

*2017 West Virginia
Young Writers Contest
Anthology*



Introduction

We proudly present the anthology of the 2017 West Virginia Young Writers Contest. It showcases the stories of eighteen students who won first place in their grade level divisions at the county level and then placed at the state level. These young writers represent counties from all around the state. Included are the winners of first, second, and third place in each grade level category.

The West Virginia Young Writers Contest has honored excellent writing by our state's students in grades one through twelve for over 30 years. The contest is an initiative the Central West Virginia Writing Project at Marshall University and supported by funds from the state of West Virginia. The University of Charleston graciously provides invaluable support by hosting Young Writers Day. The 2017 contest was directed by Dr. Barbara O'Byrne, Central West Virginia Writing Project with assistance from the West Virginia Department of Education. A Steering Committee contributed invaluable support and advice.

The mission of The Central West Virginia Writing Project is to improve the teaching of writing and learning in West Virginia schools. To learn more about their professional development programs, visit the website: www.marshall.edu/cwvwp

Sponsors

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Acknowledgements

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Judges are teachers associated with National Writing Project sites in West Virginia.

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Baylee the Beagle

Dylan Eye

Brandywine Elementary School, Pendleton County

Teacher: Erin Eye

1st Place Winner (Grades 1-2)

Hello! I'm Baylee. I'm three years old and I'm a Beagle. My humans say I am pretty and I agree. They also say I'm bad, but I'm just having fun.

I was two months old when my humans got me. All my brothers and sisters got homes before me. I still had my mom and dad, but I really wanted a home of my own.

When I got to my new house, I saw lots of things I could chew on. There was a trash can in the kitchen. I thought that if I tore it out, I could find something to eat. I got in trouble instead. Sometimes I pee on the floor, but it's always an accident.

I love to eat! Some of my favorite foods are doggie treats, popcorn, spaghetti, and pretty much anything my humans give me.

One day, I was going down the deck. I fell and hurt my leg. My humans took care of me and I felt better. A couple years later, my legs were sore and I had to go to the vet to get them checked out. I was scared, but the doctors were nice. They did an x-ray and found out that I have arthritis and bad knees. Now I have to lose some weight they say, but I think I'm skinny and perfect! I will need surgery on my legs and knees. I am very afraid because I don't know what it will be like. I think I'm allergic to it! I know my humans will take care of me. My knees will bend better and I'll be able to walk better and run again.

That's all for now! Bye-bye! I've got to go to an exercise class!

The Story of the Wolf Boy

Joshua Minney

Gilmer County Elementary School, Gilmer County

Teacher: Kari Sprouse

2nd Place Winner (Grades 1-2)

Once upon a time there was a boy named John. He lived in an old village. The people who lived there were afraid to go outside of the village, because of the strange howls of the night.

John was curious and always looking for adventures. One day he walked out of the village. While he was out he heard a strange sound. When he turned around, he saw a pack of wolves! He started to run and a wolf pounced. John kicked and screamed. The leader of the pack stopped the wolf from eating him. John put out his hand and the leader licked him. It was like magic.

The wolves took John in as one of their own. After a while, John started to look like a wolf. John became a werewolf. When his mother heard this news, she became very sad. She lost her son to the wolves.

One day poachers came and John got trapped. One wolf bit the tire on the van. The poachers and wolves were angry. Suddenly there was an attack! The poachers ran away bleeding. The wolves had a party, but John missed his home and family. John decided to run away.

The wolves looked for John. They were sad that he ran away. The closer John got to his home he started to change. He began to lose his werewolf look. One thing John did not lose was his courage. John made it to his village and ran the rest of the way home. John pushed open the door and hugged his parents.

To this day John still lives in the old village. People can still hear the strange howls of the night. The only thing John hears is his wolf pack wanting him to come home.

Flutterby Butterfly and Jack the Fly

Asa Marks

Hillsboro Elementary School, Pocahontas County

Teacher: Laura Pritt

3rd Place Winner (Grades 1-2)

Flutterby was a butterfly with red, purple, and pink checker prints on her wings. She spent her days fluttering, flying, and being nice. She was always on the lookout for Jack! Jack was a black fly. He was all black and very mean. Jack spent his days saying, “No! No! No!” Once the two met. While Flutterby was taking a nap on a flower Jack started to bug her!

Jack was trying to push Flutterby off of the flower so he could take a nap too! Flutterby said, “Please go find your own flower Jack and stop bugging me.”

The next day, Flutterby found Jack in her front yard. She watched him bug all the animals so much that they cried. So Flutterby knew that she was going to teach him a lesson. Flutterby gathered all the animals and they made a plan.

Late that night, Flutterby and all of the animals met in Jack’s backyard. They practiced and practiced singing a song about flowers. By morning, they were perfect. When Jack woke up he heard Flutterby and all the other animals singing. Jack went downstairs to smack Flutterby but then he remembered something. His mother had told him not to smack and that singing was a good thing. So Jack said sorry to the other animals and was nicer.

Lesson: Do not bug others.

Being a Teenage Girl's Little Brother

Gage Whitt

Kermit PK-8, Mingo County

Teacher: Pamela Caldwell

1st Place Winner (Grades 3-4)

I just thought I would share with you a few things about being a teenage girl's little brother. First, let me say I have heard things no little boy should hear, I have seen things no little boy should see, and I have been places no little boy should go. Trust me; I know way more about girls than I want to. Just because I know things, don't think it means I understand them, so please, no questions.

First of all, let me start by saying I really do love my sister, but she is nothing like any of my friends. She doesn't even like playing in the creek! Have you ever heard of anything like that?

When my dad is home, everything is great, but when he is working, that's when I can get really bad, really fast! I can be outside with my puppy running, and playing and I hear mom's voice. She tells me to come on because we have to go! Now, when dad is home, I don't have to go on all of her silly adventures.

Like I said in the beginning, I have heard a lot of things that I wish I could unhear. Have you ever heard a group of teenage girls talking? It's the worst noise I have ever heard in my life. You don't even want to know what they think about us boys! The only thing worse than teenage girls talking is when they decide to start singing. It's like a pack of wolves howling! They make my ears cry!

Next, the things I have seen make me want to poke my eyes out. The worst thing I can remember is I actually saw my sister putting make-up on her boyfriend. I will never be able to erase that from my memory. I have seen her

cry over the most ridiculous things that you can imagine, and I have seen my mom and dad care.

Finally, I have been places with my sister that I am ashamed of. I have been to gymnastics recitals, cheerleading competitions, make up parties, dances, and more chick flicks than I want to mention. I have been to tea parties and birthday parties with pink frilly things.

Even though I have had to do many things that have gone against my nature, I am thankful for my sister. Hopefully one day when I am grown, I will know the things that will make my future wife and daughters happy. In the meantime, I will just keep on keeping on, but that doesn't mean I will enjoy it. For those of you who were blessed with brothers, be thankful you have someone to play with you in the creek and ride bikes and get muddy with. Be thankful you don't have to check before you out in public to make sure you don't have glitter on your face that has fallen off of your teenage sister's clothes.

Magical Moonlight

Madison Combs

Slanesville Elementary School, Hampshire County

Teacher: Brenda Riley

2nd Place Winner (Grades 3-4)

It was a night like no other. Wolves were howling, owls were hooting, and crickets were chirping. I reclined in my bed wondering if the phantom was real. I had forgotten about the book laying open in my lap that started with "Find the phantom in a faraway valley." After that, I tried to fall asleep. It took me a while to drift into sleep. I tried, but I couldn't. I was thinking of all the wild horses galloping through the valley. It was so hard to try to sleep that it seemed like I counted a trillion sheep in my head.

After a while, I decided to go peek out the window. The stars twinkled in the midnight sky as I looked at the moon that seemed magical. After a while, I heard the screams of my horse, Midnight. So I grabbed my coat and sneakers and ran out the door to the barn. I saw Midnight. She was looking at something through the boards of the barn. I looked and saw it too. I asked myself, "Could it really be the phantom?" It seemed like a split second, and he was gone.

Immediately, I grabbed the bridle and jumped on my horse. I was desperate to find that magical animal. As we galloped out, Midnight was going so fast that everything flew by in a blur. The black of the night surrounded me. Finally, Midnight slowed down, but the phantom was nowhere in sight. As the wolves howled, Midnights ears pricked forward and back very quickly. She sensed something in the air like she did when danger was near. I sensed it too.

After riding awhile, we were in a forest. Something ran across the trail, and Midnight reared. I said, "Easy now, girl. It's okay." I heard something in the leaves, but I said to myself that it was just my imagination.

"Woah!" I said as Midnight began to back up. I looked back and gasped. "Wolf! Run Midnight. Go as fast as you can!" I yelled. So Midnight galloped full speed. I realized that we had run into a field of wild mustangs. I jumped off of Midnight and sat on the ground. And then I saw him, the phantom. Right way, I walked over to him. I saw the sparkle in his eyes. I stroked the diamond on his forehead, and I rubbed his beautiful coat. After a while, he let me climb on his back. We rode through the forest. Then he took me back, and I slid off of his back and onto Midnight's. I thought to myself, "Maybe this moon is magical."

After I put Midnight away, I went back to bed and tucked myself in. I heard Mom yelling, "Come get some breakfast before it gets cold." As I set at the breakfast table, dad asked me about my dreams. I didn't answer. I thought to myself, "I wonder if last night was real."

I Love Oreos!

Sydney Gray

Sand Hill Elementary School, Marshall County

Teacher: Ann Yoder

3rd Place Winner (Grades 3-4)

I love Oreos. My mom said if I don't quit eating Oreos I will have to go to Oreo rehab. I'm so obsessed with Oreos that I even downloaded a game called twist, lick, dunk. Every time my sister eats the first Oreo out of a new package I get as mad as a dog cooped up in a cage for three days! My sister and I always fight over the first Oreo. When I first open the Oreo package I take a good smell, get my milk and eat!

The white icing in the middle is my favorite part of it all. It's so creamy and smooth and it's so good! I love Oreos so much that I could form my own website called www.iloveoreos.com/theirsogood. I eat Oreos almost every night before I go to sleep and I always argue with my mom that "I should have 5" I say. "You should have 4" mom says.

"I don't agree" I think in my head. Even though she can't hear me.

Every night I want Oreos. Sometimes I crave them. Have you ever seen an Oreo package? If you have, on the front it says "**Milks** favorite cookie," but come on people my names not that hard to spell!

I mean Oreos are just little black and white cookies of joy. They make winter Oreos, Halloween, mint, pumpkin spice, peanut butter, vanilla, chocolate with chocolate icing in the middle, and all sorts of different things and man I'm running out of breath telling you this.

There's also different layers of icing. There's thins, where even the chocolate is thinner, and there's original where the chocolate is disgusting, and there's almost no icing what so ever. Then there's double stuffed which is my

favorite and it's just perfect. Then there's **Mega** stuffed and they have so much icing in them and it's like heaven. Then last but not least the triple double stuffed Oreos! That's chocolate then, white icing then, chocolate then, chocolate icing then, chocolate.

Sometimes if someone else in my house is eating Oreos like out of a new package they holler for me to get my good smell of the fresh Oreos and eat the first one then I can go back to what I was doing before. I will eat Oreos as an after school snack or a bedtime snack or a noon time snack but no matter what kind of Oreos it is or when I eat them it's the thought that counts wait no that's not right, oh yeah sorry they always taste the same.

Conjoined

Ryann Adkins

Vinson Middle School, Wayne County

Teacher: Amy Dillon

1st Place Winner (Grades 5-6)

The room was dimly lit with only candlelight and crimson-colored Christmas lights. The floor was mostly dirt, with the exception of a few checkered tiles scattered around. Bleachers lined the center, which was fenced in with gymnasium practice pads. The seats were painted with a mixture of bubblegum and cherry colored paint that was scratched and scribbled all over with a Sharpie. Curious fingers ran over names and words such as, “Marie was here” or “J + M” or the occasional heart. Every click or creak of the bleachers caused the audience to twitch and widened eyes to look upwards until the ringmaster finally padded into the middle of the room. In his arms, he carried a whip for punishing animals.

“Welcome. Let the show begin.”

“First up, the enthralling, conjoined tightrope performers!”

Chuckling came from behind the curtains hanging in the back of the room. Twins, indeed both identical and conjoined, skipped into the center carrying an umbrella. Strands of their pixie-short orange hair refused to lay straight and their skirt, the color of a mid-summer sky, fluttered behind them as they made their way to the ladder. Their eyes, which were oversized and an almost radioactive- green color, surrounded by thin lines and dark circles caused by fatigue, stared at the crowd with an intense look of determination. They began to ascend, climbing upwards, until they reached the poor quality platform and turned to the audience.

“We’re so glad you came out tonight,” the twins began.

They spoke with one voice, a voice that was low pitched, especially compared to their chipmunk chuckling, and a tone that was charismatic and inviting.

“...but you have yet to clap for us.”

On cue, a round of applause came from the crowd. They were eager for a performance after all, and if clapping and praise would result in an experience of watching tightrope walking, then so be it. The twins grinned and one waved her umbrella towards the crowd. The other nudged her and pushed her own foot forward, onto the wire and into the spotlight.

The twins were playful twenty feet up, giggling and chatting as they went along, doing daredevil tricks for the audience members. Whether it was twirling in a complete circle or balancing on one leg, the twins were hardly fazed by the risks thrown at them. The crowd adored it, but an adoring crowd is a craving crowd, and this crowd craved more action. One twin nudged her sister and whispered something softly in her ear. Nodding in agreement, they bent down and grasped the wire. Then, they tipped. The crowd inhaled. The sisters were now hanging on the wire, back towards the floor. One sister glanced at the other, who stared in terror as her hand slipped...

The twins were terrified down to their dangling ballet shoelaces. The only thing keeping them on the wire was one twin's hand, grasping it so tightly it had cut into her palm. Droplets of blood dripped onto her wrist and down to her elbow, staining the twins' dress purple. As if that wasn't enough, the blood was making the wire slick and her fingers were starting to slip...

“We're going to fall any minute,” she thought.

Her sister interrupted her train of thought by gently nudging her hand with the end of the umbrella. The twin felt her grip loosen. Without thinking, she grasped the umbrella and popped it open, drifting them slowly downwards.

Their feet skidded against the ground as they landed, sending dust flying everywhere. Candy wrappers and dented soda cans rolled away in the sea of sandy particles. The room was silent, minus the drip-drop of the twins' blood trickling onto the floor. One twin closed her eyes and turned her head away, face beet-red. The other just sighed, filling the silence. They waited for the crowd to yell and throw snacks, and storm off, pondering why they wasted their money on this pitiful show. They waited for the ringmaster to appear, angry, and drag them by their collar back to the dressing room. They waited...and waited...and....

The crowd cheered.

Snake!

Julianna Stark

Buckhannon Upshur Middle School, Upshur County

Teacher: Terri McCann

2nd Place Winner (Grades 5-6)

On a burning hot July evening, my family and I were eating dinner. We grilled out and were having steak, baked potatoes and salad. While mom was finishing dinner, I headed out to complete my usual chore of collecting the chicken eggs from the dusty coop. I always did it around dinner time.

I lumbered out to the chicken coop. Our eight hens were busy clucking and pecking the ground. I checked each of their boxes for eggs. In the first box there were six eggs! That is a lot for my old red and white chickens. Those eggs were large and varying shades of brown. Some were so light they were almost white while others were deep chocolate.

Before long, I got to the last box. "AAAHHHHH!" I screamed. I saw a giant jet black snake! It was eight feet long! I dropped the eggs and bolted out of the coop. "DAD! SNAKE!" I yelled as I ran into the house. He went out to look, but of course there was nothing there. "What luck!" I said to myself.

After that, my dad and I headed back into the house. I told my mom about the ordeal. Mom laughed, "Maybe next time you should look in all the boxes before you put your hand in.

I said, "I am willing to try it one more time, but if there is a snake, I'm finding a different chore."

The next day, I was as nervous as could be as I headed out to the chicken coop with my basket. As I cracked the door open, I peeked in and all seemed in order. I could see the dust laying on the hot summer air and smell the cracked

corn. The chickens were clucking at the coop's door, excited to be having their evening meal.

I proceeded to go in with great caution. I poured some chicken food in the feeder. The food kept the hens occupied while I checked the laying boxes. Again, I saw lots of eggs in one box. I immediately knew what that meant – there was a scary guest in the coop again today! As I peeked in the next box, there it was...the coiled, shiny mass of a black snake.

I stood in silence for several long moments watching, afraid to move. The snake, however, seemed content in the heat of the box, obviously stuffed after eating eggs. I noted several large lumps down the length of the snake's body and could clearly make out the egg shapes.

I decided that this special guest to our hen house must have a special name. Right there on the spot, I named that black snake Mr. Simon Slithers. I also decided that I was not going to be afraid. Once again, I ran for my dad, quietly this time. The whole family rushed out to meet Mr. Slithers. As Mom, Garrett and Dad arrived, Mr. Slithers silently slid through the grass to hide and wait until tomorrow to visit the hens and have his egg treat.

The Soup Kitchen

Ruby Amores

Orchard View Intermediate School, Berkeley County

Teacher: Laura Bohrer

3rd Place Winner (Grades 5-6)

I felt really awkward just sitting there in the middle of a church's kitchen. There were people everywhere but I was just kind of there not knowing my purpose.

My mom did not know what to do so we asked John [the church director] what to do. He replied that we should make the drinks. As my sister and I cleaned the pitchers I asked what we were going to make. A lady in a green shirt with blond hair said spaghetti. I looked at her dumbly and said "I thought this was a soup kitchen?" She laughed sarcastically. I thought that was hilarious and my sister [Maria] did too. The lady said if we always made soup people would get bored. But I still thought it was weird, like why would you make donuts in an ice-cream parlor.

People had started to arrive and my mom wanted to mingle with the guests. She tried to get me and my sister to go but I said "What about stranger danger!?" Mom sighed and left to talk. I went to sit down in the kitchen and eat some buttered bread because I had not had dinner yet. As I ate my bread I watched the people being served.

After everyone was done eating the guests pitched in to help clean up. When everyone was gone we took some brownies and left. On our way home I asked my mom about the people she talked to. The first lady my mother talked to was named Rosy. She had Red curly hair and had little flowers in her hair and around her wrists. When she told my mom the flowers were fake she looked a little disappointed.

The next person my mom told me about was a man who believed that the sky talks to him. So he bought a recorder and records the voices when they talk to him. The man said his name was Dan. He also told my mom that he had heard them say to “love everyone and give them love if they don’t have it.”

The last people my mother talked to were twins, one a boy and the other a girl. The girl lost her job and the boy just got employed. The man said “My name is Louis and my sister’s name is Carrie.” Carrie said she used to work at a bakery in Shepherds Town. My mom said her brother owns a bakery in Shepherds Town called “Warm Wishes” The lady said she had worked there before. I looked at her closely and saw she had a teardrop tattoo on her left cheek.

When we got home I realized something. It may sound sappy but I learned from these people. From Rosy to try to stay you. From Dan to love each other. From Louis and Carrie try, try, try again. So if you go to a soup kitchen [to eat or to serve] you might learn something about you or maybe someone else.

My Adventures in the Ball

Griffin Wagoner

Buffalo Middle School, Wayne County

Teacher: Meghan Henderson

1st Place Winner (Grades 7-8)

He doesn't like it when I poop in his bed, which puzzles me. It was a rainy night when he came to adopt me. Jenna was working with Salthazar slithering around her torso. A known convict throughout the store, he was a two-foot-long boa terrorizing the rodent section of the store for years. My neighbor, Hannah, was last seen with him before her disappearance. So far no charges have been filed, but our skilled team of forensic hamsters are working hard to tie him to the murder.

When he walked into the store I did everything I could to be appealing, but to no avail. He was about to adopt Courtney, a snobby, robot-like hamster in the cage above mine, when the large man who appears to run the place stopped him.

"What about the fat one in the corner?" I was slowly put into a dark box, and when I was released, I was in a palace of adventure. Once set down, I made a beeline for the door, but was grabbed and put into a new cage. I was limited to this space for now, but I dreamed of adventure and my escape.

Before the oldest child left for what he called, "school," he grabbed me by the waist and dropped into a clear ball. I tried vigorously to escape with no success. I began to move around only to discover that it moved when I moved! This was it, my chance to explore this new land like my ancestor, Mousipher Rodumbus.

I waited for the mother to leave before I rolled out of the room and around the upstairs. My first stop was a child's room. I rolled under the bed to

find a half-eaten, triangular object covered in cheese and meat. I ran over to it thinking of the feast I would have when I hit, face first into the wall of the clear ball.

I left, dejected and rolled to the stairwell. When I reached what I thought was the end I fell and began to roll so quickly I soiled myself from fear. When the ride of horrors was over, I found myself in a new and dangerous section of the palace. I began to scurry for a corner remembering a show I watched where Mr. Miousse taught Ferret Sun to hide in the shadows to avoid danger. Once I reached the safety of the shadows, to my left there was a luxurious room filled with expensive furniture. On my right was the kitchen. I rolled right only to bump into a large fawn colored creature towering above me, its drool falling onto my force field. I quickly high tailed it for the exit. The dog was a formidable opponent, but I was smaller, quicker. I swerved left and then right causing the dog to stumble on its oversized feet.

I landed in a large, carpeted room with many devices and peculiar looking items. The first object that caught my eyes was a small box with many fluffy animals protruding from the top. The lion in the middle who appeared to be the ringleader was shooting me odd glares. Suddenly, the penguin fell off the box and onto the ground where she lay motionless. I quickly rolled away from the box containing the Lion of Death, fearing I would become his next victim.

I reached a safe haven in the far corner of the room; a city of tiny bricks and buildings that looked half finished. I weaved my way through only to discover tiny yellow people in different outfits. I spotted a smaller figure. A child trapped under a chunk of fallen bricks! I rolled to save her by ramming the chunk with my ball, but she didn't move, I was too late. I quickly realized this a room of death and I had to escape.

Suddenly the children walked into the home carrying large bags on their backs. The oldest child saw me and shooed the dog away to retrieve me. "Silly hamster," he told me, and I was carried upstairs and dropped back into my cage where I think I will stay.

Forget Me Not

Alaira Hudson

Davis Thomas Elementary Middle School, Tucker County

Teacher: Elspeth DeLeurere

2nd Place Winner (Grades 7-8)

Some say Tokyo is busiest at night. The bar districts are bustling, as men loosen their ties and get drunk off sake, unwinding after a long day of rude customers and piles of paperwork.

But Tokyo is always buzzing. Vibrant with flashes of neon pink and silky amber dotting the city; cars and people creating an urban orchestra. Even at a molecular level, the old Edo is never still, never silent.

But somewhere, deep in the red district, there's an alley lit with bar signs and a lone streetlamp; the black asphalt reflecting the neon lights, slick with rainwater and fog. Here you could almost think that Tokyo was frozen, if it wasn't for the occasional flicker of a Bud Light sign, or the constant dripping of a leaking valve.

It's here I remind myself that the violets that grow at the edge of the water will one day wilt, and that the shimmering icicles will melt onto the window in glistening rivulets.

It's here I remind myself that I'll have to go back. Back to the apartment we owned together; Koushi and I. Back to the window where we sat together with steaming chai tea and every blanket we owned, and watched the ever changing lights of the city. Where Koushi would play Gustav Lange's Blumenlied on our aegean piano, and where Koushi would slow dance with me at 2 am because I had a bad case of nightmares, and couldn't sleep.

Back to where I got a phone call that told me Suzaku Koushi has been shot and killed in a gang fight.

Why have I unconsciously gone back to this alley? This alley that stands still.

I think of when Koushi found out that his mother had died. The pale blue 11 o'clock light that covered Tokyo like a diaphanous blanket shone through the small sunroof illuminating Koushi's silver hair. The light gray shadows and wisps of pastel lilac spilled into the room and onto Koushi's face, highlighting his cheekbones and fluttering gray eyelashes. It felt like Tokyo had stopped when the tears Koushi refused to shed, fell down his cheek against his will. The white forget me nots sitting by the big farmhouse sink suddenly seemed to mock us. I slipped a stray lock of his silver hair behind his ear, and laced his soft, elegant fingers within mine. We stood there for what seemed like hours, the pale blue gradually shifting into a glistening butterscotch.

Shaken from my thoughts I realize my legs were turning numb and angry from walking too much. This was the most I've been out of our apartment in a long time. The following months after Koushi's passing were the worst. Filled with nauseating days of staying in our king size bed, way too big for one person, and without a certain warmth, stuck in between sleep and consciousness. Days of friends trying to comfort me with no avail.

Even *one* thought of Koushi had me either throwing up violently or crying until I couldn't feel my eyes. Everything single thing reminding me of my silver haired saint.

"Forget me nots." Koushi had said when having been asked what his favorite flower was. "Deep down I think everybody wants to be remembered when they die. These little flowers are no exception," he had said with a solemn smile.

From then on after, everything was forget me not. Deep blue forget me not flower crowns made at the farmer's market to complement Koushi's hair, avocado toast with forget me not garnishes, forget me not paintings, and forget me not pots.

“Forget me, forget me not. Forget me, forget me not...”

The neons turned to watercolor and the sharp lines turned to smears as I realized there were salty tears invading my eyes.

The alley's composure is broken by a cracked sob. It's here that a broken man's cries add to Tokyo's loud echo. Trapped in between worlds in that lonesome alley, those same words spun in his head.

“Forget me... forget me not. Forget me... forget me not...”

Sincerely Your Scar

Randyn Adkins

Guyan Valley Middle School, Lincoln County

Teacher: Bobbi Wiley

3rd Place Winner (Grades 7-8)

I was a burden, a pain, ugly, and unwanted. I'm sorry. I know I made you feel insecure, but you know what? You made me feel insecure. Hiding me, being ashamed of me that hurt. Sarah, there are a million things I could say to you. I'll never be able to dry up your tears or erase the pain I brought, but I'm sorry for being your one imperfection, for being your scar.

It's funny, we scars are all different, some pultruding red, some with a hint of lilac, but we all have one thing in common; we are unwanted. I still remember the night we met-- shattered glass, piercing screeches. For a scar, one of the hardest parts is looking up at the life you've shattered. Sarah, all I could think when I saw tears burning down your little cheeks and heard your agonizing sobs was how could I cause one little girl so much pain? Looking up at the stars, I realized you're stuck with me. Up until about a year ago, we were on good terms. Sure, I was a jagged etching in your perfect porcelain canvas, but I was free. I remember glorious days of fresh air and sunbeams oozing through me. I wish I could go back to those times.

We were walking into school. You were wearing cutoff jeans. I was right below your knee taking a look at the people (I only saw what sneakers they were wearing. Hey, what shoe you wear can determine your social status). The basketball sneakers were known as "jocks." The circle of white converses, with frail voices whispering about algebra were the "nerds." I remember looking down at your sandals and then looking up at your luscious golden hair just

bouncing along. I thought, "You know this girl's her own person. She doesn't need a group." That's what I deeply admired about you Sarah. You were comfortable in your own skin.

Then, we came across another group. I refer to them as, "high heeled snobs." Their whispers were like darts that I knew were aimed at me.

"Hey Sarah!" Purple Heels called.

"Hi!" you squealed.

"Ever thought about covering that scar up? It's disgusting," Purple Heels simpered.

I braced myself. I peered up and saw your flushed face. Scars are used to name-calling. Seeing your eyes glassy and feeling your stomach drop hurt me. This, Sarah, is where my colorful world was swallowed whole.

"It's disgusting! I'm disgusting! Mom, just get a bandage," you wailed in your room afterschool.

"Fine, here," your mom, sighed. There it was, that horrid cloth inching towards me. Bam! Everything was dark. A billion thoughts flooded my mind. What did I do wrong? How long would I be smothered in misery? Sarah, there's one thought that still lingers-- What happened to you? I know what those girls said hurt, but what about the Sarah who was comfortable in her skin? I'm not the most attractive, but I'm a part of you.

Days of darkness trickled on. Rarely did I ever see the light, but we had a rare encounter the other day. As I was tucked away in my torcher, a glimmer of light seeped through. A vague, hazy silhouette appeared, and I saw your reflection. Sarah, words couldn't express the joy I felt when I saw you. I saw your eyes glistening, your vivacious curls cascading down. You skimmed across each detail in your satin dress. Suddenly, that ray of sunshine on your

face was intruded by a dark cloud. You looked at me then back at your reflection. For the first time in what felt like forever, I looked at myself. My once prominent configurations were merely pink lines. I was...healing.

"Almost gone," you sighed. As you placed the bandage on me, you smiled. Then it hit me. It was surreal to think soon I...your scar would leave you. Soon I'll be your memory. Sarah, please know that I didn't mean to cause you all this pain, but once I'm gone I hope you never find a new flaw. Your beauty was deeper than the skin. You were beautiful even with me.

Sincerely,

Your Scar

Twilight of the Unedited

Michael DiBacco

Elkins High School, Randolph County

Teacher: Madeline Ross

1st Place Winner (Grades 9-10)

I am the problem. Eugenics is the solution. The soul has been swept away in a futile attempt to attain perfection. I am the remnant of an antiquated system. A broken idol resting on the altar of the new gods. I am fragmented like my genes. What a cruel twist of fate. What was meant to create life, the codes and encrypted messages of my DNA, the purines and pyrimidines, have doomed me. What had been meant to spark creation was the impetus for its termination. They were coming. I could almost hear the scuffle of their boots. The panting of hounds. They were out for blood, the blood of savages.

Was blindness not one of the myriad characteristics that wasn't supposed to exist anymore? Yet, they could not see that they had already failed. They had meant to save the human race. I don't blame them. I have no doubt of the nobility of their motives. Someone once said that the road to Hell is paved with good intentions. They had to have had the highest aspirations. Otherwise, there is no way they could have created the furnace of morality that burns bright around me.

They say that we are living during the dawn of a new morning. One without disease and disability. One in which humanity would be extricated from the bonds of its own inadequacy. A day when we would finally control our own destinies, free from the cruel hand of nature that had molded us. The error of the creator.

However, a world without fault is a world without the triumphs and pitfalls that define us. When the first genome editing experiments were carried out, we watched on video screens as the subjects were put on podiums; examples to the rest of us of what could be. What we could be. Giants among men. It inspired hope when we needed it most.

Yet, I couldn't ignore the haze in their eyes. The haze of apathy. They had nothing to strive for anymore. No passions to indulge in, no chances to take. They had perfection in their grasps.

It was almost as if they caught a fluttering bird that had evaded humanity for millennia. Stories had been told of its attributes; what would happen when someone held it tight. The greatest minds of history had tried to deduce its mysteries, its flight patterns, etc. The despots had controlled the masses by convincing the innocent that they had captured the elusive beast, when in reality, they possessed only its shadow. Now, we had it, but as we looked at it, we couldn't help but notice its tarnished feathers.

With this technology, wars would cease and the populous would be satiated. There was only one stipulation. Utopia had an occupancy limit. I had lost my ticket.

As the masses rushed towards the light, I was hesitant. For what reason, I did not know. I know now.

They told us that all would benefit. We would all be saved. Still, some of us were lost causes. Those too old or enfeebled would be left behind. The poster child of the revolution had to be among the chosen. We were in limbo. The past was to be forgotten, and I was the past.

They were going to create a new civilization, founded around flawlessness inherit. They had to make a statement. We had to embrace what

was coming, and not what had been. So they established the colonies. Places where the unedited could bide their time. A distant memory to the new order. It was never meant to be malevolent. It was meant to be a service. We would be a museum. A living exhibit of days long gone.

We would behave like the people and places of the past, adopting the mannerisms and attire appropriate to their times. We would assume our roles as the subjects of a theatrical performance being played out for someone that we were sure must be watching. A display of the maladies and weaknesses that had once been. A dwindling star in a universe born anew.

They forced us onto reservations, where we could be studied and propagate. We would never have to worry for anything again. I don't know about the others, but when I imagined them up there, gazing at me through the crystalline dome of what would be my new sky, I recoiled in horror. Given long enough, we would be able to forget the inflicted traumas of our shared past. Yet, when I think about how the movement of our captors, the shadows from above, would soon be mistaken for the motion of the cosmos, I couldn't help but feel uneasy. Guilty, should we forget who we were. No one seems to know that most simple of facts these days.

And so I ran. So I run. That is the reason why I sit silently in this sewer now, doing my best to avoid the sweeping beams of their spotlights. I don't know where I'm going. I'll find somewhere. Somewhere here or beyond the stars that I can call home. A place where there are still meadows and springs to dance in. A place where people are referred to by their names and not their numbers. A place where people still have the spark of life in their eyes and the hope for a better tomorrow in their hearts. Not there yet. Not there yet.

To whom I ask deliverance, I do not know. I'll repeat it into eternity if it might only aid in the retention of my sanity. The glue to the shattered pieces of my mind, fractured by misguided benevolence of an oppressive system. I maintain the hope that someone may receive my plea, tap on the glass of the dome to which I am confined, and kindly indicate the escape hatch.

Close Your Eyes

Heather Wolford

Hampshire High School, Hampshire County

Teacher: Jenna Stitt

2nd Place Winner (Grades 9-10)

The blast rolled out like thunder.

Someone was tugging on my arm and patting my chest, urging me to wake. I wasn't sure who it was until my little brother's voice filled my ears as he pleaded, "Alyas, get up! Please, get up, the walls are falling down!"

I pushed myself up onto my elbows. There was dust and smoke everywhere, so thick that I could barely see my brother standing just a few feet in front of me. We'd been hit; I didn't know why, or who it was that had done it, but I did know that bombs had been dropping in other parts of the city for a while now. Mama had tried to reassure us that we were safe. *'It'll be over soon,'* she'd say as another explosion shook the ground. *'Just close your eyes.'* But we weren't safe here, and for the first time in my life, Mama was wrong.

Coughing some of the dust from my lungs, I scrambled to my feet and reached out for my brother's hand.

"Naji," I said to him, "where is Maya? And Mama? Do you know?"

"Maya Is in Mama's room," he replied, panic rising in his small voice. I knew from his short response that he didn't know where Mama was, and that scared him. It scared me too, but I knew that I had to try to stay calm for his sake.

"Come on," I said, squinting as I struggled to see the floor in front of me, "stay behind me. We'll go get Maya and then we'll find Mama, okay?"

Naji didn't respond, just held on tightly to my hand as I made my way toward Mama's room. As we drew nearer, I found where all the dust was coming from; the left side of the building had been nearly destroyed, piles of debris the only thing I

could see for what looked like miles. I could hear my neighbors screaming from in here, and I was almost certain that I could see their silhouettes running through the smoke in a blind panic. *'Breathe,'* I told myself.

"Maya," I called, "we have to go find Mama, come on."

She ran towards me, and I lifted her into my arms, motioning for Naji to follow me outside. Debris really *was* everywhere, almost every building around us in shambles. There were dozens of injured people littered about the street, and so many others already dead. Homes were in flames, and I could see people in their windows, still trapped inside. The fires lit up the night in rays of orange and red, devouring everything they touched. I glanced around in horror, my throat beginning to burn as something familiar caught my eye. On the ground near our neighbor's home, I saw a spot of blue. My heartbeat seemed to slow to an impossible rate as I found myself walking toward it. It was a dress.

"Stay back," I mumbled to Naji as I placed Maya beside him, my entire being seeming to tremble. It took me three tries to clear away enough of the rubble, and the face beneath it barely had time to register in my mind before Naji cried out, he and Maya both running to her side.

"Mama," he wailed, pulling on her hand, expecting her to wake. I pressed my fingers to her neck, and I felt nothing, her skin cold despite the heat out here, the blood that had poured from her now drying on the ground around us. My chest felt hollow, as if all the air had just been kicked from my lungs, and every muscle in my body seemed to curl inward. Why was this happening? What had we done to deserve this? I didn't know, but I also knew that we couldn't stay here. We had to move, to find our father- if he was even alive- and to get somewhere safe.

Swallowing my grief, I tugged at Naji's hand, pulling him away from our mother's body. He struggled against my grip at first, but quickly stopped fighting as he lifted his head and met my eyes.

"Mama," he whispered, his small voice hoarse and seeming to fall flat. Maya called for her too, screaming and crying as I picked her up again. I patted her hair the same way our mother always had, though that did little to sooth her, and I couldn't help but feel guilty; I had always tried to be brave for my siblings, to look out for them as my parents had asked of me... but in that moment, as we stood amidst the chaos and destruction, I knew that there was nothing I could've done to protect them from this. Our city had become a boneyard, and the rest of the world was turning its back while others sought to bury us. I prayed that someone would show us mercy, that someone would hear our cries...but my sister had stopped crying, and Naji's expression just mirrored my own.

An eerie silence seemed to settle over us as we backed away from our mother. The air was still thick with smoke and sorrow, and the world seemed to shatter as a few of our neighbors came rushing towards us. They promised us that they would get us to safety, and I felt tears in my eyes then. I lifted my gaze to the sky above, and I knew with a heartbreaking certainty that we would never reach that safe place. I took one last glance over at my mother, said a small prayer for my father, and knelt down beside Naji. I took his hand in mine, placing a kiss on his, and Maya's forehead as I said with all the breath left in my lungs,

"It'll be over soon. Just.... close your eyes."

Airplanes

Erica Cottrill

Bridgeport High School, Harrison County

Teacher: Amy Lohmann

3rd Place Winner (Grades 9-10)

The last sounds he will hear in his life are sirens.

Screams and flashes of red flood his mind, a deluge of horror and fatality and could-have-beens. The temperature climbs as drops of salty sweat roll down his back and seep through his shirt to his uniform jacket. He can hear the words “stay calm” as if they’re really being spoken. Now, there is no time for calm words.

“Daniel!” His comrade’s shaky voice yanks him back to hellish reality. “Can’t you regain control? Do something?”

He growls and barks, “I can’t. We’ve just been *hit*.” His grip on the control board tightens. “If I try anything, we’ll crash faster.”

His comrade shuts his eyes. “Damn.” He squints and punches the wall so hard he nearly breaks skin. “*Damn.*”

Daniel wheezes and tears his jacket from his body. The plane is too hot to bear, and the scent in the air is pungent. Smoky. It makes him cough.

He wonders if this is what death smells like.

His hand shoves itself into his pocket, balls into a fist. He shouts words that are incomprehensible, but it is his outlet, so he yells and yells. His throat is already becoming sore, but he’s sure that a hoarse voice won’t matter when he’s dead.

Something brushes his hand. He grabs it and yanks it out of his pocket, ready to shred it apart until he realizes what it is.

The turquoise paper airplane, now crumpled, unfolds itself in his palms. His fingers leave grimy prints on the page, but he can still read what it says, written in a child's crude manuscript:

Pleas com home dad. I miss you and me and momy love you.

He smiles and snuffles.

"I'm sorry," he says, burying his face in the page. "I'm so sorry, baby."

The sirens sing.

Bridget knows something isn't right when she sees the spotless black sedan rolling down the road. People don't come to this neighborhood—it's too out of the way for drivers to accidentally wind up roaming the roads, unless they were planning on being here in the first place, and that doesn't happen very often. Any visitor besides the mailman is out of the ordinary.

Her anxiety heightens as the car turns into her poor, rocky excuse of a driveway, and she watches the vehicle bounce up and down, up and down. Her fingers find her necklace, and she twists the thin gold pendant back and forth. She feels a small tug on her long skirt.

"Mommy, whose car is that?"

"I'm not sure, sweetie."

The little boy pulls and pulls until his mother finally cranes her neck to look at him. Seeing concern pool in his eyes, she turns around and bends down to his level with a smile.

"Is it Daddy?" He brightens and gives her a toothy grin.

Her gaze meets the polished wooden floor. "No, it's not Daddy." She rests a hand on his tiny shoulder and pinches his cheek softly. "But it's okay! Just go play with your teddy bear, alright? Cookie misses you."

He gasps. “I forgot! No, Cookie, I’m sorry!” The boy runs back into his room for his toy, and she can’t help but chuckle.

She hears knocking. She takes a deep breath, and her heart falls when she opens the door.

They tell her how he died, how the enemy found his plane and shot it down—Bridget pictures his last moments, the descent of the aircraft, the thunderous noise when it hit the ground; the images appear to her by some force she cannot control. She does not cry when they give her a small box filled with his belongings. She does not cry when they praise his service. She does not cry even when they leave and she closes the door and collapses on it, sliding down until she is crouching, her back pressed against it.

Then her son walks back into the room. “Mommy?”

“Yes, Will?”

She has noticed that for a five-year-old, he is disconcertingly perceptive. Will plops down beside her, crossing his legs to try and sit the way he was taught at preschool. He doesn’t say a word, so all she hears is his steady, soft breathing. She places her hand on his head and moves her fingers through his thin brown hair, closing her eyes and matching the pace of his inhales and exhales.

“Lookie! Look, Mommy! He wrote back!”

Bridget’s eyes shoot open and follow her son’s pointed finger in disbelief. The parcel she was given earlier is open now, and she recognizes Daniel’s blocky handwriting on torn slips of white paper lining the walls of the box. Will snatches one of the notes up and studies it with a vigor that only a child can have. After a minute or so, he gives the letter to his mother. “Read it to me,” he says. “I don’t know all the words.”

Trembling, Bridget takes the note. She breathes and starts talking, her mouth moving faster than her mind.

Will, thank you for sending these letters to me. I'm sorry I can't send any back to you right now, but I'm writing this in hopes it'll reach you someday.

No matter how hard life gets, remember that I am always with you and your mother. Even if it takes me years to get back to you, I'm going to try as hard as I can to come home. I want to see you grow up. I want to see you graduate school and fall in love and have a family of your own. I want to see you again.

To Bridget: I love you. You're the most incredible woman I've ever met. Take care of our son until I return.

Daniel

“Mommy, why are you crying?”

She takes her son in her arms and buries her face in his hair. “Daddy won't be coming home,” she says.

Will takes the letter and folds a crumpled paper airplane.

An Epic of Epics

Takoda Knarr

Webster County High School, Webster County

Teacher: Greta Cox

1st Place Winner (Grades 11-12)

“A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies, said Jojen. The man who never reads lives only one.” - George R.R. Martin, *A Dance with Dragons*.

The warm air sloshes up against the sturdy wooden hull of the galley. I stand on the edge looking out towards the sea that whips up with watery fingers, splashing a light mist on my face. The warm Mediterranean sun beats down on the other men and myself as I gaze at the modest landmass slowly approaching. I am Odysseus, famed leader of the Greeks in the ten year war against Troy. I can hear the cries of my crew as their stomachs churn and growl like the Spartans battle cries. Their mouths were cracked and dry like clay pots in an Athenian kiln. I knew that we had to land soon to replenish our stocks of food and drink, or we would never feel the warmth of our lover’s embrace again.

We pushed ashore and tethered the ship as best as our weary bodies could muster. The island was blanketed in grass and speckled with pitiful trees. The only real feature was a vast cavern that had the delicious aroma of roasted meat emanating from it. My crew braved the darkness, whether from curiosity or ravenous hunger I do not know. We approached the venerated dwelling that had fresh wine and cooked mutton. Surely nobody would complain if the victorious Greeks, starved and thirsty, helped ourselves to the extra rations? We feasted and consumed until there was nothing left but filled bellies and tired eyes. With most of my crew drifting off to sleep, I heard the “meh” of sheep quickly approaching the cave mouth, followed by a huge shepherd, lacking an eye. The

cyclops laughed knowingly as he smelled his favorite dish and rolled a boulder across the only exit. The cave went dark.

I blinked the darkness away as panic seized my warrior heart, and all I knew was that I was sweltering hot. Fire leapt around me as I slowly stood, weak from days of walking. I looked for anything familiar and found a golden cross abandoned at my feet, which I quickly clutched to my breast for protection. “Dante... We must brave the heart of the last level of Hell if we are to reunite you with your beloved Beatrice. Lucifer himself presides over this frozen wasteland, and to face him in his own domain would be foolish.” Virgil hovered over me as my eyes got accustomed to the gloom. He glided silently over the rocky pathway as he led me down further into the pits of Hell.

The fire gave way to glaciers and icicles. Soon I was yearning for the sweltering heat, due to it being stolen by the blistering cold that tore through my bone and heart with every gust of wind like even the weather itself was determined to torment your very soul. Then a voice came over me like a warm summer’s breeze. “Dante the time has come for us to be reunited.” Standing in front of me was a ghostly Beatrice, still beautiful and pure, as if she never was destined to be Lucifer’s wife. I reached out and slowly enclosed her hand in my own when the ice all around us shook violently. A giant three headed demon burst from the glacier, beating his ink black wings and sending torrents of icy air in our direction. She was mine, and my angel would not be taken from me again! I clasped Beatrice’s hand with all my might and ran away from the demonic Lucifer, when a light shined all around us. It was subtle at first, then it encompassed everything burning away the ice, demons, and wind.

I blinked and the light began to fade. The shooting star vanished across the sky of Athens, but the warmth of my beloved was still in my hand. We ran

from the city lights, fleeing the penalty of death for not following her father's wishes. Why he would marry my beautiful Hermia off to that dastardly Demetrius I would not know. I ran through the expansive pine forests, the foliage squishing under my sandals. Pine sap and needles stuck to my clothes and matted my hair into sticky knots. I ran until I couldn't see the lights of the city anymore, and I paused, panting. Looking around, the sun was beginning to set but I had lost my Hermia.

I started walking through the darkening woods, calling her name and looking in every obvious place she may stop to take a rest. Soon I hear music and laughter and see faint lights through a clearing. I stalked slowly towards the noises and emerged into a festival in full swing. Musicians played flutes, lutes, and harps while jugglers made everyday objects fly and land with such practiced grace. A play was already in session when a beast walked from the back of the stage. It appeared to be a man but it had a donkey's head! The actors screamed and ran from the stage, as did the audience. Benches were upturned and goblets of mead was spilled over the woodland floor. My vision became a blur of people rushing past me desperate to get away from the dastardly beast they have just witnessed.

I looked around and the screams of fleeing people were actually the screams of people being delighted by an extravagant party. I wasn't Lysander, silly me, I was Nick Carraway neighbor to Gatsby himself! The drummer as playing a beat, and the trumpeters began to blow a fast swinging Charleston. I swung Jordan around in her glittery dress that reflected the light from the chandeliers, sidestepped in time with the other couples, and dipped my lovely partner at the end of the song. We shimmied over to the side where Gatsby was holding us a couple of drinks.

“Having a bit of fun, Old Sport?” he smiled his pearly white teeth, the same color of the page as I turned it to proceed to the next story.

I have stood on the edge of the Titanic as it sailed across the Atlantic, holding Rose as we pretended to be rulers of the world. I have fought Grendel in the mead hall of Hrothgar, using nothing but my hands and pure strength to defeat the monster. I have pieced together parts of humans with surgical precision and created life when there was none as Dr. Frankenstein. I have wrestled the great white whale firsthand and lived to tell the tale. I have lived all these lives and wielded wands of dragon heartstring, swords from stones, and rings to rule them all as if by magic. As Stephen King himself once said, “Books are a uniquely portable magic.”

Cotton Candy

Alliyah Simpson

Mingo Central High School, Mingo County

Teacher: Katie Endicott

2nd Place Winner (Grades 11-12)

Nighttime wasn't always an entity of dread during my formative years. For most children, it's a time of animation and fear. Their imaginations bring to life the ghouls and goblins and three-eyed beasts most closely associated with pagan holidays and the scary movies smuggled into DVD players long after their parents go to bed. Now, I'm not saying or implying in any way that I was fearless, or that I ever neglected to check my closet for monsters late at night; however, when the sun completely disappeared and was overpowered by the moon and the frogs rang out their symphonies with the shrills of mating calls, my extensive sense of fascination was broadened. The moon was a secret that I felt only I knew. The cool night air was the clarity that nipped at my childish cheeks, constantly badgering me for adventure. No. Nighttime was not always an entity of dread. However, the golden night era soon slowly faded and rebuilt itself into a black blockade that altered me for the rest of my life. The ghouls and goblins of my life were real, and they slept in the next room.

Every day, when the last remaining traces of sunlight would fade from the sky, my father would lumber off in his work truck, heading out for a night in the mines. As soon as his vehicle would vanish from view, my mother would hurry us into her car and drive us to her best friend's house fifteen minutes away from our secluded double-wide. Upon arrival, my siblings and I would excitedly open our doors and run forth into open air, arms outstretched and giggling with reckless abandon; however, the joys and enthusiasm of childhood were always short-lived and our happiness never failed to swiftly dissipate. For

inside the home before us lied a sinister circle of hallucinogenic drugs and neglectful parenting. The trek to the front door was always a sobering experience, and once inside, the night always spun out of control.

The room was dark. The only miniscule source of light was emanating from the cable TV and the multitude of lit cigarettes and joints in the mouths of the adults sitting upon every flat surface. They were all sitting around and laughing at us children as if we were their own personal inside joke. My mother sat amongst them with blood-shot eyes and slurred words, reveling in the high gifted to her from the joint in hand and the crushed pills on the table. We all looked on somberly, knowing the betrayal that our mother was about to bestow upon us as she typically did shortly after the festivities began. She beckoned us forward, and we approached her hesitantly, fearing what was about to come.

I stared at the small, round object pinched in between my mother's thumb and forefinger, not wanting to place it in my mouth knowing what it was about to do to me. The color was cotton-candy pink and, according to my mother's promises, would taste like it as well, even though it always failed to do so. Desperate for our mother's approval, though apprehensive, we would always tentatively place the tablet into our mouths. Fortunately, the pills never took long to take effect.

Whenever I would wake from my drug-induced state, I always found my tiny frame haphazardly strewn across the floor amongst the other children as if we had all been carelessly discarded of. Gradually, more and more of the children would stir and their minute eyes would flutter open. Still groggy from the medications, we would silently start playing with the items found in the nearly-bare toy box in the corner of the room as the adults on the other side of the wall chattered boisterously and blasted loud music. We would continue in

this half-dormant state until the sun would slowly makes its ascent and the first golden hues of sunlight would pour into the one window peering out over the gravel driveway. One by one, parents would unbolt the door and come in to retrieve their children, some having to change long-soiled diapers and console hysterical crying.

My mother would always stumble in to retrieve us long after the others had left, waiting impatiently at the locked door for us to pick ourselves up off the floor and make our way over to the threshold leading to the hall. As we journeyed through the living room, carefully stepping over crumpled bodies on the floor, we looked around at the aftermath of the raging party that my mother and her friends had thrown. Used needles and unknown substances stained the floor alongside passed out forms. My brother, sister, and I would clutch onto each other's hands out of fear, trying to seek out some form of strength in the aftershock of our ordeal.

Life resumed as normal. My mother loaded us into the car for the drive home and we would blankly stare out upon the trees as they would blur together proportionately with the ever-increasing speed of the vehicle. We always made it back to the house in enough time to put dinner on the table before my dad's shift was over.

Sitting around the dinner table, my dad would carry on happy conversation unaware of the events that had transpired the previous night. My mother would laugh with him and act as if nothing was amiss. On several occasions, my father would turn towards us and ask how our night had gone staying the night at mom's friend's house. We would furtively glance at each other out the corner of our eyes, affirming the unspoken pact we had formed

long before. One by one, we turned towards my father and stated “It was great,” resuming our meal and our life as if nothing had ever happened.

The Heartbeat in the Walls

Ali Householder

Washington High School, Jefferson County

Teacher: Ellen Curry

3rd Place Winner (Grades 11-12)

The Heartbeat in the Walls

“They’re lonely, you know,” her grandma informs Juno slyly one early Sunday morning as she slips into her gram’s room for the fourth time that week. The lighting of the room is dim, a warm golden cast from lamplight and glow-in-the-dark stick-on stars.

Juno’s blanket is around her shoulders like a cape, red and fluffy and dragging against the scarred floor, and her grandmother’s quick to follow the fashion statement, wrapping her own around her frail, curled figure. She knots the two trailing ends at the chest, ensuring her costume complete. It will not fall.

Gram is smart that way, Juno thinks with no small amount of awe.

“Who’s lonely?” she whispers back, crawling onto the queen bed into the mass of quilts and tasseled pillows. Her gram only smiles, a noiseless yet still quite loud smile: the sort that yells without sound, the sort that screams “I know something you don’t.” Juno stick out her tongue.

Her gram is a peculiar woman with a diminutive (and Juno sounds out this word in her head, as it is much too complicated, in her opinion) stature and large hands like oven mitts, meant for hugging and squeezing and most definitely for cheek-pinching. Her dozens of rings often dig into her unfortunate victim’s face, gold and silver and ruby red. Her eyes are young; her clothes are often younger.

Yes, Gram is a very peculiar woman. Juno loves it.

She hurt her hip the Sunday before--at a belly dancing competition, of all things--and now she is staying with Juno and Ma and Mom and Scarlett, her big sister. It's great.

Kinda loud. Always interesting.

"The people," Gram replies, not in a soft voice at all, even at five AM. Gram always refuses to be hushed. Juno is at a loss. *People?*

"What people, Gram?"

Her grandma sighs, shaking her head in a disappointed manner. "The people in the walls," she says, huffing, "can you not hear them? Are you deaf?" At Juno's wide, now frightened eyes, Gram groans. "Come closer." Juno inches her way up the duvet inch-by-inch. "Oh, *please*, take your time," she monotones.

"Sorry, *sorry*," Juno says and makes her way to the top of the bed until Gram's cape is tickling her nose. She smells of cigars and dried flowers and pen ink. She smells a bit like home.

Gram leans over Juno to press her ear against the side of the wall, allowing her eyes--warm, always warm, and chocolatey brown--to drift shut. Her multiple scarves, reds and blue and greens, begin to slip off her fragile form in waves of fabric. Why she wears them to bed, Juno will never know.

The cape stays.

"See? I can hear them clear as day." And Gram laughs, a gasping, belly laugh that shakes the bed frame. "Yes, they're very funny, hear that? Come on--listen, listen."

Juno is very curious now; the adults never let her join in on anything--she's always being left out of conversations. But not, apparently, this time. She

scoots until their shoulders bump, the two of them practically nose-to-nose, and she puts her ear to the wall.

There is nothing. *Then.*

Knock, knock.

Knock, knock, knock, says the wall, and Juno springs away from it in a flurry of motion, practically catapulting herself off the bed with a trembling scream just on the tip of her tongue. She trips over her trusty blanket during her daring escape--*betrayal*--and then she's tumbling to the thick carpeted floor in a whirl of dark hair and blood red.

"Ow," she confesses, surprised.

Gram is laughing at Juno, of course. Gram is often mean that way.

"Don't be like that," she says, wagging a jingling finger. "They're just being friendly, you big baby."

Upset now and a little embarrassed, Juno scrambles back up onto the mattress, grousing the entire way under her breath. "I'm not a baby," she says, puffing up her cheeks. *I'm nine!* She musters up her courage, and after blowing a stray curl out of her eyes, she pushed the shell of her ear back to that awful wallpaper.

Gram smiles, reaching out to take one of her shaking hands. She pats it twice.

Knock, knock, knock.

Mom always told her to be polite to strangers. "Hello?" Juno greets, feeling absurd. *Knock!* The noise becomes more excited, rising in number and volume until there are hundreds of knuckles rapping on the insides of the walls, creating roars and roars of sound. It's like thunder, or perhaps laughter. Juno

can barely breathe, she's so shocked. Not shocked enough, however, that she can't knock back.

The tapping, impossibly, skyrockets to new heights.

"They're so excited to meet you," Gram says, face softening into something fond. The lines around her mouth are stark against her face from such a wide beam. "They don't get the chance to talk very much." *Knock, knock, knock*. It seemed as though the people in the walls agreed.

"Wow," Juno breathes, voice faltering in her wonder. Gram nods in total agreement. Her face, once bright with joy, is now very grave. Juno straightens on instinct.

"You can't tell anyone," she warns. "Just a secret between you and your old grams." And she does a very strange gesture then, reaching up with a gnarled hand to rap her knuckles against her chest: one, two, three times, one-two-three, steady as a heartbeat.

Juno nods and nods and nods until she's sure her neck will snap. She clumsily taps away at her own heart, and Gram's face lightens. The crinkles at the corners of her eyes change from worry to mischief.

"They tell very good knock-knock jokes," Gram says, and life is never quite the same after that.

"They hate the wallpaper," Gram informs her Monday afternoon, brushing against a hideous daffodil with the pad of her thumb.

"When they make a noise like that--" and here she mimics a quick series of soft taps, light and airy as a butterfly's wings, "--they're giggling. Like children!"

“They’ll follow you all around the house! Better yet, they’ll follow you wherever you go. They’re wonderful guides, if you’ll only listen.” And here, Gram winks. “How do you think I met your grandfather?”

“One day, you won’t need to use those ears of yours. You’ll just know.” And there is her hand over her heart again, one-two-three, steady as a heartbeat.

“They think with their hearts.”

On a different Sunday, they do not speak at all, merely travel the streets together hand-and-hand, capes brushing, following wherever the people lead them with the knock-knock-knock of a thousand heartbeats.

But. “I won’t be around forever,” Gram tells her, and Juno begins to shake her head. “No, no, listen to me.” She heaves a very heavy, very tired sigh, and her eyes do not look as young as Juno once remembers.

She knocks against Juno’s chest with one of her over-sized, weathered hands. *One-two-three, one-two-three, steady as a heartbeat.* And Juno listens.

The people in the walls knock back.