



Youth Writing Competition

In collaboration with the
National Writing Project of Acadiana

Winners' Anthology

Fall 2024

Acknowledgments

The National Writing Project of Acadiana would like to thank all of the students who submitted such high-quality creative writing for this competition. Thank you to the parents and guardians who support these students and their writing. We would like to also extend a special thank you to the teachers and administrators who provided the educational environment in which such work is valued and encouraged.

Finally, thanks to Martha Garner, Executive Director of The Festival of Words, and her amazing Executive Board, for supporting not only this competition, but also a world-class literary festival year after year.

Sincerely,

H. Michelle Creamer
Director, National Writing Project of Acadiana
Coordinator, Festival of Words Youth Writing Competition

Toby Daspit
Emeritus Consultant, National Writing Project of Acadiana



Table of Contents

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Multimedia:

1st place—Shane Waid, St. Martin STEAM, “Kat Mayor”

Fiction:

1st place—Mila Backer, Woodvale Elementary, “The Last Dance”

2nd place—Carter Malveaux, Breaux Bridge Elementary, “Stinky Sock Man”

3rd place—Michael Chad Lipari, Episcopal School of Acadiana, “The Picture”

Honorable Mention—Emmali Broussard, Episcopal School of Acadiana, “Sally”

Poetry:

1st place—Marifaye Barrilleaux, Jefferson Island Road Elementary, “Hummingbird Adventures”

2nd place—Adira Farmer, Episcopal School of Acadiana, “The Wind,” “Bee Knees,” “Flowers,” and “Pinky”

3rd place—Rozi Olivier, Episcopal School of Acadiana, “Window”

Honorable Mention (*alphabetical*)—Piper Reed, Breaux Bridge Elementary, “The Story of Beaux”

Honorable Mention (*alphabetical*)—Reid Russell, Episcopal School of Acadiana, “Stars, Sun, Moon”

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Advertisement

1st place—Jocelyn Rosales, Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts, “Communitunes”

Fiction:

1st place—Bryce Brignac, Edgar Martin Middle School, “What Lies in the Summer Valley”

2nd place—Anasia Richard, Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts, “Creepy Clowns”

3rd place—Marley O'Brien, Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts, “The Time Machine”

Honorable Mention—Kailey Patin, Parks Middle School, “The Chosen”

Poetry:

1st place—Charleigh Nelson, Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts, “The Balance of Extremes”

2nd place—Alise Lanclos, Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts, “A Little Hope”

3rd place—Natalie Ulmet, Edgar Martin Middle School, “Stream of Conscious Chaos”

Honorable Mention (alphabetical)—Annabelle Dore, Edgar Martin Middle School, “The Rugaroo's Curse”

Honorable Mention (alphabetical)—Olivia Tassin, Scott Middle School, “Writer's Block,” “Transparency”, and “Fall”

HIGH SCHOOL

Multimedia:

1st place—Sophia Bellard, Southside High School, “Equitable”

2nd place—Malak Alnesafi, Shayna Chevis, and Aaron Jack, Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts, “Kids at Sephora”

Fiction:

1st place—Kayleigh Cyprian, Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts, “Life in Wonderland”

2nd place—Morgan Tolliver, Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts, “I am Not Yellow”

3rd place—Sha’Layjia Dugas, Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts, “The Night”

Honorable Mention (*alphabetical*)—Anna Gonzales, Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts, “A Christmas Disaster”

Honorable Mention (*alphabetical*)— Aaron Jack, “Dark of The Sanctuary”

Poetry:

1st place—Radha Kulkarni, Lafayette High School, “Forever Transient”

2nd place—Addison Fontenot, Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts, “The Familiar Hand”

3rd place—Isabel Rosales, Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts, “Behind the Curtain”

Honorable Mention—Sophia Bellard, Southside High School, “Ambedo”

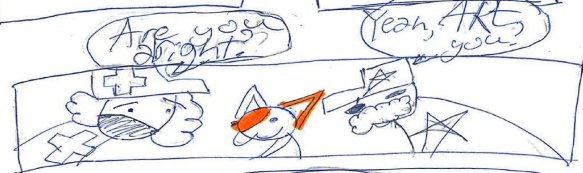
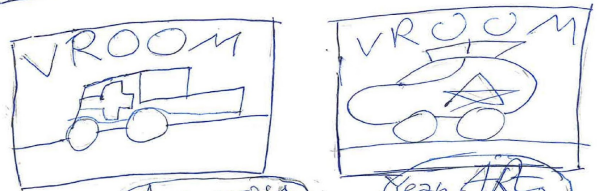
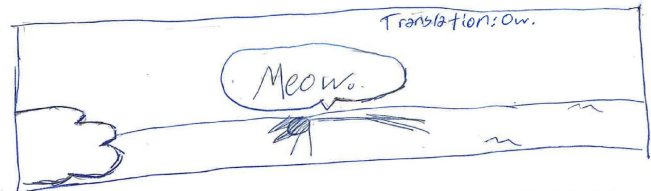
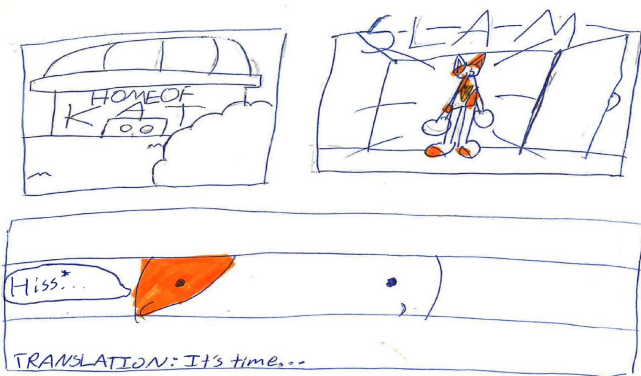
Elementary School Division (Grades 3-5)

1st place Multimedia - Elementary School Division

By: **Shane Waid**

St. Martin STEAM

"Kat Mayor"



ONE DRIVE LATER...



1st place Fiction - Elementary School Division
By: **Mila Backer**
Woodvale Elementary

“The Last Dance”

Cinderella—we've all heard the story. A girl has an evil stepmother and sisters, she lives a ragged life until a fairy godmother comes and says, "bippity boppity boo" and all is well. See, that's the fairy tale, but no one knows what actually happened.

Once upon a time, wait no, this isn't a fairy tale. Let me try again.

Hundreds of years ago there was a girl named Cinderella, she went by Ella. She had a beautiful family that loved her very much, 2 sisters and a Stepmom. Her Mom died in a car crash so her dad got remarried then shortly died of cancer.

Her sisters, Anastatia and Drizella, and stepmom, the "evil" Lady Tramaine, took amazing care of her but see, Cinderella was a little brat. She never thought anything was good enough and always wanted more. In order to keep Ella from having a temper tantrum they had to make sure her room was always clean because she was a neat freak.

Anyways after she grew up a bit she was still a brat but more mature. She dreamed of going to the Snowball and of course, if she wanted it she was gonna get it. Her stepmother made it happen and then asked if she, Anastsia, and Drizella could come with her. Ella wondered why she would want to come and of course started throwing a temper tantrum about how ignorant Tramaine was asking to go with her.

The day of the Snowball comes around and Cinderella has a beautiful ball gown and pretty glass heels, ** Yeah I said heel not slippers, It's 2024 people. **

So as Cinderella was walking out to go to the ball a Fairy Godmother appeared right in front of her. Cinderella was mad and told her to watch her path because Fairy Godmother almost just knocked her down. Fairy Godmother said sorry then Ella cut her off. Ella was asking if Fairy Godmother could grant her a new necklace and a carriage. Fairy Godmother tried to explain that she wasn't there for Ella, but only for her stepsisters and stepmother. Of course with that Cinderella started throwing a temper tantrum. Fairy Godmother calmed her down and then said fine, she would make her a necklace and carriage. As Cinderella was riding off she didn't see the smirk on Fairy Godmother's face, knowing Cinderella won't ever throw a fit again.

At the dance Cinderella was dancing with the prince, (She had bamboozled the prince into thinking she was kind) when the clock ticked midnight and she suddenly felt uncomfortable in her heels and excused herself to the bathroom. She was looking in the mirror and suddenly, POOF, her ears were small like a mouse's then, POOF again. She shrunk to a tiny mouse.

She started freaking out and ran into the ballroom to get someone to fix her, but nobody noticed her. She then saw her stepsisters talking to the prince, and her stepmom dancing with the king. After that she realized that she was not a good child but it was too late, she was already living as a mouse.

2nd place Fiction - Elementary School Division
By: **Carter Malveaux**
Breaux Bridge Elementary

“Stinky Sock Man”

Chapter one: How it all began

On a scary night, the sock named Jeremy was hanging out with his sisters, Eliana, Piper, Blair, and Layla. Suddenly, he spotted some crusty feet and cried, "Please don't wear me!" "Sorry, but I need protection," said the crusty feet. Then they got into a scuffle, but Jeremy lost the battle. After being worn by those stinky feet, he declared, "I'm stinky, and no one can stop me!" May he rest in stinkiness.

Chapter two: The Resurrection

It was a stormy night. The sisters of the fallen socks went to the socks's grave. One of the socks named Piper said, "We miss you, Jeremy," while holding back a tear as she looked at the grave. Everyone was in shock. Suddenly, the stinky sock rose from the grave, carrying a smelly pillow. He put them all in a deep sleep and dragged them into an underground lab. After a few minutes, they all woke up. With a creepy grin, he asked, "Did you miss me? .

Chapter three: He's Back.

One of the socks named Layla exclaimed, "No way, it's you!" "Yes, it's me! Where are those silly crusty feet?" Jeremy asked. "No way!" Piper said loudly, looking worried. "It's too risky!" "Well then, if you all can't tell me where he is, it looks like I'm going to have to test your survival skills!" Jeremy said. He summoned a shadow from the ground. Miss Cox charged at Layla, but Layla quickly pulled out some deodorant for some odd reason. As soon as she pulled out the deodorant, Ms. Cox instantly ran away. They looked around for Jeremy but couldn't seem to find him.

Chapter 4: On The Loose

"Where did he go?" Eliana asked as she searched for Jeremy. Piper grabbed a sword and broke a hole in the dirt. "Come on, guys, let's go!" They all climbed out of the underground lab. Meanwhile, Jeremy was in the street, searching for the crusty feet. He suddenly spotted a police officer. "No way, is he real?" Jeremy thought. The officer raised his hands in the air. "Stop right there!" he commanded, pointing at Jeremy. Using his stink powers, Jeremy teleported in front of the officer and asked, "Where are the crusty feet?" "I don't know!" the officer replied, struggling to break free from Jeremy's grip. Jeremy realized the officer didn't even know what the crusty feet were! In a moment of inspiration, he put stinky apples in the officer's face and tossed him across the road. Curious people began to emerge from their homes and shops to see what was

happening. "He's real! The stinky, smelly sock is real!" shouted one of the citizens, and they all ran away in fright.

Chapter 5: Realization

The sisters of Jeremy walked through the streets. "We need to get him to listen to us," Eliana said as she walked with the group. "We can't; he never listens to us, even when he was alive," Layla replied. "Then we'll have to exclude him," Blair suggested. They all looked up, feeling sad. They would have to figure out a way to get rid of Jeremy. As they walked, they turned around and saw Miss Cox approaching them. "You will feel the wrath of stinkiness!" declared Miss Cox. They all started running away fast. They dashed out into a field, but as they climbed up the stairs, they didn't notice that Blair accidentally slipped and fell. Ms. Cox tackled her and forced her to sniff her armpits but disappeared. "What happened? Why did she disappear?" Blair wondered aloud. She got up, looked in front of her, and saw Jeremy staring at her with a creepy smile. "Hi there, he said.

Chapter 6: Blair vs Jeremy

"Why did you save me?" Blair asked Jeremy. "Only because I want to!" he replied. "Excellent question where are the crusty feet?" "Once again, you're not going to exclude him, and that is final!" Blair yelled at him. "You know you always used to bother me, but guess what? You can't do that anymore!" Jeremy responded by hitting Blair in the face with a pillow. She stumbled back, losing her balance, and quickly sprayed him with some Febreze. Jeremy fell down but ripped out some fluff from the pillow and threw it at her, knocking her down the stairs. Jeremy walked over to her, picked up the pillow, and slowly pushed it at her. He rolled over, got up, and tackled Blair but got off immediately. "Get Blair!" he said, but she pushed him off right away. She tried to trip him but missed, and Jeremy picked her up, blowing his stinky breath in her face. Blair yelled and coughed. Suddenly, she got up and sprayed some Old Spice deodorant in his face. "My only weakness!" he exclaimed before stumbling down the stairs. She then ran up the stairs until she joined the group of her friends.

Chapter 7: Plot Twist

They went back to their house, and after a while, they heard a loud growl. They turned around and couldn't believe their eyes. "How are you still here?" Piper asked, unable to comprehend what she was seeing.

"You sprayed me!" shouted Jeremy. "And I'm going to spray something of yours!" He teleported himself and Eliana to a huge space. Eliana knew she had to exclude him. Eliana pulled out her social studies notebook and her science book, preparing for a showdown. Jeremy threw a stink ball at Eliana, making her fly and then crash down. "Cut it out! This isn't you!" Eliana yelled. "I'm

no longer Jeremy! I'm the stinky, smelly sock!" he replied. He grabbed her and forced her to smell his stinkiness, and she passed out.

Chapter 8: The Final Battle

Jeremy turned around, only to find exactly what he was looking for. "I see you've been searching for me," he said as the crusty feet circled around. "Yes, it's time to pay for your terrible crimes!" They both summoned their stink powers and charged at each other, beginning to battle with pillows. Jeremy whacked the crusty feet in the mouth, who screamed, "Oh gosh, this is horrible!" The crusty feet tried to hit him back but missed so badly he fell face first. He got back up, only to be whacked with a pillow again. They both prepared to continue their silly fight, resembling siblings squabbling over the last donut. After a while, the battle took a turn when a deodorant bomb went off, causing everything and everyone to smell amazing. Evil screams filled the air as everyone realized that Eliana had set off the deodorant bomb before she was forced to smell armpits that hadn't been washed in over twenty years. And that's the end of the story! Everyone was now safe, and the stinky, smelly sock achieved his goal.

3rd place Fiction - Elementary School Division

By: **Michael Chad Lipari**

Episcopal School of Acadiana

“The Picture”

Blue and cold, the picture was mad. He was the only picture in the art gallery that had nobody to go see him. He was in the back by the fire exit and the only one back there. “Am I good enough?” he wondered. “Will anyone ever buy me?”

One day a tall man came into the gallery. He was in the front but there was nothing he liked. Then he asked if there was anything in the back. The manager said, “Not really.” But before he could finish his reply, the man had wandered to the back of the gallery. He found himself standing right in front of the blue picture, staring. The picture suddenly thinks, “Why is he looking at me like that?” The customer asked the manager how much would that picture be. The picture became happier. He is filled with joy and hope. Perhaps I won’t get skipped over again.

“Why do you want it?” the manager asked.

The man said, “It's one of a kind— blue, red, orange, and green dots.”

The manager said, “This one does not cost much—only four dollars, the rest are way more.”

“Why so cheap?” asked the man.

“It’s not that good”, said the manager.

“I’ll buy it,” said the man. He took the picture home. He has his own gallery and the one with blue, green, red, and orange stood out the most. It reminded the man of a beautiful horizon.

The picture agreed. “A beautiful horizon, indeed, is ahead of me.”

Honorable Mention – Elementary School Division
By: **Emmali Broussard**
Episcopal School of Acadiana

“Sally”

Once upon a time there was a girl named Sally. She was very stubborn, and everything had to go her way. She and her grandmother were taking a walk, and they came upon a shoe store. Sally looked at some sparkly, fancy, yellow shoes. The grandmother asked what was wrong with the shoes that she had on. Sally said that the shoes were old and tight. So the grandmother bought her the fancy, yellow shoes. Her grandmother told her not to wear the yellow shoes to the party and instead wear the plain white shoes she had bought. So, Sally agreed. While they were getting ready for the party Sally hid the white shoes under her bed and placed the yellow ones on her feet making sure to cover the shoes with her dress. While they were at the party Sally decided to take a walk. But when she tried to stop the shoes made her go. She begged for the shoes to stop but they were being as stubborn as her. Soon enough her feet got terribly sore. She had promised to never be stubborn again. Then the shoes stopped. Sally took off the shoes and threw them in a bush then went home. Her grandmother was happy to see her again and welcomed her inside knowing that she had learned her lesson.

1st place Poetry – Elementary School Division
By: **Marifaye Barrilleaux**
Jefferson Island Road Elementary

“Hummingbird Adventures”

Hummingbird, how you fly
Up in the air, oh so high
Flapping your pretty wings so so fast
Flying in nature, I bet you're having a blast
Sucking nectar from so many flowers
It's starting to rain, have a nice morning shower

Dancing in the rain, with your love
Flying on top of me, going above
Your wings are going one hundred miles an hour
Trying to look for all the flowers
Meeting a friendly girl, perching by her side
She's so nice, you don't even try to hide
Flying away while singing a song
Realizing that you traveled so long

2nd place Poetry – Elementary School Division
By: **Adira Farmer**
Episcopal School of Acadiana

“The Wind”

Why is wind
So soft, so
Kind,so
Beautiful,
So wonderful,
It flows like
A river
It moves
Like an ocean
So gentle
Wind
Thank you
For all you
Do.
You are like clay
You can be
Molded
And made
You make everyone
Happy
Wind
You are
Wonderful

“Bee Knees”

Do bees
Have knees I've always
Wondered if they do
What do they look like are
They tiny what if bees could
Bend their tiny legs
Bees knees would be
Cute and tiny but
The question is what
If bees had knees

“Flowers”

The petals are dancing
In the wind they have
Kindness they have
Gentleness as they spin
Flowers are pretty they
Keep me happy they are
Everywhere in Colorado
North Dakota they come in
Multiple colors they are beautiful.

“Pinky”

Pinky is my baby blanket she is so very
Special to me she is pink if I try to sleep
Without her I have nightmares she is so
Precious to me she keeps me happy she
Is so very sweet she cheers me up when
I am sad she is cute cool and pink she has never
Been sad with me right next to her.

3rd place Poetry – Elementary School Division
By: **Rozi Oliver**
Episcopal School of Acadiana

“Window”

Summer: See the children play and play,
they have no school all day.
The sun makes the glass oh so hot,
go outside I’d rather not.

Fall: See the leaves fall silently to the ground,
see different shades of all the browns.
See the first drop in forever,
We definitely needed this however.

Winter: White white snow covers the crops,
While more and more quickly drops.
See now animals big and small,
See snowmen oh so tall.

Spring; Flowers bloom and bees fly,
Seasons pass quickly by.
As new crops grow everyone knows,
I’d rather sit by my window.

Honorable mention Poetry – Elementary School Division
By: **Piper Reed**
Breux Bridge Elementary

“The Story of Beaux”

My dog's name is Beaux.
He is quite a show.
I love him so dearly,
because his ears are floppy

He is soft as a bunny,
No joke, it's not funny.
I love my other dogs too,
But Beaux, this ones for you.

He barks all the time.
Really not a lie. I wish he
would shut his mouth. Wait,
not his mouth, his snout!

He doesn't just bark. He
whines at night when it's dark.
He does it over and over and over
And over and over again. And barks !

He always wants to go outside.
All day and night.
He never really stops.
And at the door he whines A LOT!

When we open the door,
He wants to come out more!
He waits and waits and waits
For hours at the door.

He is really really fuzzy.
He's cute and cuddly.
That's why I love my
Dog named Beaux.

Honorable mention Poetry – Elementary School Division
By: **Reid Russell**
Episcopal School of Acadiana

“Stars, Sun, Moon”

Stars

Look at the stars
Shining so bright
Like racing cars
In the night

Sun

Look at the sun so high in the sky
A flaming pie
Burning so hot
like a boiling pot

Moon

Look at the moon
Giant as a balloon
A big ball of light
it stays on its flight

Middle School Division (grades 6-8)

1st place Multimedia - Middle School Division

By: **Jocelyn Rosales**

Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts

“Communitunes”

Advertisement propaganda

Speaker (me) : Have you ever met people who liked the same type of music you like?

Speaker (me): no? Well, we have found a solution to help you find friends on the internet that would best help you find a community that likes what music you like!

Speaker (me): the genres can vary from rockers, to hip hoppers, and basically you can talk to everyone all around the world!

Speaker (me): we proudly introduce the newest social app communitunes!

Speaker (me): You heard it here. This can help you create friends or acquaintances due to the similarities in music that most people like in your playlist or in your favorite song in general.

Speaker (me): What are you waiting for? Download the app now for a free trial limited time only.

1st place Fiction - Middle School Division

By: **Bryce Brignac**

Edgar Martin Middle School

“What Lies in the Summer Valley”

In the valley where plants flourished- the village of Elbath lay. There lived a young blacksmith with a nice home and a big heart. His name was Aldean, skilled in the arts of the forge. He supplied the village with tools and his watchful eye. With a hammer in hand and weapons in storage. He kept the land fruitful, beautiful and at peace. The children play day and night as the forge is filled with an orange light. Down by the river in the center of the village stood the tree of life. Whoever may eat it gained un-imaginable abilities. There was a mutual agreement not to eat it for there was a consequence. Unknown but it struck fear in the soul of the village.

"DING-DONG-DING," the village bells rung. Aldean rushed to see what's wrong. A young farm woman was panicking. "The fields have gone DRY— There's a dark man in the mountains. HE IS the DEVIL."

"I will drive him off... don't panic. He could not be what you say. He is just a mere sorcerer," Aldean said to the woman and the people around. Aldean grabbed his weapon and his stead. He rode off into the distance to confront this entity.

The trees smelt of death. Leaves were falling not with grace but with a sinister twist. As he neared the colder it got. More gloomy and devilish it felt. Aldean sensed the unease, the turmoil. The fear boiled in his stomach.

He came to the edge of the valley to see a cave. A cave surrounded by the white gleam of snow. Never had he felt this feeling. This fear. This unease. He entered the cave. His blade by his side and a bow on his back. There was a fork on the first turn. A gentle breeze flew past Aldean. Aldean was drawn to the breeze. He turned the corner and there it stood. A dark, faceless— Being. Aldean trembled from the cold being emitted from it. He pulled the bow from his back and loaded the arrow. Pull after PULL after PULL. Nothing happened. The arrows froze in mid air before even reaching it.

Aldean drew his sword. Swing after swing his hand began to freeze. The being stood there.

Unfazed.

A light gleamed from its face in the shape of eyes. It began to move closer to Aldean. Its aura was enough to make Aldean tremble in fear.

He ran.

Ran far away as fast as he could. Everything was dead and frozen. Even his horse. As he strayed away things became more and more lively. Aldean followed the river, making almost no progress. The leaves were red and yellow like never before. A cold breeze flew in. The leaves

froze and the trees died. Aldean felt a breath at his side. He checked his shoulder. There stood the being. Aldean, unable to react, was knocked out cold and thrown into the river. He woke up the next morning to silence, washed up by the village.

The people were scared, trees lifeless and the markets barren. Aldean in awe, kneeled and prayed.

"Help me. Give me a way to save the village. Give me a way to defeat this MONSTER bestowed upon us."

There was a sudden feeling in Aldean's heart. He felt that he must use the fruit of life. He felt like God had answered him. Aldean headed to the tree of life. Its leaves remained in a green glamor and filled with golden apples. Aldean plucked one from the tree. He went to take a bite then guilt filled his soul. A being of light appeared in front of him. "Forge this fruit into one of your weapons. With that power you may slay this beast." Aldean headed to the forge. Its light lit the village. The clash of bronze erupted throughout the town. The heat warmed the nearby houses. Hammer after hammer the weapon began to come together. It had a bright golden glow. With the weapon finished Aldean patiently waited.

Aldean sat there waiting for the devil to come.
To come and take this town.
To destroy the people and the land.

A cold breeze filled the air. Snow began to fall, and shortly after the roofs began to frost. Aldean seated at the foot of the tree stood up. A gust of wind blew his hair back. "It's over." Aldean said calmly. He unsheathed his sword and rushed towards the devil. All his might charged into one slash. The entity in an attempt to block the attack was blown back and stopped by a tree which was now frozen. Aldean followed up and unleashed a flurry of strikes. With every one heat pulsed before them. The once so powerful devil is now near death. Aldean pulls the golden weapon behind his back and strikes down one last time. The devil started to fade away. The tree's leaves appear once more with bright colors. The villagers start to leave their homes, feeling safe with the new found warmth. Aldean stood there—comfortable and tired—knowing he saved the valley.

2nd place Fiction - Middle School Division
By: **Anasia Richard**
Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts

“Creepy Clowns”

I never really had a lot of money. I was in and out of homes due to the rent. I broke off from my family. I was all alone. So, I got a job as a barista. But that didn't work because one customer tried to call my manager and fire me because they wanted me to give them a discount. Crazy right. So my only option was babysitting. I was a good babysitter, due to having to babysit my sister all the time when I was younger. I babysat for like 2 months before I got the call so people in the rich neighborhood know about me.

So on my day off, 7:00 I was watching TV in the living room of my Medium sized house, and I got a call from an unknown number. “Hello Is, this Simone?” said a woman's voice. “yes” i said in a raspy voice, I hadn't talked in a while. So, I cleared my throat and said “Yes this is her. Who's asking?”

“Oh good. I am Mrs. Jefferson. I was wondering if you could babysit my daughter? Before you say no, it's 1000 dollars an hour, and it is an overnight stay. I know it's your day off but please, this is urgent.” I considered the offer. 1000 dollars an hour is good for an overnight stay. Even though I was looking forward to binge watching my favorite series on Netflix “Yes, I would love to.” I said in my sweeter voice. “Thank you. My husband and I don't get to go out much, so this would really help our marriage.” I was happy I said yes because I would love to help someone's marriage.

She told me the address and I got dressed and went to the house. I got there and there was a gate. They gave me the password beforehand so I got in easily. I was like a whole mile before I got to the actuarial house and it was bigger than any house I have ever seen and babysit at.

I parked my car and went into the house. “Hi,” said Mrs. Jefferson. She was so pretty. Like a model. Mr. Jefferson was coming down the long flight of stairs. I looked around and it was beautiful. There was marble, gold, and red everywhere. There was a grand piano in the center and glass sculptures lined up by the stairs.

Mrs. Jefferson gave me a list. I didn't bother to read it now because I figured it was a list for bedtime and allergies and other random stuff. “We will be back at 9 at night tomorrow” “Ok “ I said.

“Samantha is upstairs, and our number is on the paper along with rules you MUST follow. “She said the last part as if she was worried. She also gave me a look saying that I should follow the rules. Mr. Jefferson looked a bit nervous. That was kind of strange, but I didn't think much of it.

They left and I headed up stairs and went into Samantha's room where she was playing with her dolls. "Hi Samantha. I am Simone and i am your new babysitter "" Hiiiiii" she said and ran to give me a hug. She was sweet. "I will be right back Ok " "ok," she said happily. I was going to read the note because something doesn't feel right. As I was leaving, she said "Leave the door open." Why" I asked, confused. "They want it open," she said. I left the door open and left. That was very strange, but I figured she was talking about her imaginary friends.

I Went down stair into the living room and sat on the sofa and read the note. It said

"We have a list of rules that you must follow in order to keep you safe.

There is a clown in the basement that will come out at 8:00. To stay safe, you must:

1: Never go into the basement. The basement is his home. 2: at 8:30 he will come up the stairs and you must hide in the bathroom for 10 minutes. He will voice the impression people you love to get you to come out. Don't do it. 3: At 9:00 he will watch you from the corner of the kitchen. Don't worry as long as you stay in the living room, he won't mess with you. At 10:00 run into your room. He will follow you. Go into your room and into bed. He won't bother you. He will sit in the corner. He will not hurt you once you are in bed. But you should try to minimize the amount of times you move because the more you move the closer, he will get. 4: LOCK SAMANTHA'S DOOR "He will leave at 6:00 in the morning.

That's it and thank you. "along with the number Mrs. Jefferson mentioned

The moment I read that I looked at the time and it was 8;00 and I heard something coming from the basement and the clown appeared. I ran. I went upstairs and grabbed my stuff. He was outside the door so I hid in the bathroom closet. Once he left I ran to Samantha's room. I ran. He was blocking the front entrance so I ran out of the house through the fire escape. He almost caught me as we weaved up the long black stairs of the fire escape. He scratched me but I didn't care because the only thing on my mind was keeping Samantha safe and getting out of there. Once I was outside I called the cops and they came and arrested the clown. It turns out he was an escaped sociopath. I called Mrs. and Mr. Jefferson. They came and said they are so sorry that I went through that and they would pay me extra. I was allowed to press charges but I didn't because the escaped person in their house was their son. He never did them anything but the babysitters that came he tried to off. They offered me extra money, I accepted that because I already spent 2 hours there and extra would be good. The police took Mr. and Mrs. Jefferson. They were taken into custody so I took Samantha home.

I was tucking her into bed. Then I went to my room. But something was off. I looked at the corner of my eye and saw a clown! I dare not move, he just stood there in the dim light of my night light. Its smile I was ruined by ragged teeth with blood dripping out. He had the ordinary pennywise clothes and a red nose but his clothes were burnt and ripped. His teeth were sharp and

his nails looked like they could cut into a wall in a nanosecond. It looked at me and frowned.
Tilted its head and took one step closer

And closer

And closer.

3rd place Fiction - Middle School Division
By: **Marley O'Brien**
Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts

“The Time Machine”

Hailey and Ava were the best of friends. Hailey was the quiet type and never spoke up unless instructed. She was a very gifted child who would never break any sort of rules, and was very well-mannered, polite, and had a great sense of etiquette. Things were not good at home. She grew up extremely rich but had been forced to move to a low-income neighborhood because her father had just been sent to prison for embezzlement. The last thing she heard her mother say to her father was “You’re a criminal, just like your grandfather!” All the money they ever had was taken away in a matter of weeks. Her mother who had never worked a day in her life had to find a new source of income to afford to live. She had to leave her private boarding school and switch to a public school with the “regular” kids.

Her friend Ava was quite the opposite. She had recently gotten out of juvenile detention. She was adopted, and as a child, she was severely abused. Hailey and Ava had met at school, and they were both “the new kids.” Nobody wanted to talk to them. They had the same class schedule and bonded over their hate for their new school. Ava had been the new kid because she had only got out of juvenile detention just days before the new school year started.

“Hey did you see what that weird museum thing has downtown?” Hailey asked intrigued.

“Nah I didn’t my Mama took away ma’ phone, remember?” Ava satiated cocky.

“Oh yeah my bad. Well anyway, they just made the first successful time machine, and you know being the nerd that I am I was wondering if we could check it out,” Hailey said, mocking herself.

“I guess. I mean I have nothing better to do since you know I’m punished,” Ava rolled her eyes.

When they got there it was filled with news stations, journalists, and other intrigued guests. They had just made an astonishing creation, and Ava and Hailey were lucky enough to see it happen.

Ava leaned over to whisper “Psst Hailey, we should sneak in here tonight and like make a tic tok post about it. It would go like super viral.”

Hailey's eyes widened “You couldn't possibly be thinking that right now. Are you actually insane?”

“Yes I am insane so let's go. Come on don't be a baby,” she said.

“Ok, so here is the plan. We are going to come back later right as they are about to close, and then we will just sit in the bathrooms until everyone else leaves. Why in the world would they check there? It's foolproof and we are doing it. The END.”

Hailey was too shy to speak up so she just went along with it. This was her first rule she was about to break but it wasn't going to be her last. She was nervous. They left to get the supplies that they needed, and then later that day they came back.

“Alright, so do you know the plan?” Ava asked, preparing for the crime they were about to commit.

“Yes, pretty much. It is really quite simple. I don't know how I would forget it,” said Hailey

“Good so let's go,” said Ava.

Once everyone left, they snuck out of the bathroom and into the main attraction, the time machine`

“Ok, get your phone out,” Ava said hastily.

“All right all right, it's right here. Chill out,” said Hailey

“I'm going to film this video real quick and then we gonna leave, ok?” Ava said.

Hailey heard a noise that sounded like keys jingling

“Ava,” she asked, “are you sure no one is here?”

“Uh, I don't know why,” she asked,

“Because I think there is a security guard, and I think he is coming our way,” Hailey said hastily.

“Omg, what?! Come on hurry up get in the time machine with me we need to hide,”

Ava grabbed Hailey by the collar and jammed her in the time machine, but Ava's elbow accidentally hit the back of the time machine and transported them into an unknown period. They had just traveled to the 19th century, and they were in the center of New York. When they got out their heads were all discombobulated, and their organs felt as though they were put into a blender. Hailey's vision started going blurry, and she started feeling nauseated.

“Where are we?” Ava asked as she looked around.

Hailey ran to the nearest trash can trying to hold in her vomit. She dove her head into the bin, and rodents and other pests ran out. She screamed in terror having never seen a rat before. As she screamed she inhaled some of her own vomit causing her to choke. Ava held her hair back for her. When she was done.

“Are you ok?” Ava sounded very concerned.

Hailey looked up and saw a most wanted sign for the world's worst serial killer.

“Hey Ava look at this!” Hailey said.

“What is it?” she asked.

“This old man has the same last name as me, I’m pretty sure I saw him our history books before,” remarked Hailey

“Huh, yea he does and he kinda looks like you too.” she teased

“Wait, he does. Maybe I’m related to him,” Hailey thought .

“No way! I knew you had some wittle bad girl in you. You’re not all goody-two-shoes after all.”

“Can you stop?” Hailey interrupted her. “We are stuck here with no way of knowing how to get back and you are just very here teasing me about being a good kid. Are you insane?” Hailey shouted but no one looked.

“Wait, Ava. I don’t think anyone can see or hear us.” Hailey said.

“Oh my god this is amazing, No one can see us. I’m going to pull all kinds of pranks!”

Just then, a girl walked right through them.

“Okay this is creeping me out. Let’s go in an alleyway so no one can run into us,” said Hailey.

“Sounds good to me.”

As the two girls were walking to the alleyway, a man appeared. It was the guy from the most wanted sign. Hailey gasped.

“What?” said Ava, confused.

Hailey waited for Ava to figure it out on her own. Once she finally did, she screamed. Hailey became enraged just by looking at him. She thought about everything she read in the history books.

“IM GOING TO KILL ’EM!” she screamed. She grabbed the knife she always kept stored in her pocket. She ran up to the man and started stabbing him. He cried for help, but no one could hear him over the noisy New York City streets. Every stab she took, a piece of her would disappear.

“STOP! STOP!!!” Ava screamed, but it was too late. The last time she stabbed him was in the heart. Hailey had fully vanished. There was no way of going back. Ava sat there, speechless and alone.

Honorable Mention Fiction - Middle School Division
By: **Kailey Patin**
Parks Middle School

“The Chosen”

Another one was chosen. Another baby, another so-called monster. They could hear screams throughout the house, as the mother held her daughter for the last time before she was taken to The Room, a large camp, which housed multiple kids of all ages. All kids, once they were placed in The Room, would be given a name that suited them based on their actions or looks.

This girl was named Thea, because it meant Goddess. As Thea grew up, she never understood why they would leave her in a white room for hours. Why she was always left alone. That was, until she turned 12. Instead of the plain, white room she was usually left in, she was taken to a green field, where about ten kids were playing, running, flying, fighting. The Ghosts, the soldiers who took care of everyone from birth, led Thea to a dock by a huge lake and introduced her to a boy, who was supposedly the same age as her. After talking to the boy and learning more about him, Thea learned that his name was Marcellus, or Marcel, which meant young warrior.

“They said that they looked at me and automatically knew my name, why were you named Thea though?” Marcel asked, still sharpening a wooden spear that he found in the woods.

“Umm, I don’t really know. Mrs Beka just said that it suited me.” Thea replied shyly, watching as his fingers swiftly and carefully sliced the blade through the wood.

“Well, Mrs. B is never wrong,” Marcel muttered, glancing across the lake for a quick second before looking back at Thea. Suddenly, there was a piercing scream. “What was that?!” Thea yelled, still startled by that scream.

“Don’t worry about it, it happens almost every day for a month. You just happened to come out of your little box during the ‘special’ month,” Marcel said, not even startled by the screams.

Both of them talked for hours, laughing, playing, he even taught her how to sharpen a piece of wood. When the sun set, they were already both soaked from playing in the pond, water drenching their clothes and mud stuck in Thea’s hair. Soon after they dried off, The Ghosts appeared once more, dragging Marcel away, leaving Thea alone. They never even got a goodbye before he was dragged away. That was the last time she saw her only friend in a very long time.

About a year has now passed since that night, but she never lost this nagging feeling that something bad happened to Marcellus. Every night, for the last 358 days, she has been having nightmares, but they were different from normal nightmares. She would see blood, violence, screaming. She even saw Marcel a few times, but that was impossible since The Ghosts said that he was transferred to their new facility.

After a few more weeks of the nightmares, Thea finally decided to visit Mrs. Beka, hoping that she would give her the answers she wanted. As she knocked on the large, wooden, double doors that led to the main building, where Mrs. Beka lived, she wondered if Mrs. Beka would help her. Soon, she gathered her courage and walked inside, immediately met with a voice that echoed throughout the large room.

“Finally, you come visit. I’ve been waiting for you for the last thirteen years, Thea.” Mrs Beka said, grinning from ear to ear.

Thea slowly walked towards the middle of the room, where Mrs Beka sat on a lounge chair, sipping something that looked like tea.

“Well, come forward! I would love to see my star student,” Mrs Beka shouted, placing the cup on a glass, round table. Thea now stood right before Mrs Beka, trying not to break eye contact with her piercing green eyes.

“I..I heard that you might know something about what happened to Marcellus,” Thea mumbled, glancing at the cup, which held a dark brown, blackish liquid.

“Oh yes, him. The coward. What do you want to know about him?” Mrs Beka growled, her eyes looking darker than usual. Thea was confused when she heard Mrs Beka call Marcel a coward, but she decided to carry on with the conversation and get the answers she needed.

“Where did he go? I haven’t seen him in over a year, no one would even mention his name.” Thea continued, staring Mrs. Beka straight in the eyes as she spoke.

“That is confidential information, Thea. Now, I believe it is time for you to get back to your dorm, don’t you think?” Mrs. Beka said, with venom in her voice as she spoke. As soon as she spoke, a few Ghost soldiers barged into the room, pulling Thea back out before closing the door behind her. That was the last time Thea mentioned Marcel to anyone inside the camp, but it definitely wasn’t the last time she had a nightmare about him.

A few more years have passed, but the nightmares never stopped. Thea had just turned sixteen, the age when she can finally unleash the light within her, as her teacher, Mr. Oliver, poetically put it. She kept getting weird letters whenever she was alone, but she never told anyone. Some of them said *Be careful, you’re always being watched*, or *watch your back*. Thea never understood where the notes were coming from, or who was writing them. After her daily chores one day, she came home to another one.

“They’re too dangerous, run while you can? What does that mean?!” Thea muttered to

herself, before balling up the note and throwing it away. She decided to go to the lake after to get her mind off of the creepy, stalkerish letters, but even then, she couldn't escape it. As she arrived at her and Marcel's special place, she once again saw a letter, stuck to a tree by a metal tack. *'I know you, Thea, and you know me. I'm not gone but you will soon be if you don't leave. Run while you can, they're coming for you. You can't let them take control. Please run, Thea, just run. -M'* it read, most of the words rushed and barely readable.

"Marcel...they're from Marcel, aren't they?" Thea spoke to herself, before taking the paper and putting it in her pocket. She then rushed back to her dorm and grabbed a brown, duffel bag from under a loose floorboard. Many questions were running through her head as she threw random stuff in her bag. What happened to Marcel? Who is he talking about? How dangerous is this? She started remembering the nightmares she would get that last few years and suddenly, everything clicked. They weren't nightmares, they were visions. But were they from the present or the future? She would have to find out after she escaped.

But before Thea could sneak out the emergency exit near her dorm room, there was a knock on her door, and everything got very quiet. She could barely breathe, hoping it was just a guard coming to check on her before lights out. Thea decided to hide in the little vent behind her bed. She smashed the small bag in the vent before forcing herself into the small boxed up area.

As soon as she closed the vent, there was a loud blast and her door flew open, breaking into multiple smaller bits. In barged at least ten Ghosts, all armed with guns.

"She's not here, everyone spread out and search for her before Mrs. Beka has our heads." One of the soldiers shouted, before all of them ran out, spreading out amongst the hallway.

Thea could hear multiple doors being burst open through the small vent that connected all of the nearby dorms. She took this chance to escape through the small window by her closet, since it's too risky to go out the emergency exit now. As she ran out of her dorm and through the field towards the woods, she heard footsteps behind her, but she continued racing through the woods, before coming upon the large metal fence that surrounded the camp. Hearing footsteps in the distance behind her, she started to climb the fence, hoping that she could escape before they reached her.

Halfway up, Thea heard footsteps below her and she started climbing even faster. Soon, she reached the top, looking down at the ground far below her which provided a way out.

"Well, guess I have to jump." She spoke to herself, before jumping off the gate. Landing on the ground, she stumbled before getting up and brushing off the leaves. As she raced away from the camp, she only had one thought. *Well Marcel, I escaped. Now where have you disappeared to?* She thought, her heart racing. As she got farther away, the footsteps behind her disappeared. Soon, she will be free, but for now she has to run.

"I'm coming to find you, Marcel, don't worry." She muttered, still running away from the camp.

1st place Poetry - Middle School Division
By: **Charleigh Nelson**
Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts

“The Balance of Extremes”

She's a whirlwind of emotions, a stormy sea,
One moment calm, the next, a raging spree.
Her moods shift like the wind, unpredictable and wild,
A rollercoaster ride, with no way to be mild.

She's a bright star, shining oh so bold,
With creativity, a spirit untold.
But then the darkness falls, like a heavy night,
And she's lost in the shadows, without a light.

She's a girl of extremes, of highs and lows,
A delicate balance, as the scales ebb and flow.
She walks a thin line, a tightrope so fine,
Between the brilliance and the crushing confine.

She's a warrior, a fighter, with a heart so true,
Battling the demons, and seeing it through.
She's a survivor, a phoenix from the flames,
Rising again, with a strength that's not tamed.

She's a puzzle, a riddle, hard to define,
A complex soul, with a deeply etched line.
She's a paradox, a contradiction, a test,
A challenge to herself, and all the rest.

She's a teenage girl, with a burden so grand,
Living with bipolar, in a foreign land.
She's a hero, a legend, with a story to tell,
Of struggles and triumphs, of a battle to quell.

She's a reminder, a beacon of light,
That even in darkness, there's still a fight.
She's a symbol of hope, in the black of night,
A shining example of the human spirit's might.

So let's lift her up, with a love so true,
And support her journey, through all she'll do.
Let's be her rock, her safe haven, her guide,
And help her navigate, with a gentle tide.

For she's a teenage girl, with a heart so bright,
Living with bipolar, in the dark of night.
But with love and support, she'll find her way,
And rise above it, come what may.

2nd place Poetry - Middle School Division
By: **Alise Lanclos**
Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts

“A Little Hope”

In a quiet room
A poet sits, her muse gone small
Once her mind a garden bright
Now shrouded in an endless night

Her pin, once swift, now lies heavy
No longer crafting starry skies
The words she sought, now hide away
In the corners of a mind gone gray

She recalls the days of endless flow
When ideas bloomed, and thoughts would grow
Every line a spark, every verse a flame
Now she struggles, even with her name

Her pages blank, a silent plea
For the return of her creativity
She stares at the paper, her heart in a bind
Searching for the magic she can't seem to find

Memories of poems once so clear
Now distant echoes, she strains to hear
The colors fade, the voices hush
Her vibrant world now turned to mush

Yet in her heart, a flicker remains
A hope that she can break these chains
She dreams of days when thoughts will soar
When her imagination will be restored

Through the darkness, she will strive
To keep her poetic soul alive
For a poet's heart, though it may tire
Will always burn with a creative fire

3rd place Poetry - Middle School Division
By: **Natalie Ulmet**
Edgar Martin Middle School

“Stream of Conscious Chaos”

Silence, panic, gibberish selections of words in my head,
Scrambling and hurrying forth.
My mind is a chaotic flood of words and thoughts.
Some written,
Some spoken,
Some in forms of images or videos.
Five chaotic streams of mind
Coming together as a river swirling and running
In more than one direction.

Order is shamed on,
And in the chaos I thrive,
One moment a whirlpool
The next a calm breeze smelling of a garden of sunflowers and daffodils. The five rivers of
chaos aren't alone,
Yet they are unfocused.

Fire coursing through the mind,
Evaporated by shelves of ice crashing down from above.
One at a time, please,
Some might ask of them.
But here in my mind,
Chaos thrives,
And order hardly exists.

The sky turns blue, then green from the canopy,
The leaves changing from the pale yellow and vibrant orange of autumn to The soft pastel
green and sharp emerald we see in spring then suddenly A cluster of harsh, bare branches with
snow falling from above. The sky dulls and quickly regains color as
The streams and river rush faster than usual.
The silence, gone,
The panic, at an extreme,
Mind racing, prancing, bolting through the forest landscape of the headspace, Head squirming
with a headache from the abundance of thoughts.

Yet it's just another Tuesday.

Honorable Mention Poetry – Middle School Division
By: **Annabelle Dore**
Edgar Martin Middle School

“The Rugaroo’s Curse”

In shadows where the bayou lies,
Beneath the dark, star-scattered skies,
The Rugaroo begins his quest,
A beast of legend, never rest.

His glowing eyes, a piercing sight,
His fur as black as the deepest night.
With claws that scratch and teeth that shine,
He wanders past the cypress line.

He wasn't always wild and mean—
He once was human, strong and keen.
But broke the rules of swamp and moon,
And so, the curse became his doom.

A hundred years, he walks alone,
His heart as heavy as a stone.
He prowls the woods, the swamps, the shores,
Forever cursed, forever more.

The children know to stay away,
When Rugaroo comes out to play.
For if he finds you, hear the tale:
He'll snatch you quick, without a trail.

Yet deep inside, there lies a man,
A life he had, a hopeful plan.
Now trapped within this beastly skin,
A victim of his own great sin.

At midnight, when the air is still,
He howls atop the moonlit hill.
A mournful cry that chills the bone,
A call to all—he walks alone.

He's not just danger in the dark,
There's something there, a tiny spark.
He wishes to be free once more,
To leave behind the beastly lore.

But 'til that day, he hides away,
A creature that the stories say
Will hunt you if you roam too near,
And fill your heart with lasting fear.

The Rugaroo walks night's long path,
His heart is filled with sorrow's wrath.
He wasn't born to live this way,
But now a beast, he has to stay.

The Cajun people tell the tale,
Of how he roams the moonlit trail.
But in his cries, there's more than fright—
The Rugaroo weeps every night.

So when you hear the wind blow cold,
And Rugaroo, the stories told, Ça
Remember he's not just a beast—
He longs for freedom, hope, and peace

Honorable Mention Poetry – Middle School Division
By: **Olivia Tassin**
Scott Middle School

“Writer’s Block”

I fall into the cracks,
And lack the words I need,
To feel,
To breathe.
But when I inhale,
The air feels stale,
I choke as my lungs fail.
My heart feels sore,
My soul so desperately wanting to outpour,
Onto its pages though its acknowledged,
It's been ages and my hands feel frozen solid,
Unable to pick up the pen that writes out my heart.

“Transparency”

I bring my horrible truths to surface,
I put them on a stage under neon lights that give them purpose,
And I'll hope my string doesn't snap,
That my walls don't crack,
That my mirror doesn't shatter,
Under the heavy truths that matter,
And hope the clatter of the glass hitting the ground doesn't scare you away.
No matter how many times it becomes apparent,
I'll always pretend my love for you is transparent,
When really it's just another one of my ugly truths.

“Fall”

Sunflower Weather.
Summer Sun is always warm,
Yet I still feel cold

High School Division (9-12)

1st place Multimedia - High School Division

By: **Sophia Bellard**

Southside High School

"Equitable"



We need to stand together. As one. NO MORE showing!
NO MORE judging. NO MORE discriminating.



Learn to greet.



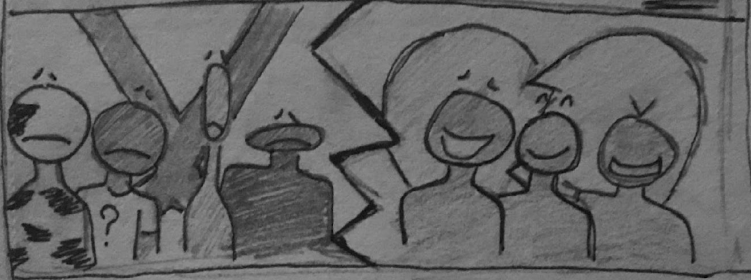
Learn to love



It doesn't matter if we look, act, sound,
or seem different...



Why are we near to "prettier" people? To people that look "normal"? Why do we have so much prejudice?



A lot of times in crime shows, the "normal" and "attractive" people turn out to be the murderers.



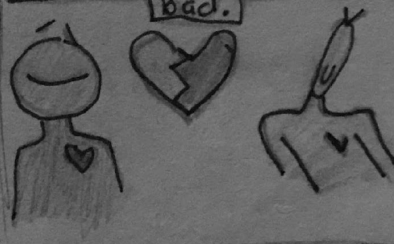
The "different" ones are blamed. The "normals" are justified. "They would never!" people scream.



But the "different" ones, they get blamed. They're the ones that get MURDERED. The victims.



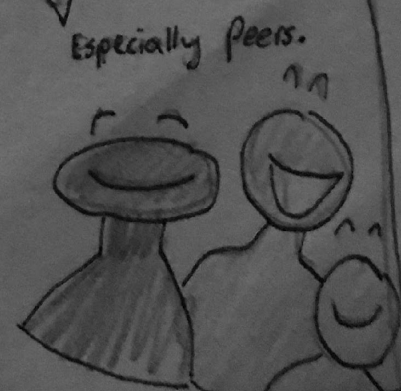
Don't get me wrong, "normal" people can be sweet. And the "different" could be bad.



But we All need to Stop judging. We'll tear ourselves a part.



We're ALL human.



2nd place Multimedia - High School Division
By: **Malak Alnesafi, Shayna Chevis, and Aaron Jack**
Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts

“Kids at Sephora”

Kid: MOMMY MOMMY MOMMY!

Mommy: What what is it now?

Kid: I NEED the new drunk elephant moisturizer to make my skin care smoothie!

Mom: DRUNK?! Excuse me?

Kid: UGH! You wouldn't understand *emo tone and hair tuck*

Mom: How much is that?

Kid: It doesn't matter mom stands for made of money either way

Worker: Hi! What can I help you with today?

Kid: Ew. Why are you working here? You're a man.

Worker: Who you talking to, little girl?

Kid: You, old man... shouldn't you be in a retirement home.

Worker: I'm 17.

Kid: Yikes. Can't tell with all those wrinkles. It looks like you need this moisturizer more than I do.

Mommy: Elizabeth Lianne Renee Grace Olivia Davis! *smacks kid* How dare you say something like that?

Kid: Whomp Whomp! It's not that serious. I don't want a man handling my skin care

Worker: *sighs* I don't get paid enough for this. Sabrina!

Sabrina: What is it? I'm on my lunch break.

Worker: She doesn't want a man handling her skin care.

Sabrina: *looks at kid* . Tell her to deal with it.

Kid: I don't want a MAN touching my skin care!

Worker: Aren't you like 10?

Kid: Aren't you like gay?

Worker: Aren't you broke?

Kid: Aren't you one fart away from being 6 feet under?

Worker: You're a brat!

Kid: And you're a man working at Sephora

Worker: Where's your mom? You know you can't buy skincare without money.

Kid: Great googly moogly! I can't buy skincare?! Without money?! OH NO!!! I don't care.
Loser *puts L on forehead and starts emoting*

Worker: You're weird. **goes to corner and eats sandwich*

Mom: *clutches pearls* Good grief! I don't know what's gotten into her

Sabrina: *walks out and eyes kid up and down* What do you want?

Kid: I want the drunk elephant moisturizer to make my skin care smoothie!

Sabrina: *slams drink down* Alright you little brat! You want drunk elephant so bad? *Slides drunk elephant over the counter.* Here.

Kid: *looks at drunk elephant* This isn't the one I wanted.

Sabrina: What?

Kid: THIS ISN'T. THE ONE. I WANTED. I wanted the moisturizer.

Sabrina: Oh, we're out of those. Sorry.

Kid: *growls* and shake violently

Mom: Y'all have to have some in the back. Please go check.

Kid: I WANT MOISTURIZER NOW

Mom: Wait honey wait, the lady is going get them right now *pats head*

Worker: You see me personally, I wouldn't take that

Sabrina: No I not I told you we're out

Kid starts hyperventilating

Mom: *hands bands* Here take this just get her the MOISTURIZER please

Worker: Dang she loaded. You got some for me?

Sabrina: *slams counter* I TOLD YOU WE DON'T HAVE ANY

Kid starts to have a mental breakdown

Worker pulls out phone and begins to record and point and laugh

Mom: STOP RECORDING MY DAUGHTER *snatches phone*

Worker pulls out second phone

Mom: This WILL be going on Facebook, I WILL be contacting my lawyer, and I WILL be giving this establishment one star on Yelp. Let's get outta here.

Drags kid

Worker and Sabrina: Thanks for shopping at Sephora! *waves bye*

Kid: I WANT MY MOISTURIZER

1st place Fiction - High School Division
By: **Kayleigh Cyprain**
Magnet Academy of Cultural Arts

“Life in Wonderland”

The tale of wonderland is a story as old as time. Many believe it is nothing more than a myth made up to lure children into the clutches of sleep; it's always been nothing more than words on a page to the masses. But Alice had seen it, lived in it, and cherished it. Alice had fallen into wonderland and fell in love with the unique wonder of it, but she had also fallen out of grace.

The visitor, now nineteen years old, became hated by the creatures that once cherished her and brought wonderland to life. They'd shunned her, sent her away, and forced her to return to a world she didn't know. The doctors said it was all fake and that Alice had been in a coma. They even said that she'd lost her mind! But Alice knew wonderland was real. She knew that those creatures likely felt triumphant for ridding their world of her.

Her “family” claimed they were concerned and hovered over her all day. However, Alice knew that they were lying. Alice knew the only family she'd ever have was down that old rabbit hole. She had to find a way back home and refused to stay in a world that didn't want her. Especially with the empty shell of a family that had long moved on without her.

When she was finally released, everything felt wrong. She had grown accustomed to the white walls and scent of sanitizer that lingered on everything there. However, outside was entirely different. Instead of the luscious forests of wonderland, she was greeted with the sight of concrete towers and cars that sped by in a blur. She felt like a mouse among a thousand rats, trapped in a cage that they'd grown to admire. It was all so terribly wrong. Alice felt her stomach tighten as nausea began to take hold.

Yet, Alice endured it all, forcing herself to try to fit in as she made her way “home” with her so-called “family.” The ride there felt as though it took hours, and instead of arriving at the somewhat familiar house from her memories, she was ushered up to a condo on the highest floor of one of the concrete monstrosities. The longer she stayed, the less her family seemed to care. Their unpleasant nagging morphed into nothing more than the occasional awkward glance from across the room. Days shifted into weeks and Alice thrived in the isolation she created, working herself to the bone as she tried to find any possible way back. However, each new strategy failed and only caused her anxious mind to push itself further in its tumble towards obsession.

She'd wake up early and research for ways back to wonderland until exhaustion forced her to fall back into the trenches of sleep. She'd read every book, searched every website, and checked every map- but they all gave the same disappointing results. It'd gotten so bad she'd begun to turn to the library for comfort, spending her hours reading every story about wonderland its shelves had to offer. Unfortunately, it still wasn't enough.

As her condition worsened, the whispers of her family did the same. They spoke of her as if she were not there, discussing how to rid themselves of her failing mind. They seemed to find joy in the notion that she was suffering, and soon enough it all was too much for Alice to bear any longer. She shattered into a million pieces; she screamed and sobbed over the whispers that constantly assaulted her ears. Yet, instead of comforting her, instead of apologizing, her family stared at her like some wild beast that they'd just discovered could bite. The disgust that painted each and every one of their faces was Alice's last straw; it was the final strike to the broken mirror that shattered its frame entirely.

Alice ran out of the door with nothing more than the pajamas on her back, but she didn't care. She'd already decided that she was never going to return to that house built of deceit and hatred. She ran until her legs gave out and collapsed in the overgrown grass as she wondered if she'd finally gotten far enough away from the rats that she could finally escape their torture. The cool breeze soothed her tears and the grass felt like the hug of a friend long forgotten as she stared up into the tree. She laid there, moving and uncaring until a familiar voice rang through the night.

In the branches above her the cheshire cat was inviting her into the tree. Alice did not waste a second in accepting the invitation, springing up and beginning to climb to the top of the tree. She could see the cat's colorful fur and the strange glint in its eyes just before she heard a snap. Then, Alice fell for the last time, just as she had fallen into the rabbit hole all those years ago. Yet, Alice was not scared or worried, she was at peace because she was convinced that she was going home.

Unbeknownst to Alice, the very family that she fled from would continue to meet every year under the tree in the garden of their abandoned family home to mourn. Once a year they would all gather to grieve the loss of their darling Alice Liddell. With each generation that passed two stories were passed down through the town. One of a sweet girl who met and unfortunate fate and one of a psychopathic teenager who had her demise on the horizon for years. Alice's Liddell's legacy will forever haunt her town as she becomes one of the myths she adored so much, as her story is told to scare children and lure them into the cold claws of sleep each night.

2nd place Fiction - High School Division
By: **Morgan Tolliver**
Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts

“I am Not Yellow”

Third week of junior year at Bridgeview High, I sat in the fourth row of Mrs. Belson’s geometry class. He sat in the second row closer to the back near the home of our class fish Flipper. This was the very moment I can trace back to all the failure that took place over the summer of 2023.

For all sixteen years of my life I have been what the average person would call odd. I’ve accepted pretty much all of me. My dark brown coils that drooped down over my thick eyelashes. My rough and hairy skin that endured all the growing pains of my teenage body. Even my green braces that I’ve had since the second grade. I, Rory Lambert, have always been weird. I’ve always been singled out. I’ve never really known how or why or what it really meant. Maybe because Lila was the older, hotter, boy magnet that I wasn’t capable of being. Maybe this is how the world works. Maybe there’s supposed to be an older sister who is perfect and a younger sister who is far from it. But I am just a fragment of everyone else’s world so how could I possibly know? Lila loved me but Dad was my best friend. Could it be because I was the last piece of Mom that he had left? After all, he says that I have her face. From every little detail even down to the single dimple of the left side of my marshmallow-like cheeks. Maybe I am the way I am because I couldn’t be her. I couldn’t be the sweet, lively soul she was. My color wasn’t yellow, I wasn’t the sun, and I darkened the room while she lit it up. And for the longest I’ve accepted me. Until last summer.

“I think you should go for it. Come on Rory, we have one more year of high school left. How is he going to know what he’s missing?” Carli said with a sly smirk. The “he” in question was Alfie Baldwin. Fourth row of Mrs. Belson’s class. Why did I have to capture Alfie’s attention? I didn’t necessarily have to. But something in the summer of 23’ was sprinkled over my pillow while I slept. Something that screamed at me to change my same old green braces that had languished as time went on. The Summer of 23’ felt yellow. My braces felt yellow. I needed to be my mother’s child.

“I guess, but what if he doesn’t notice me? What if it’s all a waste of time and I look stupid? Or what if I make the team but forget the cheer and Alfie happens to stare at me and my sweaty face and—” she stopped me before I could finish. “You’ll be fine. Literally, when Alfie looks at you he won’t know what to do with himself.” Carli was my best friend. She was the Lila I wished for. Eleven years of friendship and she’s never failed to make me smile. After cheer tryouts I waited for Lila to pick me up in her baby blue 2021 Volkswagen Beetle. I crawled in

the clown car filled with three other passengers. I scooched to the lopeft side behind the driver's seat. "What's up Snot?" Blake turned around with a grin he believed was charming. I smiled back without releasing words from my mouth. His chipped black nail polished peeped through Lila's hands as he clutched her dainty fingers. The right side of me was a slouched body that gurgled spit. Wyatt slept hunched over Valeri's shoulder. Circulating inside the car was a sharp smell of alcohol.

Lila dropped me off at our two-story brick house on Chapel St. Dad sat on his hundred year old-smelly recliner and read his daily paper. His reading glasses were positioned just to the edge of his nose as he peered through them. "Hi, gummy bear! How were tryouts?" Dad discarded the newspaper and focused on my response. "Fine. I picked up on the routine pretty easily so that's a plus." I looked down at my bag as I rested it on the counter. "I'm glad to see you getting more out there. Your Mom would've loved to watch you cheer. You remember her stories on the dance team in high school, don't you?" He waited for my answer. "Yes, I think Grandma still has her costumes at the house." I said while still avoiding eye contact. "Maybe Lila should schedule another hair appointment at Ruth's. Those stripes seem to be fading." He chuckled. At the start of summer I chopped my hair to shoulder length. Lila took me to her personal hair stylist to get hot pink highlights. This was one of the many contributions to my new self. My braces are no longer green. I've betrayed my old faithful color for the new and bright lemon yellow.

As me and Dad continued small talk I figured this would be the perfect time to ask permission to go to the Summer Beach Bash. "Carli and I were thinking about going to the Bridgeview Beach Bash if you're okay with it?" Dad isn't a fan of partying. His memory instantly replays the night of Mom's accident. I don't blame him. But I do question his state of mind. He seems to be fine on the outside but I could only imagine losing the love of your life to a reckless driver. "Um, sure gummy bear. Just make-""Sure to always be safe, I know Dad." He looked at me with admiration and smiled. "Love you Dad." I hugged and kissed him goodnight. "Love you too Rory."

The next morning Carli and I had a full schedule that would take place at the Bridgeview Mall. "This is so you, Rory." She held up a black mini dress with a green lace trim and grinned. "That would be me but I need something Alfie is going to notice. He only ever looks at me. I need him to talk to me, Carli." I saw the perfect dress staring back at me towards the end of the store. It shimmered and called out for me. "This is so me! This is an 'Alfie come and talk to me' dress!" I held up a little blue butterfly dress with a tie back and ruffles. "Yes, this is the dress Rory."

Saturday night arrived hastily. Almost every kid who attended Bridgeview High was there. The populars, the football boys, the volleyball girls and even the weirdos. Carli was

neither popular nor weird; she existed in an invisible realm between them. I followed behind as she greeted and hugged people she had last seen in May. There he was fourth row in geometry. Alfie stood there like an angel painted in a mural in ancient Greece. His effortless bed head looked perfect. His loose scraggly curls fell just above his bushy brows. He wore a short sleeve loose fitted tropical shirt with two buttons unbuttoned below his neck. My staring might have urged him to look in my direction. Something strange possessed me to flip my hair in a flirty manner. The embarrassment wasted no time and rushed into my body.

Soon I noticed him walking over. Embarrassment was shooed away by the butterflies that entered my stomach. “Sup, Carli. Who’s your friend?” He spoke in a soft slurred voice waiting for Carli to reply. “This is Rory, remember?” My heart sank and I was convinced it pounded outside of my shaking body. “Oh yea, you look different.” He glanced at me and tilted his head. “But in a good way right?” I hoped he would agree. “Sure.” As he started to walk away something took over my body. That yellow feeling of courage and some for Carli’s forceful shove, urged me to walk over and talk to him.

“Hey Alfie, um you look nice.” I said while holding my hands behind my back. “Thanks.” He says while looking ahead. “Maybe we should talk more by the firepit.” I said. A few minutes go by and he’s seemingly warming up to me. At one point we lock eyes. I took that as an invitation to lean in for a kiss. Before my lips could reach his face I was stopped by a shoulder tap. “Hey Rory, you’re cool and all but I don’t recognize you.” He said in a soft apologetic tone. “Oh, I thought you’d like the new me?” I looked puzzled as tears began to fill my eyes. “I liked you, Rory. I never could admit I liked everything about you but I thought you wouldn’t be interested in me.” He said. “Oh, you mean I always had your attention?” I looked confused. He nodded. At that very moment I realized I failed. I failed, in a way that helped me realize myself. I didn’t need to be yellow. I was perfectly green.

3rd place Fiction - High School Division
By: **Sha'Layjia Dugas**
Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts

“The Night”

“Daddy,” I hissed, tears rolling down my face as I stomped in my pretty pink heels. “Of all the men.” He looks exasperated, tired, hopeless, but I do not care. He even looks ashamed, and I know I should as well, but I do not care. The mister who calls himself *Monsieur Allard* stands next to the door near my father with his hand on his breast and a shocked look on his face. He looks dead, pale as a ghost. “This rascal is who you greet me with!” And I stand tall and I bare my own chest like a man and I step closer to the two, glaring first at my father and then at M. Allard. My voice strengthens and moves like a siren’s, and I can’t help but feel like a princess in this moment. He seems horrified, scandalized that I call him such a thing, his eyes darting between my father and I as if to ask if I’m crazy. And if he asked it out loud, I’d tell him yes. Yes! Yes, I’m crazy! I’m utterly insane! “Get out.” Off he scurries with only a bit of hesitation, murmuring a defeated goodbye to my father, who even now seems poorly equipped to handle his daughter - his mad daughter, Andiola Lorelai Sparks. “Do not speak to me.” I say with a scowl, daring him as I stare him down. His hands come to rest on my shoulders as he sighs, age wearing on his face and making him look tired.

“You need a husband, my dear.” I curse him in my mind, all the curses, never-ending curses!

“Only my mother can tell me what I need.” And I snarl like the baddest of the bad, roll my shoulders like they host the world and push him away like a rebel without a cause, my heels clicking against the glossy wooden floor as I go upstairs to my room. I hear him sigh, and he doesn’t say another word.

On the balcony, I can feel everything. The humidity and heat of this damn summer air, the romantic tingles it brushes across the skin. Everybody gets warmer in the summer, some from the summer and some from another. Hair flies on in the breeze, a lucky cool one coming every so oft, and tonight, even the moon looks like the sun with how she glows and blushes. I can feel the air on my ankles and the stares from below. They aren’t mesmerizing or wondrous, just a glance or two, a thought. Hooting and hollering and annoying groups go on, drunkards and harlots and deadbeats and delinquents. All manner of bad characters seem to flock to neighborhoods like mine and show off their inferiority. And one of them chucks something at me. I don’t know what it is until it’s sticking to the fine strands on my hair, mucking ‘em together with the scent of spearmint and saliva. I frown and I scowl and I slip my heel from my foot and chuck it back, screaming a five letter word that starts with a B, popping that consonant like its corn. The men laugh when it nearly hits whoever threw it, and they scramble for the heel, fighting over it like a pack of dogs. It’s ruined by the time there’s a victor. He holds it up, his tongue slipping out his

mouth in a most disgusting way as he makes like he's caressing an invisible leg attached to that heel. The other hits him on the head with a vengeance, pink zooming in the night until its hit and scratched dark orange tan, red dribbling down that sweaty expanse of skin. And he hollers back another five letter word, this one starting with a W, and he somehow makes it sound like an insult and a sweet tease at the same time. I turn from them, going into my room and closing the door. And nights go on like this. Daddy gets sicker, the men get more interesting, my desire for a husband stays the same. The drunkards and harlots and deadbeats and delinquents prance about in their thin clothes, showing off all the good Lord gave them, and all that they've rejected. It's the days that are fun, though. When all those bad kids act all good, because deep down inside they know they can't afford to be tough. They gotta get a job and a car and a way out of here. They're not like me. They can't chuck pretty heels off the balcony. I laugh at them when I see them now, recognizing their faces. They work at the post office, the grocery store, the Mom-n-Pop, the car wash, the dry cleaners. They clean houses, mow lawns, walk dogs, say please and thank you and yes ma'am and no sir, and here all of em are now. Except the heat of the summer night and the reflection of the perfect moon changes something in em. Hooting and hollering. And there's that same boy come and walk up to me, or as close as he can with me on the balcony. There's a mark on his forehead, scabbed and all. I have new heels on my feet, light purple. The old ones have been reused, gracing the feet of a girl I've seen stumble on in circles. He lifts his arms up and grins. "Hey there princess. You ever leave that castle?"

"No. And my hair's not long enough for you to climb." And I hear the light smack of his gum, and I'm satisfied that maybe I hit my target anyways.

"C'mon, sweet pea. You jump down and I catch you, and you ain't gotta sneak past your pop." And I think to myself that it's stupid my answer isn't immediate. I roll my eyes and back away.

"You're out your damn mind."

"You like watching us, miss. E'ery night look at you. Miss pretty thing watching us poor folk walk on by." And something really does click in me - quietly so. He is poor, and they're poor, and I do like to watch. A part of me wants to participate.

"You think I ain't got nothing better to do than hang out with a bunch of bottom-feeders?" Oohs and ahs like I'm one of them and we're sharing a joke.

"Well you ain't got nothing better to do than watch, Miss. Come on and join us. Come join me." Maybe it's the way he so humbly offers a slice of new experience, his soft tone and smile settling it.

Being on the same level as them feels different, me with my royal ebony composition and white and pastel multicolored floral print dress, those lovely light purple heels. And they're dressed in worn clothes and oil-dirtied trousers, overalls and hand me downs. I stick my nose up and puff my chest out a bit, reminding myself that I'm a princess, and that's a princess, not a doll, but someone who just hasn't become a queen yet. "Well, here I am."

"Well, there you are." He stalks towards me, the faces of his friends blissful, some of them already wandering off with a restless buzz. He's drunk, his steps unsure and his posture sloppy. I scoff when his arm wraps around my waist, drawing me to him as he grins.

"Hello?"

"Hello, princess. You like the outside?" I push him off and flick my clothes, getting the trace of him off.

"I'm starting to not."

He only laughs, and despite the downward slope of my lips, I walk with them, watching them hoot and holler and roll like lightning off clumsy thunder.

Today is different. I'm wearing a simple dark green gown and black heels, gold jewelry adorning my outfit. The man sitting across from me talks quietly, his smile gentle and thoughtful as he listens to my father and I speak. Daddy asks him about his company a few times - he responds with numbers I don't care about and glances at me sheepishly with a bashful grin. I smile back, tilt my head, watch him with curiosity. I can't quite place what separates him from all the others. Soon we're sitting in the living room, watching cheesy films as he drapes his arm across my shoulders, our faces red from laughter. And then the chorus, the symphony. He scrunches his nose and scoffs, looking out the window, where a dark orange tan face stares at me with what I think may be the most sobriety I've seen from it ever.

He stands up and closes the curtain right after the betrayal blooms on that face in the dark.

"Nobody's watching them frolic. Someone ought to teach em to keep their eyes to themselves."

Honorable Mention Fiction - High School Division
By: **Anna Gonzales**
Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts

“A Christmas Disaster”

Everything was wrong. Santas were in the malls, wreaths were on the doors, elves were on the shelves, and Frank Sinatra’s voice sang beautiful Christmas carols. Now, you may be wondering what was wrong with people feeling holly and jolly during Christmastime. I would answer that indeed, feeling the Christmas cheer was a lovely thing. However, today was June 25th. That’s right, it was the middle of summer. This brings me back to my previous statement: everything... was... wrong...

An uneasy feeling crept down my spine as I made my way through the streets trying to avoid getting trampled by shoppers running to and fro. The oddest thing about it, though, is that their cheeks were flushed and their breaths were visible as if it were a cold winter day. To add to the oddities, people kept giving my summer attire questioning looks as if I were the one dressed inappropriately. I finally decided to stop a young woman carrying a bag of candy canes. What she could ever need that many for, I doubt I’ll ever know.

“Excuse me, ma’am, could you help me with something?”

“Sweetheart, in case you haven’t noticed, I’m in a bit of a rush- oh my! What are you wearing?” She exclaimed.

“That’s what I wanted to ask you, actually. Why is everyone acting like it’s Christmas?” I questioned.

A blank distant look appeared on her face as her eyes briefly deadened. Then, as if nothing had happened, life returned to her face as she quickly ran her eyes up and down me.

“Baby, aren’t you cold in those clothes?” she asked, visibly concerned.

My brows furrowed in confusion. “Never mind.”

The next couple of days were quite similar. It was now July 2nd and it was my 73rd time listening to All I Want For Christmas is You by Mariah Carey and my sanity was dangerously close to snapping. I had gotten fussed at by my mom for “acting the fool” by wearing summer clothes. She said she would ground me if I kept up the farce that it was the middle of summer, so now I was scared, alone, confused, and very, very hot. I couldn’t go anywhere without sweating bathtubs due to heavy fur coats or heaters blasting in my face paired up with the unforgivingly cruel summer sun. And of course, because my mother was... well... my mother, she soon started to blame my bizarre behavior on drugs. FYI, I build legos, skate, and study in my spare time. I am not doing drugs.

My mother and I didn't exactly have the best of relationships. Ever since my dad passed last year in January she'd been really stressed between her two jobs and my not so perfect grades. I tried telling her that I was trying the best that I could and that I probably had ADD and dyslexia, but she was from a family who didn't believe in "mentally ill crap" and thought I was just making stuff up to excuse my C's and D's. This created a lot of tension between us. That, and also that she wasn't around much because she was either at work or trying to find a new boyfriend, which I resented. It was too soon.

According to those around me, Christmas was two days away. I decided to write my mom a letter since she believed that today was December 23rd and not July 4th. To me, this was a huge show of love because I absolutely detested reading and writing. As I sat in my room trying to figure out the fanciest way I knew of saying "Thank you for being a good mom, I love you" while desperately trying to not think about the legos calling my name, a loud crash jolted me out of my reverie. I bounded down the stairs and ran straight out of the front door, looking around me.

A three car pileup was in front of my house. Shards of glass and other random car parts littered the ground as a cloud of smoke slowly rose from the accident. People ran to the cars with looks of horror as ambulances rushed to the scene.

My mother found me and pulled me back inside the house. I asked her what had happened and just as she was about to answer me, the look of near panic disappeared off her face and was replaced with a calm that was unnatural for my stressed mom.

"Sweetie," she said. "Would you like to decorate some cookies with me?"

My mom never called me sweetie.

My blood turned cold as I stared into her face; her eyes that were slightly too big, her smile that was just a little too wide. It was just a couple of things that were just a tad bit off, but the combination of all of them gave her an uncanny air that made goose bumps appear on my skin as I ran up the stairs and locked myself inside of my room. *What on earth was going on?*

I tried calling my friend to see if he thought anything was off, too. Looking back, I do realize that this was a stupid idea, but I was desperate.

"Hello?" he asked, his voice cheerful. Too cheerful.

Great, I thought. My friend had never been an outgoing person so hearing him so unnecessarily joyous was very off-putting. I hung up. A few minutes later, the doorbell rang, disturbing the silence of the dark house. I heard the door open, but the weird thing about that was that I hadn't heard any footsteps going to the door, which was impossible since all the floors downstairs were wooden.

My mind was seriously reaching its limit as I huddled on the floor of my closet, a blanket over me. My goal was that if someone came into my room, they would see the window I had left open and assume that I had run off.

“Hello,” said the visitor. “How are you?”

“Hi, Simon!” My mom responded cheerfully.

Simon..? Oh no... Now it made sense why the voice sounded so familiar. I didn't want to believe that the friend I had just been on the phone with had miraculously appeared at my front door in mere minutes even though he lived 30 minutes away. I had called his house phone, too, so I was certain that he had been home five minutes ago.

My breaths were coming in short as I grabbed my backpack containing all of my necessities and a couple changes of clothes. I hurried over to the window and briefly gazed out at the snow filled streets, hoping I wouldn't slip. Snow... Snow?? I snapped my head back towards the window and felt the hot summer sun beating on my exposed skin, unable to help but notice that the cars that were just in front of my house were now gone without a trace. I took a deep breath and began scaling down the wall into the empty street below. Just then, I heard my mother and Simon calling for me outside my bedroom door, again as if they had magically appeared there instead of walking up the noisy wooden stairs.

As I finally reached the ground, a strong sense of unease gripped me. Or maybe that was just the dozens of hands suddenly grabbing onto me, those hands somehow including my mom and Simon's. I thrashed and screamed, but was quickly overpowered and thrown to the ground, the faces grinning ominously down at me were so numerous that I could only see a small circle of blue sky.

“Hi, sweetie,” My “mom” said, her lips still stuck in an unmoving grin. “Aren't you tired of being alone?”

Tears sprang into my eyes. “Yes...” I choked out.

“So join us.”

“I can't...”

“Just jing us. Let go, it'll be alright.”

“But-”

“You'll be all alone if you don't. Become like us.” All the voices had joined in now until it was a barely discernible whisper.

“I'm sorry, mom.”

“Dark of The Sanctuary”

The door was closed shut and a sign taped to the fresh mahogany wood read "Enter at your own risk." I was roaming through the abandoned church in my hometown and happened to come across it. People said it was filled with the spirits of those who once praised God in it. The room caught on fire some decades ago and killed the whole congregation that Sunday morning. No one knows what caused the fire, and no one has come back since then. The smell of smoke still permeates the air, even today. I've come here to get confirmation of His existence. As much as everyone says he doesn't want me, I need to know for myself. So I'll walk through the dark of the sanctuary to find Him.

I placed my fingers on the door, traced the dust down from the sign to the handle, and turned it open. A wave of cold air hit me. I walked inside, into the eternal darkness that almost covered the entire room, oblivious to all of my surroundings. From the faint light coming through the stained glass windows, I could tell this was the main room where all the services used to be held. I walked down the aisle, up to the altar, hopelessly looking up at the ceiling. I figured I could find Him here, so I closed my eyes. For a brief minute, I prayed. I should've fell to my knees, but I didn't. I saw everyone fall to their knees in the pews when I was a kid, so I always copied them, but this time, I was alone. I just stood.

When I opened my eyes, a man appeared before me. He wasn't God, though. Just a man. His face was blurry, body perfectly sculpted through his clothes, voice deep like an earthquake. I froze when I saw him. He looked at me with smoldering eyes, the same eyes all the men looked at me with in my daydreams and nightdreams. It was familiar, it was confusing, it was sin, but I did nothing to stop it. He began to walk in my direction, and the closer he got, the more I realized he was a ghost. Now we were face to face. He touched my hand and kissed my lips. Though I couldn't feel it, it made me smile. I felt ashamed and embarrassed, but no one was around. I was the only one here.

At that moment, I knew of His existence. It wasn't real. If he loved me, if he really wanted me, my praise, my worship, my loyalty, my utmost admiration, why would He hurt me like this? Hurt isn't love. Pain isn't love. Making someone suffer isn't love. I died after that by the table with the collection plate on it and went straight to Hell. As I burned, I thought of that kiss. I knew it wasn't a choice. I knew if love meant unhappiness, then I was meant to be here.

1st place Poetry - High School Division
By: **Radha Kulkarni**
Lafayette High School

“Forever Transient”

Shining bright, the sun rises high as
Poppies bloom under the Eastern sky.
Ruby buds open, fresh with life, glowing
In the dew-dropped grasses.
Nestled in a tree, a cardinal trills,
Garnet red against olive leaves.

Scarlet strawberries, fat with juice, swing
Under drooping stems, as ladybugs
March across sunbaked earth, taking wing to the
Midday air, swollen with heat. The wind
Exhales sluggishly, bats restlessly at
Raspberry leaves.

Ants march soundlessly over fallen leaves,
Under oak trees that shiver, barren in the chill
That autumn brings.
Umbrella-like branches reach upwards towards
Monarch butterflies migrating south, escaping
Numbing silence.

White snow falls from frostbitten air,
Icy snowflakes drift to frozen hills,
Neck and neck with the crimson, setting sun,
Trembling with exhaustion.
Enter the cardinal with one final trill as
Red fades to black.

2nd place Poetry – High School Division
By: **Addison Fontenot**
Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts

“The Familiar Hand”

There is a hand that bares itself from the ground
It longs to hold mine, and I ache
There is not a moment that it leaves me alone
A hand that only I know greets me as I walk
The day grows old, night takes over
but the moon feels far from my window
I lay in bed, hearing the floorboards groan
They call my name, and I know
Fingers tug the covers I sleep in,
Want me to feel like home
There is nothing I wish to give
It still won't let me go.
A tired breath and a look at the hand before me
Its fingers move, grasping the air above
The eyes I hold are now closed,
My arm leans down to the hard floor
A wooden board, a rusted nail
Rough skin, and a frigid touch
Fingers wrap around mine,
I find it doesn't hurt, not like I once believed
The moon fades, stars begin to blur
Rising birds chirp, and the day must be bright
I'm on the edge of the bed as its grip tightens, and I know
A hand that is so desperate will never let go.

3rd place Poetry – High School Division
By: **Isabel Rosales**
Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts

“Behind the Curtain”

Sitting on the edge of your bed
Wondering about reality
Wondering what is like to be outside
Being able to feel the wind between your hair
Feeling the sunlight on your skin
So you look at it
Thinking if you would ever be able to go outside
Be able to taste the freedom
And run down and up the hills
The curtains illuminate from the outside
Glowing in your eyes with desire
Pulling you in
Getting closer and closer to the land of wonder
The smallest touch of the window can brighten your soul
But even though you want to explore the outside world
You sadly can't
For it has been told that it's dangerous
That nothing good will ever come from it
So you continue to sit in your bed
Wondering when it will be safe to go

Honorable Mention Poetry – High School Division
By: **Sophia Bellard**
Southside High School

“Ambedo”

(noun): A kind of melancholic trance in which you become completely absorbed in vivid sensory details

The wind sighed through my branches. My leaves rustled lazily about, making a soft and gentle song. The scraping of leaves on one another was almost like the whisper of wings flapping around, just like the birds who nestled deep within the branches, deep within the hole of my trunk.

The bark on my old trunk was softly peeling, still healing from the past brutal winter. Bugs buzzed about, crawling and burrowing and making little homes for themselves. Some of the bark falls off in gentle tufts, wafting around me before landing gently on the floor, a halo around my roots.

My roots were happily nestled deep within the moist Earth, drinking up any moisture that could be deep within, getting ready for the upcoming spring. I hum a soft song, yearning for the warm spring. I look down, smiling softly at all the life I was helping.

Tiny buds blossoming around me, eager to take on the world. Their stems poked out, curious and new, getting a feel of the Earth before fully opening up. Their perfume wafting around me, holding close. A nice patch of mushrooms sprung up around me, clambered into tightly woven groups. Their caps range from opened fully to barely peeking out. All of them were a lively color and were all there to help. “We’re here! We’re ready to assist!” they sigh happily. I relaxed, content. This cycle of old and new was comforting. Definite. Fulfilled.

I sat still and sure in the orchards, gazing around from my perch on the hill, taking in all this new life budding up before me. All this new existence, so curious and ready to take on the world. So anxious to see its beauty. I watched, happy at their avidity; a wise old tree amongst the latest, fresh buds.