel the sun as it silently peeks through my curtains, the birds singing their morning melody. I slowly pry my eyes open and wiggle my caterpillar toes beneath my covers. My blanket, warm and soft, feels like wolves fur on my feet. As I slide out of bed, my feet touch the cold wooden floor, one that I've gotten so use to walking on. I make my way to the door and as I open it, the aroma of banana pancakes fills the air and makes my mouth water and my stomach beg for food. I smile as I hear a familiar voice softly singing along to the radio. *Mom*. I let the music guide me to the kitchen and I giggle quietly at the sight in front of me. She doesn't notice my presence so I lean against the wall and watch. A warm feeling that fills my chest as she's softly sings: "Out in the garden where we planted the seeds there is a tree as old as me," and prances around with a spatula in her hand waiting for the next pancake to be ready, her hair out of its usual tight ponytail. I close my eyes as tears start to slowly roll down my cheeks, like raindrops on a window. I open my eyes again to feel the pad of her thumbs brushing away my tears and then she leans in to kiss my forehead. She embraces me in a long, warm hug and my nose is met with a familiar fragrance of roses and Vanilla. "I missed you," I whisper. "I know, honey," she says as she weaves her delicate fingers through my hair. I glance at the tattered work uniform sitting atop the chair, the one I have come to hate. I don't know how long she'll stay this time and in my mind I hold onto this moment because I know it won't last. She'll be gone as quick as she came.

THANKSGIVING

ARZAN KERMANI

The Normal School Award

The air, cold. The family, noisy. Me, tired. It was Thanksgiving day. The day of gluttony, fake smiles, and intrusive questions about my personal affairs. No, I don't know where I want to go to college Nana. Now shut your trap and enjoy your free meal. The entire family was coming. The dads, moms, sons, daughters, cousins, step cousins, grandpas, grandpas dog, the dogs goldfish named grandma, grandma. The dads watched football, isolated. I envied them. "Occupy the kids," I was told. I would rather incubate myself with the dead bird in the oven. Just because we are roughly the same size does not mean that I should be held hostage by a browner, louder version of myself. It's not fair to both of us. Focus on getting all the lumps out of your "world famous mash potatoes," before you focus on my affairs. The shrills from the kitchen meant that the meal was ready. Relieved, the main event had come to fruition. The promise land had been reached. Time for mindless small talk at the dinner table, with a guy I met briefly at a barbecue once and his absent minded succubus for a wife. Alright ready. You ask me how *blank is. And then...ohhh I got it! I'll respond with *blank, how is *blank. The trick is to make sure that we will both never recover the twenty seconds we managed to chip off each other's life! Also don't show me your kids soccer picture when it is obvious I am trying to exit this conversation. I hope he breaks both of his shins in a horrible sprinkler incident. Oh man, that would shatter his dreams of being a professional soccer star, huh. Similar to how he shattered your dreams when your wife pushed him out seven years too early in an 8-year stranglehold on your life. Have fun trampling people for a TV on the day to be thankful for what you have. Ironic isn't it. Get me a something cool while you're there. Yes I know I'm being a hypocrite, I acknowledge this and I ask aren't we all. So something cool, remember. The night approaches, the people leave, and some of us go to sleep thankful for leftovers.

a day in the tobacco fields

FELICIA ZHORNITSKY

Philip Levine Prize Award

she wakes up at **5 a.m.**, just like she did the night before
and the night before and the night before and the
light from the post outside her trailer home makes
the bags under her eyes stand out in the dark,
a testament of yet another sleepless summer night.
the sun and her siblings start to rise as she
walks out the door: another work day has begun.

she's at the farm by **7 a.m.**, just like she was the day before
and the day before and the day before and the
lady beside her is looking at her mad so she'd
better put on her rain jacket and gloves, both
soaked with the red-brown dye that fills her summer days
and nights, when even dreams won't come.
she weeds the tobacco plants, just as she had the day before
and the day before and the day before and the
plants that take her energy and life grow and grow
just as she shrinks and shrinks until
she loses herself in the "again and again and again"

she starts to feel the pain at **10 a.m.**, just as she had the day before
and the day before and the day before and the
stomachache gets worse and worse and she works until
the world spins when they tell her to stop, take a break
drink some Gatorade and so she waits until it stops
while the sweat starts to escape her forehead

she stops to eat at **12 p.m.**, just as she had the noon before
and the noon before and the noon before and the
food tastes rotten after touching her hands because
the angry lady had told them the portable restroom was too
far so she rinsed her hands with her dirty water bottle but it didn't work
and there was that red-brown dye on her hands trickling into
her food and she feels the stomachache coming back

they spray the fields at **2 p.m.**, just as they had the time before
and the time before and the time before but the
time before, she hadn't known to turn away as the
pesticides drifted through the air and she was so sick
they let her take another break and she lay there
waiting for the rolling waves of nausea to subside

they tell her to leave at **7 p.m.**, just as they had the day before
and the day before but not the day before
when they kept her and the others until 8 and they worked and
worked until even the sun had to leave them on their own.
she gets home late, where her head pounds as
she hides her hands, the ones covered with strange
little bumps and the unforgiving red-brown dye
that refuses to leave even as she stares at the ceiling
hoping that relief will come at last.

FRACTIONS OF A WHOLE

MAYA VANNINI

FACET Award

I am one one-half, and two one-fourths. One-half Pakistani, one-fourth Belgian, and one-fourth Italian. But (debatably) more importantly, I am many many generations. If first generation is considered first to live in the united states, I am second and third and fourth and fifth generation. This is not surprising, considering I was born into a country made for immigrants by immigrants. Also not surprising is that my one-half makes me second generation, while my two one-fourths is where it gets muddy. Yet, as our great Melting Pot will allow, my one-half will become my children's one-fourth and their children's one-eighth and so on until there's no point in keeping track of the one-whatever.

The cliché is that the glass is half full or half empty because one-half is nearly a majority. No one will ever ask you if the glass is one-fourth full or one-fourth empty because it doesn't work like that. It's one-fourth full, three-fourths empty. There's only one-fourth to cling onto, one-fourth to claim.

Being one one-half and two one-fourths and a hodgepodge of generations gives me an interesting vantage point. My maternal Pakistani side has always pulled me in. Lured by my mother's Urdu-speaking family, I've found myself enthralled with the world they left behind. They are the first generation to live in America, and with their journey came their culture—from mouth-watering masalas to Eid prayers to three day weddings—still so fresh in their minds, in their hearts.

My paternal Belgian and Italian side has always felt starkly more American than anything else. Even though my Walloon grandmother's voice drips a heavy French accent as she recounts her teenage in Nazi-occupied Belgium, her late husband's New Jersey Italian roots brought her to suburbia. A picture-perfect 50s housewife, a successful bread-winning husband, and three all-American boys -- one a football player, one a car

enthusiast, one an artist. The melting pot melts into the American mold.

Yet it would be foolish to believe my mother's side preserved culture unscathed. They came here for college -- full-scholarship, brain-drain kids. Kids who accepted America with open arms, digging into hamburgers and singing along to the Fleetwood Mac. Kids who had long left Islam—a component of Pakistan so large one struggles not to generalize the country as a giant mosque. Kids who married American kids and raised American kids. So American, in fact, that our family looks like a random generator put various people in a room—we are Belgian, Italian, Korean, Black, and of course, Pakistani. Not one of the second-gens can understand the wisps of calligraphy forming right-to-left Urdu poetry. Not one of the second-gens can recite any prayers whatsoever. And so it goes.

Growing up in the diverse Central Valley. I've been surrounded by second-gen kids like me. Kids that tag -American on the end of their nationalities, even though we are all engulfed by the suffix. We drown in in the melting pot. One-half becomes one-fourth and we pass on what is not lost in the commotion of getting through each day. Language left first, its bags packed long before we were born as our parents learned English. What leaves next? Food, as I've never learned to fill the house with an intoxicating masala aroma? Dress, as it's ridiculously expensive to buy saris in the States yet equally expensive to order the hand-embroidered fabrics from Pakistan themselves? The small bit of culture I've managed to sink my talons into means more than anything to me. The Pakistani in Pakistani American gives me a sense of who I am yet one-half becomes one-fourth and one-fourth becomes one-eighth. The x-gens of all races "white-washed" and "Americanized," melted into an unidentifiable stew in the Melting Pot. And I am scared.

And why *should* we carry our immigrant ancestors' suitcases, packed to the brim with songs and recipes and dances and literature and tradition? Because to be "Americanized" is to toss the contents of your suitcase in with the others. Because it has taken me the heartbreak of inevitable giving up aspects of my culture to realize that "Americanization" is just as much taking in others. Living in America, I know much more about Mexican and Hmong culture than my parents, and far more than my parents' parents. I see my school celebrate Cinco de Mayo, Mardi Gras, and Hmong New Year. I see my classmates translate school messages into their parents' native tongues, a foot in each world.

These x-gen kids of all races flooded the streets on January 21. "White-washed" and "Americanized," they walked for the country their ancestors flocked to for a better life. They remembered an inescapable truth:

we live in a country of immigrants. Although I fear my roots may melt into an unidentifiable stew I know that one-eighth becomes one-sixteenth becomes one-thirty-second yet never zero. Never zero, as the numbers asymptote in defiance. We all have our remnants of culture pre-”Americanization”—no matter how small. We are all x-gens of all races. We are all children of immigrants.

DEAD PROSPERITY

EMERY HALLER

FACET Award

That day started like all the others: I woke up, brushed my teeth, got dressed in my usual blue jeans, red Converse, and whatever nerdy t-shirt I felt like wearing that day. I noticed that it was raining so I grabbed my favorite black Carhart before grabbing my golf clubs and heading to school. My name is William by the way, William Dietrich. I am fifteen and live in the small town of Sagesburg California. I am a sophomore at the local high school, Sagesburg High,(go Red Hawks). I was one of those kids that every school has, the ones that are invisible unless needed for tutoring or answers to last night's homework.

By the time I got to school, the rain had stopped and was replaced by an oddly heavy fog, but I had barely gotten there in time to make it to first period. I didn't have time to give it a second thought. It wasn't until after I had arrived at my first class that I noticed something was off. Everyone in the room seemed they were on the verge of an all-out brawl. Every little thing seemed to cause them to lash out in a fit of almost bloodthirsty rage; even the teacher seemed like he was about to go off at any moment. The only exceptions were my friends Hendrik and Elisa Schulz. Hendrik was a short, scrawny kid with blonde hair, blue eyes and light skin. Elisa was almost a perfect reflection of him, but looks was where their similarity ended. Hendrik was a jokester in class and Elisa more serious when it came to classwork. The both of them were already trying to calm down the students, but were getting nowhere fast. I quickly began helping them as best as I could, and by the time the second period bell had rung, we had broken up five fist fights and prevented another seven arguments from reaching that point. The three of us decided the best thing for us to do would be to see if anyone in the school was still sane, so Hendrik and I went to our next class together, leaving Elisa alone to go to hers.

As we walked to my second period class, I noticed that this air of ill temper was schoolwide and was getting worse. Hendrik and I did all we

could to avoid any unnecessary confrontations. At first it seemed like there was no one left who hadn't gone completely insane until we got to our second period class. We met up with a boy named Tobias Schmidt, who, like us, seemed unaffected by the wave of aggression that had hit the school. Tobias and I look very similar; teachers were constantly getting us confused with one another. Unlike me, Tobias was an all-around athlete who spent his time playing any sport the school offered. It was after Tobias, Hendrik, and I had broken up the third fist fight that period when I noticed the second strange thing about them all. I pointed this out to Hendrik and Tobias.

"Hey guys, have you noticed everyone's eyes?" They both gave me puzzled looks.

"No, what do you mean?" asked Tobias

"Take a closer look at the whites of their eyes, they've all turned a pale shade of yellow."

They both looked around until they noticed it themselves. "Now I see it, but our eyes still look fine, do you think it has anything to do with why we haven't gone crazy?" said Hendrik puzzled.

I thought about it a second. "Maybe, but we can't be certain. We should still point this out to Elisa when we go to break in a few minutes." Ten minutes and two fights later the bell rang for break.

After regrouping with Elisa and seven more people, we decided we should find somewhere quiet and indoors to discuss what we should do. We agreed on going to the office, It was the one place students try to avoid most of all so there would be little if any people in there. As we made our way through the hordes, I noticed something eerie about the crazed students that I didn't notice before: their skin had turned to the color of ash. We made it inside of the office building just as the bell signaling the end of break sounded, but instead of its usual drone, it was a high pitched squeal like the sound of a dying pig. As soon as it sounded, all the students and faculty members that were outside fell unconscious in complete synchronization, as if they'd all just been put under some mass hypnotism.

I took a moment to explain what was going on to the rest of the group, and we decided that our next move should be to move to someplace safer. After a bit of a debate, we decided on the locker rooms because of the concrete walls and high windows. I turned to my golf bag which I luckily still had with me, because I didn't have the time to drop them off in the morning. I handed a club to everyone to defend themselves with

if someone attacked us. I turned to lead everybody out the door when I noticed a girl walking among the unconscious bodies. Whoever it was, was obviously infected with the same thing all the others had, but Janet, one of the girls in our group, and recognized her.

“Teresa!” Janet screamed for her as she took off out the door before I had the chance to stop her.

“Everybody head to the locker room I’m going after her,” I said to the group as I raced out the door after her.

One of the boys joined me in pursuing the girl instead of staying with the rest of the group, but I was too worried about the girl to see who it was or protest. We had closed the gap to only a few yards when Janet reached Teresa and hugged her. Instead of returning her friend’s hug, Teresa only snarled and then bit into Janet’s neck causing the girl to let out a blood curdling scream as Teresa began to devour her former friend’s flesh. At that moment the other infected began to stir.

“Run!” I yelled as I broke into a sprint, the other boy right on my heels. Just as the rest of the group was getting to the locker room door the girl at the back of the group tripped and fell, getting left behind by the rest of the group. The boy and I helped her to her feet and got to the door just as the horde behind us caught up to us. The girl I had helped and I both got through the door unscathed but the boy was grabbed at the shoulder by one of the infected who then bit his forearm. I swung at his attacker with my golf club, stunning it enough to pull the boy inside. It took all five of the guys to shut the door behind us to prevent the horde of infected from forcing their way inside.

After we ensured that all the doors were locked, we took a second to process exactly what we just saw. All the people who had once been our friends, were no longer human; they were now nothing more than savage animals. They were zombies. After waiting for what seemed like hours, the noise outside finally stopped but no one dared to look outside and see if the coast was clear. We were all finally able to relax, and I was finally able to see exactly who we saved. All of them were in my grade, and some of the few people who I actually considered friends. The guy who had gotten bit was Maximilian Wells. He was a few inches taller than me and had black hair and dark brown eyes, a goatee, and a dark tan. He was a wisecracker, but he was also a caring guy when he wanted to be. He was sitting against a wall nursing his wound while letting out the occasional groan from the pain. I walked over to him with a piece of gauze I found in first aid kit in the PE teacher’s office which connects the boys and girls locker rooms and proceeded to tightly bind the wound, making him wince.

“Hey, thanks for the save in there,” he said as I finished binding the wound.

A little while later the girl I had practically carried across the quad came over and sat down next to me. My heart skipped a beat when I realized who it was. Amelia Brandt, the girl I’d had a crush on since the eighth grade. She was an honor roll student and a complete and total nerd; she was the whole package. She was about my height and she had light brown hair with slate-gray eyes. She was kind, funny, a bit crazy, and has helped me get through some bad times lately.

“You were amazing back there, the way you not only ran after that girl without a second thought but then you also saved me back there when we made a run for it.” She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. “Thank you.” She smiled then walked away leaving me alone again.

As I sat there alone, my mind racing, I was visited by two more girls, Hannah Griffin and Sandra Green. Hannah was a dark haired girl with blue eyes and a freckled face; she was skinny and of moderate height. Back in fifth grade, I had considered her my rival and then as we both grew up and matured, I began to respect her more and more, I now consider her a friend. Sandra has blonde curly hair and green eyes. She is somewhat short and is also quite possibly the smartest girl in school.

Hannah was the first to speak. “Thank you for you know ... saving us back there I ... I mean we both feel you’ve already proven yourself to be the leader of our little group and I think the others will agree.” Sandra simply nodded.

“No problem,” I said. “I mean we are all in this together. We are the only people in the school who were unaffected by whatever is causing it.” They both seemed satisfied with my answer and walked away.

I decided to get up and rejoin the others. On my way, I found the last two people we’d rescued sitting and talking together, so I decided to walk over and say hi.

The boy was named Lukas Haas. He was about a foot taller than me and had sandy brown hair and green eyes. He was the most popular guy in the whole school. The girl, Michelle Winkler, was, aside from looks and the fact that she was a straight A student, his exact match as a female. She had dark hair and brown eyes. She had fair, flawless skin and was easily one of the prettiest girls in school.

They both looked at me in disgust, as if I had been made of moldy cheese and rotten eggs. Michelle said, “Why did you bring us here? All you did was lead us into a dead end. There is nowhere for us to go now

and it's your fault. We are going to starve in here before anybody finds us."

I shook my head. "No we made the right decision to come here. There are a ton of advantages to it; we just to give it a little while before the zombies move on in search of prey."

"I didn't agree to this plan and neither did Lukas. If I wanted to lock myself in a room to wait for starvation to kick in, I could've done it on my own" she said angrily.

"Listen, if you don't like our situation then why didn't you go outside and find us a better place to set up? Otherwise, you need to move. There are some mats behind you that we can use for beds. Besides, it's only temporary and this is easily the most fortified room in the school" I said, returning the attitude she had given me.

She just gave me another disgusted look then walked away with Lukas.

Hendrik got up and called everyone to attention and said "So, guys I've been thinking we should come up with a name for those things. I am mean we've all probably figured out that they are some type of zombie, but zombies implies that they are undead with rotting flesh but they aren't like that. The only significant features that make them different from us are their eyes and ashy skin."

I realized that Hendrik had a point; they weren't quite zombies, but at the same time, they still weren't human.

"How about ashers" Hannah said "You know because of the color of their skin." The next few minutes were spent discussing other possible names for them, but ultimately we went with Hannah's idea.

After about an hour, I decided that we need to gather as much supplies as we could before nightfall so me and the other guys decided to armor up with what we could find in the locker room to search the school. Luckily, most of the student body had dispersed off campus, so we locked the tall metal gates at each of the four of the school's entrances and searched the campus for anything useful. Then spent the rest of the day barricading the school and clearing out any ashers that were still on campus or in classrooms sparing who we could and killing those who didn't give us another option.

With the help of some of the other guys, we set up five mats so that two people could share each to help make up for the lack of blankets by sharing body heat. Everyone seemed reluctant at first but then they gave in and we decided who would sleep with who. Tobias and Hen-

drik partnered up right away due to the amount of sleepovers they've had over the years. To my surprise Max and Sandra partnered together, Elisa and Hannah who were longtime friends took the next mat, Toby and Hendrick followed suit, and Lukas and Michelle partnered up soon after, leaving me and Amelia in the last one, although neither one of us objected. Each group was placed between a row of lockers, creating a small amount of privacy for each group.

The next day we decided to search the town for supplies as well as any other survivors, so the entire group armored up and we hotwired one of the cars in the school parking lot. We started by going to our own houses first in case any family members had survived, but we soon learned that if they hadn't turned already, they were dead. By the end of the day each of us had our own truck that had been filled to the brim with anything we could find that might help increase our chance of survival. Surprisingly we were back to the school by three o'clock and we spent the rest of the daylight hours unloading. When we were finished unloading, Amelia and I took a walk around the school to make sure there were no new holes in the fence to patch up.

We were just about to go back in the locker room when we heard a crash coming from inside followed by what sounded like a gunshot. We snuck in through the supervisor's office to see Lukas was carrying a hunting rifle and holding the entire group at gunpoint; luckily his back was to the window overlooking the locker room. Tobias saw me and gave me a slight nod as if he knew what to do without me even saying anything. I picked up a rifle and handed it to Amelia.

"If things go wrong I want you to shoot Lukas." I said as I told her the rest of my plan

She said nothing and simply nodded. I took that as my green light and slipped out the door which Lukas had left open. I was unarmed and the only thing I had protecting me was Amelia, who then signaled Tobias.

"Don't do this Lukas, Max isn't sick he's completely healthy." Said Tobias doing his job perfectly by stalling Lukas as best he could to keep me from getting spotted.

"Shut Up! Toby we don't know anything about this disease. He could still be one of them for all we know. It's possible he could still change and I'm not going to risk the entire group for one person." Said Lukas.

"We don't know that for sure either, I mean think about it, if we didn't have some level of immunity we would've been turned when everybody else did. Not only that, but everybody else turned in just a few hours and it's been almost two days since he was bitten. The best thing we can do

is wait and see, not killing him.”

“Don’t you get it if we ‘wait and see’ we won’t be able to react quickly enough so I’m going to stop that before it happens. Don’t you see it’s for the good of the group?”

“No what you don’t see is that unlike those... things out there Max is still a living breathing person, and if we...”

“Enough! I’m tired of this. You either need to move or I’m going to kill you and the animal you’re protecting.”

Lukas had run out of patience and he ordered everybody to stand up and part ways so that he could shoot Max. Everyone did reluctantly, except for Hendrik and Elisa who had stood up but were still adamantly protecting Max. Lukas cocked the rifle and took aim at Hendrik’s head.

“I’m going to give you to the count of three to move out of the way, or I’m going to shoot you first then your sister. One ... Two ... Thr ...”

Without thinking, I leapt from my hiding place and shoved the barrel of his gun down and away from me at the same time as he pulled the trigger knocking the gun from his hands sending it skittering across the floor. My friends approached to help, but I waved them away. No one was going to hurt my friends; I wanted to fight him one on one to prove to myself that I could protect them.

Lukas was much bigger and much stronger than me, but I knew something he didn’t. Lukas charged me; I dodged and took the opening to punch him twice in the ribs which made him recoil. It soon became clear that Lukas had not been taught to fight like I had; his punches were wild and he made it too obvious where each one was coming from. I kept dodging until I backed myself into a corner. Which he used to get a couple swings in, punching me in the ribs several times sending pain shooting up both my sides. As he wound up for a punch aimed at my face I side stepped and used his momentum against him to send his own face into one of the locker doors. He stumbled backwards from the door. His face was livid mad, blood was gushing from a nose that was undoubtedly broken. He came at me more wild and angry than before and he tackled me to the ground. He punched me once more in the ribs before I kicked him in the chest allowing me to get back on my feet. I’d had enough, he charged at me once more but this time I sidestepped and gave him a hard jab to the stomach. While he recoiled I grabbed his head and kned him in the face knocking him out cold.

My victory however, was short lived. Tobias and Max made a makeshift cell for Lukas out of one of the sports equipment storage areas which

was only a small section of the locker room with a grated fence and door dividing it from the rest of the room. Everyone was congratulating me on beating Lukas and saving their lives again. When I saw Elisa sitting against a wall and clutching her abdomen, her shirt soaked with blood. The shot that Lukas had fired from his gun as I knocked it away had hit her just below her ribs. One look at her and I knew she wasn't going to make it.

“Hendrik Get over Here! Your sister needs you! She’s dying”, I yelled and the cheerful mood instantly vanished. Hendrik instantly dropped what he was doing and sprinted over to his sister’s side, I applied pressure to her wound I did everything I could to stop the bleeding, but she was losing too much blood too fast.

“I’m so sorry Elisa. This wasn’t supposed to happen. If only I had been there a little sooner I could’ve stopped him before he could take a shot.”

Elisa smiled weakly. “Will, I don’t blame you for what happened it couldn’t have been avoided you have only just become the leader of this group and have already saved it several times. Just promise me that you’ll look after Hendrik for me.”

“I promise”, I said holding back the tears.

“No. No! NO! Come on sis pull it together you can’t die I won’t let you. You and I were supposed to make it out of this thing together. I’m sorry for everything I’ve ever done to you, for all the teasing, and the pranks, and the insults.” Hendrik said sobbing.

“Come on Bro. Are you seriously crying right now? I thought you were supposed to be the strong one, the alpha twin.” Her face was growing paler by the second and her voice was getting weaker she didn’t have much time left. “Just think about it this way I will be waiting for you when you get there. Then, we can pick back up where we left off and you can tease me for eternity.” She put her hand on his face.

“Nah, Sis we’ll go together so we can race each other the whole way. Won’t it be more fun that way” Hendrik was barely understandable through his tears.

“Well, then you’ll have to catch up because I’ve already got a head start”, her voice trailed off and her hand dropped from Hendrik’s face leaving a bloody smear on his cheek. She was Gone.

“Elisa? Wake up Elisa!” He said frantically trying to revive his sister, to no avail.

I put my hand on his shoulder and stopped him then, gently closed her eyes using my index and pinky fingers.

After spending a moment of silence processing exactly what had happened. Tobias, Hendrik, and I, grabbed some weapons and headed to the welding shop to get wood, paint, and tools to build her a coffin and grave marker. When we finished we wrapped Elisa's body in a bed sheet put her in the coffin and nailed the lid shut. Hendrik chose a spot on the lawn in the quad underneath a Tree, and the three of us went to work digging while Max and the girls put together a grave marker.

When we had finished it was almost sunset we put the casket in the back of the truck and brought it to the hole where we lowered her in, saying our goodbyes, then Amelia brought out the grave marker.

We came back and ate our fill of the new supplies celebrating our time with and reminding ourselves of all the happy times we'd had with her everybody was enjoying themselves except for Hendrik who was sitting by himself crying.

When I asked what was wrong he said "What do you think is wrong? My sister died today. She was the only family I had left"

"You see that's where you were wrong you didn't lose the last of your family you entered a new one. Hendrik ... we are your family now. I want you to know that if there is anything you need just let me know."

"Thanks Will, that means a lot" Hendrik Smiled "But on a more serious note what should we do with Lukas?"

"I know you must probably want to kill him but Killing him isn't the answer, but we should wait for tomorrow and discuss this tomorrow with the rest of the group, But for now we celebrate your sister's life"

"Agreed"

After that we all enjoyed the party. When we finally decided to go to bed everybody fell right to sleep.

The next day we all got up early to discuss Lukas's punishment, after hours of arguing we decided to exile him from the campus with only a Knife and a day's worth of food and water, but we made it clear to him that if he ever showed his face again we would not hesitate to shoot him where he stands. Tobias, Hendrik, and I put a sack over his head and bound his hands and feet before loading him in the back of one of the trucks with his mercy ration. We weaved back and forth on roads until we found a house in the middle of nowhere where there weren't any

ashers and we were sure there was no way he could follow us back. We carried him inside unbound his hands and removed the sack from his head we left his supplies and knife a few feet away so he had to work his way over to it to unbind his feet keeping him from chasing after us. We got back to the school at about sunset where we had a quiet dinner and went to bed.

Max never did turn but a few days after we banished Lukas his arm turned gangrenous, he died a week later. We buried him right next to Elisa. We learned then and there that compassion and mercy can only go so far. All that matters is looking out for each other and survival. The world is cruel and anything could affect our chances of survival we must adapt and adapt quickly if we don't we might just be the next thing on the menu. The day after he died I decided to set up a radio beacon so that any survivors out there could find a safe place to call home, and it worked the first group of survivors arrived at our gates only a week after I started the broadcast. Then, a few weeks later we got a few more at then a few more the week after that they were always around our age and it was always the same story a quick rain then a weird fog the second it stopped then by noon almost everyone they ever knew was a savage killing machine. By the time a year had passed we had gone from a small group of seven teenage students to a group of 107 people. By the time 5 years had gone by we had a total population of 2500 people and become almost completely self-sufficient. The only time anyone had to leave the walls was to get things like medicine or fuel anything we couldn't make ourselves. We named our town Elisian after the two people who died from the original group, and whose sacrifice inspired us to create a place of safety where people didn't have to look over their shoulder every second of every day and live their lives in peace. As the years went by I began to notice the ashers were gradually decaying until eventually they rotted away into nothing. We saw less and less every year until about 15 years after the initial event when they stopped appearing entirely. Now we spend our days rebuilding civilization in hopes of one day restoring the world to its former glory.

THE NEVER ENDING BUCKET

AMAYRANI REYES

MFA Award

It was never ending. It went on forever, an abysm that was just an empty space, an infinity itself. Tiny blue balls that had a grayish color, if you touched them long enough would turn black and be of no use to you, that never seemed to fill up the white bucket that clung to the belt that in turn clung to my back like if it let go it would fall into the abysm.

I wiped off the sweat that was accumulating on my forehead, slowly crawling its way down to my eyes, stinging me. Ignoring my blurry vision from sweat reaching its target, I swiftly moved my fingers from branch to branch, avoiding the fruit that wasn't ready like bombs in a mine, knowing it would be a pain to take them out of my bucket later. The rhythm of my fingers synched with the rhythm of my breaths, the only other sound that I could hear other than the radio being played by a worker next to me, a static voice of a man blaring about how immigrant workers had rights too.

I glanced at my bucket, two eighths full.

The day was at its best, depending who you asked, as the sun let its presence be known to everyone. A dramatic change from the cooler morning to the scorching afternoon.

“Tengo frio!!!”

I am cold, was a phrase being shouted across the field at this time of the day, as if they said it enough times it would magically become true. Others just hollered into the air, similar to the way singers do in mariachi songs, to no one in particular and yet heard from all. I smiled, keeping myself from releasing my own shout, that would have just been an epic failure.

I adjusted the white bandana that was tucked in under my hat, to keep the angry sun from lighting my neck on fire. It had already fried my

hair, which now I wore in a bun instead of a braid, a lesson that I had to learn the hard way instead of listening what the others had told me.

I took in a shaky breath and started again, my eyes instinctively searching the tree for the best fruit taking it before others could. It was a harsh game out here, it was either take the best now or watch the others take the best in your face. I guess we don't share paychecks, do we, to be thinking about others.

Three eighths of my bucket is filled and a hot breeze caresses my face motivating me to keep going.

I pick every single blue ball in my bucket individually, as I move from branch to branch in the same tree. I move a fraction of a centimeter and I can hear a million small bombs falling to the floor with a thump and I grit my teeth out of frustration. I bent down slowly, the smell of blueberry attacking my nostrils, picking up the biggest blueberries that fell and quickly cleaning up my mess by swiftly hiding it under the tree with the side of my shoe. The raspy sound of the bottom of my shoes scraping against the dirt filled with blueberries breaking the over enthusiastic

Voices of the ads on the radio. If they saw the mess I was making I would be sent back to clean it up and trust me no one wants to waste time doing that. For the first time I understood why people say "time is money."

I squat down a little looking under the tree finding plenty of blueberries ready to be picked. I lifted my bucket to check the weight once more, and I knew I was halfway there.

I push myself harder. Wiping my forehead again with my hands full of dirt, knowing that I would probably get acne later on. I move aside a few branches, exposing the center of the tree, holding its stubborn branches down with my sides as if it knew that I was going to take everything it had.

I hear the women beside me begin to talk to the women on the other side of the row of trees. Their conversation sparking on fire as they went. Talking at a fast pace, like only the original mexicans know how to do, without looking at each other, laughing every few minutes, gossiping about their family members. A "have you heard," "I can't believe," and "I knew it was going to happen" were common phrases coming out of their mouths. By the end of the day, I pretty much knew their whole life story and the new gossip in their lives. It was really quite a shame that Jenni, her niece, got pregnant so young.

I squint my eyes trying to block out their conversation, as "interesting"

as it sounded I couldn't multitask as well as I thought.

So I focused on the million of ants crawling through the branches, knowing the maze of branches by memory while I scrape the little fruit and dignity the tree had left. I step back down of the little hill of dirt that the row of trees were planted on, slipping slightly on the dirt and almost tripping my bucket forward, making my heart race even faster if it was possible.

I reach the upper middle part of my back and hit it with my fist repeatedly like if I was choking, trying to get rid of the pain in my back that felt like I was being stabbed repeatedly because of the increasing bucket weight as I filled it up more and more.

Just like that five eighths of my small bucket is filled up and my back bursting with pain.

I watch as the worker next to me cleans out her bucket getting rid of any leaves or pink blueberries. She grabs her three buckets and slowly with no energy starts walking up front where the crates to empty your buckets are at. Her wide brimmed hat looks crisp from being exposed to the sun too much, and a shiver goes through my body as I notice the many layers of clothes that she had on to protect her from the sun. I felt like ripping off my long sleeve shirt off just thinking about the heat she was probably suffering under all those layers. I wonder who was suffering more, I that had only one shirt under a long sleeved blue collar shirt or her with her millions of layers.

Anyhow, her face was unrecognizable, as it was covered with a cloth hugging her tightly that it almost looked suffocating. Her big sunglasses made her look like a big fly in pink carrying her new iphone 6 plus in her belt buckle. I stopped to watch her as she walked down the long row of trees, her back full of dirt, wondering if she had done the full six crates that we needed to do every day—

“Hurry it up, hurry it up” I hear my mom as she emerges from a tree next to me out of nowhere like Moses coming out of the parting sea interrupting my thoughts, “if you keep going that pace you will never finish.”

“I know”, I say with annoyance in my voice because I knew she was right although I hated to admit it. I picked up the pace again moving over to the next tree, which was begging me to pick it since its fruit dragged it down to floor, it was way to heavy for him. Just what I needed.

At this point I felt like my back was being hit with a hammer every second and I knew that my bucket was full. I grabbed the other two

blinding white buckets, one hanging from my belt the other two in my hands and made my way down the dirt path, passing the millions of trees and workers frantically trying to fill up their buckets before time was up. I hold back from wiping any sweat from my forehead, scared that I would tip my buckets and drop the blueberries.

I hear the distant sound of a car horn as the wind blows in once again as if bringing the message to the rest of the people. I smile, time was up, at least for today it was.

IN TIME

GER THAO

Hmong American Writers' Circle Award

When I lived in Thailand, my family was constantly shifting between the refugee camp, Thamkrabok, and a tiny Hmong village within the hillsides. I never knew then why we lived so because my young self was only curious towards the new and mysterious places to be explored. To the mind of a child, the reasons matter not. First and foremost were the new friends to be acquainted with and discoveries to be made. But I did know that there was a bigger difference. It wasn't the change from crowded bamboo huts to a calm, scenic, countryside-like life, though that is something branded into my memory of childhood. Rather, it was attending school.

Schools in Thailand require uniforms consisting of a white short-sleeve dress shirt with a knee length pleated navy blue skirt for girls and navy blue shorts for boys. This neat, official looking uniform brought to the 4-year-old me endless excitement not only because I got to wear new clothes, it was also the proof that I could now go to school. This was such a hard-to-come-by chance for me and my siblings in the refugee camp due to a shortage of money, but there in the hillsides, we had the opportunity to experience school life because the government was covering most of the expenses.

It was such a big change because education and attending school was a luxury for a family like ours. It was luxury because everything cost precious, hard earned money -sometimes from the labor of the children -necessary to feed a family of twelve. Education was a priceless treasure because it represented a better future where success was an opportunity we could grab.

Yet now, it isn't like so. It's not that anything is worse than before, but because it has become such a regular part of our lives that we can no longer see it for the treasure it is. Now, we feel like education is

something forced upon us, something society illogically demand of us. We have become ignorant of how irreplaceable and magnificently precious this thing is that we can obtain so easily for free. So many right now in this world can put their lives on the line or work themselves to exhaustion to get just a sliver of it, but we here are so blinded by our good fortune that we think education is idiotic and restraining our freedom, pointlessly taking up our time. But it is and always will be the greatest thing we have had the luck to have experienced.

A EULOGY FOR OUR LOVE

SAMANTHA PARK

Fresno Writers Award

The moon peaks and dips
The side of your face carved out
In empty hollow craters
That you try to fill with my flesh

Your hand covering my mouth
Coveted screams full of
please, please, please
Stop
Nails catching in silky hair
And ragged skin
Tug and Tear/ Love and Lust

Grimacing smiles
Repeated apologies and sweet parted goodbyes
Ballads dancing with monologue tongues
Slithering down, down, down
Lips parted and panting

Be still - hush, hush
Love brushing and bruising, and
Wilting
From skin to bone
From flesh to heart
Dangling in your open fingertips

THE STORY OF THE STUFFED ELEPHANT MY DAD BOUGHT ME ALMOST 10 YEARS AGO

JULIETA ORTIZ

Fresno Writers Award

When I was younger I used to never care about the external part of myself:

My nose was never too big,
My eyes were never too small,
My hands weren't made for an instrument.

When I walked

I walked with this sass,
This pride that made me believe I was a lion,
Feared by all in the animal kingdom.

When I spoke, my voice resembled a roar that could have been heard throughout all the land,

My mother combed my wild mane and told me to beware all those in the kingdom who try to do Me harm.

My father battled with me,

His roars saying that I must be strong, I must hold my ground,
wounds split against my golden fur.

I cried in pain because of him, but because of him my teeth sharpened,
my senses heightened,

I was strong.

I was a lion.

I was a lion whose strength was carved into my heart and ironed in like a stamp set up for display.

I went to the zoo one summer.
I was 13 and my nose was too big,
And my body wasn't proportioned correctly.
I was no longer so brave,
my peers called me huge
my mother said I was just

Noticeable.

I went to the zoo one summer.
I read the plaques with little interest
then wandered off away from my pack.
I came across the elephant.
Isolated in a habitat of dirt and rocks,
It faced away from the crowd.
It's ears giant flaps against its head
It's body slumped
I wanted to cry.

I went to the zoo one summer.
My dad told us he'd get us anything from the gift shop.
My sister quickly scrambled to find what she wanted and I calmly
walked towards the stuffed animals;
There were about 23 Zebras, 18 Cheetahs, too many to count tigers.
But my eyes led me astray...

As we got into the car I held a stuffed elephant in my arms,
As if it was the only thing keeping me from falling apart.
I could have chosen a lion.

I was 13.
I was realizing I was not big the way one should be big.
I was humble and quiet.
Grand in a different way.
I was realizing I sometimes couldn't be strong.

I pulled my elephant to my face and said:

I myself am sad
I myself feel isolated
I myself am noticeable
But I myself am worthy of love.

FREEING A FALCON

CAROLYN ALLEN

San Joaquin Literary Association Award

In the Rajput States of India, I was hated by most. I was a glorious bird a humble sparrow hawk and in an aimless, almost petty way the others envied my status. No one courageous to raise a fuss about themselves, but as the most beloved I was an obvious target and was baited whenever our master were to look the other direction. The sneering faces of others that met me everywhere, the insults hooted after me when I was at a distance, began to wear on my nerves and emotions. The smaller and obviously inferior males were the worst of all. There were several and none seemed to have anything better to do except jeer and me.

All this was perplexing and upsetting. However, I had already made up my mind that the moments I was unmasked was a heavenly experience and no matter what went on the more I was able to see the better. As for the job I was doing I hated it more than I can perhaps make clear. The wretched varmints clenched in my talons, the grey, cowed faces of those who wouldn't survive their meeting with master and those who had already taken their last breath, oppressed me within an intolerable sense of guilt. However, I could gain little perspective. I was young and ill experienced and all I could think of was the freedom of flying. All I knew was I was stuck between my undying love for the freedom of flight and my hatred against the evil-spirited beasts whom made my job so unbearable. But as my mother before me I had a duty to my master so I rarely complained.

One day something happened which in a way was enlightening. It was only a small incident in itself, but gave me a glimpse into what I'd spent my days doing. Early one morning my Master did as he always had to prepare for the hunt, brought me my breakfast, and we were on our way. The drive felt longer, different. I heard new voices. I remember it was a cloudy and humid morning at the beginning of the rains. I became curious as to where we were I asked around but it appeared I was the only one.

When master opened my cage the smell of fresh air caressed my senses. I felt myself placed on master's gauntlet, my leash tethered, and my bell attached. There are others like me here so I waited my turn. I had just begun to dose off when I felt my hood being lifted. I am ready and focused. As I sit perched on master's arm looking off into the distance I see my prey. It is a pheasant, which I know will please my master. I take flight however once I am in the air I lose the bird. I had almost made up my mind that I had imagined the bird when I heard rustling in the bushes a little distance away. A small rodent appeared, dying, much too small and not well enough to take back to master. The vermin seemed to have suffered a brutal attack. As I flew closer I saw the rodent's dead body sprawled in the mud he could not have been dead many minutes. He was lying on his back his flesh tattered and intestines spilling out from within. His face coated with mud, the eyes wide, his teeth bared and almost grinning in an expression of pure agony.

I had already steered far away from master, farther than ever before. I could not turn back now with nothing to show, so I pressed on. There was a unquestionable peacefulness about flying so far from master. I did not listen for his whistle or fear him becoming angry that I had yet to bring him the prize. At that very moment I was only focused on the wind brushing against my face and the glorious sunlight gleaming down on me. However, I knew I had to find the pheasant I had been so diligently pursuing. The pheasant left not so subtle trails. As I flew on I came upon a small hill at the bottom, the pheasant. It made me vaguely uneasy. The pheasant was perched in the sand his back towards me. He took little notice of my approach but did not fly away. He was cleaning the blood from his claws and feathers.

I watched from the hill's peak. As soon as I saw him, I felt the sinking feeling I typically associated with closing in on prey. It is a serious matter to take a life and obviously one should not do it if it can possibly be avoided but I knew to come back empty handed would be detrimental to my persona and my reward. Yet at that distance the pheasant looked no more dangerous than a fly, besides the apparent red stains. I came to the conclusion that if it was not me to catch him he would simply wander aimlessly until another came about and caught him. To come all this and then trail feebly away without the pheasant, no that was impossible. I would be constantly reminded and ridiculed of my cowardliness.

But I did not want to capture the pheasant. I watched him sit ever so peacefully preoccupied with his own thoughts. I was not afraid to kill other animals, but to kill this pheasant seemed to only worsen my guilt. Somehow killing another bird always seems worse than to kill another. But it was perfectly clear what I had to do. It was my job my duty to my master.

I decided it would not be me who killed the bird I would leave it to master (which was typically never allowed). I knew he'd be angry, but I could not bear the thought of plucking the heart out of what seemed to be a now harmless bird.

I took flight; I could not delay any longer. I latched onto his wings so not to give him any way to escape my grasp. Strangely he did not squirm he only looked up at me in shock. At last at what seemed a long time perhaps ten seconds he became aware of the situation he was now in. He began to struggle but I allowed for little movement.

“Why are you doing this? Have I wronged you in some way?” he asked frantically.

“My master has ordered me I am only doing as he has commanded.” I responded hoping he could not hear the shame in my voice as I spoke.

He was silent for a while and all I could think was the guilt I would've saved myself if I could only do as I was told. Yet I continued my grasp becoming tighter the closer we came to master. As I approached I heard his whistle and grew all the more anxious. As I placed the now unconscious bird in front of my master's feet I knew I would receive nothing in return.

The pheasant came to. I watched as my master twisted his neck you could see the agony of his whole body as the jolt overtook him. He released a final chirp before his head dropped. I could not take it any longer so I flew to my master and perched on his arm awaiting my hood to be placed over my eyes.

Afterwards of course there were endless discussions of my first pheasant I could rarely bear the thought of what I'd done. I was strictly doing as I'd been trained but I could not shake the feeling of guilt. The others were proud of what I'd done for master. They knew being smaller than I they'd never have the opportunity to please their master in such a way. From that point on I did not hesitate in killing my prey. I have never grown to enjoy it though the others say as time goes on you learn to bear it and even become gratified in the experience.

JUST A MOMENT

ELIZABETH DE AZEVEDO

Chicano Writers and Artists Association Award

Everything had happened so fast. Sara could not fathom how much was going on at the same time. One second she was getting out of her seat to turn in a worksheet, and the next she had muffled voices and sirens filling her ears. She could not feel her hands or face, but she did feel a warm trickle of liquid coming down the left side of her head. She was on a gurney, and had a woman walking next to her, slightly hovering, though she did not understand what the stranger was trying to say. Sara tried to look directly at her, but if she concentrated too much, her vision went blurry and she resorted back to simply keeping her eyes open and out of focus.

A pounding in Sara's head got stronger each time a mumbling voice spoke, and eventually she began to feel her fingers again. An oxygen mask was strapped to the girl's face, and a pulse monitor was wrapped around her wrist and on the tip of her right index finger. Her hearing began returning, but there still was very little clarity. Her body still ached, and she began to feel a throbbing in the left side of her head and face. The trickling liquid was starting to rush faster, and judging by its warmth, Sara could only assume it was blood. The gurney was lifted into what she could see as an ambulance, with medical equipment and bags everywhere.

EMTs jumped into the ambulance with her and began inserting IVs into her arms, talking urgently, but she was still struggling to hear and could not make out the conversation they were having. The beeping of the heart monitor and the Darth Vader-like sound of the oxygen mask on her face were the only things she could hear without issue, but soon even those were taken from her. Sara eventually drifted off to sleep, the silhouettes of the EMTs rushing over to her the last thing she could see before her vision went black and her hearing faded out to nothing but a ringing within the silence.

That silence lasted for what felt like years, and Sara felt like she was suspended in a pool of darkness. Her eyes remained closed, and her fingertips twitched occasionally, but she moved nothing else otherwise. A faint beeping came into her ears, and progressively got louder, faster, and more persistent. She struggled to open her eyes, and suddenly felt a pressure in her chest that came every second, stopped for three, then resumed and repeated. The beeping became louder, and the pressure became more forceful, and Sara soon felt as if her chest were going to explode. She clenched her teeth, her eyes shut tight and her lungs unable to bring in air. After the last three-second pause, she could no longer handle the compressions, and she felt herself convulsing as she gasped loudly for air.

At the sudden rush of oxygen, Sara's eyes shot open, and she continued breathing sporadically in a desperate attempt to fill her lungs with air. Her hands clawed at the arms pressing into her chest, as well as the doctor's hands holding the oxygen mask to her face, and she began to panic. Eyes wide and breaths short, Sara could barely think about what was around her. The doctor next to her was speaking softly, trying to calm the girl down, and looking directly into Sara's eyes.

"You're going to be okay, sweetie. You're alright now, don't worry. My name is Maria." The woman's voice was soft, comforting, and calm, and as Sara stared back at her, she felt the anxiety deep in her chest being to die down. Her breathing then slowed, and she was no longer trying to get the nurse's hands off of her. Her own arms fell to her sides, still shaking, and Sara felt her heartbeat relax enough so that she did not hear it as a constant thumping in her ears.

She took a quick glance around the room she was in, which was three cream-white walls and a wrinkled sky-blue curtain separating her from the other patient on the other side of the thin barrier. The doctor and two other nurses stood near her bed, concerned but relieved that their patient had awoken. Sara looked back at Maria, who simply asked her, "What do you remember, sweetheart?"

Sara closed her eyes, trying to recall what had taken place earlier. She was in her college psychology class, finishing some worksheets that had been assigned, and her memory of what happened afterwards was non-existent. "Where am I? What happened to me?" she croaked out. Her voice shook and cracked at finally being used after being dormant for so long, and her throat ached at the sudden vibrations of speaking.

Maria sighed, taking one of Sara's hands in hers. She motioned for the nurses to leave the room, and they removed themselves silently. Maria looked at the heart monitor for a few seconds, then back at her patient.

“You had a pretty bad fall. You were at school. You seemed fine according to your teacher, but as you were walking to turn something in, you blacked out. When you hit the ground, the impact was enough to split your skull open.” She paused, looking at Sara’s hand in her own. “Your classmates and your teacher were terrified. At first... We couldn’t tell if you were still with us or not. Your pulse had gotten so weak that we almost couldn’t detect it.”

Sara just stared at Maria, processing the new information. She had fallen? She only remembered finishing her work, and then immediately after that came sirens and an oxygen mask.

“Why ... Why did I fall?”

“We don’t know yet. We’ve taken some blood tests and nothing out of the ordinary has come back as of right now. You flatlined a few minutes ago and we had to revive you. Something is definitely wrong, we just don’t know what it is yet.”

Sara nodded slowly, closing her eyes. Her head was aching, and a dull throbbing pain took over the left side of her face. “I think I want to go back to sleep. Can I go back to sleep? Everything hurts.”

Maria nodded. “Of course. You need some more rest. I’ll wake you if any of your tests come in.” The doctor stood, her hand still lingering over Sara’s, and she smiled. “Sleep well.”

Sara smiled back with what little energy she had left, and she closed her eyes. Maria finally moved her hand away from her patient’s, adjusting the sheets so that they covered Sara’s arms a little bit more, and she stepped silently toward the door.

The nurses had been waiting in the hallway, holding new clipboards with what could only be new test results. Maria sighed at the looks her nurses gave her, crossing her arms.

“It doesn’t look very good,” one of the nurses said, and he held his clipboard out to Maria. She took the clipboard, glanced at the sheets clipped to it, and handed it back angrily.

“That was a horrible understatement, Damian. Coral, yours next.” She took the other clipboard from the second nurse, flipped through the pages quickly, and returned it with the same anger as the first. She stood quietly and looked down at her feet, her heart beating so hard against her chest that she thought it might jump out. Her nurses looked from their senior to each other and back again, clutching their clipboards to their chests as they waited for another reaction. Finally Maria spoke.

“There’s nothing we can do, is there?” Her voice was small and quiet, and it didn’t match the assertive outer shell she had set up over her years in the medical field.

Damian shook his head. “No, ma’am. It seems like Sara was sick for a while without even knowing it. This episode was the final hint at it, but now it’s too late for her. There’s no treatment that can help her at this point.”

Maria let out a frustrated breath, tapping her foot and closing her eyes. “This isn’t fair for a girl her age. She’s barely a sophomore in college. She’s studying psychology. She wants to help other people. She shouldn’t have to go this early, and certainly not this way.”

“We can try and keep her as comfortable as possible before she eventually passes,” Coral said, taking Damian’s clipboard.

“We *will* keep her as comfortable as possible,” Damian assured, putting a hand on Maria’s shoulder. “Doc, I promise, we’re going to make this young lady believe she’s the most important person in the room at all times.”

Maria smiled. “I’ll hold you to that,” she whispered, and she made her way to her desk to prepare for her patient’s special treatment plan. Her nurses smiled at each other, and went their own ways to plan their surprises.

The next few days in Sara’s hospital room saw brightly colored posters, balloons, and sheets to help lighten the atmosphere. Sara’s smile was a constant bright flash in the center of all of the action, and her nurses always made sure that smile never faded or faltered. They delivered bouquets of various flowers, small plates of pastel pastries, and adult coloring books that would be filled by the end of the day. Maria made her occasional appearance between patient visits, staying for up to thirty minutes before needing to move off to her next room. She would always bring the most unhealthy gifts, such as bags of dark chocolate or liter-bottles of soda, and would request to be alone with Sara when she came into the room.

“So, how are you feeling today?” Maria asked, pulling a seat up to Sara’s bed and sitting with the chair facing backwards. She rested her arms on the back of the chair, smiling at her patient.

“A little bit better. I’m still tired, and my head still hurts a bit more than I’d like. Overall, though, I think I’m improving.”

Oh, thought Maria, if only you could.

“That’s good. I’m glad,” the doctor said, shaking a memory from her mind.

“I do have a question though.” Sara looked down at her sheets, setting down one of her nearly-finished coloring books.

Maria straightened in her seat. “Yes? Is everything okay?”

Sara’s brow furrowed. “I’m just wondering why you guys are doing all of this for me. The gifts, the colorful stuff, and the snacks are all wonderful, and I thank you for that, but I just don’t know why it’s necessary to give all of these things to me.”

Maria noticed the girl’s eyes looked more tired than usual, and they were dulled and staring instead of bright and alert like they had been before. There were dark bags under them, and her eyelids looked heavy and sunken in. She looked almost like a skeleton, complete with a pale complexion.

“Well, you’re a very special patient of ours. We wanted to make you feel as such.”

“How am I any more special than the other patients? Is there something wrong with me?”

Maria stayed quiet a moment longer than she should have, and that hesitation was the only answer Sara needed.

“You’re ... You’re not well, Sara. Your condition is worse than we initially thought. We wanted to make you feel as comfortable as possible for as long as possible.”

Sara was now the silent one, and she looked away from Maria to stare at her sheets. “I understand. I... I don’t like the sound of it, but I think I understand why you all did this.” Her voice was little more than a whisper in the quiet room. She looked back at Maria, a feeble smile on her lips. “Thank you for all of this.”

Maria smiled back, and was about to respond when her phone rang. She checked it to see who had called, and stood from her seat. “I’ll be back. Just a moment.” Sara nodded as Maria left the room to take the call, shutting the door behind her.

A patient had just come in and needed immediate attention, so Maria would have to cut her visit with Sara short.

“Thank you for calling so soon. I’ll be right down.” Maria shut her phone down, turning back to Sara’s door and going back inside. “Sorry

about that, there was” Her sentence went unfinished as she processed what she saw.

Sara had her eyes closed, and her mouth was slightly open, and her hand still held a black gel pen against her coloring book page. Maria rushed over, checking Sara’s pulse and finding nothing. She fell back into her seat, staring at the girl. Her eyes drifted to the colorful page, and she leaned closer to see what was on it.

The vibrant colors were accompanied only by the single phrase: “To Maria, thank you for everything. You’ll see me again in just a moment.”

BROWN WITH A HINT OF ORANGE

LLUVIA SALAS

Chicano Writers and Artists Association Award

On my first day of preschool, my teacher asked the class to draw self-portraits of ourselves to hang up in the room as a way to make friends in the class. A broad smile grew on my face as I knew that this was my time to shine. Not only could I draw something more than a stick figure, but my father had also taught me how to color inside the lines.

I took a light gold color stub in between my fingers and carefully began to draw the shape of my body; I began with a triangle, that slowly grew two arms and two legs, followed closely by a somewhat circular head. I reached my little arm across the table to the center that held every color ever invented and my fingers found their way to a complete yellow crayon that boldly read “Crayola” along the center of it.

Taking the sharp point of the crayon, I drew straight lines from the makeshift head until they flowed like a waterfall down my shoulders in an elegant swoop. My lips curled slowly into a smile as a pink stub found it’s way into my sight and once again I brought it into my hands and carefully colored in my triangular shaped dress, moving it horizontally then vertically knowing that my father would oppose; yet I was on high that made me unable to remember many of his teachings.

My teacher looked over my shoulder and praised me for how cleanly I was coloring and I swelled with pride. She asked if I was done and my lips almost said yes until I remembered the color blue. Gasping dramatically, I immediately stood in my chair and essentially laid on the table to reach the only complete blue crayon; I took it and very carefully made two small dots inside my head to make my eyes.

So my drawing stood: lightly colored skin decorated with a vibrant pink dress, long beautiful blonde hair that made my blue eyes pop. It was the best drawing of me that I had ever done, and I rushed to the front of the class to show my teacher before she hung it up by two clear pins.

I could see it clearly from my seat and I couldn't help the proud smile that I wore on my face for the rest of that afternoon. After snack time, the teacher made us line up by last name so that we could take a trip to the bathrooms and wash our hands before carpet time. I asked all my fellow classmates what their last name started with and after various glances at the large poster of the alphabet, I took my place proudly in between the S's.

Walking out of the classroom, I took a glance back at the wall that held our portraits. I saw blues, greens, purples, pinks, oranges, reds, and yellows staring back at me in messy patterns. I noticed that all the girls in my class had a drawing with similar colors to mine which made me a little angry because mine wouldn't stand out as much, but I knew that mine was the best one.

When we made it to the restrooms, I pumped the soap dispenser and pink foam fell into my small hands, then I ran my hands under the cool water as I saw the crumbs from my snack float away into the drain. Looking up, I noticed that my hair looked a bit messy, and so I took my wet hands and smoothed down my hair like many other girls were doing around me.

In the mirror I saw flashes of the colors brown and black rushing around each other in a hurry to make it back into line. I met my brown eyes in my reflection and smiled at how great my black hair looked, I ran my brown hands that held a bit of orange in them to make my hair look even greater as I too rushed out the door and back into line.

After our teacher finished assigning us our positions on the carpet, I found the wall once again. Beaming down on me was a vibrant ball of elegant pinks, yellows, golds, and blues dancing in front of me and I exhaling calmly because I knew, that my drawing was the best.

AN AMERICAN CAROL: TWO PLAYS IN ONE ACT

DUNCAN WANLESS

Dramatic Arts Award

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Matt Greene:	A TV pundit; Host of <i>The Truth with Matt Greene</i> .
Christine Murray:	A political operative; former co-host of <i>The Truth</i> .
The Ghost of Politics Past:	A man from the sixties.
The Ghost of Politics Present:	A millennial.
The Ghost of Politics Future:	A fourth-grader.

SCENE: *The set of The Truth with Matt Greene, a nationally syndicated political talk show.*

TIME: *Shortly after a presidential election; the 2010s.*

NOTES: *There are two plays contained within this single script. One is about Matt Greene the conservative firebrand, while the other is about Matt Greene the liberal firebrand. To read the play about conservative Matt Greene, disregard all bolded text. To read the play about liberal Matt Greene, disregard all underlined text that precedes bolded text.*

(Darkness. A faint electronic buzzing is heard)

VOICE *(off)*: And ... we're live.

(A TV studio comes to life in one sudden flash of light. A large, shiny desk adorned with red, white, and blue lights has bold logo on the front reading “The Truth with Matt Greene.” Behind the desk, a sharply dressed MATT GREENE sits confidently, peering boldly into the “camera” in front of him. A brief fanfare plays.)

MATT (*with an aggressive, bombastic ferocity*): Good evening and welcome to The Truth. I’m Matt Greene, here—as always—to expose what’s going wrong in this country. Let’s dive right in with our first guest, the former co-host of this show and my dear, dear friend Christine Murray, fresh off of victory in this year’s presidential election. (*CHRISTINE enters and sits on the chair across MATT*) Good to see you Chris.

CHRISTINE (*flashing a large smile and speaking calmly; she is used to being in front of cameras*): Thanks for having me. It’s good to be back on The Truth.

MATT: So, you just stepped down from the President-elect’s transition team after championing the conservative **progressive** message that led him to victory. Looking back now—on the campaign’s tremendous success and your role in keeping the president-elect accountable to the real majority of Americans—what do you think you’ve learned about where this country is, especially when it comes to what the people think about the horrifyingly Marxist **racist** administration we’ve been suffering under these past few years?

CHRISTINE (*exasperated by the phrasing of the question*): I think that what I’ve learned from working on this campaign is that the country, by and large, is full of good, well-meaning people who are at the same time losing touch with core American values. But that’s not to say that ...

MATT (*interrupting*): And that’s what the president-elect’s victory embodies, is it not? That the country has finally realized what it is that really matters and has made that turn back to ensuring this is a country of liberty **equality**, not totalitarianism **oligarchy**, as we’ve seen it become lately.

CHRISTINE: Well you see, that’s the thing, Matt ... I’ve stood for conservative **progressive** causes my entire life: as a lawyer; as a journalist; even as your co-host on this show. But when I left here to work for a campaign I thought stood for the issues that really matter, I was amazed at how divided we are as a people.

(MATT seems annoyed, even a little unsettled, by this; his body language changes to be far less cocky and aggressive)

MATT: So ... so how do we, as courageous conservatives **activists**, stand up to those deepening divisions? How do we combat the insidious influence of the liberal elites **alt-right** and their media puppets **fake news**?

CHRISTINE: To be perfectly honest, I don't think that's the problem, Matt. I think that the way media has ended up working in this country is doing a lot to divide us in very severe ways. We have a lot of problems and I don't think they're being solved by the polarization I've seen as I've traveled the country with the campaign.

(This seems to strike a nerve with MATT. He pauses for a beat, looking somewhat nervously down at the papers in front of him.)

MATT: And... and... what do you mean by that, exactly? I mean, you hosted this show with me for eleven years! You were one of the few journalists really working to keep people aware of what a dark path we as a nation were going down! *(He is frantic, and growing more so as he speaks.)* We're doing the right thing by exposing those communists **fascists** out there for what they are!

(There is a loud mechanical swoosh, like a power outage. Suddenly and completely, the stage goes dark once more. After a beat, a spotlight appears center stage, illuminating nothing. Another beat, and MATT emerges from the darkness and walks into the light, uncertainly.)

MATT: Hello?

(Another spotlight appears, stage left. Standing there is a MAN, dressed in an old-timey suit and hat and wearing those glasses all men seemed to wear in the 1960s. He stands still for a beat, reading a magazine. He looks up, sees MATT, smiles broadly, tucks the magazine under his arm, and walks forward towards MATT, extending his hand jovially. The spotlight follows him.)

GHOST OF POLITICS PAST: Hello there! It's a pleasure to see you again, Matt!

MATT *(while confusedly accepting the GHOST's hand)*: Who are you? What happened to my show?

GHOST OF POLITICS PAST *(chuckling)*: Why, Matt, I thought you would recognize me! I'm your high school civics teacher; the one who fought in the War? The one who taught you everything about what it means to be American?

MATT *(completely bemused)*: Oh, yes, yes of course! How are you here? You must be long dead by now!

GHOST OF POLITICS PAST: I've been sent here. It's my job to remind you what it means to be American.

MATT: Oh, you don't need to worry about that. I did what you told all your students to do! I worked hard, I remembered my values, and now I have a national show! I'm one of the highest rated broadcasters on cable! My message is heard by hundreds of thousands of people every weekday!

GHOST OF POLITICS PAST (*in a very teacher-like tone*): Matt, Matt, Matt ... what did I always tell you was central to our identity as Americans?

MATT: The right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

GHOST OF POLITICS PAST: That's right. What else?

MATT: A belief in a government of the people, by the people, and for the people ...

GHOST OF POLITICS PAST: Correct. And there was one more thing I would always say made America great ...

MATT: I ... I don't remember, to be perfectly honest. But it doesn't matter because I've lived my life trying to do what you said and speak out to protect the rights of the people!

GHOST OF POLITICS PAST: An informed citizenry, Matt. That was the last thing. Here, take this. (*He hands MATT the magazine he was reading, then walks back to his starting position on stage left, with the spotlight again following him*) You should read it sometime.

MATT: The Nation **National Review**? But this is a liberal conservative magazine!

(*He looks towards the GHOST, stunned, but the other spotlight has faded. MATT is once again alone, illuminated by a single spotlight center stage. A beat as MATT processes what has just happened. Then another spotlight appears, this time on stage right. Standing there is a YOUNG MAN wearing a baseball hat and a t-shirt with the American flag on it, flannel shirt and scarf.*)

GHOST OF POLITICS PRESENT: Hey bro.

MATT: Hi.

GHOST OF POLITICS PRESENT: You psyched about the election results? This country's turning back around!

MATT (*regaining a bit of his earlier cockiness*): Why yes, yes I am. I'm proud of the American people for making the right choice. He'll fight for real American values, at long last.

GHOST OF POLITICS PRESENT: Yeah I mean I guess that's cool. I just want him to stop those damn Mexicans from taking our jobs **legalize pot so I can get high at work.**

MATT: I mean, that is, obviously, an issue of importance, but that's not the only thing the president-elect stands for! He's gonna lower taxes, protect the Second Amendment, fight terrorism... **expand Social Security, protect the environment, defend gay rights...**

GHOST OF POLITICS PRESENT: Eh.

MATT: Those things don't matter to you? You voted for him because of that one issue?

GHOST OF POLITICS PRESENT: I mean there's other stuff too ...

MATT: What about regulating Wall Street? Isn't that an important issue to you?

GHOST OF POLITICS PRESENT: Uhh ... yeah. It needs to be done **sucks.**

MATT: No! The president-elect opposes **supports** regulations!

GHOST OF POLITICS PRESENT: Oh. My bad.

(Exasperated, MATT turns away as the spotlight on the GHOST fades. After a beat, a YOUNG GIRL'S voice is heard.)

GHOST OF POLITICS FUTURE: Hello?

MATT: Huh? Who is it now?

(From directly behind MATT, a YOUNG GIRL emerges. She walks beside MATT and looks up at him eagerly.)

GHOST OF POLITICS FUTURE: Are you Matt Greene? My mom and dad watch your show every day.

MATT: Yes, yes I am.

GHOST OF POLITICS FUTURE: I love your show too. I like how you stand up to those socialist sexist bastards in our government. My parents always tell me you're the only news source to trust nowadays.

MATT: That's ... horrifying, really.

GHOST OF POLITICS FUTURE (*innocently taking Matt's hand*): Don't worry, Matt. I'm the next generation. I'll make sure that no person who threatens the rights of Americans will ever be tolerated in this great nation. (*she seems to expect this will reassure him*)

MATT: Oh God.

GHOST OF POLITICS FUTURE: Only ten more years until I can vote! And by then there will be thousands upon thousands of kids just like me, who've grown up with nothing but the raw, unbiased truth from your show. None of that Mainstream Media **fake news** bias for my generation! We will never compromise in the defense of American values!

(*Suddenly, the stage returns to complete darkness.*)

CHRISTINE (*off*): Matt?

(*The lights slowly turn back on, revealing CHRISTINE and MATT back in their original places on the set of The Truth.*)

CHRISTINE: Matt? Hello?

MATT: What? Oh yes, the interview. So sorry. I must have dozed off. So you were saying that even here on *The Truth*, the media has divided the American people in seriously dangerous ways?

CHRISTINE: Exactly.

MATT: I think I have to agree.

CHRISTINE: You do?

MATT: Yes, actually. (*he swivels his chair to face the audience*) I'd urge all our loyal viewers to start watching some other shows. I mean, obviously, still watch this one but watch some Rachel Maddow **Bill O'Reilly** too. The other side aren't bad just because they believe something different ... I think it's important that Americans remember what it means to be well-informed and have a productive democracy.

(*Curtain*)

UNTITLED

HARPREET NIJER

Honorable Mention

When I die
adorn the cage of my ribs
with the seeds of sunflowers
when you visit me
allow the streams of your tears
to water my roots
so that one day
I will be able to grow flowers of my own
my heart will bloom once more
and my soul will be reborn

I always found it ironic that when
my heart beat faster than
my mind could race and
my eyes could blink and
the chills graced upon my spine
I hid behind my hands
covered my eyes
and pulled myself into a deeper, closer darkness
I found that
there is something comforting about your personal darkness

UNTITLED

YISEL TAPIA

Honorable Mention

Dusk is a strange time of the day. Laying on my bed and running my hand across the cool surface of my comforter, the timid light of dusk that seeps through my clear window makes my room glow softly, and it feels like my room is ready to fall asleep itself. The strangest part of dusk, though, is that no matter how tired the walls of my room seem, no matter how far down the sun sinks into slumber, I am still wide awake.

Sometimes, though, I enjoy the time that comes after dusk. I mean, I'm quite in love with the stars that visit me on a pitch-black sky, and though the moon is a lovely sight, I find my breath is taken from me at the sight of what should be nothingness, and instead find millions of massive fires caused by unimaginable chemical reactions scattered across the night sky, billions of light years away. But it reminds me of just how insignificant I am, and sometimes, I get overwhelmed by the notion that I may not achieve greatness; not in a grand sense, at least. Though, yes, I know I should be a bit more confident in my abilities. I'm only sixteen, and I have an affinity for almost everything to do with the fine arts: drawing, painting, writing poems, writing novels, playing guitar, singing, dancing, sculpting; it's all what I love to do. So I know I have a different pace than others yes, and soon, I'll be a legend who will possibly leave a mark right beside the names of the greats.

But I'm not. Not yet, at least (since I'm feeling slightly optimistic at the moment). I'm just sitting on a concrete slab, and it's cold and the wind seems annoyed with me as I lay still, uncaring of the goosebumps raised on my skin and my cheeks screaming at me for warmth as they begin to numb; uncaring of the bugs that may crawl into my thick hair, or the dirt that'll get trapped inside of it; uncaring of the fact that my mother will probably kick my ass, since I had just taken a shower before sneaking outside.

It's cold. It reminds me of the good kind of cold, where you see snow

and the sky is gray but the sun rays meet your skin anyways, and you laugh and laugh as you throw snowballs as carefully as you can at your three year old brother, who has never seen snow before back in our little California town. The kind of cold you are glad to be in, but also glad to be out of once you warm up inside of a nice little hotel room that your dad can barely afford, and that your mother makes hot chocolate in for you to sip even more goodness into your body.

Though it may remind me of good times, however this kind of cold is the bad kind...it's not even the average kind, where you're just walking to school on a winter morning, and your fingers and nose are beginning to lose feeling as your mind does, as well. It's the bad kind that you feel could freeze your tears if you cried; the kind that makes it hurt to breathe and think and live. It's a pissed-off cold that wants you to make you as pissed as it is by biting at your fingertips and making you shiver violently as if a devil was possessing you. In a sense, one is; it's seeping deep into my bones, and I feel as if this kind of cruel cold will never leave me.

I stand up, teeth chattering as I keep my arms crossed and place my bare feet as carefully as I can as I step towards my backyard door. My glasses are lopsided, and my lips are chapped, but I ignore these inconveniences as I focus on getting inside as quickly as possible. The door is the sliding kind, so as I push the heavy glass as silently as I can, I squeeze my body through and begin closing. The door makes a strange sweeping sound, like somebody dragging along a broom across a linoleum floor. I leave it open just enough to slip through, and my cold ears brush against the frame of the door. My feet meet carpet, and I slowly begin to close the sliding door, my breathing as silent as the midnight air.

It's hard to sneak out of my house. My parents stay awake until at least one in the morning, and though my insomnia keeps me up pretty late, it's hard for me to stay up as I become more and more sleep deprived. They keep their bedroom door open, too, and since it's across the hall, I have to go into a sort of super stealth mode. That's with the best conditions, which require that my parents be a bit forgetful and bit more tired than usual. If they close their door, and sleep at midnight instead of later, then I would be able to sneak out. There's also the struggle with the alarm, and the fact that my grandfather sleeps in the living room, but my grandfather doesn't care much for telling my parents about what I'm up to, and the alarm can be muffled to where it won't reach my parents' ears. But the conditions need to be perfect; and that's not always the case.

It's warmer inside, but now I feel like I can't breathe. I can't breathe in this house without being allowed to. That sounds like an exaggeration, and maybe it is, but I have no control over what I do. I have no real power, except the power to cause myself sorrow. I lose and I lose, and with every step I take closer to my room, blindly wandering in the dark

of the house as I rely on memory to navigate, I feel like I'm drowning. The air is warm, smothering me with its comfortable presence, and I can only hope that it will kill me pleasantly.

A door knob turns. I rush into my room, turning the knob before I close it so it doesn't make a sound, and jump into my bed. I cover myself in the blankets, close my eyes, and go limp.

My bedroom door opens. A faint blue light seeps in that I can't see, but have seen enough times to know is there. My heart races, and I stop breathing. I count my heartbeats, and let out a slow, soft exhale, and after six heartbeats, the door finally closes. I shuffle in my bed, feeling the softness of my flannel sheets, and bury my cold nose into the mattress where my body heat has already made it warm.

* * *

Experiencing life is odd. It seems fun at times, but then inconveniences arrive, and they seem to be coming in swarms, until you can't handle them and lose control and make a mistake and the consequence of that mistake is tragedy. Tragedy makes life seem like it's not worth the effort. There's too much work that you put into being alive that can be torn at any given second, if the circumstances are right. Romanticized ideals and high expectations are shattered by the constant presence of reality and disappointment. Once you learn that living has an end, however, suddenly life is too precious to waste. For some, death is a motivation that is not fully comprehended past its surface definition of "the end." It seems impossibly far away, and can even be a comfort. But once time passes at a rate that seems unfair, and you are suddenly about to walk into death's embrace, you panic. You fear. You deny. You've put too much effort into life just to have it all thrown away. It isn't fair. It just isn't *fair*.

* * *

I sigh into my sheets, and turn my head to look at my clock, which gleams "1:07 a.m." in a harsh red light.

I AM AN ARTIST, MY FACE IS MY CANVAS

LIZZETTE CUEVAS

Honorable Mention

Makeup is not a mask. Makeup is art, passion; makeup is expression. When I wake up, my routine consists of starting the day with a fresh face and thousands of fluttering ideas for that day's look. Maquillage brings to light my creative, comical creations. Being avant-garde in a colorless world allows you to express your persona, to go above the horizon in any work you do.

Makeup is not just about how you look; it's about how you feel. When I started out, and was absorbed into the makeup world, I was amazed to see how many versions of myself I created. Applying "Cyprus Umber," a nutmeg and cinnamon shade, can make me feel that I am indomitable, while "Realgar," a pigmented fire-shade tinged with apricot, encourages me to be a leader. Cosmetics took my life and gave it a twist; it allowed me to express myself in ways I never thought possible. It brought me out of a comfort zone and into realization that I can change the world one-step at a time and one blending brush at a time. Makeup is a part of my everyday routine and reminds me how much of an empowered woman it makes me look, feel, and act. Clutching a M505 Morphe brush is almost like holding the key to another world of vivid colors never seen before. Before taking on the day, I spread my Matte Tarte Paint Lipstick in the shade "Frenemy" to portray a sense of competence. Every day is viewed as a fresh morning to devise new ideas into quotidian activities; these ideas are creative and artistic like makeup.

Creativity in a world so bland goes a long way. It's like picking up a transition shade of ABH in "Burnt Orange" and turning it into a butterscotch sunset by just adding a little "Morocco". When you feed ideas to everything you do, you create a sunset of your own. Every different makeup look is pleasing and exotic, as should be every new idea. Makeup is so many things besides creative and artistic, it is confidence.

I am as bold as my lipstick.

When a vivid imagination meets a Morphe M433 brush, there is no telling what I will create that day. As I look onto my pallet of shades beginning with wine, salmon, carmine, and ending with apricot, mahogany, and bronze, I look upon the mirror to discover a girl with ideas ready to burst. I will forever declaim, “Inner beauty is great, but a little mascara never hurts.”

SMOKE AND FEATHERS

STELLA VELEZ

Honorable Mention

When truth first fluttered up
from the depths of my stomach,
her feathered fluttering wings
tickling all the way up, scraping
against my ribcage and throat.
When truth first showed
her feathered self,
first made a break for freedom,
I closed my teeth and she chirped
out of the gaps between them,
set herself upon the tip of my tongue
and I wondered if she was real,
if she would vanish
into the distance
into nothing.
I worried she was nothing.
But she stayed perched there,
making her presence known
or scaring me with her silence.
But always there,
until I spat out some feathers,
hesitant fluffs of down that
spiraled through the air softly,
a part of her let out,
out into the world I live in.
And it stuck.
And she stayed.
When truth first fluttered up
from the depths of my stomach,
I would not let her out.

No matter how she screeched
and flapped her feathery wings,
pecked against my
snapped shut teeth.
Because what if she was only
smoke and feathers, not real.
What if she left me uncrushed
and made me a liar.
Left me with a mouth
full of smoke and feathers
Full of nothing.
but now,
I know the truth.

THE LITTLE OLD LADY FROM PASADENA

VIVIAN AILA DE LA CRUZ

Honorable Mention

sun-dried leaves,
white,
of the ground,
it is only somewhat,
a dirty brown,
but they more-so look like sun-dried bones,
in a desert, minus circling vultures around predicted red rotting flesh...
how can the sun be a mother, and a killer?
as it browns my grandmother's skin ...
warms, and stings.
rejuvenates, burns ... and cooks ...
i think of her burning, broken back,
each of her vertebrae tucked inside a heated fleshy vessel,
from head,
to heart,
to lumbar,
it's ridges and cracks...
i step on delicate,
dead,
dry leaves,
to feel it's radiating sunny killer in another way ...

i think of other killers,
ones with intent,
some with none,
remember a melon truck, and it's trucker,
similarly-existing,
like absent notions of staying focused while driving ...
and how the girl who crossed the street is under his tire and her
crushing bones perhaps sounded like leaves under my shoe
as skin becomes ashed from charcoal roads,
a world slips off it's axis ...
and becomes another where fish learn to breathe outside of water,
and blood stains remain ...
though it's not the first time she's broken bones,
i want all the pain in her ribs when her lungs inflate ...
cancer's, and her ill-memories..i want god to allow me to take the
existence of her ache's place ...
like i want the sting of the sun, she knows so well from the fields of
texas, washington, arizona, and california, on my back,
and the tiredness in all her muscles she's worked for,
in mine ...

I WELCOME YOU

GIOVANNI ROMERO-ITO

Honorable Mention

I awoke in a dark place with nothing in sight,
But an enchanting pale woman,
Her lips match the shade of a red spider lily,
Her eyes the colour of the northern lights,
She was shrouded in a cloak made of the blackest storm clouds,
As I slowly stepped towards her, I said
“I use to fear you, I use to hate you,
But now,
Your work is something I’m far too accustomed to”
Inches away, I glared intently into her eyes and said,
“I welcome you”
Her mouth opens as she burst into laughter,
She placed one of her scraggy, freezing hands around my neck,
And the other inside of my chest, wrapped around my heart,
With every beat, her grip tightens,
With every breath, the pressure grows,
She leans in close,
Our faces centimeter from each other,
She whispers
“I don’t need to stop your heart,
To kill you”
As she takes a deep breath I feel the hollowness grows,
As she siphoned from me,
Lives flash before my eyes...but none of them are mine,
I saw old friends who left long ago,
I saw nooses tied,
I saw bullets fly,
I saw the ocean steal someone never to be found,
I saw knives breakings skin leaving blood stains on the ground,
I saw building being reduced to ash,

I saw cars flip,
I drew in a deeper breath to snatch my soul back,
I gripped her cloak and shouted,
“You made me go through that before,
I told you I’m not scared anymore!
I welcome you, but I don’t seek you,
I know one day, long from now I’ll meet you,
And I’ll gladly go with you, I’ll go running,
But until then. ... You are done,
taking from me”

THE QUEEN OF THE NIGHT

JENELLE CARLIN

Honorable Mention

Consider the Night Blooming Cereus for a long moment. A night blooming cereus blooms only once. One night out of an entire year does its beauty emerge. Silky white petals, encircled by yellow lacelike threads, a whole other flower, like a tiny sea anemone, within the outer flower. Insistent upon sunlight, yet it saves its flower for the moon; it takes from the day and gives to the night. One night a year, as delicate and fleeting as a life in the universe.

Heavy flowers resting delicately on a vine, nearly fifteen pounds. In some cases, even a hundred. Requiring the outdoors for sunlight and space, these gigantic beauties cannot be contained, and when they finally bloom, it is breathtaking. One night, in June or July, this flower opens up towards the moon, releasing an intoxicating vanilla smell strong enough to knock someone over if they are not careful. By morning, nothing remains but the dying bud. From this death, however, grows new life. A red-orange fruit, spined and elliptical, emerges, keeping the vine alive until the following year when it will bloom yet again. When the bud begins to grow again, it is white— pure, virginal— but as it matures, it develops a rosy hue at its base. The flower is its pinkest just before it blooms, and when it does, the onlooker is entranced. From sunset to sunrise, it is the Queen of the Night.

It is enchanting, breathtaking, elegant, and beautiful. The Night Blooming Cereus possesses the capabilities of a Lorelei to the hundredth degree. Anyone present cannot abstain from its beauty; your eyes are drawn in, and with it, your soul. Mesmerizing in all forms— such an angelic masterpiece, so secretive, it may just be the ninth wonder of the world. Its intoxicating aroma attracts viewers from miles away. How ironic that such a fragile flower could exist on its polar opposite; the cactus. Perfection emerges from prickliness.

The cactus, so expansive in its species; so tolerant. How is it that such delicacy could emerge from such a different plant? This relationship symbolizes life; from brutality, beauty can emerge, if but only for an instant. We are the Night Blooming Cereus; we spend our lives hidden within a protective layer, a prickly wall, only to emerge when the timing is right. But there is more to the cactus than just thorns and needles. Cacti are a beautiful species, tucked away; secluded in the desert. Saguaros, Prickly Pears, Peyotes, Mammillaria, Echinopsis, Clyndropuntia, Barbary Fig, and Ocotillo, only a number of the two thousand species that exist around the world. They all share something in common—survival. Despite periods of dormancy, they also experience periods of growth and blossoming. They can live up to three hundred years. While humans are not nearly this fortunate or resilient, we too experience the roller coaster of dormancy and blossoming. Though we may be secluded and walled up, the perfect moon will arise, and with it, our beauty will unfold for all to see.

Cacti are composed of ninety-four percent water. Night Blooming Cereus' are eighty-two percent water. Humans are seventy percent water. The liquid of life; what keeps us alive. Absorbing, storing, and using—water is the lifeline of all species. We all depend on something.

So much hidden under our protective layers. So much of us covered by uncertainty, self-consciousness, and fear. Fear of what will become of us if we bloom. Will we die before the sun arises, or will we remain, forever existing for all the world to see? Perhaps it is more than self-consciousness at play here. Perhaps it is our environment; societal negativity bringing drought to our once lush gardens of emotion. Forever being made to feel inadequate, we wait until the moment is just right to unveil our true identity. Concealed cosmos in all of us, left intact yet forever fragile. Unable to come face to face with such realities, we become the girl awake 2 AM journaling her thoughts on a tear-stained notebook page, the boy who cannot slow his heart that's racing for a girl whose image he cannot get out of his head, the drug addicted man whose best friend killed himself, the rape victim who refrains from intimacy, the foster child who questions their worth; our heads and hearts whirl and soar within us at the speed light, yet we cannot see anything but darkness. Total darkness. Perhaps, that is when we bloom best.

A REFLECTION OF TIME: A ZUIHITSU

SEBASTIAN GREER

Honorable Mention

The constant pace has tripled. The hallways are full of the tip-taps of student's footsteps. The dry, cracked, air has changed the morning. The continuous car honks of impatient drivers and illegal U-turns clutter my thoughts before class begins.

A **Reflection** of my life tends to always run through my mind as I start my overflowing assignments. Assignments and assessments crash into me like tidal waves against rocks.

The message is constantly unraveling. Papers are turning, yet I am stuck. Notebooks are full of information and material that I have yet to study. I ask myself, are you happy?

Happiness is slowly deteriorating, but I can only determine that. The flames are slowing dimming, I am the only one who can kindle them back to a scorching and glowing light.

Days of soothing cold last for only two, while days of blistering heat last for a month. The ghostly haunt is emerging. The great feast of thanks is in a month. The ringing of bells and the aroma of pine cones are swiftly approaching. So much to prepare for, yet so little **time**.

Time is limited. The clock is ticking. The graphite of the pencil scrapes against the paper as I rush to finish labeling the skeleton in Anatomy class. The classroom is humid with the sounds of sniffing surrounding me. The Sweat drips down my face secreted by worry and ambition.

Worry drives stress. I've realized I can control what feelings overcome me. I've realized the position and situation that I am currently in. I just have to figure it out on my own as a responsible student who cares for their future education.

Time has always conquered my agenda and schedule. Workloads have consumed and deprived me of my interactions with the people around me. The rotting, disgusting, and gross garbage goes out more than me. I'm trapped in a prison cell with a pencil screeching a plethora of papers.

Aromas of food are truly the only things that makes me happy. **Happiness** is brought by these delightful scents. The details from these scents I receive are unimaginable. Missing ingredients and flavors can be changed within an instant. Detail has become very important in every aspect of life.

As I prepare for my meal, the waitress brings a plate full of orange chicken. The vaporized citrus juice and the chopped bitter onions and garlic intertwine to create a colorful entre.

Responsibility has been placed in my hands since the I gained the ability to read. Overwhelmed perfectly describes my life. I wish it didn't have to be this way, but it is what I have been given. Management and opportunities are endless. I have to jump to reach these numerous open doors. These open doors shut with decisions I make. I must examine and do everything carefully.

Acceptance is hard. Outcomes may not be in our favor. That's okay, make another plan. Great plans sometimes collapse like the great Roman Empire. That's okay, try again. Ivy league Universities may burn and vaporize your application. That's okay, they're missing out. Your boyfriend or girlfriend might break and tear your precious heart to tiny fragments of tissue and love. That's okay, because there are so many other available and willing individuals in this giant world. Acceptance is difficult, but it is tolerable.