



Youth Writing Competition

In collaboration with the
National Writing Project of Acadiana

Winners' Anthology

Fall 2020

Acknowledgments

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This anthology is dedicated to Steve Domingue, whose support over the last several years has allowed us to not only survive, but thrive, in difficult financial times.

Sincerely,

Toby Daspit
Co-Director
National Writing Project of Acadiana

H. Michelle Kreamer
Director of Research Initiatives and Youth Programming
National Writing Project of Acadiana

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Elementary School Division (Grades 3-5)

1st place Poetry—Elementary School Division

By: **Shya Hebert**

Broadmoor Elementary School

“Eclipse”

The Sunday morning after you left
Was different than those before it
The usual Sunday calm stretched
Farther from me--
A state's length away
All I wanted to do
Was watch Gilmore Girls
Or bake Funfetti cupcakes
Or laugh on Nana's couch
Or make fun of Daryll
Or swim
Or read
Or anything that would remind me of you
Instead I sat
With eyes closed
Until the sun
Snuck through my window
And kissed my forehead
The way you did
Before saying goodbye
She told me she's best friends with the moon
Even though they're so far away in the sky
She said she shares her light with the Moon
So she can light the darkness
Friends like day and night
Connected by a circle of love
Remind me that we're never really apart
When you lead
I follow
Like the night follows the day
No matter where we are.

“On Second Thought”

I barely had time to think, when I found out school shut its doors--
That the virus seeped its way through and glued them shut
I thought it might be nice to sleep in
Now, it feels impossible to think of a time before the virus
A time before: Before locked doors, face masks, six-feet apart,
And frozen...time, time, time
Time to sit, think, and write along with words of news reports
Time to drift and dream
Time to feel: Sadness, depression, and longing, like a burger with no meat
Time to appreciate the time before
But
When the time came to hear school bells again
I woke with a smile, and I didn't give that a second thought.

2nd place Poetry—Elementary School Division
By: **Chloe Willis**
Jefferson Island Road Elementary

Ode to the Uneven Bars

A high twig
holds me.
I'm a feather.
Cartwheels
on air
that bring
me higher,
my hands
are explorers
that discovered
a path
to the
wonderful
world of
magic.
I hold up
my invisible
hands
that reach
from island
to island.
My hands
are telescopes
that help me
see the world.
My arms
wrapping
around trees,
my hands
out of
control
going everywhere.
Suddenly
they fly
high,
higher than
the trees
that wait
for me.

3rd place Poetry—Elementary School Division
By: **Haiden Dugas**
Cankton Elementary School

Turkey Turkey

Thanksgiving

Turkey
Feathers so big
Gobbling-waddling
Walking all around filled with fear
Dinner

1st Fiction—Elementary School Division
By: **Greta Schexnayder**
Myrtle Place Elementary

Murder Mystery: the marriage never ends

It was a cold, yet warm October Tuesday morning, I was walking to work, all the Halloween decorations were up in my neighborhood, and no one was up at this time of the morning, so I was alone. I wasn't entirely scared, but as a woman, I had a right to be a little scared. It was cold, so I had a green jacket, blue jeans, and I had a navy blue shirt underneath, so I felt comfortable. I arrived at the Los Angeles detective bureau about 5 blocks from my house. I had left my daughters, Annie and Chloe, with my boyfriend Juan, They aren't his though. I am a mother of two, who has a boyfriend, living in the house, and you might be thinking “that’s so unsafe” but I trust him. Yes, I have been in a previous marriage and my husband, Collins, has a criminal record. He told me after being married for two years, that's why I divorced him. That is where Annie and Chioe came from, Collins. My partener, Louis, was at work when I got there.

“Hey sugar, how's it going?” I took off my jacket and hung it on my chair, He always called me that, I protested against him calling me that, but he refused to stop.

“Louis, I asked you to stop!” I said in a way that somehow made him smile.

“Alright, then I'll call you...” he stopped as if he was thinking of something that he already knew.

“Diablo, yea, that sounds right.”

I smiled, “I have a name, you know, It’s Bailey.”

He frowned slightly “I’m still going to call you sugar.”

I frowned. “Fine,” I said sorrowtully. My friend at the office, Jake, dropped off a file named: dead girl found in Los Angeles City Park. “Boss wants you to look through this,” said Jake. I looked through it. It was horrific, her name was Julia Johnson. She was beaten to death, the file also stated that she was held for 47 hours before her killer had beaten her to death. She had been starved. She was dumped after being beaten where she was held captive. “Hey, Louis, come take a jook at this,” I said, trying to sound worried so he would pay attention to me for once.

He took a minute to read it, but soon he said “let's go to the scene of the crime” I nodded and we climbed into my van and zoomed off. Once we got there, the body was being carried away. “Stop, let me and my partner take a look,” said Louis.

“Alright,” said one of the men rolling the body away “Prepare yourself,” said the other one. Louis uncovered the body, I looked away and gagged as Louis did the same. I looked back, she looked like she had been thrown off of a bridge, five times. I only glanced, but I knew there was more to the story than “she had been beaten”.

“Louis, there is something that they aren't saying.”

He frowned. "I can tell, it's horrific". We went back to the office and we started investigating. Based on the evidence, we thought that she had been taken off the street and that her killer was most likely a psychopath, and he had been abused as a child. We also thought that he may have a wife based on his actions, but he may have a girlfriend. We looked into it some more. We compared what the evidence said, and then, we got a hit.

DNA was found at the scene. "Finally, a break," I said.
"Yeah, but I'm enjoying solving this case," said Louis
"You weirdo," I said, smiling.

It turns out, there was an autopsy report. It had shown that she had been tortured, and there were certain marks on her wrists and her ankles, she had been bound. The DNA matched someone, we knew that it did, but we didn't know who. Finally, the results came in. Someone named Collins Brown, I stared at the report in shock. It was him? No, it couldn't be. I couldn't sleep that night. I felt worried, scared and shocked all at the same time. I felt as if someone had stabbed me in the heart five times. I got an hour of sleep, I had dreamed about Collins, he wasn't evil, he was nice. He didn't have a record, he was clean. I dreamt until my anxiety woke me up. When I got up, I needed coffee, a lot. I went downstairs and there he was. Him. Collins.

I gasped in horror. He stared at me, a bloody knife in his hands. I said stupidly, "Who did you kill?" He started at me and it felt as if it was seconds before I started running and running. Soon, I had blacked out. The rest is a blur, but I remember one thing, being bound up in my own room, Annie, Chloe, and Juan were there. I started panicking as I saw blood trickling from Juan's stomach. I saw the girls were alright, but they were both blacked out. I was alone, with Collins.

"Long time no see." said Collins, in a cold, dirty voice.

"What do you want from me?" I asked, but no sound was coming out, I soon realized, there was tape over my mouth! I tried to move, but I couldn't move my hands, nor my feet. I was bound, just like in the case file. I was one of his victims. I worked it out in my head that he was killing because he wanted revenge on me, for divorcing him. I was the cause of this, I made this happen. I felt so horrible.

"Want to play a game?" asked Collins in the same, cold, dirty voice. I tried to scream, but the sound was blocked. I banged my whole body everywhere, screaming, shouting, crying, but no one, no one, was coming to help. I was stuck with him. Was he going to kill me, he had already killed Juan, but what about Annie and Chloe? Were they going to be alright? "Let's go," said Collins.

"No!" I said in a muffled voice, "Annie, Chloe, wake up!"

He took the zip ties off of my feet, and we walked, it seemed as though we were walking for hours, but I knew that we had been walking for a few seconds. We got to the backyard after what seemed like forever. He had a whole set of knives. Machetes, hatchets, and more that I could even name. He also had many guns. Was he going to torture me? If so, then would he make me look like Julia had? I frowned under my tape. For a few minutes, he was fooling around with his tools. He soon came out with a very sharp knife. "This is my favorite out of all of these," said Collins, sounding like a little kid talking about his rock collection. "I'll put him to

work today,” said Collins. He then took off the tape on my mouth. “Do you like him?” He said. I nodded and he smiled. “Say it, say that you like it,” said Collins, in a deep, cold voice.

“I-I like it,” I knew that if I didn’t cooperate, then I would be dead faster, and that would give me more time to escape if I did cooperate. I said slowly “What are you going to do to me and the girls?”

“Nothing to the girls, but you, I have plans for you.” He took out a rope, and he put it in front of my face and teased me with it. I frowned. Then he took out his “favorite knife” and as I felt something penetrate through my skin, I thought many things, I thought “Isn’t he going to torture me first?” and also “He might do that to me after I’m dead,” and my last thought was the most terrifying one “What about Annie and Chloe?” Next thing I knew, I was dead.

Middle School Division (Grades 6-8)

1st place Poetry—Middle School Division

By: **Titi Tinubu**

Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts

White-washed

You know black girl right?
That means constant gaslighting from society,
people thinking that we always want to fight,
and constantly questioning our propriety.
Getting told the usual “I would never date a black girl”
and wanting blue eyes and straight hair.
Figuring out the best way to get rid of our curls
And hearing the common phrase “I’m not racist I swear.”
But when you try to fit in you get called white-washed.
Acting white, texting white, dressing white, all of the above.
Meanwhile we are just trying to fit in at any cost,
because our natural characteristics are what most make fun of.
But yet when it comes down to it they want our hairstyles, curves, big lips, and more
Getting fake tans that make them look like passing person of color
and using our characteristics as decor.
How the tables have turned, yet no one wants to hear our hollers.
So when I get told that I am acting white,
I ask myself, is this not what they wanted?
And once again I stand there like a deer in headlights,
confused as to why we get taunted.
We are the main source of trends, fashion, and dances.
While we might get put down the most, people want what we possess.
History must not repeat itself under any circumstances,
and while we have had our problems, the oppressor shall not be oppressed.

2nd place Poetry—Middle School Division
By: **Aaron Jack**
Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts

Black Dove

I'm your reflection holding your possessions.
With a bright and burning match.
These walls you built are coming down.
And not a single brick you'll catch.

You stabbed me to death and ripped out my lungs.
But I still rose from the dead.
You can't get rid of people like yourself.
I'm just like you, but I'm messing with your head.

I came back to life as a black dove.
And fooled the pristine whites.
I made them think I was innocent.
So they wouldn't suspect my shadows at night.

When the fools weren't looking, I sharpened my beak.
And became the king of the ducks.
So, now I'll drag you in the pond.
With a poisonous plan I'll quickly construct.

I'm your reflection holding your possessions.
With a bright and burning match.
I've turned you to black dove, too.
Now we'll die together, all strings attached.

3rd place Poetry—Middle School Division
By: **Laila Landry**
Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts

The Book

There once was a book,
That would sit on its nook.
It felt so high in the sky,
Only thing that could get it was a fly.
It was shiny and gold,
None of the pages fold.
The words were in Greek,
And written so sleek.
It was about mystery,
And had lots of history.
It was quite very old,
But the words were still bold.
The cover was a torch,
That had a fiery scorch.
Inside were images,
Of some sort of scrimmage.
You have to decode,
And get in the right mode.
There is rarely any words,
But don't think it's just for nerds.
It's actually very interesting,
It just takes a lot of listening.
I'll just give you one clue,
It began with a view.

1st place Creative Nonfiction—Middle School Division
By: **Madison Lanclos**
Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts

The Battle of Life

Everyday can feel like a battle. A fight that seems impossible to win. You try, and try but you always end up losing. You wake up every morning thinking that today will be different, but it isn't. It's the same as it was yesterday and the day before that. To you life feels like an endless cycle of disappointment and disaster. You feel like you aren't good enough to have something work out for you. So you always expect the worst, and never plan for the best. Life for you is like a merry-go-round, because everything just repeats itself and nothing ever changes. You always feel like everybody has a better life than you. But just like you, everybody goes through bad and good times. You hide behind a smile and every time someone asks if you're 'ok' you say you're fine when in reality you're broken inside and wish you had the courage to talk to someone but you don't. So you just keep your feelings to yourself and try to forget about all of your worries, but you can't. Instead your mind just keeps reminding you and then you feel worse than you did before because now you know that no matter what you do you will never be able to forget. "But that's just how life is" everybody says, and you wish it wasn't true but from experience you know it is. To you life is just a constant feeling of sadness and disappointment. And you keep your feeling hidden from everybody because the feeling of everybody knowing how you truly feel is terrifying. So you do your best to keep them to yourself and always let people think that there is never anything wrong even if there is. In your mind you're constantly asking yourself "why is life hard for me?" when actually life is hard for everybody. Life is just a depressing game and whoever is unlucky enough to play always loses. You wish that it was different but at the same time you know that you wishing won't change anything. You don't

even bother to have dreams because in your mind you know that they will never come true so you just forget about any dream you ever had. And at school you never have fun and to make matters worse you've always been the odd one out so you never really had many friends. So you just spend your days alone and away from everybody else. And to you life is just unfair. And it always will be, no matter what you do.

2nd place Creative Nonfiction—Middle School Division
By: **Sophie Simon**
Academy of the Sacred Heart

Oreo

We live in a small wooden house in Sunset, Louisiana. I am eight years old. There is a playground behind our house, our house is also surrounded by a forest. I have always wanted a little cat, since our house is in the country we always have lots of stray dogs or cats passing by. We even have snakes sometimes. My mom never let me keep any of the cats though because she is scared that they have diseases. We play on the playground almost every day. We do this because in the country we have terrible internet, so none of us could watch TV or play on our ipads.

One day there was a terrible rainstorm that went on for about five or so hours. I kept hearing banging and realized that it was branches hitting the ground. It made me nervous that a tree would fall on our house since there is a huge live oak on the side of the house. Once it was over we went outside to check and see if anything had gotten damaged because the house was really old and most of the wood was dry rotted. Then we went to the playground, but I heard a terrible noise. The noise was like a hundred bumblebees fighting with each other. I was really worried to see what it is. But it ended up being okay. A little kitten was screeching and moaning; it was so sad to look at. It was black and white striped, like a hundred Oreos stacked on top of each other. I called her Oreo. Whenever I found her she was all worn out, tired, and hungry. She had a huge ringworm and was so skinny that I could see her rib cage. I thought that she was about to die, but whenever I picked her up she started purring. I went inside to give her some water and peeled the skin off some of Cane's chicken tenders to give to her. She ate it so fast. After I fed her my mom walked into the room and screamed. I said, "Mom, stop! You're scaring Oreo."

She said, "Get that cat out of my house!"

I said, "But mom, she needs a bath and we need to take her to the vet to get the ringworm checked." Then my mom said, "Ok, but it depends on what the vet says about that cat if we will keep her."

And I said, "Thanks, Mom!" After that, she said, "Wait, you need to do all the laundry, and the dishes if you wanna keep that cat."

I said, "FINE."

Then my dad came into the kitchen and said, "Don't get too attached to her because something could happen."

I said, "Okay dad, but I don't think that anything will happen at all."

My mom and I went to go buy food for Oreo the next day, and I was still mad at her for making me do all the laundry, and dishes yesterday. But I mean I had to do something that would make her let me keep Oreo. When we got home I gave Oreo the food. She would not eat it and I got worried. What if she is sick? My mom came up to me and said, "Sophie she is just scared, don't worry."

Then I said, "Your right, she'll be fine."

The next week I took Oreo and put her in a kennel. We got in the car to go to the vet and Oreo would not stop hissing. She really hates car rides. The vet gave us some medicine that we have to give Oreo every day so that the ringworm would go away. My family and I got in the car to drive to our house. Two days later Oreo ran away. I knew that there was We started to look everywhere for her. I was just heartbroken, it felt like I had been stabbed in the heart. My dad had even said, "Don't get too attached because something might happen to her." I wish I had listened to him, but I had so much fun playing with her anyway and she was so fluffy and cute. I was so sad whenever she ran away but I guess that life can't be perfect.

1st place Fiction—Middle School Division
By: **Jedesia Joseph**
Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts

There is One Impostor Among Us

The game that is taking over teenagers all around the world, Among Us. 5 friends got together to play the game in real life. In among us there are crewmates and 1 impostor, who pretends to be crewmate, but also kills crewmates. Lucy, Anna, Grace, Katie, and Maddie decided to play the game in real life. The rules are they put 5 papers in a hat, 4 with a crewmate, 1 with an impostor. When the impostor kills you, you have to go into the house and announce your death. Everyone will hide outside when the game begins at midnight.

Katie and Maddie arrived at Anna's house at 8:15, and Lucy and Grace arrived at 8:30. The girls still had time before the game was to begin so they made tik toks and watched the movie clueless. At around 11:30 they all picked hiding spots and got the hat ready. "Katie if I'm impostor I'm going to kill you first", Anna said. "No you better not, I always die first ", Katie responded. They all walked outside and each grabbed a piece of paper and walked away. Anna ran into the backyard to hide in the shed ,and the sound of running over the crunching leaves scared her. Lucy ran to the trampoline and had the brilliant idea to hide under it. Grace followed Maddie because she claimed she was afraid of the dark. Katie was unbothered and surprised she hadn't died yet so she just swung on the swing set. Minutes later Maddie called a meeting and claimed it was Grace because she wouldn't stop following her . They all had a group vote and Grace was voted off. Grace showed everyone her piece of paper that had a crewmate on it, but now she was out of the game. **Grace was not the impostor.**

Maddie had the same idea as Lucy and slowly crept under the trampoline. Maddie then smelt a foul smell, so she took her phone and shined her light and wasn't prepared for what she saw. Lucy was laying under the trampoline dead in cold blood. She had a lot of stab wounds and blood was everywhere. Maddie soon let out a blood hurling scream. Then she began to hear footsteps behind her. The screaming stopped and everything was dead silent. Anna and Katie soon began to worry about Maddie and Lucy so they teamed up to see what happened. "I bet Maddie is the impostor and she's trying to trick us," Kaite said . "Yeah maybe" said Anna. The two slowly walked by the trampoline and peeked under. They saw Lucy, and Anna was about to scream until Katie put her hand over Anna's mouth and said , "shhhh, whoever killed Lucy is looking for us, if we scream they will find us". She said in a shaky voice. **Maddie was missing.**

Anna and Katie ran into a next door neighbor's house. There they found Maddie with a terrified look on her face holding a stab wound. "He's in here, run ", she said. Katie and Anna tried to run but someone wearing all black and a ski mask grabbed both of them. "Who are you and what do you want", Anna said. " I just wanted to play the game too," the man replied. Katie and Anna both cried and begged to go home. Then Katie remembered there was a serial killer on the loose who was obsessed with games and always won. Anna, Katie, and Maddie all were sitting in the corner wondering what to do next. Grace began to wonder where everyone was and why they were taking so long. She saw a trail of blood leading to the neighbor's house. Grace slowly peered open the door and saw all her friends terrified. The man gripping the knife in his

hand slowly turned around and took off his mask. **“Grace?” “Dad,” she replied.**

2nd place Fiction—Middle School Division
By: **Salha Abdul**
Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts

Ten Minutes

2:05 A.M.

HELP ME! I'M DYING! I'M DYING! HOW COULD I DO THIS? I DON'T WANT TO GO! I
WANT TO STAY!

Ten minutes earlier...

1:55 A.M.

Right now, I'm home alone. I'm pretty sure I should be sleeping right now, but I can't sleep. It's silent. I can hear my own breathing. I've been trying to sleep for hours but my mind is just too restless. I keep thinking about people, my past, my future, and even my now. All my mistakes, mistakes that I can make in the future, and mistakes that I'm making now. I know I'm going to regret doing this, but it has to be done. I can't go on like this...

1:57 A.M.

I'm in the kitchen right now. I just found the pills. I need to do this... I can't open the bottle. The cap is rough and it's hurting my hands. Is this a sign? Should I still be doing this? Is the universe trying to tell me something? Does someone out there still want me? No. Stop thinking about that. If anyone wanted me or even cared about me, they've had years to say something, but they haven't. UGH, this stupid bottle won't open! I throw it to the floor and head back to my room. I guess I'm not going to do it after all.

1:58 A.M.

I'm in my bed again. I'm mad that I couldn't get that bottle open, but if I really wanted that, wouldn't I have found a way? I guess that wouldn't have been the right decision then.

Either way, no one would miss me. They would be happy this ugly, fat, dumb, waste of space left this earth permanently. No one cares now, why would they care then? Why should they care? I treat everyone cruelly and expect something in return. I expect love in return. I expect someone to care about me. That's so stupid and greedy though. Who could love or even care about me?

1:59 A.M.

I'm in the hallway. It's right between the kitchen and my room. I'm trying to walk into the kitchen, but something's stopping me. What's stopping me? I want to do this. I need to do this. It's not a matter of wanting anymore. If anyone truly loved me, they should've said something. If anyone ever cared about me, they would talk to me and ask the words I can't answer anymore, "Are you okay?". Am I? Is wanting to die okay? Is hating everything about yourself okay? I'm at a crossroads. Should I head back to my room and finally ask someone for help, or should I end all of this pain right now?

2:00 A.M.

I'm in the kitchen. I see the bottle laying on the floor, lifeless. Is that how I will be soon? Will I be at peace? Will I finally be able to rest? I pick up the bottle. I hear the pills rattling, like a rattlesnake when someone gets too close. It's colder than when I was holding it. Is that how I will feel? Cold and lifeless? If I do this, how long will it be until someone finds me? I don't care. I've never wanted a funeral either way. I open the bottle at last. It was so easy to open this time. I guess I really do want this. There's no smell. I guess I should expect that. I pour about seven onto the counter. When they hit the counter, it reminds me of my childhood, throwing rocks for hopscotch.

2:01 A.M.

I'm staring at the pills. They're as white as snow. I pick up one. It's cold like snow too.

There's no turning back now. I will do this. I go to grab a cold water bottle. I put one pill in my mouth. I decided I should at least know what it tastes like. Nothing. Wow, you would think they could give these some flavor. Everything about these pills is lifeless. I swallow the flavorless pill, along with the cool water. That wasn't so hard. I just have six more to go. One by one, I swallow each and every pill. That was easy. Now, I just have to wait.

2:02 A.M

I head back to my room. I lay down. I feel really lightheaded. Is that how it's supposed to feel? My stomach is killing me. It feels like someone is tearing it apart from the inside. This would always happen when I was a kid and would take a pill on an empty stomach. This time was different though. I was older, I wasn't sick, and I just took seven pills. The pain is unbearable. Maybe if I get up and walk around, it'll help.

2:03 A.M.

I'm in the restroom. I take off my shirt. The pain is so bad. I wish I never took those stupid pills. This feels horrible. No, I can't think like that. I can't go back in time. I just need to power through. I need water. Maybe that'll help. It has to help...

2:04 A.M.

I'm in the kitchen and I just drank two bottles of water. The water is doing nothing. If anything it's making the pain worse. Suddenly I feel a sharp stab in my stomach and I fall to the floor. My chest feels clogged, like someone stuffed a deadly cotton in there. My mouth fills with this weird foam. I can't breathe. Why would I take those stupid pills? I just ruined everything. My chest is heaving up and down but barely any air is going to my lungs.

2:05 A.M.

HELP ME! I'M DYING! I'M DYING! HOW COULD I DO THIS? I DON'T WANT

TO GO! I WANT TO STAY! I try to make a sound but no one is around to hear my whispers of a scream. I stop moving. I stop breathing. I stop struggling. The pain stops. I feel calm. There's a sort of overwhelming peace that takes over me. Am I dead? I feel dead. Now my vision leaves me, along with my hearing. I feel strange. I feel like I'm-

The End

3rd place Fiction—Middle School Division
By: **Naomi Cuccio**
North Vermilion Middle School

Missing Pieces

Pain ripped through me as I fell down from the force of the gunshot. I faintly heard someone calling for me. A man rushed up to me. He held a phone to his ear, screaming to the person on the other side. I accepted death.

I woke up in the dark. There was a blind fold over my eyes and my head felt groggy again. I tore off my blindfold. When I looked across from me I saw a raven haired woman. She was slumped over. I walked over and turned her chair to me, catching her shoulders as she fell forward.

As she woke up she looked at me and pulled away, scared. I walked back to my chair and sat down across from her.

“Who are you,” she asked.

“I don’t know.” I tilted my head down trying to remember.

“Me neither,” she spoke quickly.

Then the intercom wailed, “your task is to get out of the room. Your times will help to determine your scores that will determine who gets the job.”

“What are we doing here,” the woman asked.

“I don’t know,” I replied, “It’s best to do as they instructed and ask questions later. For all we know the person with the lowest score dies.”

“Don’t say that.” she looked at me, tears in her eyes.

“I’m being practical,” I spoke quickly, “we woke up with blindfolds on in a dark room, and no memories of who we are. The last thing I remember is a white room and a weird dream where I got shot. My best guess is that we got kidnapped but that doesn’t explain how we lost our memories. Either way the best decision is to do what they want for now until we know what’s going on.”

The woman looked me in the eyes, “I also remember that room.”

I looked at her knowing we were taking up valuable time. I looked around the dim room again and that’s when I noticed that cameras were facing towards the door. It didn’t make sense. I went over to the door and looked at it but, nothing seemed unusual, I turned the light switch off and on again. That’s when I heard a low clicking and turned the doorknob. To my surprise it was open and as I walked into the hall a short beep stopped a timer above the door displaying my time and another number, Below was another timer, still going, a number six before it.

“Hey six come stop your timer,” I called.

“Why did you call me six,” she said walking out the door. I pointed to the two numbers displayed before our times.

“Okay your two then.” she spoke softly.

“I guess so,” I replied.

“Wait how could your time possibly be thirty seconds. We were talking for longer than that.” She looked at me.

“The timer must have started once we left our chairs the second time” I said.

“Okay but what do we do now.” she said. Then she collapsed. I rushed over to check her pulse when I collapsed too.

I woke up to lights in my eyes. I was in a grey room but this time I was sitting in a chair with my hands tied behind my back. The blinding lights didn't allow me to see much more than shadows. Then they were shut off and it was pitch black.

“The top five are as follows.” the intercom wailed loudly, “Two, Four, Six, Eight, and Ten, your number is in ink on the back of your neck. Everyone has an hour until the next trial with their assigned group of five. Thank you for your cooperation.”

All of a sudden someone was behind me, untying my hands. Dim lights like the ones in the last room came on. There were three men and two women including me in the room.

I walked over to Six's chair and whispered as I untied her hands, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, what about you,” she replied.

“Fine. My theory is that the doorknob had some sort of delayed sedative.”

“That's exactly what I was thinking,” a scruffy haired short man with a raspy voice called from across the room.

“How did you hear me,” I asked.

“I didn't.” he said, “I can read lips.”

I introduced myself as Two and asked them each for their number and anything they remembered. They all seemed surprised I had been first but complied with my questions. The short guy was Eight, the green eyed Four, and the blonde one Ten. They only remembered the white room.

With nothing left to say I looked for a way to escape. I brought the bright lights in front of the security cameras, blocking them.

“What are you doing,” Eight asked.

“Isn't it obvious,” I said.

“Too obvious,” he replied.

“I'm getting out of here, come or don't, but you won't stop me,” I mouthed.

He nodded his head in understanding. He grabbed my hand and traced a question mark then, a little girl with orange hair was tracing words on my hand in a kitchen.

“Are you okay?” Four pulled me up from the ground.

“I'm fine” I called.

“I remembered something, when you traced on my hand,” I mouthed to Eight.

Four looked at us confused, so I grabbed his hand and traced the simple words. I remember. His eyes widened in surprise. We're leaving, coming? He nodded.

The last thirty minutes wait felt like an eternity, We tried to tell Six and Ten the plan the same way I had told Four, but they didn't understand. I whispered the plan into their ear and they both agreed.

“This game is a psychological one,” the intercom wailed, “you will each get a vial. When the lights turn out someone will drink, it doesn't matter who or which vial. One vial is poison it will be labeled as so and given to only one person. They can tell or not. Your time ends when you get out of the room. If no vials are drunken you are immediately disqualified. Now everyone check your pockets.”

I checked my pocket and was surprised to find the vial, since I had already checked my pockets earlier.

“Who has the poisoned vial,” I asked quickly.

“I do,” six said quickly handing me a glass container with a red dot on top.

“Great I’ll drink the poisoned one.” I looked around the room to surprised faces.

I was making the ultimate gamble. Either I was right or I would die. Suddenly a memory of me and a brunette haired women playing cards surfaced.

No time. I chugged the sluggish liquid down. Then everything was dark.

The pain came again but this time I knew it wasn’t a dream so much as a memory. I had been in a gang as an ally of the cops after the gang had mistakenly killed my mother and sister in a shootout. I had busted the boss and his son was hunting me down. I was caught. I was shot.

I had been brain dead when a company approached my brother with a deal. If he went through their experiment they would try a newly developed cure. They woke me up and he told me the whole thing. He hated me for joining the gang. I approached the company suggesting I do the trial instead and they excepted me right away. Then the white room. Signing my memory away. The needle.

I woke up. I remembered now. Playing cards with my mom, my mute sister talking to me with fingers tracing over my hand, and my brother crying hysterically at the joint funeral.

A women in a nurses uniform walked into the room and came to sit next to me.

“You were perfect. you quickly figured out the first puzzle and that the poison was just a sedative. You were smart in the way you communicated with no noise. You were brave. What you didn’t know was that there were more cameras,” she spoke sweetly.

“Where is everyone else.” I asked, sitting up.

“Safe in their homes. We never said those eliminated from the trials would be hurt. You did sign up for this after all.” she smiled.

“I knew there were other cameras. I wanted to win the game then betray you and run away with the rest of them,” T spoke softly.

“Wanted,” she asked.

“That was before I remembered.” I looked at her and she gasped, “My mother and sister dead, me dead. my brother devastated.”

“Why would you tell me that you remembered.” she asked in panic.

“Because I don’t want to remember anymore I want you to give me the special job you had planned and give me a stronger dose of the serum,” I spoke quickly before the tears came. “plus what good is an experiment if I kept the results from you.”

“Are you sure,” she asked.

I nodded my head.

High School Division (Grades 9-12)

1st place Poetry—High School Division

By: **Jolie Blanchard**

Acadiana High School

A Young Poet's Dream

Suddenly, it's quiet, the only thing to be heard
is an old vinyl scratching as it reaches the end of its last tune.
There's a white cat standing awkwardly
in the middle of the cozy shop,
He seems to be looking for something.
One would usually be startled by such a sight
but something about the feline's mournful face reminds me of Mathew,
the resemblance provokes a certain childhood nostalgia.
His anxious posture tells me he's probably got somewhere more productive to be.
The animal looks undeniably human here.
He strikes me as a creature who spends a lot of time sorting through his words
searching for something extraordinary within the rubble, a wise one.
He strikes me as a creature who knows more about this life than he'd like one to believe,
an illusionist.
His eyes alone unveil worlds I know nothing of.
I ask the cat, what are you so afraid of? Is it everything you have to lose?
My voice sounds like a measly echo.
He chuckles lightly,
Please, he says, that's something I had to face a long time ago.
At some point you stop fearing the dark and begin to find comfort in never
having to face your own reflection.
For a second he sounds spiteful but then he laughs again.
Kid, what are you afraid of?
I am taken aback by the question. After a moment of pondering I reply,
I fear that one day I will walk outside and the sun will have disappeared.
I'll cry for all of the flowers and for all of the schoolchildren
who can't play hopscotch in the dark,
and for the moon, especially for the moon because
who is she without her counterpart?
I'll cry because I am the moon.
I'm afraid that nothing is what it looks like,
I'm afraid that no one's really happy.
I'm scared to death of everything that is bigger than me.
He's not startled by my response or the tears forming in my eyes, he simply nods and says
You should write a poem.
I'm perplexed, no one likes a self-indulgent poet.
Confused, I try to reason with him,

But all the greatest poets... they - they wrote about wheelbarrows
and ravens and Harlem nights and summer days and milk and honey
and no one cares about what I'm afraid of!

He sees that I've got passion.

Young poet, he says, do not be afraid of the words that come cascading from your mouth.

Use them to defend the weak, use them to educate the masses,
use them as life rafts when you are drowning, use them as bridges that lead to foreign worlds,
but never leave them for dead, never abandon your craft, Young poet.

As long as your words are improving the blank page, I know you'll be alright.

Before I can thank him for his wisdom, the dream expires,
the white cat dissolves into the depths of my subconscious.

As I awake I reach for my notebook and title the next empty page

2nd place Poetry—High School Division
By: **Carmen Lopez**
Ovey Comeaux High School

rest home

lonely old men retire their bodies like lovebugs
submitting to the Great Fluorescent Lights,
floating above the days, trapped in their own minds,
brains whipped and buttery due to the gods fiddling with them.
soon enough, they'll be hooked up to machines,
forcing themselves to become cyborgs
in order to remain in a world where they've forgotten their own names.

3rd place Poetry—High School Division
By: **Arianna Gaspard**
Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts

Astray

Her once rigorous passion
to sail through typhoons
has now agitated itself
into sea-foam blooms.

A melancholia from lost
and broken promise lands,
That have now been blown over,
By lost hope's scarlet sands.

Her bones creak and groan;
wearied down by the hours
spent on the crows nest
And sat rotting in rain showers.

Her soul cracks and fractures:
Let down by expectations,
Of gleams of hope,
Tainted by despair's solicitations.

She would tie the weighted chain
About her festered feet,
Dragging her in closer,
To the ocean's slow heartbeat.

Was she not to sail,
Past tempests to treasure?
Was she merely meant to sink,
For the sake of destiny's pleasure?

The salted blue sings like sirens.
Her ears ring with a steady heart.
To her surprise the cold holds comfort,
As she and light depart.

The whispers of not to leave,
Louden unbearably with cries.
But if they truly wanted her to stay,
Why did they wait until she dived?

There was no point in resurface.
She knew that above would let her down.
And why not accept her fate now,
Since she was always meant to drown.

And so there she lay forgotten
Everyone missing that girl,
Who once fervently set asail,
Now buried deep down with the pearls.

Honorable Mention Poetry—High School Division
By: **Ellen Rogers**
Lusher Charter School

How to Be a Redhead

Live somewhere *lush*. Green complements your hair.

Only drink out of stainless steel water bottles.

Wear your hair in braids. Call them plaits. Make sure no one ever sees you braiding.
It ruins the effect.

Talk about how much you hate your hair. Write about how lovely it is in your diary.
I can't tell if it's more strawberry or copper.

Eat pears.

Have your first kiss in a barn or on a fire escape.
Redheads never live in the suburbs.

When you argue with your fiancé, storm out of the door and into the snow.
Come back an hour later with Chinese takeout and a cold.

Paint your fingernails pink and your toenails red.

Invest in a good pair of overalls.

Cry when you see dead birds. Scold children who kill ants for fun.

Use words like vivacious. Win the third grade spelling bee. Use a hair ribbon as a bookmark.

Eat beef stew in November and lemon ice in June.

Be careful around cheese and dandelions.
Yellow washes you out.

Watch foreign films without subtitles.

When you turn sixteen, grow willowy. If you're nearsighted, stop wearing glasses.
You're a woman now.

1st place Creative Nonfiction—High School Division
By: **Meg Francis**
Lusher Charter School

Dandelion Weeds

I didn't like the playground at my kindergarten. It was the kind where wood chips dug into your hands when you sat down. Other children met me in the tunnel and kissed me on the mouth to see if we felt like the people on TV. Spiders watched us with inquiry. I sometimes sat on the bottom of the metal slide, cooking. In the sun, I was my own breakfast. I thought about what I could do to set myself apart from the other shouting children that devoured attention like a sugar cube. On TV, many people were shown, but the camera only ever focused on a couple people. I pondered how I could secure my spot while wiping the residue of cheese balls on my plaid dress. I didn't really do anything of substance, though I made sure eyes were on me whenever I had the opportunity.

I ate flowers that grew in the shaded corner. Dandelions littered the small patch of grass. I stuffed the yellow plants into my mouth one after another. I swallowed with minimal chewing, not wanting to taste it for longer than I needed in order not to choke. They were bitter and I wanted to stop, but I liked that people looked at me. I liked that they laughed at me because I didn't know what it meant.

There was a talk tube on either side of the playground. I grasped both sides of it and hoisted myself up so I could speak into it.

“Hello?”

“Hello!” A response.

This was more ears than eyes, but someone was listening. I continued the conversation with the only logical conclusion I could have possibly jumped to.

“God?”

A waited a moment. After a brief second, “Yes, it’s God.”

I was a little bit starstruck. Six year old me couldn’t believe that *the* God had taken time out of what must be a busy day to talk to her. However, after a couple seconds of calling out again, no one responded. I didn’t let it get to me. Surely he had lightning to cast, or whatever he was doing these days. Looking back, I hope whatever student thought it would be funny to tell me they’re God knows they fueled my toddler ego into the conclusion that if God wanted to pop in and say hi, surely at least one camera was on me.

2nd place Creative Nonfiction—High School Division
By: **Madison Firmin**
Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts,

I Wish

I wish that I was skinny. I wish that when that when I looked at those stupid magazines that they keep in every of every doctor's office in the world, that I wouldn't WISH to be them because I already would BE. I wish that I didn't cry myself to sleep every night because according to the people on the internet, my fat rolls matter more than my happiness does. I wish that when I looked in the mirror, I wish I wouldn't try to pull my shirt down just a smidge more because god forbid a little stomach fat.

Why should I have to WISH? Why can't I be the normal one and have the skinny girls on Facebook wish that they looked like me? Instead of commenting, "Love your confidence, even with a plus size body" under my newest TikTok, I would get a, "Let's go shopping this weekend! #bikinis." People would just invite me to go to the beach and not ask if "I was okay wearing a swimsuit" first. Yeah, that actually happened.

I guess it's partially my fault though. It's not like I tried to NOT get fat. But I didn't try to get fat either. It just kinda happened. How do you gain weight anyways? One day you're wearing an XS and the next a XXL? I don't even remember being skinny anymore. It's like I've lived so long trying to gain confidence for having a plus size body, that I've forgotten what it feels like to have a skinny one.

Did you know that over 50% of America's population are either overweight or obese. So, at least I'm not alone, I guess. I don't want to seem like a crybaby but I wish that people chanted #fatlivesmatter as much as they do with other people groups. And yes, I know that fat people might not face as much discrimination and inequality as other people, but I still wish we had millions of people fighting for us too.

One thing that I have learned over the years is that skinny people love to call themselves fat. Like, shut up Julia, you literally gained .005 pounds. I might start calling myself skinny when I LOSE .005 pounds. I wonder how people would react to that? And you know, most fat famous people are FAMOUS for being FAT. Skinny people aren't famous for being skinny. They are famous for having a talent. Is being fat a talent?? Have I missed a memo or something? I could've been putting that on my resumé instead of, "Knows every single word to every single Elton John song." Both are still great accomplishments though.

I can't wait to see how many people say that this writing has helped them be more confident in their fatness. Like, I would love to be the advocate for fat people. Not plus size people. FAT PEOPLE! One of my goals is to change someone's life by doing something I love. If I make even ONE person feel better after reading this, then I will be satisfied. Even if I still weigh 200 pounds.

Just so everyone understands, I'm not trying to make anyone feel pity for fat people. I myself, am okay with being fat. I've come to accept it. If you can't get rid of it, then love it. Okay, only use that motto for weight. Please don't fall in love with a snake if it won't leave from out of your front yard. I will not take credit for fueling your love of snakes people!

I'm sure not many people have made it to the end of this. But if you did, I love you. Even if we know nothing about each other, I still love you. I love that you are living each day to its fullest. I love that you have confidence in yourself, or at least you are trying to find that confidence. Many people believe in you, including me. Be proud of your weight. Who cares if you don't look like the lady on the cover of the newest Victoria's Secret catalog? You are you, and that's the best you can be!

At the end of the day, I'm fat and I'm proud of that. Like yeah, maybe it'll cause some health issues somewhere farther up the road, but I'm not going to hate myself and put myself down about a few extra pounds. Why should I have to feel like crap? Being skinny shouldn't be someone's goal. Being happy should be. I would rather be fat and happy than sad and skinny. Live each day loving yourself. I want you to wake up happy and fall asleep that way too. I wish that everyone who reads this, feels happy about themselves after they're done.

1st place Fiction—High School Division
By: **Brynn Beatty**
Lusher Charter School

When the gulf finally reached the city, no one seemed to care.

Waves

My mom's car made ripples in the street on the way to school. The water settled halfway up my calves, but it wouldn't recede back through the city. We coexisted. I spent a weekend last month pressing saran wrap to the bottom edges of the car to seal off the flooding. Our basement is a lost cause.

Brine

I made pasta with sink water on Thursdays, but I didn't need to add salt to boil. The pot was coated in brackish water from where it sat in the low kitchen drawers. I fished them out at dinner time and dumped soap in the drawer when I'm done. Our dishwasher broke last week.

Pavement

I skinned my knee walking home from school yesterday. The waves grabbed at my legs and tugged. I fell down, slouching through the water and onto the concrete. The cars in the street next to me let off a heavy current that soaked through my backpack. My blood washed away in the stream.

Waterlogged

Only the girls were left in class. The boys went home weeks ago and never came back. They couldn't handle not seeing their feet as they walked through the school. Water dripped from our clothes, coating the second floor hallway too. I took out my notebook and asked Sarah if I could borrow a pencil. Pen ink ran too much.

Fumes

At lunch, we dropped bath bombs in the courtyard to color the water. We swam streaks in the lawn, our bellies brushing the ground when we slipped under. The teachers didn't comment when our handprints stained the desk.

Soaked

When the girls' track team left the city for a meet, water poured out the bus with the coaches. The girls spilled into the gym and clustered in on themselves. When the shot went off, they were faster than the other girls by miles. The weights were lifted off their feet.

Rust

I started biking to school. The water reached my thighs, and it wasn't worth it to climb through the car window. Girls climbed out of sunroofs in front of school. Others just sat on the hood the whole way. I smeared powder into the gears every night to prevent decay.

Sand

Ms. Barnes looked tired on Monday, but by Thursday, it wore away. Her face was blank, but she smiled softly when we waded into the classroom. She sat on her desk and skimmed her sandals across the surface until the ripple reached us.

Cavernous

The girls in school stopped following the dress code weeks ago. The principal left with the rest of the boys, so no one pulled at our shoulders and reminded us of the rules. Our skirts dragged through the murk until we hemmed them to our fingertips.

Depths

When Sarah and I walked around at night, we stepped before knowing how deep it was. Our feet sunk through the waters and touched the cracked concrete of the sidewalk. We sank to our waists at the curbs and dragged our beaded bracelets through the current.

Street

The potholes didn't matter anymore, but we patched them up for service hours. I plunged my body into the water and trusted the others to pull me up when the cement weighed down my hands. They grasped my sides and dug their fingers in. Seconds later, I breathed.

Weighted

Last weekend, my mom and I climbed up to the attic and cut a hole through the roof. Just in case, she says. I sanded down the edges to avoid splinters and memorized where all the flashlights in the house were. We laid a tarp over the hole and dove down the stairs.

Backwash

Tomorrow, I'm going to float down the street, eyes closed, on my back, fingers combing through the gulf. The sun will dry my face, and my hair will curl underneath my body. I'm going to float until someone finds me.

2nd place Fiction—High School Division
By: **Lacey Auzenne**
Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts

What Became of Dahlia Linesberry?

Dahlia Linesberry was a young girl, no more than seven years of age. She lived in the small, sleepy town of Lucksend with her mother, father, and elder sister, Louise. Unlike her older sister, Dahlia had always been enraptured by the idea of adventure. She, Louise, and some of the neighborhood's other children would often go to play in the small forest just behind the town's post office.

It wasn't uncommon for Dahlia to return home covered in scrapes and bruises from her "adventures." Louise was never deemed to be responsible for Dahlia's injuries, though; Mr. and Mrs. Linesberry were all too aware of their younger daughter's antics. They'd send her to bed dressed in fresh bandages at least once a week. Nonetheless, the family was happy- at least until Dahlia's accident.

The day of Dahlia's accident was one like any other- blackberries bloomed along the forest outskirts as the sun made its steady ascent above Lucksend. She and Louise were off to the usual forest meet-up spot, when Louise stopped her younger sister. She fumbled around in her bag, looking at Dahlia's long, tangled brown pigtails with disdain.

"Look at you, Dolly. You've already managed to mess up your hair! Ma just fixed it!"

"But, Louise! We'll be late!" Dahlia had whined.

"Hush, you. You know we can just show up when we wanna, like we always do." With that, Dahlia let out a resigned sigh and stood still in front of her sister. Louise smiled to herself while she used her fingers to comb through and braid her sister's hair. She secured the braid with one of her own butter-yellow ribbons; Louise always carried ribbons in her bag to trade with the other girls her age.

"Can we go now?" Dahlia asked as she bounced her knee in anticipation. Louise nodded.

"Yes, but Ma and Pa wanted me to remind you to not to play in the-", Before she could finish, Dahlia had already begun her run towards the clearing. "...lake." Louise sighed and zipped her bag up, not bothering to attempt catching up to Dahlia- the kid had incessant energy when she had her mind set on something.

The two arrived at the clearing, where Dahlia's group of friends sat in a cluster, no doubt waiting for her to arrive. Their faces lit up upon seeing their group's leader.

"Dahlia! C'mere! We've been waiting for ya!" One kid, a boy named Wayne, yelled. Dahlia sprinted over without second thought, nearly tripping in her haste to get to her friends.

"Sorry y'all. Woulda been here earlier, if it wasn't for Louise slowin' us down." Dahlia said while she shot Louise, who was mingling with her own friends, a glare. Louise didn't notice the glare, but even so Dahlia was proud of her act of defiance. After exchanging the rest of her greetings, Dahlia plopped down onto the ground; the other kids followed suit.

“We were tryna decide what we wanted to play when you showed up,” one girl explained. “It was between superheroes, cowboys, and treasure hunters.” Dahlia rubbed her chin in thought.

“How ‘bout we put it up for a vote? All in favor of superheroes?” Two kids raised their hands.

“Cowboys?” two more hands.

“Treasure Hunters?” the remaining three kids, as well as Dahlia herself, raised their hands.

“It’s settled then!” Dahlia exclaimed. The kids quickly busied themselves discussing the plan for their game. They decided Emily Jones would hide the treasure (a large rock the kids found), and the others would follow the map she drew to find it. Emily ran off to do her part, and returned back to the group in about five minutes time. She ran off to the older kids, and returned with a sheet of paper and a few crayons, with which she drew her map. The search was nearly ready to go underway when Louise called her sister over, much to Dahlia’s annoyance.

“Are y’all gonna play further on?” Louise asked while she toyed with a pink ribbon in her hair- she must’ve traded one of hers for it. Dahlia nodded.

“We already know not to go past the fence line, Louise.”

“Yes, but listen. You need to be careful- you know Ma and Pa don’t like you getting all scuffed up.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure,” Dahlia said, beginning her walk back to her waiting group. Louise grabbed her arm before she could get any further.

“What now?” Dahlia turned around with a whine. Louise sighed.

“I was just gonna ask you to stay away from the lake again- Ma and Pa don’t like it, and I’ve had creepy nightmares about that place; it feels like bad news, somehow. And you know neither of us can swim well.”

“Don’t worry, Louise. I know what I’m allowed to do.” Dahlia went to return to her original path, where she saw her crew waving her over. She looked back to Louise before she left. Louise nodded her head, and Dahlia scrambled back to her friends.

After going over the plan with Dahlia to make sure everyone knew the rules (which were admittedly quite simple), the gang was off. They got tripped up a few times to Emily’s annoyance, but they eventually found their way to their destination.

“Search just beyond those trees.” Emily said proudly. The kids followed her instructions, but Dahlia froze. The lake was beyond those trees. Dahlia was far from scared of the lake and was an okay swimmer, but she didn’t want her parents to be angry. Emily noticed Dahlia’s hesitation.

“What’s wrong?” she asked Dahlia with a smirk. “You chicken?” Dahlia scoffed.

“Course not! Just thinking, is all.”

“Well think faster- they probably found the treasure without you at this point.”

Dahlia marched forward, determined to prove her bravery to not just Emily, but to all of her friends. The kids were arguing with one another when she and Emily caught up.

“We found the treasure, Emily, but Wayne over here dropped it in the lake.” one of the

girls said with a glare in Wayne's direction. Wayne looked to the ground in shame.

"Well someone better get it!" Emily yelled, her face red as a beet. "I was gonna paint that rock and give it to my Grandma!" Dahlia played with her hair while she, once again, thought to herself. She knew she wasn't allowed to swim in the lake, but if she did that, surely she'd prove her bravery to the others. That and she'd be able to show Louise and her parents she was old enough to do things without their constant worrying.

"Can't you swim, Dahlia?" A boy in the group asked. All eyes were on her.

"Yeah- I'll try to get it!" Dahlia said. She took off her shoes and prepared to dive into the lake when Wayne spoke up.

"Are you sure this is a good idea? I think we should just find another rock..." Emily swatted at his arm and looked back towards Dahlia expectantly. She placed a hand on her hip.

"Well?" she asked. Louise's voice echoed in Dahlia's head.

"I was just gonna ask you to stay away from the lake again- Ma and Pa don't like it, and I've had creepy nightmares about that place; it feels like bad news, somehow..."

Dahlia shook off her fear and, with cheers from the other kids, jumped into the lake. The children waited patiently for Dahlia to surface, and eventually she did, but not as they expected. She thrashed about in the water, spluttering for air.

The group immediately ran off for Louise, who was relieved to see Dahlia still struggling (albeit weakly), by the time they made it back to the lake- her sister still had a chance. Without second thought, Louise threw herself into the lake and clumsily swam towards Dahlia, who was once again beginning to slip under the water's surface. Louise felt fear bubble inside of her. Dahlia was taking too long to rise up for air. She held her breath and slipped beneath the water, herself. For a moment, all was silent. Then someone emerged from the water and hobbled onto the shore. Before anyone could ask what had happened to the other sister, a lone ribbon floated to the lake's surface.

3rd place Fiction—High School Division
By: **Savannah Dupre**
Magnet Academy for Cultural Arts

Never Be A Star

You've seen the man in the moon, and he's seen you. In fact, he is fascinated by you. The way you live for the night, the way he does. You make him wonder what morning looks like, more importantly, what you're like in the sunlight.

In every transition from night to day, the sun brags about his light. He says that people play and work under him, but only sleep under the moon. You prove him wrong. Not everyone basks in the glory of the sun. You don't. You alone give the lonely man in the moon hope. What he'd give to know more about you.

One night, he finds you laying in the dewy grass. You gaze at the moon in adoration, unaware that he gazes back. He watches the clouds gather, heavy with water. He tries to will them away, not wanting to ruin your night, but he holds no power over the weather. The tides he can shift with a wave of his finger, but not the clouds. They are their own master, moving in a constant cycle. The first raindrop falls and you give him a longing look before running for shelter.

He sees you the next night, drawing a picture of the moon. The likeness is uncanny. You grow steadily more obsessed with the moon as he does with you. You find yourself reaching up, as if you could touch the sky; he reaches down, as if he could touch the earth. But while your hand hits only air, his hits a barrier that bars him from reaching you. He leaves his hand long after you put yours down and keeps it there for several nights, leaning in closer and closer until all his weight is against the barrier. Unexpectedly, the barrier breaks. He falls into the night sky, trying to grab stars just out of reach. He even passes the sun, which burns his hand when he grabs it. He cradles his burned hand close to him as he hurdles toward the untouchable earth.

He hits the ground like a meteor, right in the middle of a crowded street. Car horns blare. He'd never heard sounds like these before. Space is mostly silence. Onlookers soon gather around the crater he created. Their faces entrance him. He's never seen one up close. Now, though, he could even see the way the hair above their eyes scrunch up in wonder. They ask if he is hurt. Mostly, though, they want to know how he'd come to be in the middle of the huge crater.

"I fell," he answers.

None of them seem to believe him. Some say that if he would've fallen from such a height that he would've died.

"I can't die."

After he says this, they seem to be even more concerned.

Soon, men in blue uniforms, come to him asking the same questions the others had

before. They try to help him up. Once their skin comes in contact with his, though, they find themselves moving away in pain. His skin is cold, too cold, like liquid nitrogen. They get a blanket and place it around him as they walk him to the ambulance.

He stares into the faces that pass and sees you. He fights against the strong men who hold him. He yells to you, but he doesn't know your name so his voice is lost among the many. You continue on; he's forced the other way.

At the hospital, they stick needles in his skin. They are puzzled as the silver liquid, thick like molasses, drains from his arm. Nurses look at him worriedly and stay a safe distance away. They hook up an IV to his arm, although no one knows what ails him nor what medication to give. He fidgets nervously when nurses and doctors ask him questions. They ask about his hometown and his family history, but he has no answer.

"I never asked," he responds absentmindedly.

They categorize him as an amnesia case. Late at night, he walks to the window and stares at his old home, almost like he gravitates towards it. He reaches out to the window, but draws back in fear of falling once again.

The workers at the hospital worry because he doesn't sleep. He spends the night watching the moon. When the moon sinks into the sky, he watches the sun, never having seen it from this distance.

He tries to leave, but they won't release him, claiming that he still suffers some sort of illness. After a few days, they put another man in his room.

"My name is Gary. What's yours?"

When the doctors asked him the same question earlier, he didn't have an answer for them. He didn't have one now either.

"You have amnesia?" Gary asks.

"They say I do."

"And what do you say?"

"I say I'd like to leave."

"Then go."

"I've tried. They stop me every time."

So, Gary helps him plan his escape. Finally, the plan is ready to be executed. As the nurse makes her rounds, Gary calls out, complaining of severe chest pain. While she's busy examining Gary, he sneaks out. He snatches some scrubs from a nearby hamper and changes in the nearest empty room.

Soon he calmly walks down the hallway to the exit. The gravitational pull he felt now leads him down the hallway as if the moon is ready for him to go home.

He is nearly out the door when you come in. You lay on a gurney, barely moving. Even with the redness and bruising on your face, you look ethereal. Somebody says you've been in a

nasty car wreck and are fading fast. He hides around the corner until all the doctors and nurses have cleared out of your room.

From the windowed wall of your room, he watches. You no longer look like you live for the night. You barely look like you live. Not much of your skin can be seen because of the abrasions and other injuries, but what can be seen is pale like Shakespeare's moon.

Suddenly, he stands by your bedside. Your eyes flutter open. A look of recognition is evident on your face.

"I know you," You say lowly.

"Barely, my love."

"I drew you once," You smile.

"It was a beautiful picture."

"You could see it?"

"I have excellent vision," he jokes.

"And how'd you get here?"

"I fell, trying to get closer to you."

"Was it worth it?" You ask.

"Of course."

Your labored breathing slows to a stop. Gently, he closes your eyes.

With you gone, he has no purpose, so he walks into the moonlight and lets the pull of the moon guide him into the sky. He pulls himself back into the moon. It is like it is a missing piece of him, but the true missing piece is gone, dead.

He knows souls can be immortalized in the sky, so every night he searches the sky, hoping to see a new star. Although there are new stars, not the one he desires.

Then, one night, there is an especially bright and beautiful star, whose light is bright enough to be seen from Earth. He knows that if you had become a star, it would be that one. He does everything in his power to move closer to the star. Eventually the planets align in just the right way. You are right next to him.

You are very confused; everyone is after they die. You ask "Are all these stars people?"

"They're not stars. They're spirits, souls. People who were forgotten because no one knew to remember. They had no place among their own, but have one among the Stars."

"Sometimes lovers waiting for their other halves are welcomed among the Stars; they shoot across the sky to reunite with their soulmates after years of being apart.

And stars are constantly being destroyed and created because forever is too long for the living. They move on, as does the star, for a lifetime is too long to watch one's soulmate with another. Forever is also too long to stay for companionship, so never feel like you can't leave because of me."

"I don't want to leave."

"Of course not yet," he responds wisely, "you just got here." He continues on his rather

passionate explanation. "Then there are meteors, the sky's ghosts. People who felt slighted in their life. They moved on, possibly forgave, but they never forgot. They hurl themselves through the sky and into planets. They destroy themselves trying to heal; they'll never be stars.

Stars can be meteors, though. They get very angry watching their loved ones move on, envious of the world they were forced to leave, and angered by their apparent unimportance in life and, subsequently, in death.

" What about planets? Who goes there?"

"They're living homes. Why would they bother themselves with the dead?"

"And what about the man in the moon?"

"Well, he'll never be a star."

Honorable Mention Fiction—High School Division
By: **Ella Ostheimer**
Homeschool

A Grim Destiny

Chapter 1

“Unknown soul” was roughly written on the tombstone, if it could even be called one. It was only a jagged boulder with an inscription in marker. It didn’t stand out against the cryptic woods very much.

Not like people pay attention to things like that these days, he thought to himself. Otherwise they would have seen me by now. Or my father.

It didn’t matter what the tombstone looked like. It only mattered what was underneath. With what fingers that remained underneath his stained, bandaged hands, he started to dig at the earth like a wild animal. Wasn’t that what he was? A wild animal, scavenging for his life and staying in the shadows. He was barely human after what his father did to him.

The weak murmurs inside his head started to come back again, and his bones ached.

“Just leave them to rest...”

“How much do you need?”

“How long will this go on?”

He tried to block it all out as he uncovered the remains, hoping there was the piece he needed. Yes. He pulled out the femur out from the grave and inspected it. It was buried no more than a week ago, and could last years for him.

He unwrapped the bandages from his leg, exposing the rotting and cracked bones underneath. He located his broken femur. He took a deep breath, shaking, then yanked it out.

“The hard part’s not over yet, Alex,” he reminded himself.

He took the fresh femur and snapped it into the vacant hole. The essence of a recent life ran through him once again, sending his body into violent convulsions. His bones rattled uncontrollably. The whispers around him grew into screams.

Then the vision came. He saw the femur’s previous owner’s life through her eyes. He saw everyone she loved, the things she did, and everything else - everything, including her death. Staring up at a decaying black cloak draped over a burnt grinning skull, he recognized the face of his father.

“I’ve come to reap the fruits of the living,” his father rasped at the panicking woman.

Alex could feel the reaper’s strong, frigid hands as they clasped around the terrified woman’s throat. She tried to kick and fight, but it was all in vain. Her world still faded to black emptiness.

Alex lied on the damp ground as he finally snapped back into the present. The screams faded into whispers once more, with a new voice among them.

“Where am I?” the dead woman mumbled. *“I feel numb.”*

The harmony of ghosts rose up again.

“You’re bound to him...”

“We’re all bound to the Collector...”

“He picks up what the Reaper puts down...”

Silently, Alex walked back to the ruins of a cabin that he and his father called home. When he walked in, all that greeted him was the creaking of his father’s rocking chair. The infernal fireplace illuminated the Reaper’s haggard form. Without his hunting cloak, the scars were much more visible : the charring of his bones and crude indentations from attacks over the centuries cursed his immortal being. A long hairline fracture snaked across his face.

The lost souls whispered among themselves.

“We’re back here again...with him...”

“I don’t like this...”

“He’s...he’s the one who choked me...” The female ghost breathlessly mumbled. Her fear subsided as her anger grew. *“He killed me!”*

“Yeah, no kiddin’, lady,” an older ghost growled. *“He killed **all** of us. It’s his job.”*

They watched as the Collector silently plopped in front of the fire next to his father, neither one acknowledging the other.

“I don’t understand this,” the woman sighed. **“Why is this happening?”**

“The Collector needs to replace his dyin’ bones with new ones, so he can survive,” the old ghost told her. *“They say his father had made him that way. So, he refuses to kill like his father. Instead, he just tracks his father’s kills, then returns to ‘em after they’ve gotten a proper burial ‘n all that.”*

“So that’s it then. This is the afterlife?”

“No tellin’. I’ve been here for three centuries.”

Alex groaned and pressed his hands to his head. “Could you all be quiet?”

“Pardon?” The reaper asked, finally acknowledging him.

“Nothing,” he rambled. “I was just talking to myself.”

The silence consumed the room once more.

“Alex,” the reaper announced, *“You are one of my greatest beings I have been blessed with changing. You have grown so much from the abandoned, sickly mortal I had rescued. Lately, however, you have been acting...strange again. You’ve been neglecting your duties that you used to enjoy. You have been talking to yourself.”*

Alex hung his head in silence.

“Come,” the reaper ordered, snatching his dark hunting cloak. He threw a scythe into Alex’s hands. *“Tonight we will be reminded of the line that separates the mortal from the immortal...”*