

# VOICES OF TOMORROW

An Anthology of State Finalist Writings

YOUNG

Authors'

CONTEST 2024



The annual Young Authors' Contest is hosted by the State of Maryland Literacy Association and endorsed by its statewide chapters.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the spirit of celebrating the profound impact of the Young Authors' Contest, we extend our deepest gratitude and admiration to the local chairs who have dedicated themselves tirelessly to nurturing the voices of young writers across the state. Their commitment to fostering literary talent and creativity has not only supported but also propelled the state-level contest to remarkable heights.

To **Anne Arundel's Sherrie Ugolini** of Windsor Farm Elementary, whose leadership as AACPS Chair has been instrumental in guiding young authors in their literary journey.

In **Baltimore City, Hanna Scinta** of Maree G. Faring Elementary School, who has brilliantly managed the school-based contest, offering invaluable opportunities for students to showcase their talents.

**Amanda Rampata** in Baltimore County, whose efforts have significantly contributed to the enrichment of the county's literary landscape.

**Cecil County's Chrissy Hilliker**, whose dedication has been a beacon of support for young writers, encouraging them to pursue their literary passions.

**Eastern Shore's** dynamic duo, **Emilee Holson** from The Salisbury School and **Dr. Brian Cook** of Worcester County Public Schools, whose collective efforts have magnified the voice of young authors in Somerset, Wicomico, and Worcester counties.

**Frederick County** celebrates **Kate Mills** from Middletown High School and **Andrew Velnoskey** from Ballenger Creek

Middle School, whose leadership and commitment to both high school and middle school contests have been exemplary.

**Harford County's Cheryl Monk**, a retired chair who continues to inspire elementary and middle school students and shapes the future of Harford's young writers.

**Howard County** shines with **Maria Moy, Alison Rudo, and Shareen O'Neale**, each chairing the elementary, middle, and high school contests, respectively, their collective efforts weaving a tapestry of literary excellence.

**Montgomery County** sees **Tanie Shenk** of Montgomery Virtual Academy and **Kelly Tanzi** of Woods Academy, whose school-based contests open doors for young authors to dream and create.

**Queen Anne's County's Kelley Sweiderk**, whose guidance ensures the county's young authors are celebrated and encouraged.

Lastly, **Western Maryland's Erica Foley**, representing Garrett and Allegany counties, whose dedication nurtures the region's rich literary talent.

Each of you, through your unwavering support, dedication, and hard work, have not only hosted and supported the Young Authors' Contest but have also laid the foundation for a brighter, more creative future. Your efforts are a testament to the power of community, education, and the arts. Thank you for your outstanding contribution to the literary world and for inspiring the next generation of writers.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Grade 1, Poetry</b>	<b>1</b>
“I Love My Sister”	1
“Young Authors’ Contest”	2
<b>Grade 2, Poetry</b>	<b>3</b>
“The Beach”	3
“My Family”	4
<b>Grade 3, Poetry</b>	<b>5</b>
“Treehouse”	5
“Nature”	6
<b>Grade 4, Poetry</b>	<b>7</b>
“Always Art”	7
“Your Brain Can Grow”	8
<b>Grade 5, Poetry</b>	<b>9</b>
“Watercolor Sunrise”	9
“Feeling Blue”	11
<b>Grade 6, Poetry</b>	<b>12</b>
“Your Paw Prints on My Heart”	12
“The Mountain in Me”	14
<b>Grade 7, Poetry</b>	<b>15</b>
“What’s the Point of Life”	15

"My Hair...I'm Not Ashamed"	17
<b>Grade 8, Poetry</b>	<b>19</b>
<hr/>	
"Lost in the Music"	19
"Flowing in the Wind"	21
<b>Grade 9, Poetry</b>	<b>22</b>
<hr/>	
"My Jar of Candies"	22
"Moon"	24
<b>Grade 10, Poetry</b>	<b>26</b>
<hr/>	
"Sisyphus"	26
"Hades"	27
<b>Grade 11, Poetry</b>	<b>29</b>
<hr/>	
"Honeysuckle"	29
"Rocking Chair on the Beach"	32
<b>Grade 12, Poetry</b>	<b>34</b>
<hr/>	
"The Fall of Girlhood"	34
"The Writer's Touch"	36
<b>Grade 1, Short Story</b>	<b>39</b>
<hr/>	
"Loose Tooth at the Beach"	39
"Unicorn in my Closet"	41
<b>Grade 2, Short Story</b>	<b>43</b>
<hr/>	
"Lillian and the Book Villain"	43

"The Bird's Party"	45
<b>Grade 3, Short Story</b>	<b>47</b>
<hr/>	
"Wolfy"	47
"Hope Gets Lost"	50
<b>Grade 4, Short Story</b>	<b>53</b>
<hr/>	
"Mother of Mississippi"	53
"The Cloaked Trickster"	56
<b>Grade 5, Short Story</b>	<b>59</b>
<hr/>	
"Scrabble"	59
"Stuck in Time"	63
<b>Grade 6, Short Story</b>	<b>66</b>
<hr/>	
"The Stuffed Animal Switch"	66
"Scary Adventures in Alaska"	72
<b>Grade 7, Short Story</b>	<b>78</b>
<hr/>	
"Lily Pads"	78
"Winter of Guilt"	84
<b>Grade 8, Short Story</b>	<b>89</b>
<hr/>	
"The Haunted Springhouse"	89
"Gone Astray"	95
<b>Grade 9, Short Story</b>	<b>101</b>
<hr/>	
"At the End of the Sea"	101

“Wingspan”	107
<b>Grade 10, Short Story</b>	<b>115</b>
“Oh Brother”	115
“The Downfall of the Obelisk of Light”	121
<b>Grade 11, Short Story</b>	<b>127</b>
“Empty”	127
“Secrets”	131
<b>Grade 12, Short Story</b>	<b>137</b>
“Paragon”	137
“Hallow Home”	145

Page intentionally left blank.



*Grade 1, Poetry*

# 1ST PLACE

---

## “I LOVE MY SISTER”

By **Jiya Kothari**, Triadelphia Ridge Elementary  
Howard County Literacy Chapter

I have the cutest baby sister.  
Sometimes she calls me mister, mister.  
She is only 3 years old,  
But to me, she is gold.

We like to play, play, play  
Each and every day!  
Sometimes we dance and sing,  
Together, we do everything!

I do not even try,  
But sometimes I make her cry.  
I tell her it is okay and give her a hug.  
She smiles and gives me a little tug.

Mila, you are my sweetheart.  
I hope we are never apart.  
I'm always here for you, sincerely.  
I love my sister so dearly!

*Grade 1, Poetry*

## 2ND PLACE

---

### “YOUNG AUTHORS’ CONTEST”

By **Phoebe Blanco**, South Shore Elementary  
Anne Arundel County Literacy Association

**Y**ay!

**O**n task

**U**ndo or keep

**N**ear the end but fun

**G**reat

**A**wesome

**U**se creativity

**T**hink

**H**ard but fun

**O**rganize

**R**eally fun

**S**pend time

**C**urious

**O**n/off

**N**ever give up

**T**ry

**E**nter

**S**elf-done

**T**est

*Grade 2, Poetry*

# 1ST PLACE

---

## “THE BEACH”

By **Quinn Westbrook**, Buckingham Elementary  
Eastern Shore Literacy Association

Waves crashing on the shore,  
Seagulls squawking up above,  
Sun shining on faces,  
Children throwing frisbees,  
Sandcastles being built,  
People reading books,  
Folks swimming in the ocean,  
Jumping over waves,  
At the beach.

## 2ND PLACE

---

### “MY FAMILY”

By **Zoe Lane**, Waterloo Elementary  
Howard County Literacy Chapter

My family is big, there are too many to name.

So we will do the basics, if it's all the same.

My Mom, Dad and brother are my main family

There is lots of love and giggles for everyone to see.

Next are my Grammys, they love me very much

They come to all my games and cheer me on a  
bunch.

I have lots of aunts and uncles, I have trouble remembering  
them all

I give them hugs and we play games, both big and  
small

My cousins are rockstars! We love to laugh and play

I wish I could see them every single day

My Gropop and my Granddad are in Heaven, it's far away

But I still love them each and every day.

Yes my family is big and crazy, I love them it's easy to say

I definitely wouldn't have it any other way.

*Grade 3, Poetry*

# 1ST PLACE

---

## “TREEHOUSE”

By **Anna Behrendt**, Triadelphia Ridge Elementary  
Howard County Literacy Association

You see a tree  
I see a vision  
I've planned it out  
With great precision  
I gather wood  
And other tools  
To make it look  
Just like it should  
Like a house, but in a tree  
It can fit just you and me  
Made of wood  
Yet made of steel  
Or maybe that's just  
How our hearts feel

*Grade 3, Poetry*

## 2ND PLACE

---

### “NATURE”

By **Suravi Poudyal**, Emmorton Elementary  
Harford County Literacy Chapter

Beautiful sky blue and white  
Gentle breeze, I see a kite  
Birds are flying towards my sight  
Blooming flowers colorful and bright

Beautiful mountains capped with snow  
River, river I see you flow  
Blue lakes I want to row  
Wavy oceans nice and calm, my heart glows

*Grade 4, Poetry*

# 1ST PLACE

---

## “ALWAYS ART”

By **Henry McCabe**, Kennard Elementary  
Upper Shore Literacy Association

Red, blue, black and white  
Sometimes dark  
Sometimes bright  
Square, circle  
What a sight!  
Pencils moving  
Body grooving  
Always Art

Painting, drawing  
Paper mache  
Paper, pencil  
Sketching ways  
Pastel, pen  
Marker, paint  
Color, styles  
Always Art

A beautiful peace  
A beautiful release  
Something that cannot  
Break us apart  
Always Art

## 2ND PLACE

---

### “YOUR BRAIN CAN GROW”

By **Joshua Von Steuben**, Rising Sun Elementary  
Cecil County Literacy Association

Did you know your brain can grow?  
How are you supposed to know?  
It only takes a little practice  
If you don't practice you might miss this  
Then you won't become smarter  
And it will be harder  
To make it to college  
To get more knowledge  
So you should grow your brain  
Or your brain might be drained  
Also you should get plenty of sleep  
Or you might be tired enough to weep  
You should also eat healthy foods  
They'll make you in good moods  
Exercise will make you fit  
And help you learn quite a bit  
So your brain can change  
It doesn't have to stay in its range  
You can work harder  
To get smarter  
You should learn more knowledge  
So you can go to college  
I hope I said this in a nice way  
If not I'll be in dismay  
But I'll see you another day



# 1ST PLACE

---

## “WATERCOLOR SUNRISE”

By **Lily Price**, Jones Elementary  
Anne Arundel County Literacy Association

The grays and blues and pinks  
Combined and swirled  
And made the night sky weaken  
To let the sun push through

Mingling around the luminous forest  
Are little sunbeams  
That cast yellow spotlights  
Above the shadow-casting trees

The cold breath of wind  
Pushed the hair out of my face  
And my toes were tickled  
By little blades of grass

The flaming ball of fire  
Was slowly pulled up to the sky  
By the invisible string  
Grasping with all its might  
To illuminate the things  
That we have yet to see

The song of the birds

Calling us to rise  
To seize the earth into the morning

The smell of sap  
Clinging to the bark  
On shady trees

The grays and blues and pinks  
The dancing sunbeams  
The feel of cold bursts of wind  
The slowly rising sun  
The morning birdsong  
The smells of sap

All make my watercolor sunrise

## 2ND PLACE

---

### “FEELING BLUE”

By **Julianna Martinez**, Churchville Elementary  
Harford County Literacy Chapter

When someone you love passes away,  
You have a guilty feeling that they should have stayed.  
You feel as if you're the reason they're gone,  
While others might say that you are very wrong.  
When you wake up from sleep, you hope last night was a  
dream,  
But it wasn't, even though it may seem.  
You might think you are hungry,  
but you cannot eat.  
The world feels so small under your feet.  
Without them, you cry, and feel empty inside.  
Without them, you feel as if you can't breathe.  
Without them, you feel smaller than a flea.  
You try to think about the good and happy times,  
just like people tell you too,  
but it's not that easy, it's pretty hard to do.  
You think about how others have lost loved ones too,  
But even when you know that,  
It doesn't stop you from feeling blue.

# 1ST PLACE

---

## “YOUR PAW PRINTS ON MY HEART”

By **Jenna Ahn**, Mount View Middle  
Howard County Literacy Association

For eight long years, my faithful friend,  
Until that May day, when it had to end.  
An abyss now exists, where your presence once filled,  
More than a dog, a companion so skilled.

You were my ally, always by my side,  
The night you departed, how I wept, how I cried.  
Life without you seems without tomorrow's glow,  
Yet I must continue, despite the sorrow.

Regrets I have, for my past wrongs,  
Yet, I prayed for your health, all along.  
God had other plans, and I couldn't disagree,  
He knew it was time for you to be free.

Though you're gone, you're not forgotten,  
In my heart, you hold a place unrotten.  
I wish you were here, as I write this poem,  
In honor of you, Penny, who was special.

We reminisce about the joyous times we had,  
Striving to smile, hiding the aches so bad.  
Your place can never be replaced, not by another,

I miss you, dear Penny, each day like no other.

Just like my love for you, that will never drain,  
Your pawprints on my heart will forever remain.  
In every gentle breeze, in every drop of rain,  
I feel your spirit's whisper, easing the pain.

## 2ND PLACE

---

### “THE MOUNTAIN IN ME”

By **Olive Martin**, Matapeake Middle,  
Upper Shore Literacy Association

I smell the breeze of the mountain.  
It's as fresh as the grass beneath my feet.  
I see the birds flying gracefully like a fish in a stream.  
This is the mountain in me.

I hear a stream trickling along, singing its summer tune.  
The sky is as blue as the wings of the blue jay,  
flying over fields of green pine trees.  
This is the mountain in me.

I taste the honey from the bee's hive,  
it's sweet in my mouth melting on my tongue.  
The moss is soft on my feet.  
This is the mountain in me.

The purple flowers in the meadow,  
shimmer in the last bit of light.  
The bird go to their nest,  
chirping the mountain song.  
This is the mountain in me.

*Grade 7, Poetry*

# 1ST PLACE

---

## “WHAT’S THE POINT OF LIFE”

By **Maira Khokhar**, Mount View Middle  
Howard County Literacy Association

You can feel pressure building everywhere  
Energy flowing through our bodies  
What once were loose muscles are now tense  
Everything getting faster and harder

Competition building while the prices continue inflating  
Some wealthy and spoiled while others struggle to survive  
Some clawing their way to power  
Others utilizing it

We love one and another, support each other,  
Together we make a difference,  
Together we make up the world,

We feel delight, joy,  
Pain, love  
We feel emotions

That's Life  
It's Beautiful  
Like a rose, but every  
Rose has its thorns

In life There are challenges, Which one will face,  
There are choices which one must make but  
the point isn't which you choose, it's how and why you  
choose,  
In life mistakes are just lessons

Inspire young minds, go above and beyond  
You can be extraordinary only if you try  
Strive for the impossible,  
Reach for the stars

You have to try, make an effort  
Pain isn't impossible to evade forever  
But joy isn't either,  
Life isn't perfect but it's not dreadful either

You have to put in some effort to BE  
Happy to MAKE others happy  
Because Life is only worth living,  
If you're willing to live it.



## 2ND PLACE

---

### “MY HAIR...I’M NOT ASHAMED”

By **Joshua Akinbobola**, Monarch Global Academy  
Anne Arundel County Literacy Association

Why do I look at my hair in despair?  
Why is it like a band of vines  
Why are others full of flair?  
While, my hair is kinky like a bear .  
Others remind me daily how messy it is  
A reality I can't deny  
While, others have marvelous hair to care  
Why do I look at my hair in despair?

The history in my hair every coil and every vine  
I look at my hair and I see it every time  
But what I see makes me shiver away  
Now I look at my hair sad and ashamed

I see my peers hair full of radiance and glow  
I blend inside and keep my hair down low  
I cover up every time  
As I keep on thinking  
Why? Why? Why?

I questioned me, myself, and I  
Why? Why? Why?  
Why do I have these vines

I look at my hair for the last time  
Instead of despair my eyes shined

Now I realize my hair is not a prize  
For people to ridicule and criticize  
For now I see the beauty of my hair  
Now no longer will I look at my hair in despair  
For the blood sweat and tears engraved inside me  
My hair is beauty strength and a living history  
For my hair carries the fire  
I understand my hair grows higher  
For every curl coil vines or straight each vines is beautiful  
no mistakes

Now I look at my hair with no despair...

# 1ST PLACE

---

## “LOST IN THE MUSIC”

By **Sree Saranya Ganti**, Mount View Middle  
Howard County Literacy Association

The stage awaits, a spotlight so bright  
A violin in my hand, anxiety in my eyes  
My heart races, filled with both fear and delight

With trembling fingers, I tighten the bow  
Anxiety whispers, “Will I hit the right note?”  
But deep within my soul, my passion burns strong

Anticipation builds, nerves begin to rise,  
The first stroke of the bow, a hesitant sound  
But with each note played, confidence is found

The strings vibrate, resonating in the air  
Butterflies flutter, as I navigate the score  
Yet the music guides me, like never before

The melody unfolds, and my fingers move with ease  
The rhythm takes over, and the anxiety flees  
The violin sings, and I'm lost in its sound

The audience is silent, their eyes fixed on me  
But I'm lost in the music, and I play with glee  
The notes reach high, then they gently fall

The violin whispers, and then it sings  
The song comes to an end, and I lower my bow  
The audience erupts, with a standing ovation

I take a deep breath and feel a sense of pride  
For in that moment, I felt truly alive inside

*Grade 8, Poetry*

## 2ND PLACE

---

### “FLOWING IN THE WIND”

By **Kieryae Kodges**, Blended Virtual Middle School  
Frederick County Literacy Chapter

All flowers are special.  
Unique in their own way.  
Gliding among the wind,  
and for all the flowers I pray.

I pray for their  
Mind  
Body  
Health  
and Spirit,  
knowing they might not do the same for me.  
I will lift them up when they fall,  
and I will be the light when they can't see.

Your words filled with  
Lies,  
Hatred,  
Jealousy,  
and Deceit,  
do not interrupt my day.

Because I know,  
that in my heart,  
we are all just flower petals,

Flowing in the wind, & finding our own way.

# 1ST PLACE

---

## “MY JAR OF CANDIES”

By **Lily Karpman**, Oakdale High  
Frederick County Literacy Chapter

When my friends are sad  
I pop open the jar of candies atop my neck  
And pull out their favorite flavor

The wrapper crinkles  
They take a bite  
And start to smile

Sweet words grace their tongue  
And I give them another candy  
I'm glad it makes them smile more

All day I give out my candies  
Helping people smile  
With their favorite flavors

I lay down to sleep and rest my weary jar  
I reach inside it  
The only candy left is bitter

I eat it anyways  
I can like the bad flavors  
The ones left at the bottom of my jar

I'll give away my favorites  
As long as my friends have something sweet  
I'll be okay...

## 2ND PLACE

---

### “MOON”

By **Micah Georgeson**, Mountain Ridge High  
Western Maryland Literacy Chapter

Mirror calls me inconsistent, unrepentant, a liar, irrelevant;  
I beg to differ. In my dance across the sky at night  
I see the woman, looking for purpose, for truth.  
I give her beauty, my beauty.  
I give her dreams.  
I give her hope.  
If mirror wants to compare, well, look who makes her fall  
into despair.  
And who gets her looking up at the future,  
Like a desperate leaf clinging to a tree?  
Me.  
I am her anchor, her chance at redemption.  
Mirror may depict me as an irregular construct of the mind,  
But I merely cite my steady patience in defense.  
When the poor woman down below wishes to translate  
into something better,  
Something different, she needs only look at me  
As I change, stretch, go away, and come back brighter.  
She relates her secrets; I give her courage.  
I integrate my dreams, my beloved inconsistency, into her  
being.  
She loves me, yet not herself.  
So I tell her to apply for a job as a psychiatrist, to counsel  
both of us.



She smiles, happy of my radiance, deaf to my pleas.  
Instead, I look around.  
There is that rude mirror, the candles, and a speckled pink wall.  
My form is changing.  
The woman is back.  
She looks into that rudely consistent mirror,  
Shattering her dreams of youth once more.  
She comes to me for consolation.  
I may see her wrinkles, her threadbare clothes, the careworn hands,  
But I also see the lively girl she once was, and I let her see me see it.  
She smiles, thanking me.  
Now I travel.  
Once more, I disappear. I am gone from her.  
It is time for the next cycle.  
My dreams will never end. Not until my death.  
Not until imagination dies. Hope dies.  
I will continue my dream.

# 1ST PLACE

---

## “SISYPHUS”

By **Anushka Skariah**, Centennial High  
Howard County Literacy Association

Am I Sisyphus?  
Cursed with the burden of perfectionism,  
Struggling under the boulder of compulsion,  
Disguising this torture under the guise of a perfect mastery  
For the flawless, the elusive, the unblemished.  
Perfection, always pursued, never attained.  
I am torn between a fruitless toil and complete failure.  
Creating art, meticulous, and methodical,  
Refining the finest line, hue, and structure.  
I avoid mistakes, yet always search for one,  
Disregarding and discarding near perfect projects,  
Noticing the invisible errors, overlooking the visible beauty.  
I force symmetry into an asymmetric mold.  
My attempts to satisfy this notion of Perfect  
Engulfing me, leading me on this vicious cycle of  
Creating, ruining, discarding; creating, ruining, discarding.  
My hubris is thinking that I can achieve the unachievable.  
Like Sisyphus, Ego, taints my perception of mastery,  
Manifesting into a fear of failure,  
Paralyzing, and immobilizing.  
While I do not have control yet,  
I see a blessing in this curse  
Of perseverance and diligence.  
I will discard this boulder on my shoulder  
Because I am not Sisyphus.

*Grade 10, Poetry*

## 2ND PLACE

---

### “HADES”

By **Niki Holloway**, Frederick High  
Frederick County Literacy Chapter

Mother, I'll never wake up from him,  
I have already traveled too far.  
He is no longer alone,  
in this pit of darkness.

He'd be alone without me,  
He'd be alone if I never partake of the fruit that binds me  
here.  
He may be stern, pitless,  
unmoved by prayer  
forbidding and aloof;  
but that's not what I see

I see a dark dove  
flying so low to be properly seen.  
It seems distant, but he truly wants someone who can be  
with him.  
Not alone, Not rejected.

I'm never degraded,  
Never silenced,

Never held to the expectations that hold other women  
captive.

I rule beside him,  
Never silenced.

His name, once ferocious,  
dissolves on my tongue like sugar,  
I whisper it,  
Hades.

# 1ST PLACE

---

## “HONEYSUCKLE”

By **Zuzu Kusmider**, Queen Annes County High  
Upper Shore Literacy Association

My entity,  
Honeysuckle as sweet as having friends to prompt  
Sweetly ruminative conversation.

We become ornery as our freckles fade and the sun no  
longer kisses us,  
a bore to my adolescent inclinations.  
In the season's ultimatums  
lightning bugs will return,  
so will childish manners.

In existence,  
There is the gesture of a weary harvest moon rising and  
fickle pinky promises, devoid of sincerity.  
As well as promises of I "like" you.

Thus far I've learned the difference between like and love.  
Belittling of integrity,  
greedily I want both.

I've learned I come from my mother's garden beds,  
their growth and expiration.  
Her cursive -

So perfect I could never understand.  
So thoughtful, only to watch and eulogize.

From swimming in the conviction,  
"I've become a living contradiction"  
or drinking in the inherent goodness I've found in my  
allotted span,  
I think with knees tucked as I sip cold tea.

Often I'm reminded this is my first go at life, as it is my  
parents.  
"I just want to be your friend."  
I want to be my father's friend too.  
My entity.

And because I found springtime suited me best,  
For a month I watched a wren build her nest.  
Just for her to shut her feathers to her kin.  
Instilling fear of rejection  
Teaching independence,  
so I've learned.

I feel my actuality developing,  
Relishing it so I may not be too naive.

I'll notice the trees of April implicating prime time for  
hosting  
Garden parties.  
In all that I cherish and originate from  
I hope I host garden parties.

I'll sleep on what I'm provided and bore into the propensity  
of others I'm surrounded by. Breathing in honeysuckle and  
what is to be my existence,  
my entity and the allotted span I'm not entitled to but  
privileged to live.

## 2ND PLACE

---

### “ROCKING CHAIR ON THE BEACH”

By **Miranda Martin**, Southern Garrett High  
Western Maryland Literacy Chapter

People ask if a tree falls in a forest  
and no one is there to hear it,  
does it even make a sound?

Little do they know,  
She did the exact same.  
She fell,  
acted out,  
tried to get someone to care.  
She felt as if no one was there to hear her,  
witness her fall.  
She thought that  
since no one pays attention now,  
what difference would it make  
when she's not there at all?

She'll never notice,  
but now the fallen tree has been reused,  
carved into a stunning rocking chair that  
now sits on a vacant beach.  
A salty wind rocks it back and forth, ]  
even when nobody's there.



An old couple walks by,  
looking for a place to rest and watch the sunrise.  
Laughter echoes across the water as  
children use it as 'base' in their competitive game of tag.  
Young lovers sneak out in the middle of the night  
to hold hands and watch the stars.  
A woman goes there after her long work day,  
finding it a place to relax and unwind.

They may not hear the tree at first,  
but someone will eventually hear the echo.

# 1ST PLACE

---

## “THE FALL OF GIRLHOOD”

By **Macy Woroniecki**, Stephen Decatur High  
Eastern Shore Literacy Association

Girlhood went by in one summer haze  
It transformed inevitably into fall  
The way it only ever did in youth  
With blistered palms from monkey bar swinging  
And the last lightning bug go the season cupped in my hands

All at once time gave me away  
I outgrew the swing set at my local park  
Became aware of the way my clothes hung on my body  
And my mom became human right before my eyes

I cared more about the things  
I once thought were silly  
I reached ages I had only haced dreamt about  
Had only ever meticulously planned  
The seasons changed and I did too

But sometimes  
When the light falls just right in my backyard  
And the air smells clean  
I can almost feel  
My dad’s arms wrapped around me

Can almost taste  
The sticky sweet frosting of my sixth birthday cake  
Can almost see  
Her  
A dear friend of mine  
A barefooted, tooth gapped treasure  
Leaping through the sprinkler  
Soft hearted and shy  
Reading whole books all in one day  
As if she needed the words like air  
As if without them she might die

And I can only hope that one day  
Maybe I can be as wise  
As unapologetic and true  
As kind

Sometimes I think I'll spend my whole life  
Learning how to become her again

## 2ND PLACE

---

### “THE WRITER’S TOUCH”

By **Gouri Gupta**, Glenelg High  
Howard County Literacy Association

The grip on my pen  
    So painful yet calming  
        Causes my blood to draw  
            And drip to the paper

        The crimson color of the liquid  
        Stained the paper with hard work  
    Bringing life to this masterpiece  
Till Gogh, DaVinci, and Michaelangelo drowned

But I continue writing  
    The blood slowly dries up  
        Yet tears well in my eyes  
            And drops to the paper

        The wetness slowly blooms outwards  
        1...2...3...4...  
    Then, more tears fall  
5...6...7...8...

My beautifully tainted pen  
    So skillfully dancing  
        Across this mediocre paper

That could suffer no more

And I continue writing  
More solemnly, this time  
sweat dampening the paper and pen  
Causing them to tarnish more

Cursed with the Writers' touch  
Affecting 1-in-a-many  
A curse that is never reversed  
So as long as I live for

But my achieved work  
Is merely gratitude  
For me  
And those who listen with keen ears

My blood is black  
My tears are opaque  
My sweat is cold  
Traits of the Writer who wrote this page.

With this all aside,  
I look back down to the paper  
A spitting image of me  
That I crumble in the confines of my hands

I crush hard.  
So, so, hard  
That my knuckle turns white  
And the paper gasps for air

I let go,  
now drained of life,  
And laugh at its demise,  
A rebirth with no alibi

I pick up my soiled quill.  
And meticulously spell it out;  
My name in the same cold, opaque, tar-like, ink  
Bold, Bright, and Beautiful

And now any time  
I face any burden  
I'm realized I'm  
Blessed with a curse

Known as The Writer's Touch.

# 1ST PLACE

---

## “LOOSE TOOTH AT THE BEACH”

By **Miles Vocke**, Buckingham Elementary  
Eastern Shore Literacy Association

**W**iggle wiggle. “Still there,” I thought. “Will this tooth ever fall out?” I said to myself. Wiggle wiggle. It’s a regular drive to the beach with my family in the camper, noisy and FUN! We were driving to the beach and we saw my friends who were already there.

“Guess what? My tooth is wiggly!” I said as I showed them what it looked like. Wiggle wiggle. They were camping too and their mom and dad and my mom and dad were each setting up the campers so we got to play on the beach dune and near the ocean. It’s a game called Wipeout that me and my brother made up. It’s so much fun.

“I wonder if my tooth will fall out while we play,” I thought. We were parked next to each other. It was lunchtime. Wiggle wiggle. “I hope my tooth falls out eating lunch,” I said to myself. After that, we went back outside to play a little bit more. There was a huge thunderstorm coming. The sand started blowing and the sky got darker. We were surrounded by clouds. Then we went back inside the camper and my brother saw purple lightning.

**K**ABOOM! The thunder crashed. We went out when the storm was done and went to the dunes. We slid down the hill again before we went back inside. Wiggle wiggle. I showed my mom. “Can you please get this tooth out?” I asked her. She twisted and pulled and finally

it was out. It was bleeding for almost 5 minutes. I was excited to see if the tooth fairy would come to the beach. The next day I woke up and looked behind my pillow and saw she left \$5. "Yes!" I whispered to myself. Later that day, I proudly showed my friends the money from the tooth fairy. I hope I have another wiggly tooth tomorrow!



## 2ND PLACE

---

### “UNICORN IN MY CLOSET”

By **Remi McGown**, St. John's Lane Elementary  
Howard County Literacy Chapter

Once there was a girl named Mya. One night, when she was going to bed, she saw a rainbow light coming from her closet. She nervously walked over and opened the door. Inside, she found a tiny and beautiful unicorn. It had a rainbow light coming from its horn and it was wearing a pink heart locket around its neck. Mya was so surprised – at first, she thought it was a dream. She pinched herself. It was really real! She couldn't believe her eyes. There was really a unicorn in her closet! She tried thinking about what she would do with the unicorn when she was at school so her parents would not see it.

Suddenly, Mya's mom walked into her bedroom. Mya shut the closet door quickly and said, "Nothing to see here!" Her mom gave a suspicious look and just said, "Time to go to school." Mya didn't want to leave the unicorn at home, so when her mom wasn't looking, she packed the unicorn in her backpack.

When Mya got on the bus, she began to get scared the teachers would notice she had something in her backpack. When she got to her classroom and walked over to the carpet, she heard the sound that unicorns make. Her teacher said, "Mya, what is that sound?" Mya said, "Nothing." She thought in her head, "What am I going to do?"

At recess time she called the other kids over and showed them the unicorn. They all loved the unicorn and began playing with her. Because they were all surrounding the unicorn, the teacher got suspicious and walked over. The teacher said, "MYA! Is this yours?!" The teacher then had Mya put the unicorn back into her backpack.

When Mya got home from school, she went to her bedroom, opened the backpack, and put the unicorn back in the closet. Mya then began to hear music. She began walking around her room to see where it was coming from but couldn't find it. Suddenly, her eyes popped open, and she woke up in her bed. The music was the sound of her alarm clock. Mya said, "It was just a dream." She felt very sad.

Mya walked over to the closet and opened the door. Inside, she saw the pink heart locket that the unicorn was wearing. She then smiled because she knew it wasn't a dream after all.

# 1ST PLACE

---

## “LILLIAN AND THE BOOK VILLAIN”

By **Aubrey Johnson**, Triadelphia Ridge Elementary  
Howard County Literacy Chapter

Lillian walks to the library holding her magnifying glass. She want to check out a book about detectives because she wants to become a detective. She goes straight to the mystery section and finds a book. She opens it and starts to read. Boom! Flash! There’s a light shining at the end of her book. She turns to the final page and sees that all of the words are missing. Dun Dun Dun.

She looks around the library and sees lights shining out of the books. She runs to the mystery section. She opens the books and sees that the last chapter is missing from them all. She thinks to herself “Why would someone do this?” She runs to the head librarian Ms. Jenkins. She says “Ms. Jenkins, all of the final chapters are missing from the books!” Ms. Jenkins looks frightened, eyes open wide. Ms. Jenkins yells out “Oh no, we need endings to our books!”

“I will solve this Ms. Jenkins, no worries” declares Lillian. Lillian gets her magnifying glass and starts to bravely look around. She notices some letters on the ground and they spell “STACY.” She runs to the closest computer and searches for books that have “STACY” in the title. The first result is “Stacy and the Book Villain.” She uses the call number to locate the book. As she arrives, she sees a purple cape flashing with letters swirling around it. On

the floor next to the book, she finds a note that reads "You can't destroy me without the words of the last chapter, mu ha ha ha!"

She bravely picks up the book searching for clues. As she opens it, Stacy pops out of the book surprising Lillian. Lillian tells Stacy what has happened and how the book villain stole all of the last chapters. Stacy reveals to Lillian that the book villain always leaves a clue behind on a note. Lillian quickly grabs the note and uses her magnifying glass to inspect it. In a very small font, she reads "Make me a book where I am good". Lillian and Stacy wrote a new book that turns the book villain into a hero. Boom! Flash! Words start swirling around the library and back into the books. Stacy says goodbye as she gets sucked back into her book. Lillian smiles and goes back to reading her new detective book.

The end (thankfully).

## 2ND PLACE

---

### “THE BIRD’S PARTY”

By **Emery Reynolds**, Grasonville Elementary  
Upper Shore Literacy Chapter.

**H**i I’m Honey! And this is my story. Well first, let me tell you something about me. I’m a purple bird with pointy wings, and guess what? - I’m a little bit different because my wings light up when I sing. I love having parties, but when you have no friends, it’s hard to have a party. When I was little, I didn’t have any friends. Most times, I just didn’t want anyone to see me because I was worried they wouldn’t like me.

But one day, I really wanted to have a party, so I walked down the road. I was scared to meet a friend. When I stopped at a house, I knocked on the door, and someone who looked like a pink, purple, and brown monkey came out and said “Hello?”.

I was so scared and excited that I said, “Do you want to be friends?”

And the monkey said, “Well first, what is your name?”

I said, “My name is Honey”.

The monkey said, “Hello Honey, my name is Fingerling. And I have another friend for you to meet. Her name is Furblette.” Furblette was a furry rainbow ball and very small.

Then I asked both of them “Do you want to go to a party?”

They both said, "Yes!!!! Where is the party?"

"It's at my house. It's going to be really fun!" I said

So we introduced ourselves some more and then we had the party! We made cupcakes, played games, and went down the water slide! Then we had a singing contest and I sang first. We were having so much fun I forgot about my wings lighting up! Fingerling and Furblette loved how my wings lit up! I was so surprised!

They both said, "Your wings are SO cool!". It made me feel encouraged and happy.

And that is the story of how I made my friends.

The End

# 1ST PLACE

---

## “WOLFY”

By **Iracema Resendiz**, Chesapeake City Elementary  
Cecil County Literacy Association

One dark night, I was reading a book in bed with my friend Mackenzie at the orphanage. I woke up to hear the sound of wolves howling at the full moon. I remembered that the rule was no reading when the lights are out when suddenly, Mrs. Hawk, the headmaster, came into the room. She checked every single bed until finally she came to me and Mackenzie’s bed. When she saw that I was reading, she locked us up in the cellar. The cellar is where you go when you get punished, it’s dark and creepy. At least it wasn’t scary when Mackenzie was with me. We were in the cellar all day and night.

The next morning, Mrs. Hawk came running downstairs. She told us to wash up. We knew what that meant, it meant that someone might adopt us. When the people came they said that they wanted to adopt someone. Me and Mackenzie leapt into the air. We were so happy. But when the people came to check us out they only wanted to adopt Mackenzie. I got so sad. I started to cry when Mackenzie left with her new family. Mackenzie was my only friend.

One day I went out in the woods next to the orphanage and I was crying when I heard a lonely howl. I started to search for the lonely wolf. I searched the whole forest then I finally found him. The wolf was a gray wolf. I found a piece of rope on the ground so I tied it around the

wolf's neck like a leash. I walked the wolf back to the orphanage. The wolf was hungry, so I grabbed my bowl and shared it with him.

Suddenly, Mrs. Hawk came into my room. When she saw the wolf, she screamed and locked me and the wolf in the cellar. That night in the cellar I decided to adopt the wolf and call him Wolfy. I snuck out and secretly took Wolfy for a long walk in the woods. We walked all day long and went back into the cellar at night before Mrs. Hawk saw I was gone. I woke up really early the next day and decided to run away. After a few hours, I planned my escape. I grabbed Wolfy's leash and walked him to the gate, opened it, and ran far away.

I started to get hungry so I sent Wolfy to hunt me a deer. He tried but he couldn't, so we ate healthy plants instead. Since he was a lonely wolf, not even one wolf taught him how to hunt. After we ate dinner we walked a little bit more until we saw a woman riding a horse. She felt bad for us because we were all alone and we had walked a long time through the woods. She asked me if I had any parents and I said no, so she asked me if I wanted her to adopt me. I was so happy and I said yes.

She let me get up on her horse. She said her name was Ms. Caitlin. We went all the way to the other side of the forest. There was a very big farm. After a few minutes of gazing at the farm, Ms. Caitlin told me to get off the horse. She took me and the horse into the barn. She let me untack the horse and put it in its stall. We went inside her house and ate lots of tamales. Then, we went back outside and Ms. Caitlin gave me a tour of the farm.

First, she showed me the barn. It had lots of horses in it. There were seven horses. Second, Ms. Caitlin gave me a tour of the rest of the farm. We went to look at the pigs. There were five pigs altogether, 3 farm pigs and 2 mini pigs. Next, we looked at the cows, and then, we looked at



the fluffy sheep. Last, we looked at the chickens and collected chicken eggs.

At night, me and Wolfy ate dinner. We ate cow tongue tacos for dinner. Wolfy loved tacos so much that he ate ten of them. Ms. Caitlin gave me a book about wolves and horses to read. After reading, Ms. Caitlin let me sleep in a room that looked like a wolf cave, with a dog house and a bed for Wolfy, and lots of wolf and horse posters. In the morning, I woke up and made lots of pancakes for breakfast. After breakfast, Ms. Caitlin taught me how to ride horses. I trotted, cantered, and galloped. Me and Wolfy were so happy at the farm. The lonely wolf brought me to a world of happiness.

## 2ND PLACE

---

# “HOPE GETS LOST”

By **Preston Fodel**, Emmorton Elementary  
Harford County Literacy Chapter

Once there was a polar bear named Hope who lived at the North Pole with her mama. It was a cold snowy day and Hope was just waking up from her morning nap. Penny the penguin was sliding on her belly to Hope’s den. “BOO,” Penny said. “Aaaah!” screamed Hope. “Oh, it is just you. What do you want to do?” asked Hope. “I have an idea. Follow me!” Penny said.

“Do you want to go to the water?” asked Penny. “Well, my mom said that the ocean is dangerous” Hope said with a fright. “Oh, come on don’t be a scaredy bear. It’s not like there will be any sharks” Penny said with a laugh. “What? I’m not a scaredy bear,” Hope said. “Well, you’re acting like one,” Penny said. “Fine. Let’s go!” So Penny took Hope to the water. “WOO-HOO,” Penny said as Penny jumped into the water. Hope was scared because she could hear the ice breaking. Hope nearly fell as an iceberg broke off! She was sanding on the iceberg as she started floating away. She tried to yell for help but Penny could not hear her. It was no use, there was no one else around.

Then, a narwhal saw Hope crying and swam over to her and said, “What’s wrong, why are you sad? My name is Narry like Starry.” “My iceberg floated away at the North Pole, and I am lost and have no idea where I’m going. Do you?” Hope replied. “Sure, I know these waters like the

back of my tail. Right now, you are passing in between Greenland and Iceland and heading towards the Labrador Sea. I hope you find your way home" Narry said. "Thanks!" Hope said, as the narwhal swam away.

Soon she saw land. She wondered where she was going and saw a seal. "Hello, I'm Hope. Do you know where I am?" She said to the seal. "Sure, you are floating by Canada. My name is Joe. On your way you will see some big whales, a big Canadian Flag near the shoreline, and some tall lighthouses. Once you get to New York, you will see a big statue of a woman holding a torch, called the Statue of Liberty, which is in the United States of America. My friend Doll will help from there. That statue is my favorite," Joe said. Hope thanked Joe for his help.

As hope passed Canada she saw a lot of whales, a Canadian flag, and the tall light houses that Joe talked about. Then she finally saw a huge statue on an island and said, "That must be the Statue of Liberty." Then she saw a dolphin and said, "Hello my name is Hope. What's your name?" "My name is Doll," said the dolphin. Hope asked Doll, "Can you take me home to the North Pole?" Doll replied, "No, but I can take you to someone who can. There is an aquarium in Ocean City, Maryland. I can take you there." So, Doll took Hope to the aquarium in hopes of finding someone that could finally take her home.

Once they got to Ocean City, Doll said goodbye to Hope. Hope said goodbye too. Then Hope walked into the aquarium and asked a nice person if he could take Hope home. His name is Mr. Jack. HE SAID YES! He got keys for a boat and took her all the way home. She was so excited to go home. All her new friends followed the boat back to the North Pole. When she got home, she said, "Goodbye!" to all her new friends. She saw Penny at the shoreline and Penny immediately apologized for taking Hope to the water. Hope said, "It's fine, it's not your fault

the iceberg broke. I ended up making a few new friends along the way." Hope then asked Penny where her mama was. "She's at your den feeding a baby," Penny said. Hope jumped up and down in excitement because she always wanted a sibling! She missed her mama so much during her scary adventure, so she rushed back to her den to see her family.

THE END

So that's the story of a lost polar bear who still has more adventures to come!

# 1ST PLACE

---

## “MOTHER OF MISSISSIPPI”

By Eloise **Coningsby**, Bel Air Elementary  
Harford County Literacy Chapter

Lisa turned her gaze from the window to the paper she had been staring at for what felt like hours. She sighed, great, another writing assignment. She read over the instructions again. It was pretty clear what her teacher wanted her to do but the last line caught her eye, “Write a poem that speaks to you.” What was that supposed to mean? Lisa let out another sigh and turned back to the window.

The sun shined down on a giant oak. Its long branches seemed to wrap around the river like a child hugging his mother close. The mother river was long and lean and seemed to glow in the sunlight. Trout jumped out of her water. Their scales were smooth and shiny. Birds landed on the oak and started singing their cheerful songs. Their voice was like the voices of the women who sang at their local opera, that Lisa’s mother made her wear a stuffy dress to every Sunday.

The mother seemed to beam with pride as her children surrounded her with love and hope. Her water wound around a few maples whose leaves twirled in the wind like graceful ballerinas leaping across a stage lined with spotlights. In a meadow nearby a little deer joins his mother as the graceful doe nibbles some grass. The mother keeps a watch full eye on the little one as he plays

with a friend nearby. Especially now since she could feel a different set of eyes watching them...ready to attack. Suddenly, a flash of bright red streaks into the meadow, but he's too late. The mother had already herded her child into the bushes. As the clearing empties out the fox slowly raises his head and trots over to get a drink of water from the mother of the forest.

As the fox runs away the mother deer walks over to the oak and sniffs the mother river as if asking her what to do. "Just be calm and keep protecting your little one," the wise mother seems to say, "everyone should try to live in harmony with each other, teach your deer how to be kind and hopeful and maybe one day predator and prey will be able to live with and love each other forever." As the mother deer raised her head, she thanked the mother of the forest for the wise words. Suddenly, the mother deer felt fur touch her own. As she turned slowly around, she saw her little buck gently rubbing his head against her skin. She nuzzled him back to reassure him everything would be alright. Slowly they began to trot away, and the mother river slowly began to smile her warm, gentle smile, a job well done. Even though she knew that problems would appear in their little forest like how the sun would sometimes get caught behind a cloud she knew that with the help of the rest of the forest (and a little help from her) the sun in their lives would always return.

As Lisa finally turned her head from the beautiful, story-filled scene an idea sparked in her mind. Slowly, she lifted her pencil and began. She scribbled down thought after thought, sentence after sentence. She wrote and rewrote for hours and hours. Finally, she lifted her paper from her clipboard. She looked at it, she turned it around and then she smiled!

She ran outside and danced around the meadow. She didn't care if she had bare feet. She didn't care if her

hair was a mess. All she cared about was her poem, her glorious poem! She did a cartwheel and then another! Then she stopped. Slowly, she walked to the giant oak and kneeled down, facing the mother river. She scooped up a handful of water and held it up to the sun. Beams of light reflected little rainbows into the grass.

As Lisa let her handful of water flow back into the stream and rush away down river, she took a deep breath. "Thank you, really, thank you. You have inspired me beyond imaginable. I never knew that nature was a whole book of stories just waiting to be revealed and I hope your generation lives on and on, forever." And at that moment, the mother of Mississippi smiled, her warm, gentle, knowing, caring, trusting, smile.

## 2ND PLACE

---

# “THE CLOAKED TRICKSTER”

By **Alice Cannon**, Manor Woods Elementary  
Howard County Literacy Association.

A plump bald man hurried down a narrow alleyway in a small town that sat right in the middle of a large valley with grass as far as the eye can see. The man was hurrying because his wife was getting annoyed for the man was late for his scrumptious dinner. The man squeezed between two large barrels, which sent him spiraling forward. THUMP! The man fell face first onto the brick sidewalk. A small, swift leg had tripped him up good!

“Ughhhh,” the man groaned as he pushed himself back to his feet.

“What happened?” He muttered to himself.

“I happened,” said a young girl’s voice from the shadows.

“Who goes there?!” said the now extremely alert man.

A cloaked figure stepped out of the shadows. The man could dimly see a mob of hair over a thin face.

“I want to make a trade with you,” said the girl as she pulled out a ring from her pocket with her long, nimble fingers. The man looked a little closer at the ring to see that it was made of a bill. A one dollar bill to be exact.



"Who are you?" asked the man, completely ignoring the fact that the girl was showing him this item that was no use to him, at only one dollar.

"Who I am should be none of your concern, but what I can do, well, that's another story," the girl responded.

"What do you mean by ..." the man started, but then he stopped and watched as the girl twisted and turned the ring around and around in her hands. He watched in utter astonishment as the girl opened her hand once more to reveal that the one-dollar bill had transformed into a \$100,000 piece of folded paper.

"So, you wanted to trade something for that? Well, what have you got?" said the girl.

The man pulled a small ring from his finger and put it in his palm. The cloaked girl leaned in closer to the produced item. "By the looks of this, it may only be worth \$1,000 dollars," said the girl.

"Oh, well, No! The ring was FAR more expensive than that!" the man lied. He knew the girl was actually quite accurate in her guess because the real price was \$1,295.99, not more.

"Ok then," the girl swiped the ring of diamonds out of the man's hands and put the ring of money in between her thumb and pointer finger, "so the deal has been made." She dropped the ring and then sprinted away down the alley.

"Huh, I definitely got the better trade!" the man said to himself as he looked down at his trophy.

"What?!" the ring had transformed back into the mere dollar. "Oh, you little cheeky trickster!" the man yelled. He watched in anger as the girl's black cape fluttered, then disappeared behind the building.

At that, the man rammed through every barrel in the alleyway and chased after the cloaked trickster. The girl turned corners and whizzed past people with great ease, but for the man it was quite hard. The girl ran to the edge of the town with the man hot on her tail, literally! The girl was struggling to drag the man, for he was holding on tight to the tail of her cloak.

Finally, from the man's weight, the bit of cloak ripped off and the man thumped down on the road. He stood up, bloody and bruised but chased on. The girl turned a sharp corner that lead out of the town and into the grass.

"Well, that's not too smart, there's nowhere to hide," the man thought as he turned the corner.

He froze. The girl had completely disappeared! The open grassland was empty except for the man. The cloaked trickster was gone, and the man was left with nothing but a dollar.

# 1ST PLACE

---

## “SCRABBLE”

By **Breanna Ortiz**, Piney Orchard Elementary  
Anne Arundel Literacy Association

Jacob lifted the dusty case from the top shelf, heaving it up the stairs.

“Did you find it?” Jacob’s mother asked.

“Yeah,” Jacob replied. He slid the boardgame over to his mother, who caught it between her hands. Tonight was game night at the Jones’ house.

Jacob’s mother opened the case as Jacob walked over to her. Delilah, Jacob’s four year old sister, scooped in beside her brother.

“Game?” Delilah squealed. She put one chubby hand on the case of the game, brushing off dust from its surface.

“Yes, Delilah,” Jacob’s mother confirmed. She pulled Delilah closer to her, squeezing her gently in a hug. Jacob rolled his eyes and knelt over to unfold the board. Scrabble letters spilled out as he lifted the box, clattering against the hardwood floor.

“Eek!” Delilah shrieked, jumping backwards. Jacob’s mother pursed her lips and shot a warning glance at him, picking up Delilah before she fell.

“What?” Jacob asked bitterly. He wasn’t a fan of game night. And it had been forever since they’d played Scrabble, of all games. It had been Jacob’s father’s

suggestion that they played his favorite board game while he was away at war.

Jacob swallowed a sharp retort and clumped the scrabble tiles into a pile, pushing them over to the side so he could work on setting up the game. Meanwhile, Jacob's mother propped up her phone and played cartoons for Delilah.

Once the game was intact, the three sat in a triangle at different corners of the board.

Each person grabbed one tile from the pile and placed it face up on the middle of the board. Delilah had picked a G, Jacob's mother had picked a C, and Jacob had picked S.

"Me first, I suppose!" Jacob's mother exclaimed. She picked an C and placed it on the middle square, then finished the word "cleat." Next, Delilah lifted an H and plopped it down on the right side of the first letter to make "chair."

The game went slowly. Jacob placed a R underneath the first C and made "cry," and his mother continued the line with an E. Before they'd even finished three words, Delilah broke into tears.

"What now?" Jacob groaned. He pulled the tiles toward him to protect them from his sister's tears. Jacob's mother lifted Delilah and bounced her gently, murmuring soothing words into her ear.

"We'll have to cut game night short, sweetie. Is that okay?" Jacob's mother asked. She was still soothing Delilah. "Yeah," Jacob muttered crossly. He pursed his lips and collected the scrabble tiles to put back into the case. Then he folded the board and stuffed it beside the letters.

Closing the case's latch, Jacob heaved it into his arms and walked downstairs sullenly. He shoved the game

back onto the shelf where he'd found it, and pulled out his phone.

"Dad?" Jacob called into the speaker. "Hey, champ!" Jacob's dad replied brightly. A smile tugged at Jacob's pale face.

"Hey, Dad. Can I . . . talk to you for a while? Delilah's upstairs with Mom." Jacob pleaded.

"Of course," Jacob's dad said seriously. There was a static, as if he was sitting down to listen. Jacob smiled gently and began to pour out how the night had gone.

"After we'd eaten spaghetti--my least favorite--Mom made me fetch Scrabble. Then we started the game as usual, but Delilah had to have a breakdown before we even reached the five word point." Jacob sighed. "She's probably taking a nap now."

"I wish I could have a nap," Jacob's dad shook his head, Jacob could hear the hair brushing against the speaker. "We never get a lick of sleep on the base. Russia could attack any moment."

Jacob frowned, but he realized his father couldn't see his pity.

"I wish you could come home," Jacob whispered. "Me too, buddy." His father replied sincerely. The phone crackled, as if something had touched the speaker.

"A little virtual hug," Jacob's father chuckled.

"I love you," Jacob murmured. "I love you too, champ." His father soothed.

Delilah was still sleeping by the time Jacob returned upstairs. His mother had given him lots of hugs and kisses, explaining how she'd heard his conversation with his father.

"I'm sorry that I don't have as much time with you anymore," She'd sobbed, squeezing Jacob tightly. It made

Jacob realize that even though she spent more time with Delilah nowadays, she still loved him just as much.

“It’s okay, Mom, really,” Jacob had replied. Now, Jacob lay in bed, staring at the staccato ceiling. Thoughts pounded through his head, and he imagined his father fighting for his life out on a blood-stained battlefield. But one thought rang even louder than the others.

“I wonder what game we’ll play next time.”

## 2ND PLACE

---

### “STUCK IN TIME”

By **Katelyn Barber**, Gorman Crossing Elementary  
Howard County Literacy Association

//  
Please confirm you would like to travel to October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1761.” I took a deep breath, and pressed confirm. There was a short beep, and a loud whirring sound. Suddenly, the metal walls of the time machine disappeared and I was standing in a small brick house, 359 years in the past.

Sheet music was stacked in piles everywhere. Being careful not to step on it, I pulled out my clipboard and pen. I crept up the spiral staircase and into a small room, where a young boy was playing violin with his sister. I clicked on my audio recorder. I scribbled down notes about everything I saw. Suddenly, the 5-year-old Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart stopped playing and turned in my direction.

“Did you hear that?” he asked his sister. I didn’t wait to hear her reply. I sprinted out of that house as fast as I could. As I slammed the door shut, I heard the sound of papers falling. But a mess in the Mozart house was nothing compared to the mess that would be created if I was seen. I radioed in for pickup, and soon was back inside the time machine.

As our historian returned to 2155 A.D., he thought that the papers falling was no big deal. But as Wolfgang

and Anna Maria walked downstairs to investigate the noise, Wolfgang slipped on a piece of sheet music and hit his head. As his father later said, "He was never the same afterwards." He was always angry and distractible, and did not have the patience for music.

I stepped out of my time machine and into my office at Discovery Time Travel, Inc. My boss, Herman Timber, was waiting for me there. I handed him my notes and audio recorder, but instead of smiling like he normally did, he glared at me.

"Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart?!" he cried, outraged. "Who is that?! You were supposed to research Leonardo DaVinci!" I stared at Herman. I was sure he had assigned me Mozart. But I stepped back into the time machine anyway.

"Please confirm you would like to travel to November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1468. Once again, I clicked the button. There was a short beep, and a loud whirring sound. Then, the metal walls around me disappeared, and I was watching a teenage boy drawing in a small room. I stared, mesmerized, at 14-year-old Leonardo DaVinci.

Suddenly, I heard footsteps behind me. I whirled around to see an old man glaring at me.

"What are you doing here?!" he demanded. I started to panic. A crowd had formed around us, and I had already caused enough trouble at work today. I blurted out the first thing that came to my mind.

"I came for a drawing!" Even Leonardo was staring at me now.

"A drawing?!" the old man asked, stunned.

"Yes," I improvised. "I came here from a faraway land, where I heard tales of this boy. I only wanted a drawing

"Well, if you want one that bad, hand over 100 lira." The old man retorted. I fished around in my pockets.



Luckily, I always brought emergency currency on these trips, and I had just enough. But I handed them over, took a drawing, and ran.

Our historian thought he was safe, but he had no idea how much damage he had caused. Because his drawing had sold for so much, DaVinci never learned other forms of art, including inventing. DaVinci's ideas, passed down from generation to generation, were used to invent the time machine centuries later...

I tried to radio in for pickup, but there was no reply. Not even "hold on a minute". After about an hour of trying, I finally gave up. By now I realized what I had done. I had disappeared Mozart. I had un-invented the time machine. I had meddled with time.

And now, stuck in time, I must live with the consequences.

## 1ST PLACE

---

### “THE STUFFED ANIMAL SWITCH”

By **Kristina Phillips**, Middletown Middle  
Frederick County Literacy Chapter

**R**ING RING RING. I inwardly rejoice and think, “School’s finally over!” I race to my locker, grab my stuff, and start to walk home. When I get home, I grab a Pepsi and head upstairs. Right when I’m settling into my beanbag chair, sketchbook in hand, my mom strikes again.

“Hi Avery,” she calls from her office. “Remember homework before hobbies.” I groan and trudge over to my Mount Everest of homework. Then, I hear a splash. I spin around and see half my bed drenched in soda. I sigh and think, “Why bother? It’ll probably dry anyway and I have mounds of homework.” I get started and am so focused I don’t hear mom call me for dinner. She comes in and puts her hand on my shoulder. I jump up, so frightened, I almost scream. I then see that it’s her and calm down.

We head downstairs and dig into our food. Dinner is usually pretty quiet, since mom and I don’t talk much. Once I finish dinner, I head upstairs and get back to my homework. After a while, I finish and fall fast asleep snuggled in with my stuffed animals.

BEEP BEEP-BEEP BEEP-BEEP-BEEP my alarm clock sounds. “Ughhhh. I hear you!” I exclaim, “I’m getting up,

now be quiet!" I sit up sleepily when something strange catches my eye. My stuffed animals are waving at me!!

"AHHHHH!!!!!!" I scream with fear. "Maybe it's a dream? But.....WHY ARE THEY ALIVE?!?" I've heard that if you pinch yourself in a dream, you return to reality. I start to pinch myself, but sadly nothing happens, besides those crazy creatures still waving at me. Hesitantly, I get up. They bolt towards me, all talking at the same time.

"Hi Avery!"

"What's up Avery?"

"Mornin' Avery!"

I rush out of my room hoping they don't come too. "I've got to get out of here, as soon as possible!!" But, when I look back at the stairs, I see Skylar the Sloth, Bella the Bear, Alex the Arctic Fox, and Charlie the Cat. Skylar looks at the others and starts speaking. "Please, oh please, can we come to school with you? We really want to know what it's like!"

I REALLY don't want to do this, but, what's the worst that could happen? I hesitantly agree, but warn, "You need to stay out of sight!"

"Oh, easy," replies Alex. "We have a potion that makes us invisible to other people, but not to you!"

"Great," I reply, finally calming down. "Now, get in my backpack, and stay there!" I walk to school and go to Language Arts. Mrs. Harris calls my name for attendance, and before I can respond, Skylar the Sloth says, "Here!" in a high pitched voice. Everyone looks at me with weirded out faces. I wish I hadn't brought my stuffed animals. Oh well, it's too late now.

Forty-seven minutes later, I walk out of Language Arts and think, "I barely survived that, but can I get through my other classes?" Before I know it, I'm on the ground with everyone around me. Some are laughing, some are staring at me, and some are trying to hold in an outburst of giggles. I look around, bewildered about what just happened. Then I notice Bella the Bear and Charlie the Cat on the floor a bit in front of me. "This is so embarrassing," I groan. "Everyone thinks I tripped over my own shoes because they can't see these crazy stuffed animals." I whisper-shout at Bella and Charlie, "This is why I told you to stay in my backpack!"

People look at me like I'm crazy since it seems like I'm talking to thin air. My face turns 100 different shades of red. I sigh, get up, and walk the rest of the way to history. Luckily, nothing else happens and forty-seven minutes later I rush downstairs to math. "Test today!" Mrs. Smith announces. Everyone groans. I raise my hand and ask to go to the bathroom. "We're about to start a test, Avery. Be quick."

I fast-walk to the bathroom, relieved to be away from my stuffed animals. When I return, everyone is working on their test. I walk to my desk and see Alex the Arctic Fox and Skylar the Sloth scribbling on my test. Just then, they stand up and head towards the turn-in-tray. Before I can stop them, they turn it in. "Nooooooooooooooooo!!!!" I think. But, Mrs. Smith grabs all the tests, ruining my chance to get a good grade. I walk to my desk and sigh, "Maybe science will be better."

Mrs. Johnson starts the science lesson. A few minutes later, my Chromebook opens mysteriously. I

quickly shut it, not wanting to get the consequence for an open device. The lesson goes by pretty quickly, and then I see Mrs. Johnson waving me up to her desk.

"Avery," she whispers. "I noticed that throughout the class your Chromebook was open. You know what an open device means, right?" I start to protest, but she puts up her hand, signaling me to stop. "You'll have lunch detention today." I inwardly groan and wonder why my stuffed animals had to mess with my computer.

Lunch detention obviously isn't fun with everyone staring at you, but finally, the bell saves me and I joyfully rush to art.

I slide into my seat and Mrs. Jones declares, "We're painting today!" Everyone cheers and people start getting out paper, paints, and brushes. I start painting, actually enjoying myself for the first time today. A few minutes later I feel a cold puddle of liquid traveling down my shirt. I look down and I'm covered in hot pink paint! I try my best to clean it off, but my white t-shirt is now pink.

"Ughhhhhhhhh," I think. Art ends and I walk to PE, glad that the day's almost over.

I arrive in the gym and Mr. Brown exclaims, "Hi kids! We'll be playing soccer today." We head outside and start with passing the ball. Nothing bad yet! Then we divide up in teams and play a game. With my usual luck, Alex the Arctic Fox followed me out here and now has the ball right by me. He kicks it and it hits Mr. Brown's face. Turning and looking around, Mr. Brown roars, "Who did that?" Everyone stares at me, and before I know it, he's pointing me in the direction of the principal's office. I hurry there and the next thirty-five minutes is spent listening to Principal Allen

lecturing me about how “we don’t kick a ball into anyone’s face.” He literally said that 13 times. Yes, I was counting.

Finally, the bell rings and I speed to my last class, band. Just a few minutes later, we are playing a song. I play percussion: snare drum, bass drum, auxiliary, etc. After we get through a few songs, she tells us to listen up. All the percussionists back away a bit from the instruments. Mrs. Cooper starts giving us information about our upcoming concerts. Then, I hear a loud bang that sounds like a snare drum. I look around to see who did it. Skylar the Sloth! I groan. This day keeps getting worse and worse!

Mrs. Cooper looks around, very angry, and shouts with rage, “WHO DID THAT???” Since I am near the drum, everyone points at me. Mrs. Cooper howls, “Avery, why did you do that? You know better than that! Go to Principal Allens’s office right now!!” So, for the second time today I’m sitting in Principal Allen’s office having him shout and roar at me too.

Finally, after forever, the bell rings. I sprint out of school and dart home. I am greeted by my Mom on the porch glaring at me.

“I’m so sorry Mom. I’ve just had a horrible day. I promise I didn’t do any of that stuff the school told you I did. I promise.”

Mom sighs, “Well then, who did?”

“Mom,” I start. “I know this sounds crazy, but it's true. It was my stuffed animals. This morning they magically came to life. They have been causing trouble at school.” For once, my Mom is speechless.

“Oh, Avery. I’m so sorry that happened to you! Don’t worry, I’m not mad at you. Now, let’s figure out how to get your stuffed animals back to regular stuffed animals!”

Just then, I get an idea. “Last night I accidentally spilled Pepsi on my bed and on them. So, maybe if we spill soda on them again, it’ll turn them back into regular stuffed animals!”

“Great idea,” Mom praises. We rush to the fridge and grab a Pepsi. Then, we sprint upstairs with it, calling my stuffed animals to come too. We set them up on my bed and pour the soda over them. We wait for a few minutes but nothing happens.

“Maybe the Pepsi needs more time to soak in, like last night,” I say.

“I hope this works!” Mom exclaims.

All night I am up worrying about if my stuffed animals will turn back into regular ones. Finally, morning comes and I quickly sit up looking around my bed. My stuffed animals aren’t moving!!! I’m so excited I jump for joy. My mom comes in and questions my excitement. I explain, “My stuffed animals turned back into regular stuffies!”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Mom says, relieved. “I’m so glad it worked out!”

“Me too!” I say. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I see Skylar the Sloth wink at me. “Uh oh,” I groan. “Here we go again!”

## 2ND PLACE

---

# “SCARY ADVENTURES IN ALASKA”

By **Douglas Gartrell**, Clarksville Middle  
Howard County Literacy Association

### *Chapter 1. Alaskan Adventure Begins.*

A persistent chant of "Lenny! Lenny!" echoed through the room, shattering the remnants of his sleep. With a groan, Lenny opened his eyes to see his seven-year-old brother, Devonte, perched on his bed, bouncing with barely contained excitement. "It's today!" Devonte announced triumphantly.

A jolt of realization shot through Lenny. Today was the day for their trip to Alaska, a prospect that filled him with less than enthusiasm. He had envisioned spending his summer soaking up the sun in Santa Monica, not braving the Alaskan wilderness. But Devonte's unwavering enthusiasm, coupled with the promise of pancakes, had ultimately swayed him.

The boys, dressed in jeans and sweaters, tumbled down the stairs of their modest two-bedroom townhouse, a whirlwind of anticipation. Instead of the usual breakfast fare, they were greeted by a feast fit for a king: bacon, eggs, and towering stacks of fluffy pancakes. "Now I'm flippin'!" exclaimed Devonte, prompting a playful smack on the back from Lenny.



"We wanted to start the day off right," their mother said, a warm smile gracing her face. Even Cupcake, their loyal dog, watched the pancake-eating spectacle with envious eyes. "You're too cute to resist," Dad declared, tossing a pancake towards the eager canine.

Bellies full and spirits high, the family piled into their white wagon, suitcases in tow. "Ready to hit the road?" Dad asked with a grin. "YEEEEAH!" erupted the boys and Cupcake in unison, marking the start of their adventure.

## *Chapter 2. Journey to the Unknown.*

Two and a half hours later, the family pulled into the bustling Oakland International Airport. Finding a parking spot amidst the pre-vacation frenzy proved to be a challenge, but their determination prevailed. The imposing edifice of the airport, a sleek metal structure with vast blue windows, awaited them.

Excitement battled with exhaustion as they navigated the throngs of travelers rushing to catch their flights. The check-in process was a marathon of its own, followed by the inevitable overpriced neck pillows and questionable airport food. Finally, they boarded their plane, settling into their comfortable business-class seats.

As the plane soared through the air, Devonte gripped Lenny's hand tightly. His wide eyes betrayed his anxieties, but a reassuring smile from their mother calmed his nerves. The next nine hours were an endurance test, punctuated by boredom, turbulence, and a desperate longing for solid ground.

Finally, the plane landed in Fairbanks, disgorging its weary passengers onto Alaskan soil. Devonte let out a sigh of relief, his fear replaced by the thrill of adventure. A short Uber ride later, they arrived at their destination: Grandpa and Grandma's welcoming log cabin, bathed in the warm glow of orange light.

The family was greeted with open arms and warm embraces. After settling in, they gathered around the dining table for a hearty dinner of beef Wellington and mashed potatoes. Cupcake, not to be left out, enjoyed a feast of his own.

As darkness descended, Grandpa tucked the boys into their beds, a bedtime story on his lips. The tale, whispered in the dim light, was a chilling account of a monstrous encounter from his youth. The image of a nine-foot, black-furred beast with glowing red spots haunted their dreams.

Later that night, thirst led Lenny downstairs for a glass of water. As he passed a window, a fleeting glimpse sent shivers down his spine. In the darkness, he could have sworn he saw the very creature his grandpa had described, its glowing eyes fixed on him.

### *Chapter 3. The Unexpected Encounter.*

Shaken by the vision, Lenny crept back to his room, the glass of water forgotten. He lay awake, the memory of the creature's eyes burning in his mind. Sleep was a distant prospect, replaced by a cocktail of fear and adrenaline. Devonte, sensing his brother's unease, stirred beside him. "Lenny, what's wrong?" he whispered.

Lenny hesitated, unsure whether to share the terrifying vision. But Devonte's unwavering trust in him won over his fear. In hushed tones, he recounted his encounter at the window, the details growing more vivid with each retelling.

Devonte's initial skepticism soon gave way to concern. They were in the Alaskan wilderness, a place where bears and wolves roamed free. The possibility of something more, something beyond the realm of their understanding, began to weigh on their young minds.

Determined to investigate further, they decided to make a pact. If they saw the creature again, they would tell their parents immediately. With this resolution, they finally succumbed to sleep, the promise of a new day offering a fragile hope.

The morning sun, filtering through the cabin's windows, brought a renewed sense of calm. The memory of the creature seemed less frightening in the light of day. Yet, a lingering sense of unease persisted.

During breakfast, Lenny and Devonte couldn't help but glance out the window, half-expecting to see the glowing eyes again. But the scene was peaceful – birds chirping, squirrels scampering, a world seemingly unaware of their encounter.

Their parents, sensing their apprehension, reassured them that it was likely a trick of the light, a shadow playing games on their tired minds. But the boys weren't convinced. They knew what they had seen, and it wasn't something easily dismissed.

After breakfast, Grandpa announced a surprise – a hike through the woods behind the cabin. This unexpected

adventure, while initially met with groans from the boys, soon turned into an exciting exploration.

As they ventured deeper into the forest, the sunlight filtering through the dense canopy cast an eerie, dappled light on the path ahead. The air was alive with the sound of buzzing insects and chirping birds, a symphony of nature undisturbed by human presence.

Suddenly, Devonte stopped, his eyes wide with terror. "Lenny," he whispered, his voice barely a tremor, "look!" Lenny followed his gaze and his heart skipped a beat. There, in the distance, crouched behind a massive fallen log, was the creature. Its obsidian fur shimmered in the dappled sunlight, and its eyes, those haunting red orbs, were fixed directly on them.

Fear paralyzed them for a moment. The pact they had made, the promise to tell their parents, seemed insignificant in the face of this terrifying reality.

But then, instinct took over. With a surge of adrenaline, the boys turned and ran, the creature's guttural roar echoing behind them. They ran through the forest, branches whipping at their faces, lungs burning, legs screaming in protest.

They didn't dare look back, the fear urging them forward. They only knew they had to reach the safety of the cabin, to warn their parents of the danger that lurked in the woods.

Finally, the cabin came into view, its warm glow a beacon of hope. Bursting through the door, they collapsed onto the floor, gasping for breath. Their parents, alerted to their frantic arrival by the sound of their panicked footsteps, rushed to their side.

Between ragged breaths, the boys recounted their terrifying encounter, the words tumbling out in a desperate torrent. Their parents listened with a mix of disbelief and growing concern.

One thing was clear - their adventure in Alaska had just taken a dramatic turn. They were no longer just tourists; they were now face-to-face with something unknown and potentially deadly.

And so, the boys found themselves at the crossroads of their adventure. The thrill of exploration had been replaced by the chilling reality of danger. They had a choice to make: face their fear and continue their journey, or return home, the memory of the creature haunting them forever.

The encounter with the creature forces Lenny and Devonte to confront their fears and grow as individuals. They realize that the world is a much bigger and more complex place than they ever imagined. They learn valuable lessons about courage, resilience, and the importance of family. They return home with a newfound appreciation for life and a deeper understanding of themselves.

# 1ST PLACE

---

## “LILY PADS”

By **Reygan Ladner**, West Frederick Middle  
Frederick County Literacy Association

**G**randpa scratched his chin, contemplating his work. “What do you think, Chen?”

Chen sat staring at the canvas of blue, amazed at how his grandfather had painted its river. It was like you could see the river moving across the paper. 11-year-old Chen always loved his grandfather’s paintings, which gave him a great sense of awe. Just then, Grandma came in with some matcha.

“Wei, it looks beautiful!” She kissed him on the cheek and set a teacup in his hands.

Grandma then sat down and handed Chen some tea as well. Grandpa turned to him and opened his mouth to say something, but hesitated. Grandma smiled sadly at him. Grandpa returned his wife’s smile and said, “Chen, I have something for you.”

“Really?” Chen asked curiously, wondering what the looks had been for. “What is it?”

His grandfather stood up, crossed the room, and gently picked up his favorite paintbrush. He washed the paint off it and sat down again next to Chen. “Here, child. It’s time for you to have it.”

Chen took it and held it gingerly, looking at it lovingly. He knew it was a very meaningful gift, for his

grandfather cherished it. "Thank you, Grandpa," he said breathlessly.

Grandma smiled and squeezed Grandpa's hand, then spoke to Chen. "Chen, that brush was your father's."

Chen looked up in amazement, understanding the sadness in both his grandparents' eyes. "My father's?"

"Indeed," Grandpa said softly. Chen brushed his fingers against the wood and imagined his father painting beautiful paintings. *Painting has always been in my blood, from my grandfather to my father*, he thought.

His father and mother had died in a house fire when Chen was four-years-old. He had been at pre-k when it happened. He could still remember Grandma crying and Grandpa's chest heaving as he held Chen. And though he couldn't remember much, Chen still remembered his mother's voice and the smell of his father's soup dumplings, still fresh and waiting for him.

Chen sniffled and hugged his grandparents tightly. "Thank you!"

Grandpa smiled and said, "Go try it out, child."

Chen nodded and walked quickly to his room. He had been taught not to run in the house because Lily, his cat, would get excited and trip him. *Lily's not here anymore, Chen*, he thought sadly.

Lily, named after Grandma's favorite flower, had been the only true friend he'd ever had. She would lie at his feet as he painted and appreciate his paintings with him after he'd finished. Every night without fail, they would sleep together, just Chen and Lily, and he would fall asleep to her soft purring. Every night without fail...

Until a week ago.

She had passed away of old age, and Grandma had been the one to discover her, curled up on Chen's pillow in

eternal sleep. Chen had cried himself to sleep for the past few nights, because every night without her warm body next to him was a reminder she was gone.

Tears filled his eyes remembering, and he quickly entered his room and closed the door softly. Heading to his canvas, near the biggest window, he gently placed his father's brush on his stool.

Chen slipped his smock over his head and squeezed out his acrylic colors onto his palette with care. Then he picked up the brush and sat on the little stool, thinking. He usually knew what he wanted to paint immediately, but today was his first time painting without Lily.

Suddenly, he knew.

His brush stroked the canvas, creating a pale blue sky. He added grass and a small pond, complete with a small dock. Around the pond, Chen painted tall oaks on shore and little reeds along the banks. He breathed deeply and painted small lily pads on the surface of the water.

Finally, he painted delicate water lilies on the green lily pads, bringing the whole painting together. A tear rolled down his cheek and though it seemed silly, the thought that his feet were cold came to mind.

*I'm being silly*, he thought, looking at the painting. But his eyes lingered on the lilies and he quickly looked away. *That's it, I'm done for today*. Chen stood quickly, slipped off his smock, and set down his brush and palette on the stool. He sighed and walked towards the door, but looked back.

The painting seemed to be calling him. He walked back towards it, staring at the bright greens, pale blues, dark browns, and tinted pinks.

And the flowers. He wanted to touch them, but he hesitated. Chen ran his fingers through his black hair, and his fingers pressed against the smooth material.



The second he touched the canvas, Chen felt a pulling on his fingers and was suddenly spinning. His stomach lurched and his heart thumped. He didn't know what was happening. "Help!" He cried.

Pinks, yellows, and blues flashed past him in a kaleidoscope of colors. "What is happening?!"

Suddenly, he landed with a thump on his knees atop soft grass. "Ow!" He exclaimed, sitting back and rubbing his shins.

*Where am I?* He thought as he looked around. In front of him was a wooden dock on a small pond. Around him were great tall oaks. "Wha- wait. Am I in my painting?"

He waved his arms around, going through his mind the touching of the painting, the spinning and flashes of color, and finally here, in who knows where. Maybe his painting?

"This is crazy. I'm going insane. I'm hallucinating, that's it!"

"I'm literally losing my mind." He clutched his head and closed his eyes. "Alright, one, two, three!"

Chen opened his eyes gingerly and looked around. "Rats, same place. It really does look like my painting, except real," he told himself as he touched the grass. He stood up slowly and looked around. "Though it could be a coincidence."

He was puzzled over it, his eyes swooping over the landscape, until he noticed the actual pond. Atop it had lily pads and delicate lilies, just as he had painted!

"I'm in my painting. I-I'm in my painting." He stammered in disbelief.

Chen stared at the lilies for a long time and then walked around, curious of the world that he had created. It was very beautiful scenery and he was quite proud of

himself. He was walking through the small forest of oaks when he heard a soft rustling.

He whipped around. "Who's there?"

Immediately, he felt stupid.

*I didn't paint anyone in my painting. But still, what was that?* He heard it again, and decided that it probably wasn't anything dangerous. Still, he hesitated, but in the end, his curiosity took over and he walked towards the sound.

Chen couldn't see anything, but was cautious nevertheless. The rustling grew louder as he neared it.

All of a sudden, out stepped a black paw. He stopped immediately. A small black cat walked out from behind a tree trunk and cocked its head at him. It appeared to have been following him as he had walked around earlier.

Chen was frozen, barely breathing. *It can't be. It's not possible.*

The cat walked towards him softly and rubbed against his leg, meowing and trying to get him to pet it. *Don't get your hopes up. It just wants to be pet.*

But then, the cat laid down on his feet and stared up at him with big eyes.

Chen couldn't stop it. He started crying and kneeled, gently stroking the cat's head. His cat's head. "Lily! Y-you beautiful, adorable girl. I-I...you're here!"

He picked her up and sat cross-legged on the ground, petting Lily as she purred. He hugged her tightly, wanting to stay here with her forever. He couldn't stop crying. Chen sobbed and scratched Lily's ears as she lay in his lap, meowing and wondering what was wrong.

He was filled with such sadness and love that he couldn't breathe. He had missed her so much, and now she

was here. And though he didn't know how, it didn't matter. She was here, and that's *all* that mattered.

The two friends sat there for what seemed like forever, just together.

Chen suddenly felt a soft pull on his arm, and even though he had never been here, he knew what it meant. He couldn't bear it. He sobbed into Lily's fur, embracing her warmth and not wanting to let go.

But she got up and stood in front of him. He sat there, crying and sniffing. He looked up and found her sitting, staring at him intently. She seemed to say, "I love you, but we have to part, my boy."

Lily looked at him sadly as Chen wiped away his tears. He felt a stronger pull on his arm and reached out. He pet Lily's head and she leaned into his hand lovingly.

Chen forced himself to stand up and looked down at her. She put her paw on his foot and he couldn't help himself. He knew it would make it harder to leave her, but he picked her up and held her in his arms for a few minutes.

Black fur against olive skin.

Then, he kissed her head for the last time and set her down. The pull was strong now and was pulling him away from this world with Lily. He had to leave, he knew it. He didn't want to, but he had to.

Just before he was pulled out of that perfect world, Chen called out, "I love you Lily! You'll always be my special girl!"

And then, he succumbed to the kaleidoscope of spinning colors.

## 2ND PLACE

---

### “WINTER OF GUILT”

By **Gabriella Picha**, North Harford Middle  
Harford County Literacy Chapter

**T**hirty-four days. That’s how long I spent alone in those woods. Forty-three was the average temperature at night. Fifty-one during the day. Eight was the number of near-death experiences I encountered. 1 was the number of regrets. My name is Savannah Ramirez, and this is my story.

I hate you. Those were the last words I ever said to my mom. Then came the accident. I want to tell you that it was a clear spring day, one of the ones that make you feel warm and fuzzy. That I was just having a friendly conversation with my mom, and all was well. Until it wasn’t. But that’s how this day went in my dreams. The reality was that it was a bitter winter day, gloomy and no end in sight. I was arguing with my mom about something so dumb I don’t even remember. Then I said those awful words to her. I hate you. The car went silent my mom was gripping the steering wheel so hard her knuckles turned white. She was staring at the road so hard I thought her eyes might pop out of her head. She said nothing. The silence was scaring me more than what she was about to say. Then suddenly, a deer jumped out in front of us. My mom swerved the car sliding on the icy road. Then I saw it, we were sliding directly towards the guard rail. If we went over our car would descend a cliff god knows how high taking us with it. Before I knew it, the car rammed into the guard

rail so fast the impact itself almost knocked me out. Then we went over.

I dangled upside down in the car as I looked outside snow began to fall. I looked over to my mom. Glass from the windshield covered her, her arms hanging lifelessly. I reached over and checked her pulse. I waited. I waited for so long to finally realize I did not feel any pulse because there was none left. I unbuckled myself and crawled out of the car. I sat on the cold ground staring at my mom's lifeless body. There is nothing I can do, I told myself. I need to find my way back, no one will see us down here. I need to leave her to find help. That's what I told myself as I walked endlessly for hours into the woods.

Nightfall came sooner than expected and I was freezing. I grabbed the survival backpack from the car before I began walking, but I could not salvage anything else. I took a look inside. A blanket, mountain food, a pot for water, string, and a Firestarter. It's not a lot but it was something. I tried to stay positive but how could I? How was I supposed to survive on my own? I must find a way out.

Little did I know that I was about to spend 34 days alone. Suffering, and wanting to die.

I woke up the next morning cold and lying on a tree root. The snow from yesterday did not stick luckily. Luck, that's not a word I want to use. What part of this is lucky? I'm going to die alone in the middle of the woods where my body will never be found. Where is the luck in that?

I never thought of myself as an outdoors person but better late than never, I guess. My first priority was shelter, so I walked on looking for somewhere warm and safe. Turns out you really won't find any places like that in the middle of the woods. Still, I continued to walk. I waded for about an hour before I realized I walked in a loop. I was

back at the wreck. I stared at the car. My mom's hair peeked out through what was visible of the remaining bits of the window. I couldn't leave her like this. I needed to give her a proper goodbye.

I was 13 on that day. Thirty-four days later I was so much older, and this moment shaped my future. Children should not be the ones burying their parents but here I was burying my mom alone. I knew so little about what was to come yet I feared my future more than I ever thought I could.

Four days. That's how long it took me to build my shelter. Three hours is how long until it collapsed due to a snowstorm. I sat there in the ruins of my shelter trying to find a way to stay warmer. That's when it hit me. My mom's winter coat was in the back of the car when we crashed. It must still be there. I walked out into the storm heading towards the car. I had to prepare myself to see what's left of my mom's memory. Living on through her coat, the car, even the broken glass reminded me of her. When I reached the car, I spotted the coat tucked snug under the back seat. I stared at the coat. I wondered how I would be able to live like this. Not just what was left of my shelter when I did a double take. I looked to the car then where I buried my mom. Maybe I won't be able to live with this guilt but for now I have to. I have to get her and myself back and give her the respect and love she deserves.

Four hundred thirty-eight thousand nine hundred sixty-six pounds (about 199111.47 kg). That is the weight of 18 buses. And that times 1000 is the weight of guilt I feel every day yet from that day through the next 33. I had to forget about it and carry on.

Twenty-six was the number of days I had to continue on for when I had my first meal. I hadn't found any water source around so I could make the mountain food. I also could not waste the single bottle of water I found in the car.

I had been living off berries found in the woods. Until on the 8th day I finally found a natural spring. It felt like a miracle, I nearly cried. I filled up my pot and bottle of water then headed back to camp.

This little thing had felt like such an accomplishment it almost felt wrong to not celebrate. But of course, with every good thing that happens, two terrible things always take its place. Especially in my recent situation. That night contributed to my first two near death experiences, and I had no idea.

A blizzard. I mean seriously a blizzard now! Why is it always me? Of course, it wasn't actually a blizzard but any bit of snow when I have no warm shelter sure makes it feel like it. But I clearly wasn't the only one. Apparently, coyotes think the same thing. Especially the one that walked right into my shelter and lunged at me. I quickly reached for the spear I carved days ago in case. I impaled the coyote and it squealed. Oh my gosh. I thought to myself. I have never killed anything in my entire life. I stared at it. I got up, walked at least 30 yards away and threw it into the woods. I walked back, sat down, and cried. Just when I thought that this situation wasn't so bad, it got worse.

In the next 25 days I went through six more near death experiences and so much more than you can ever imagine. Finally, my time was almost up, and I had no idea.

I woke up like I normally do cold and not well rested but this time I heard voices. I heard people calling my name and my mom's name, too. Once, twice, five times I heard it. I was sure I was hearing things. Then I heard more screaming. Lots of people. They were yelling that they had found the car. I peeked my head out of my shelter and looked up over the cliff. After my eyes adjusted, I could see people. They were calling to me and I had no idea what to do other than cry.

I used to measure my life in numbers. Then, I realized the numbers can't measure pain, guilt, or happiness. I always tried to justify what I felt with numbers. It made me believe lies so outstretched no one but me believed them. I realized that I had to live through my pain and my guilt and truly feel it to move on. I still live with the guilt of what I said to my mom that day. Out of everything I did in those 34 days that was my only regret. The only thing I would change from what happened. Even though I would give anything to change what I said to my mom, I learned a lot that day and in the ones that followed. My name is Savannah Ramirez and that was my story.



# 1ST PLACE

---

## “THE HAUNTED SPRINGHOUSE”

By **Catherine Clayton**, Swan Creek School  
Harford County Literacy Chapter

The crunch of my thick-soled boots on the graveled path echoed in stillness. My heartbeat quickened as I shakily exhaled, puffs of vapor fogging up my glasses, making it nearly impossible to see. In the darkness, the moon glowed faintly, barely peeking through the clouds. Pushing up the sleeve of my woolen overcoat, I glanced at the luminous dial of my watch. “Half past 11 - almost the witching hour,” I groaned. “But I won’t stop until I see it - or rather, do not see it,” I murmured determinedly to myself, my whisper slicing through the uncanny silence.

I thought back to the legend that had inspired this outing: the story of the ghost that lives in the springhouse. Just an old family folktale about a random bump in the night. Except this yarn had stuck to the abandoned Cavendish Hall estate like glue. No one had wanted to touch the place since it had been lit aflame in the 1800’s. Somehow, fire had blazed through the dense grove of trees and over the vale, gutting the Hall. A wealthy family named Stephens had bought the property recently, and the estate agents were glad to be rid of it. I shuddered in my overcoat as thinking about it gave me a chill but continued resolutely on.

Lost in my reverie, I glimpsed the faintest outline of something in the corner of my vision. It moved fast - very

fast. I abruptly snatched my train of thought and drove it swiftly back to the station. For now.

Continuing on the path, I caught sight of an amorphous shape wafting through the air, gliding as if riding the frigid winds. As quietly as I could, I quickly leapt with catlike grace over to a massive oak tree, sheltering behind its bole. Peering out from the edge of the trunk, I was gob smacked at the astonishing sight.

*Whoosh!* The ephemeral shape darkened, darting across the clearing. Raising its spectral nose in the air, it turned slowly towards my hiding spot. Crouching, I bowed my head and froze behind the tree - scrunching my eyes, and fervently wishing I had just stayed in bed.

Moments later, I felt a rustle in the air before me. Opening my eyes a crack, a shadow loomed in front of me. A horrible visage, indescribable except for its sharp teeth and eyeless face. It groaned, its words wretched and contorted. If I were paying more attention to my head rather than the fear racing through my bones, I would have realized sooner it was saying, "Help me...please..."

But instead, I gave in to sheer terror. I shrieked - so loud, that the shadowy abomination shot up high into the air. With my heart in my mouth, I bolted. My feet flew as I sped up the path, gravel spraying every which way, kicking up dust, mud, and leaves - but I didn't care. A dirty overcoat would be the least of my worries if the shadow caught up to me. My heart pounded like a drum, but I wasn't stopping. I ran, and ran, and ran - till it felt like I had run kilometers. Suddenly, my legs gave out from under me, and I was forced to stop, wheezing for air. As my breath quieted, I noticed the sound of the shadow chasing me was gone. Confused, I leapt up and spun around, but nothing was there. I shook my head in disbelief.

“Get ahold of yourself, Serena,” I chastised myself. I turned smartly and sped back up the path leading to my family’s estate, Hushwood Manor, determined to reach my room with all possible haste.

\*\*\*

“Wake up!” an impatient voice bellowed into my ear.

I startled, squealing and flailing around. I clutched the soft covers around me tightly, squinting up at the speaker.

“Hollister!” I groaned grumpily. “As my eldest brother you may be Viscount Hinchingbrooke, but, at this particular moment, you are *not* my favorite!” I retorted.

With a resigned sigh, I gracefully pulled back the duvet and stepped into my slippers.

“Last night ‘twas a nightmare,” I murmured reassuringly, while donning my dressing gown. “Just a nightmare.”

Crossing the room to the antique vanity, I spotted my overcoat, unceremoniously flung over a chair. I paused. Reaching out, the woolen fabric was damp against my fingers, and the substance on the hem felt...like mud? I muffled a squeak as I touched the pocket, and something made a dull clinking noise. I stepped back, and froze, waiting for the horrible shadowy visage to return. But there was nothing. Swallowing hard, I summoned up a bit of courage and reached into the pocket to feel...something cold, with lots of jangly bits on it. I gently pulled it out and stared at it. A gold bracelet, strung with charms.

I cradled the bracelet in my hand, remembering the shock of finding it. As the eldest daughter, I had been tasked with restoring the Muniment Room, which hadn’t been refurbished in no one remembered how long. My ancestors had certainly been negligent in preserving the room, where all our manuscript treasures accumulated for

basically centuries. Endless shelves of family documents weighed down wooden bookcases. As I was removing everything for cleaning, I was stunned to discover a concealed entrance to a hidden room.

There, I had found the diary of my Great-great-great-Grandfather, the 8th Earl of Hinchinbrooke. The Earl, who in a fit of anger, had threatened to banish his Countess, Charlotte Elizabeth. Distressed, the Countess fled to the springhouse in despair. But an unexpected sudden summer storm had caused the springhouse to flood, drowning her. By the time the Earl had come to his senses, searching for her, and seeking to apologize for his outburst, it was too late.

I had sat on the floor of the secret room reading this diary, tears rolling down my face at the Earl's pain and his guilt over the loss of his true love. With the diary had been a bracelet in an ornately carved wooden box. The Earl had penned a note indicating the bracelet had belonged to the Countess. But while she had been found clutching the bracelet, a priceless ruby heart charm had gone missing. He had gifted the ruby charm to Charlotte as a bridal troth and mourned its loss as it was to have been an heirloom. That's when I came up with the brilliant idea to search the springhouse. And since Cavendish Hall was being sold, time was of the essence.

Securing the bracelet onto my wrist, I walked over to the wardrobe to dress for the day. I was determined to get a closer look at the springhouse. In the morning light. Not at night.

\*\*\*

I tripped, slipping on a broken branch strewn across the path. Muttering crossly, I kicked it away, and got back up. I was close to the springhouse, closer than I cared to be after last night's encounter. But I had to do this.

Squaring my shoulders, I stepped forward and ealked toward the cursed place.

At the stone springhouse's heavy door, I paused, looking perplexedly at the old-fashioned lock. Grimacing, I plucked a hairpin out of my bun. I wasn't against breaking rules if I could prove to myself last night was simply a fluke, or neurons misfiring. "Ghosts, specters, they aren't real. Are they?" I wondered yet again.

After several frustrating minutes, the lock gave way to my hairpin. I pushed, and the door creakily swung open. Snapping on my torch, I hesitantly stepped inside.

Weak light filtered in, illuminating the stone walls, ceiling, and floor. In the corner, a stream still flowed keeping the room cool. As I glanced around, I wondered if, when the springhouse had flooded the Countess had panicked? Perhaps in her distress as she floundered, the bracelet unsnapped, and the ruby charm was lost.

I shivered, my warm breath fogging up the air. The hair on the back of my neck stood up, but I was alone. Or at least, I was alone as far as I could see, but not as far as I could *sense*. Steeling my resolve, I began examining every stone crevice, hoping to find the charm.

After searching for what seemed like hours, I glimpsed a dull glint in a corner. Kneeling, I picked at the stones surrounding the object with my pocketknife, gasping as a blood-red ruby heart came loose. I had found it! Giddy with relief, I unclasped the Countess' bracelet. Threading the ruby heart charm onto the links, I fastened my family heirloom securely onto my wrist.

Before me, sparks flew from an amorphous shadow glowing brightly. Shielding my eyes, I peered through the intense purple-green glow.

And there she was, in all her afterlife glory! Raising her arms toward me, I heard her whisper in the wind,

“Daughter of my heart, accept my deepest appreciation for releasing me from my stone prison. Remember – conquer your fears – never flee. Always face life with courage! She intoned, fading from sight.

I was alone. Taking one last look around the springhouse, I closed the door.

Centuries later, the symbol of my Great-great-great-Grandparent’s love was returning home, and she was free. Smiling to myself, I hugged Countess Charlotte’s ruby charm close to my heart and followed the path home.

## 2ND PLACE

---

### “GONE ASTRAY”

By **Catrina Donmoyer**, Stephen Decatur Middle  
Eastern Shore Literacy Association

**A**s the bleak winter sun began to sink lower and lower into the horizon, our hopes of finding her did too. It had been almost an hour since she disappeared, and now we were trudging through the snow, shivering in our unseasonably light clothes. We were searching desperately for our younger cousin, Hailey, whose curiosity often led her astray. Grandmother had divided us into five search parties to try and locate her. Naturally, the police had been called, but that didn't do much. The underfunded police station in this small town would be little to no help with our predicament. My fingers were white from grasping the handle of my flashlight too tightly. Grandmother made me take a flashlight “just in case” we weren't back before dark. I stared blankly at the rusty old swings and peeling blue monkey bars in front of me. It had been Tyler's idea to come to this eerie park and look around for Hailey. Judging by the overall appearance of this place, if Hailey did go here, she most certainly left. Not even she was moronic enough play on this crumbling equipment.

“Tyler she's not here,” I called to him. He was by the decrepit seesaw, staring into the abyss as if Haley might magically materialize if he concentrated hard enough. “You and I both know she never liked this old place,” I reminded

him, fighting my way through the knee-deep snow to where he stood.

"I'm grasping at straws here, Anita," he sighed. "We've already checked the library, the bakery, the fort in the backwoods, and the docks. Where else could she be?" He started kicking anxiously at a pile of ice next to him, chipping off shards of it with his boot. The rapid falling snow obscured my surroundings so much that it was like a white, thread bare blanket had been tossed over me. I could barely make out Tyler's expression, but I already knew that he was feeling guilty. The two of us were supposed to be the ones entertaining Hailey and keeping her out of trouble before she had disappeared. Obviously, we hadn't done a very good job.

"Look," I said trying to ignore the knots in my stomach, "we have to keep going. You think you're cold? Imagine how frozen she is. She doesn't even have her jacket with her!"

"You don't think she got hurt, do you?"

"I don't know, Tyler! She's been gone since dinner ended. I certainly hope she's okay, but I have no idea what kind of state she is in right now!" I practically yelled, my grasp on the flashlight tightening even more.

"Okay, okay," he said nervously as if I were some wild unpredictable monster. "Let's check by the pond. Maybe she wanted to go ice skating or something." He started venturing back towards the road in order to avoid battling through such a thick layer of snow. I trodded along after him, cursing my short legs as we walked. Oddly enough my feet started to feel warm again. Oh great, I'm getting frostbite, I thought bitterly.

The road wasn't much better than the park, but at least it was a slight improvement. I took my phone out of my pocket to check if any of the other search parties had



found Haley. Nothing. I sighed and my breath turned to fog in the freezing air. I watched as the blue slowly faded from the sky and was replaced with shades of pink and orange swirled around the ever-dimming sun. Time was running out.

"Wait," Tyler stopped abruptly, his hand grasping at his chest.

"Now what?" I asked tersely.

"It's gone!"

"Tyler, we don't have time for this. What is gone?"

"My cross! I had it on when we left, the clasp wasn't working the greatest, but I didn't think I'd lose it."

"Uh..." I stalled. "Maybe it only recently fell off. Perhaps it is somewhere in the snow around us." I watched as my cousin crouched down, frantically searching through the snow. I hesitated before kneeling down a couple feet away from him. Immediately, the icy water soaked into my pants making me wince from the sudden cold. I moved my flashlight across the the smooth snow, looking for a glint a metal among the white powder.

"We have to go back and retrace our steps, then we'll find it," Tyler declared standing up.

"Go back? Are you crazy!"

"You aren't a person of faith, so you don't get how important this is to me!"

I stood up, snow cascaded down from my jeans. Softly, I said, "You're right. I have no idea how important your cross is to you, yet I was willing to freeze my legs off helping you look for it. You have to understand that we can't go back. It would take us weeks to find it, and if you would rather search for a worthless hunk of metal than your own sister, well, I'm not going to spend another minute

with someone so selfish." I walked off not sparing a look behind me as I left for town.

My boiling anger simmered as I continued my search. I was roaming the sidewalks of the town, ducking into various open restaurants to inquire the staff to whether they had seen Hailey. I figured I should check the fort again in case she had gone there within the hour Tyler and I had been searching. Hailey had built that fort with the help of Tyler, our cousins, and I last summer. She would often sneak out at night and try to camp there. Tonight was different though. That was the first place we checked and there was no sign of her. No provisions, no blankets, no flashlight, no Hailey. I walked along the path in the woods and veered left to where the fort was located. It was only about the size of a walk-in closet, crudely pieced together out of spare two by fours and branches found on the ground, but Hailey thought it was the best hideaway ever. I crawled through the lopsided door and scanned the room. Nobody was there. Defeated, I inched back outside and sat down with my back against an ancient oak tree. *You have to keep going*, I told myself. *She's still out there. Somewhere.*

I was about to get back up when I caught something glinting out of the corner of my eye. Something was stuck in the ground and only peeking a couple of centimeters out of the snow. I reached out and grabbed it. It dangled down from my fingers, spinning lightly from my movement. Tyler's cross. I held it at arms length as if it were some rabid animal. I perched my flashlight on my shoulder and examined the clasp on it. The part that closes was unaligned. I pried it back into place causing it to snap closed again. If only Tyler had been just a little smarter I wouldn't be sitting alone in the woods with his "extremely important" necklace. It reminded me of something. Specifically somewhere.

That's when it hit me. I got up and bolted back to the trail, not stopping to catch my breath until I reached the main road. I stuffed the cross unceremoniously into my pocket. *No, that's a bad idea. It'll just fall out and get lost again.* I hesitated a moment before putting it around my neck. I continued my awkward jog through the mountains of white powder until I finally arrived. The church was not much to look at. Just a simple brick building with faded stained glass windows. I pushed down the handle of the door and slipped inside. I had no idea why the church was open at nine on a Thursday night, but I wasn't going to question it. I walked down the aisle scanning the pews for any sign of Hailey.

I stopped dead in my tracks. There she was, sleeping in the third row. I could finally breath again. I smirked; only Hailey could fall asleep on something as uncomfortable as a pew. I knew from experience that it was close to impossible to get any shut eye on those. I gently shook Hailey. She sat up, blinking sleepily.

"It's time to go home, kid," I told her. "We were very worried about you."

"I'm sorry," she muttered. "It was cold in the fort so I decided to sleep here."

"Why didn't you just come home?" I inquired. She shrugged and looked up at me innocently with her ocean-blue eyes. I shook my head and lifted her up onto my shoulders. There was no way Hailey would even be able to see over the snow if she walked back.

Suddenly, the door swung open and Tyler entered the church. I set Hailey down and she ran over to hug her brother.

"You found her," he said amazed.

"So did you." I hesitated for a moment before walking over towards Tyler and handing him the cross. "Here, I found this in the snow."

"Thanks," Tyler whispered.

"I'm sorry I called it a worthless hunk of metal," I said solemnly.

"And I apologize for being so stubborn and rude when you were only trying to help." I nodded awkwardly in acknowledgment and he and smiled at me warmly in return.

"I'm tired," Hailey protested drowsily.

"Alright then kid, let's go back." Tyler lifted Hailey onto his shoulders. Together we left the church and after trudging through a seemingly endless world of snow, we finally made it home.

# 1ST PLACE

---

## “AT THE END OF THE SEA”

By **Kristen Arthungal**, Atholton High  
Howard County Literacy Association

For years and years, my people lived on the water. There was no grass, no sand, no dirt; land did not exist at all, in fact. In every direction, nothing was to be seen but open water and our little houses floating on it.

When I was young, my mother whispered to me stories of a time when there were plants so tall, their leafy tops brushed the sky; of a time when animals roamed, not just in the water beneath us, but beside us and above us. She told me of flowers that bloomed in every colour from pale white to brilliant orange, and of tiny, green grass blades, glittering with the morning dew. As a toddler, this delighted me. But now, I knew better: land was simply an amusing fantasy. That was what my father told the village, anyway. He was the king, and by law the village could not contradict him.

The day before my eleventh birthday, my father asked me what I would like most for a gift. I sat quietly for a moment. Just a month ago, my mother had said I was too old for stories now that I was nearly eleven. I missed her description of shining dew drops and beams of sun breaking through the leaves. But most of all I wanted to hear again of the brightly coloured flowers.

“Father,” I said tentatively, because I knew my request was a big one, “Can we go live where the flowers are?” To my surprise, my father turned to me angrily.

"Where did you hear about that? There are no such things as flowers, Salacia. There never were. There never will be. We are blessed to live in a world of water. Do not anger the spirits by wishing for more than we have!" I had cried myself to sleep that night.

The next week, as the village dined together (we did so weekly), my father had made an announcement.

"It disappoints me to say that I have heard talk of land recently. Some of it, unfortunately, is from my own daughter. And so I will tell you what I told her: land is just another story for us to be distracted by. Be thankful for what the spirits have given us, and do not wish for more, lest we anger them. If I hear any more speaking of land, or trying to go to it, you will be punished." The people stared at him, startled, but my father ignored them and continued.

"Know this, my people: whatever punishment I give you will certainly be more merciful than whatever way the spirits rebuke you. I am not a harsh ruler."

In the many months following, he reminded us at every meal together that our world of water was one to be glad for. I never wondered why my father was so strict about it.

The day I turned fourteen, my father woke me before the sun had risen.

"Happy birthday, my daughter," he whispered. "Come, we have a long journey to go on: I have had a vision from the spirits. I will explain more on the boat, your mother is waiting." Half-asleep, I followed my father outside and stumbled into the boat; every family in the village had one, but nobody was allowed to sail off without permission from my father. After several minutes of struggling to stay awake, it occurred to me that my father still had not explained what we were doing.

"Father, where are we going?" I asked.

"We are going, Salacia, to find land. We are going to the end of the sea."

My mother and I gasped.

"But—but, Father, you said there's no such thing—there never was—"

"Of course there's such a thing! Where else would the village have gotten the idea?" My father cried out. My mother stared at him for a moment.

"Then why," she said quietly, "have you constantly discouraged the people from even dreaming of it?"

"Because I am the king. Lowly citizens do not deserve to have what I don't." My father did not seem aware of how childish and selfish his words sounded. I chose, however, to ignore this: my father had never been a humble person and there would be no good trying to change that now. I was about to ask him how we would get to this supposed land when he began to speak again.

"One hundred and fifty years ago, the village (as it was back then, of course) was set in a little forest. My grandfather was king, but he was a poor ruler. He judged the people unfairly; he was unwilling to take into consideration the opinions of the people; and when he was in a rage, he tortured the animals, he burned down plants, and he even cursed the spirits. But the spirits did not punish him: instead, when my father was born, they blessed him with immortality and the power to harness the elements in the hopes that their gifts meant he would rule peacefully. And he did; my father ruled very well. The spirits were pleased. But what they did not know was that his power was beginning to consume him. He wanted more, and the greed ate away at him until he unleashed his power and tried to overcome the spirits. Immediately, his power and immortality were taken from him. But it wasn't just power the spirits took; they took our forest and left us

with nothing but water, hoping that this would humble us. One day, they told my father, when the people were worthy of it, they would return us our beloved land. But now," my father's expression suddenly became eager, "now, the spirits have sent me a vision. They have told me we will get land back!"

I shook my head. The story was not believable in the least; the spirits, of course, were real, but the land?

"Father, how can you expect us to believe that?" I asked. He looked at me.

"The spirits told me you would not believe me," he said quietly. "I hope that what I do next will convince you that I am telling the truth. As I was saying before, the spirits sent me a vision telling me we can get land back—for a price. Payment in two parts: the first part goes to the spirit of water. . .then, land will appear, temporarily, and the second part will be given to the spirit of earth. And then," his expression nearly maniacal, "then we have land again for good! No longer must I suffer for my idiot father's mistake."

"Father," I quavered, for his expression was that of insanity, "how-how are you going to pay the spirits?"

"It will not please you, my daughter. The spirits require sacrifice. . .*human* sacrifice."

My mother and I gasped once more, because we now understood why my father had brought us: he was going to give us to the spirits, hand us willingly to death. Then my mother stood.

"You are not such a cruel man," she said, her tone firm though she trembled, "as to give your own wife and daughter to death."

My father's head turned slowly to her. "What do you know about what kind of a man I am?" he laughed softly. "I do not love you: I never have. But it is village law that if



there is a king, there must be a queen. Finally, I get back the world I deserve, and you think pity will stop me? You are mistaken, *dear wife*." Then he grabbed my mother, so quickly I barely saw the movement, and he pushed her into the sea.

"Mother!" I screamed. But it was too late. A hand, a liquid hand, the hand of the water spirit, rose above the surface and pulled her, struggling, to her death.

"It is almost your turn, daughter. Are you ready to go see Mother?" My father asked the question in a mocking tone.

"No," I hissed, shaking with grief and fury. There my father was, leaning over the edge of the boat to watch with satisfaction as my mother was pulled down even farther. And then a savage idea overtook me: I pushed him with all my strength, just as he mercilessly had done to my mother. As my father fell into the water, he clutched the edge of the boat, but his attempts to get back on were fruitless: the hand appeared again and jerked him under the water.

Then he was no more.

For years and years, my people lived on the water. There was no grass, no sand, no dirt; land did not exist at all, in fact. In every direction, nothing was to be seen but open water and our little houses floating on it.

Those days were over. The sacrifice had been made, and if my father had told the truth (and I reasoned that he had, after the water spirit took him and my mother), there was now land again, just waiting to be found. For three days now, I'd been sailing, straining my eyes for what I thought would look like a glimmer of white sand or a leafy foliage. The price my sweet mother paid was not going to be in vain, I had told myself after shedding tears for hours. Whether I found land tomorrow or next year, I would not stop sailing until I came to the end of the sea.



## 2ND PLACE

---

### “WINGSPAN”

By **Eden Rankin**, Northern Garrett High  
Western Maryland Literacy Chapter

S pending the last 15 minutes turning my room inside-out while looking for more of my belongings that had fallen victim to the pixies that ravaged my apartment building while I was away this morning had me feeling more overwhelmed than usual. In the ungodly hours of the morning, I'll fix this mess because the gods above know I don't have enough time to figure out a way to get within a half foot radius of the Strangler Ivy that was currently trying to choke the globe that sat on my desk.

The tribe of pixies that were currently harassing everyone in our village in the most minor, but infuriating ways were not normal pixies. They'd been brought here by the past summer's influx of rich, snooty vacationers from the mainland who have nothing better to do with the money rotting in their vaults but spend it coming to a tiny, storm-weathered island to scope out potential locations for an 8th family house. Like they needed an 8th house to let rot under neglect.

It was quite the trend on the mainland lately to live like the stubborn and weathered folk who reside in my town. I think it's ridiculous and horridly offensive.

At this point, it proves to be quite the annoyance to even walk past the hovel down the street on my way to flight practice. Even though the summer has gone, a little posse of teenage boys about my age in waistcoats and

suits starched so thoroughly, it's a wonder they can move at all, stayed on our island. They hole up in their rooms in the hovel when the breeze starts to blow, complaining how cold it is when in reality they've never had to endure anything uncomfortable.

They congregate on the steps of the hovel making fun of everything they lay their eyes on. It gets tiring to hear jabs about my attire when all I want is a peaceful walk.

The dark overcast sky holds promise for the storm clouds brewing out over the ocean waves to be especially brutal once they reach our island. This will be one of the biggest storms of the season. All morning, the strong coastal winds have torn through the cobble streets. Anyone who decided they wanted to try their hand at braving the streets today will sport a spectacular red on their features as a result of windburn, if they haven't already blown away. I could already feel my cheeks going numb.

I could see the absence of gelled hair and pristinely polished shoes ahead.

The moment I stopped just before the entrance to the hovel to adjust the helmet on my belt, the red door slammed against the bricks and the flurry of motion that poured out onto the sidewalk was accompanied by several screeches and curses. Upon further inspection, I could see the boys getting terrorized by a bunch of pale purple pixies.

"Ow. OW! It is in my hair! Get-it-off-get-it-off-get-it-off!" One of the tall ones shrieked as he clawed at his head while flailing madly.

The rest of the boys tore off down the street like they thought they had a chance. By this point, the boy that was tugging at his hair, or rather at the small purple creature that was currently stuffing its fanged mouth full of red hair like it was a Parisian delicacy, would probably resort to

bashing his brain against the brick wall of the hovel. It was then that I decided to intervene.

I reached into my bag to pick out the floral perfume I kept in there for these exact emergencies, took a few strides to close the distance between me and the madness in front of me, and promptly sprayed the bottle into the eyes of the small creature. I watch with satisfaction as it lets out a scream and flies away, rubbing furiously at its face.

The redhead was looking very dazed and confused with his hair sticking up at all ends, shivering as a particularly strong gust of wind rolled up the street and blew up the tails of his waistcoat. His features were pinched like he was sucking on a lemon candy, and he was so pale that you'd think he'd been locked away in a cellar for the better part of his life. He had dark blue eyes that were like tanzanite gemstones and stood out strikingly on his pale face.

"What have you guys done to them?" I asked.  
"Normally they aren't so, er, violent?"

He seemed to snap out of whatever stupor he was in and straightened up so that it looked like he himself had been starched. After straightening his lapels and smoothing non-existent wrinkles out of his coat, he set his jaw and narrowed his eyes.

His mouth twitched, almost like he was pained. When he spoke, I instantly recognized his smooth, nasally accent from the mainland. "It was an ambush, we did nothing."

"I doubt that."

He sneered. "I am repulsed that you people can live in these horrendous conditions."

"It's almost like you lot aren't the reason they're here?" I looked him up and down. "The nerve you pompous high-lives have criticizing us on the vermin you

brought here." And with that, I carried on back down the street.

"Well- I- I'd *never*-" He started.

"No, you probably wouldn't"

The next moment, for some reason, he was walking by my side as I was putting the pink bottle back into my bag.

"Listen, I'm sorry if I offended you, I just have places to be and issues to take care of." I glanced over in time to see his features pinched into a halfway confused look with the remnants of the affronted look he had sported just a second earlier.

He hesitated for a moment, the pained look making its return. He seemed to straighten up further, if that was even possible. "I suppose I ought to be the one to, er, apologize." Then, he mumbled, "*D'agr er mes excuses les plus.*"

His blue eyes were downcast and he chewed on his lower lip. "Thank you for saving me."

"I am sure you would have done the same for me." He snorted, or choked, and turned a delightful shade of red to match his flaming hair. "What's your name?"

His face contorted in brief surprise. "Val Matisse. And you?"

"Claudia Kingsten?"

"Are you quite sure? You sound uncertain."

"Still recovering from the whiplash of you switching your attitude so fast."

He was silent for the next few blocks.

"Where are we going?"

I chose to ignore his question, instead, asking one of my own.

"Were you named after Saint Valentine?" I looked over at his flushed face. I wasn't entirely sure it was from the wind. "You know who that is, right?"

"Of course I do." Val snapped as if I was insulting his intelligence.. He swallowed, staring straight, and chewed on his inner cheek before he spoke. "He was the patron of love and marriage to put it short."

"I just thought 'cause you were named Val."

Monotonously, he added, "Mother thought that if she named me after the patron saint of love, it might save her own marriage."

"Oh." I hesitated, squinting my eyes as another gust of wind pressed against me. "Well I am not sure about you, but I am going to flight practice."

"Is that what that helmet is for? I thought you were some sort of polo player. What aircraft do you fly?"

I snorted. "Aircraft, he says." Val gave me a quizzical look. It was almost like he expected me to sprout a pair of wings.

I wasn't sure why, but I asked him if he wanted me to show him how to fly. To this, he eagerly nodded like if I would've asked a child if they wanted my Halloween candy.

I could gear him up with some of the spare sets of armor in the bins and take him on a flight.

As soon as we arrived at the field, I quickly shucked on my armors and pointed to where Val could find his - in the spare bin beside the entrance. I waited impatiently for him to figure out how to put on the leg pads, tapping my foot in the dust.

Trainer Ross was standing in the middle of the vast field with her clipboard. She was a broad-shouldered woman who towered over me and kept her silvery hair tied back in a plaited bun.

After checking us both in, she eyed me severely before she turned on her heel and stalked away.

Val shuffled over to me, looking quite uncomfortable. He looked around and past me as if he were searching for something.

"Your aircraft?" He asked, perplexed. He peered at me suspiciously before he slipped his tinted flight goggles on.

I couldn't help but chuckle. "Come on, I'll show you where I store it."

I took him to the stables.

Val's brows furrowed as he tried to form words. "You.....you all ride dragons? I was not thinking you rode these beasts--"

"Hey, don't call him that." I snapped. "His name is Nino. And no, I'm only one of three dragon-riders in the program. Don't be shy."

I took Val's hand and steered him to meet my Fireback dragon. He was sleek, one of the smaller breeds--perfect for fast recreational flying.

Val mounted Nino very slowly, almost like he was scared of him. After I mounted, I held tight to the reins and thumped Nino on the side to get him going. His magnificent wings flared and the scales on his neck and back lifted as he took off.

We tore out of the stables and up into the air in record timing. I heard Val screaming as he held onto me for dear life. As we broke into the brilliant light, I eased back on the reins so Nino could ride the wind currents.

"You can look now."

"You do this for fun?" He looked slightly queasy for a moment and I found myself hoping that he was smart enough to not vomit on me. "That was horrific."



"It always is the first time." I paused. "At least I don't use magical suspension. Your guts don't know where to go when that happens."

My eyes were closed and the breeze was tousling my hair. When I opened my eyes, all that could be seen were white, fluffy clouds for miles that were bathed in a soft light.

"You mentioned they do not only ride dragons?"

"Yes. Magical suspension, as I mentioned." I rubbed the blue scales on Nino's side, listening to him purr. "You can fly on brooms, pegasus, machines of sort, and other creatures with wings, magical or not. If you can, you can manipulate air currents, I've even seen water currents used in flight. Some people with the ability to teleport use a technique that makes them fly, but it is very precise. You can fly with wings of your own, if you have 'em.

There is no set way to fly, just like there's no set way to live, I suppose."

I look over my shoulder. Val's blue eyes were slightly unfocused in thought.

"You say all of this like it is normal?"

"What, does the mainland not have magic?"

"Not this kind, not this abundant." He tilted his head. "People can grow wings?"

"Sometimes they aren't fully human." I smile. "I've met faeries, harpies, some people who just have feathered wings growing out of their backs that aren't any of those I've just mentioned. I've seen humanoid moth hybrids, hummingbird hybrids, and some tamer pixie breeds sometimes fly with us."

Val grinned as he stroked Nino's blue scales absentmindedly.

Val looked around at the tops of the clouds, smiling serenely. Then, he whispered, "Anyone can fly?" And he turned his head back to look at me.

I felt my lips stretch into a wide grin and I nodded.  
"Anyone can fly."

# 1ST PLACE

## “OH BROTHER”

By **Amara Nwankwo**, Montgomery Virtual Academy  
Montgomery County Literacy Association

If you had asked me how I felt about him eight years ago, I would have suggested dropping him off at the nearest orphanage. With his pumpkin-like head, small eyes, and ashy lips that always had spit drooling over them, who would want to keep him? Besides, the four of us were perfect and complete. I didn't see the purpose in having a brother. I surely didn't want one either; all the care, love, and attention a baby required seemed too great for a person so tiny. Changing diapers and listening to hours of crying was not something I was looking forward to either. It was always me and my sister; We were the perfect duo, so the thought of adding a baby brother to the equation often disgusted me.

Bright, golden rays heat my skin as they shine through the open window. Chips of white paint from the windowsill attach to my fingertips as my nose consumes the fresh morning air. I relish the stillness and—"Oh, God, it's happening!" Mom's urgent voice pierces through the peaceful morning. I glance over to the red couch, and suddenly her face twists into a mixture of pain and panic.

"Mom, are you okay?" I ask, walking quickly to her.

"No!" Her cold hand grips my arm and her long nails create tiny dents in my skin.

"What's wrong?"

"The contractions have started! Oh, my Lord!" Witnessing her so pained was unusual and unsettling. Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. "Honey, the contractions started," she yells to my father, who emerges from the hallway and rushes to help her up from our couch. In the kitchen, my younger sister, who was in the middle of making a bowl of cereal, peeks into the living room to see what all the commotion is about. I look up at the blue clock on our wall to see that it reads 10:12 a.m. Dad slowly leads my mom to the entryway, where she slips on pink slippers that match her knee-length pink dress, while he digs inside his backpack for his car keys.

"It's time," Dad grins. My lips stay in a straight line and my brows furrow, knowing that when we return, we'll return with another human being who will be the wrinkle in our perfect family. I put on my black sneakers, unlike my sister who slides on her green sandals; it's July, but I accurately predict the hospital would blast their air conditioning. "Get that bag," he yells at the two of us, his pointing finger motioning behind us. Behind us, a large, burgundy bag sits in a lonely corner of the living room. My sister and I place both our hands on each handle and lift the bag. We dismiss the aching and twitching in our muscles and haul the bag behind our parents as we hurry out the door. As Dad locks up, I realize the next time we return, our family will have grown to five.

Two hours later, the four of us return home. "Ridiculous!" Mom waddles to the couch and plops down

in a huff. "The audacity to say I'm not ready to be admitted into labor!" As she fumes, the three of us put the hospital bag back, take off our shoes, and sit down.

"I can't believe they sent us back," Dad says incredulously.

"I thought this was it," a crack in mom's voice manages to slip out.

The doctor, who examined her contractions and asserted they weren't far apart enough to admit her into labor, insisted we go back home. My sister sits on the couch, silently, playing with the loose thread on her black shirt. Everyone is silent. What was to be done at this point was unclear to me, but I wasn't exactly upset at the fact that my soon-to-be brother had not arrived yet. Grabbing my coloring book off the floor, I attempt to kill time. Dad returns to his desk, and my mom and sister continue to lounge. Thirty minutes pass and Mom, craving a cookie, heads to the kitchen, but instead of munching, I hear water leaking, then a shriek. "My water broke! My water broke!" I drop my coloring book and, along with my sister, dash to the kitchen to find a puddle of water on our hardwood floor. Mom's hands clutch our white countertops as she cries, "Quick, go get Dad! We need to get to the hospital!" I rush over to my dad's desk, almost tripping over my coloring book.

"Dad, Mom's water broke. She says we need to go now!" He jumps up from his brown chair and hurries over to her. Carefully, he helps her to the entryway, where she slips on her pink slippers again.

"Don't forget the bag!" I sigh and grab the bag, rolling my eyes at having to repeat everything. "In and out,

in and out," Dad encourages from the car as we speed towards the hospital. Mom takes deep breaths, urging Dad to drive faster in between each one. Within twenty minutes, we arrive at the hospital parking lot. Together, we assist Mom into the building, where a receptionist instantly calls for a doctor upon seeing us. Three middle-aged doctors arrive and ask Mom to lie down on the stretcher one of them is rolling. She complies, and I see a look of relief on her face before they wheel her away into the delivery room. The receptionist, young and dressed in a black shirt and pants with white sneakers, guides us to the waiting room. There, we sit in a row of blue chairs near a table filled with magazines, kiddy games, and toys. I look up at the high, white ceilings and ponder about the changes that are bound to occur with a baby in the house. My dad's foot, which taps against the glossy floor rapidly, pulls me away from my thoughts.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Yeah, I just want everything to go smoothly."

"Everything will be fine."

"I hope Mom's okay too. She looked so pained, and we all know she has a high tolerance."

He was correct, mom could handle a lot of pain, so this baby causing so much suffering was yet another reason why he was burdensome. I get comfortable in my chair and wait. Ten minutes pass, then twenty, then sixty. My eyelids feel heavy and soon all I see is pitch black.

Suddenly, a hand violently shaking me disrupts my nap. Groggily looking around, I see my dad and sister standing up near a doctor, who says, "Yes, you can go in

now." I stand up and look over in the corner at the huge clock, it's 11 pm.

"Let's go meet your brother," my dad says, with enthusiasm I cannot reciprocate.

When I walked into the room, I wasn't sure what to expect, but a small, white, ashy alien was not it. I gazed at him with curious eyes, wondering what this peculiar creature was. He cried and spat, wriggling around in a clear box, while my sister and I watched with blank expressions. We exchanged a look, our eyes communicating with each other. Meanwhile, four nurses hovered over him, monitoring his pulse, blood pressure, and temperature. Nothing about his appearance or presence seemed to impress me, but the nurses constantly checked and watched him until he was swaddled in a blue blanket with a little white hat, in my mom's arms. As I approach her, I take in the little boy in her arms.

"Do you want to hold him?" mom asks. Although initially reluctant to touch or hold him, I agree and sit on the hospital bed. She gently placed him in my arms and for a moment I was looking at the most innocent, fragile being. His body was so tiny, and I could see his little chest rise and fall with each breath he took. I acknowledged for the first time that I was his big sister, and he was my little brother.

After eight years, the innocent boy I once held is no longer as cute and innocent. "Did you take my markers?"

"No," he says as a sly smirk creeps on his face.

"You're a terrible liar. We talked about this: you have to ask before taking things!"

"I didn't take your markers, I swear!" I scan his desk and spot a green one casually lying there.

"Mmmhmm, then what's this?" He diverts my eyes and remains silent. Two days prior, I had just lectured him about taking things after he took my stuffed animals and hid them. "Stop taking my stuff, I'm serious!" I grab all the markers I see on his desk and the floor and storm back to my room. A few minutes later, the door to my room squeaks open, and he shyly peeks in. "What do you want, Nnamdi?"

"I'm sorry for taking your markers, but I only wanted them to draw this picture." He holds up a drawing of our entire family holding hands. Drawn in blue marker is my dad, mom, me, him, and my sister with a title above that reads "My family." "I just wanted to finish coloring the faces."

"I love the drawing, but you still have to ask." He nods in agreement. "Alright, you can use my markers, but return them once you're done."

"Thank you! I promise to bring them back!" He grabs as many markers as he can off my desk and runs back to his own. I sigh, with his adorable smile and kind heart, who wouldn't want to keep him?



## 2ND PLACE

---

# “THE DOWNFALL OF THE OBELISK OF LIGHT”

By **Esther Harbin**, Frederick High  
Frederick County Literacy Chapter

I love the woods.

The two weeks that I spend in my friend's cabin are arguably my favorite time of year.

That is mostly because of the walks.

We have been taking midnight walks since we were tall enough to unlock the front door and not get caught sneaking out.

It is scary but in the best way. It feels safe. We have learned every sound, and that none of them will harm us. We have explored almost every corner

Except for the park.

We had been making up stories since our parents had to accompany us. Mum told me that they used to take us there before it closed, but none of us remember it. Marc had been so scared of it when we were younger, that it became a sort of like a game for me and our Mirela, to make up stories about why it closed to scare him. My go-to had always been axe murderers and it had become a running joke in my family whenever one of us went somewhere not to get axe murdered.

But now we are bigger and braver, and I had spent the past year cultivating a fascination with old abandoned theme parks.

So when the clock struck 12 we were already on the trail to the park.

"This must have been nice, back when the park was open." Mirela's even voice cut through my thoughts. It was beyond me how she looked so laid back, but she was the oldest and bravest of the group.

"Less scary too I bet." Marc clung to my arm and I could feel the goosebumps where his skin touched mine. I shoved him playfully, trying to distract him from his obvious terror. That boy needs to lighten up a little.

"It's the same forest it's always been Marky, and we've survived this long." He muttered something about an uptick in local axe murderers, drawing a small giggle from me. "Actually the park closed because of financial reasons-" "That we know offff" Mirela wiggled her hands in the universal symbol for "spooky ghost oooh scary".

The gate loomed over us as we attempted to (probably) illegally break into the park. Pulling on the chain, it proved to be locked. Fortunately, the fence was easy to climb. "Seriously, if they didn't want anyone getting in they should have gotten a less easy to climb fence!" Mirela threw her hands in the air, accidentally hitting Marc in the face "Hey!" Marc pouted as he tried to hide his exhaustion. He wasn't really a fan of exercise. I handed him a bottle of water "We should probably rest a bit. Listen for axe murderers I think." The other two agreed.

The park was beautiful in a way that only abandoned places can be. Dark and derelict. It was surprisingly big for what I had assumed was a kiddie park. Surprisingly, it had been really hard to find any information on it, just a barebones site and a few articles about its closure. It had

closed due to financial problems and had been a mostly kid-focused park, as most of the smaller ones are. It was mostly the standard ones, except for the two roller coasters, Obelisk of Light and The Bluff. The Obelisk of light was pretty unique, being much more compact and tall than most. It was very surprising to me that I had not seen it on any of my abandoned park or roller coaster forums. But that was not something to be concerned about at the moment. The park maps were in the same place they would be when the park was open so I grabbed a few to hang up in my room and share on my forums.

This was my first time in an actual abandoned theme park. Though I lived near many, they were all illegal to break into. Unfortunately, trespassing would get you disqualified from competitions, so I did not plan on passing up this chance to take pictures. The plant life was also starting to overtake the rides. Mirela immediately ran towards the tilt-a-whirl. It was her favorite ride. "Awww Jesse ya gotta take a picture of this for me! It will look so sick in my dorm!" Chuckling, I framed the picture, making sure to get the lighting just perfect. "Of course. Only the best for my best friend." Marc pouted "What am I! Chopped liver?!" I leaned over and gave him a one-armed hug "Awww, you'll always be my second favorite Marky" Seeming contented he opened the map "For that emotional turmoil you just put me through, I think I should get a cool picture too."

Great minds must think alike because he also wanted a picture of a roller coaster. His was the bluff. It had a ride page, so I knew significantly more about it than the Obelisk of Light. The bluff was a wild mouse-style roller coaster, just a lot bigger and made of wood. Overall it looked pretty fun. "I wish there were some some way to get it to work" Marc was leaning over one of the rails that would have kept guests from going under the coaster.

Mirela did the same. She was a lot better at fixing things than either of us "It's technically possible I think? Probably not a good idea tho." I snapped the photo. "Yeah Mirela, what if you get stuck up there and get axe murdered? I'm not saving you if that happens." The other two laughed. I looked back down at my map, locating the Obelisk "Now that we're done getting your *boring* photos, let's go see the Obelisk!"

The other two groaned when they saw that it was across the park but I happily filled the walk with a very detailed history of the park. Up until the Obelisk of light. "It's like all the information disappeared after that!" We stopped in front of the Obelisk. It was huge and utterly beautiful. It didn't have a normal first drop but gradually eased up a hill. Like, one second you would be on the ground, and the next you would be in the air. Amazing. I was midway through my fifteenth picture when Mirela tapped me on the shoulder. "Hey, Jesse? You sure you didn't hear of like, an axe murderer on the roller coaster?" "I um, I don't think so. I feel like at least the local news would have covered that?" We split up, as the coaster was giant. Mirela, an avid lapel pin collector went to the little shop next to it, in search of one. Marc went with her to look for shirts and other cool stuff. I kept taking pictures. That's when I spotted it. A piece of track was pulled up. It looked feeble like the piece sticking up would break if I tugged at it. I wanted it for my collection so badly. The incline was not terrible for a track, enough that stairs were going up the side. I didn't take them tho. When I was a kid, I watched my friends play Assassins Creed and my parents spent the next few months having to stop me from climbing every furniture item I could access. They ended up sticking me in a kiddie parkour class. It remains my favorite sport and I spend most of the time since practicing and scoring 3rd in

the youth unified competition. So I reached the midpoint of the incline easily.

The slope was not all that steep. Maybe it was the excess force from pulling the track or maybe the foot I had lodged under the track had come free, but I fell. It was kind of one of those things that you see on TV where time slows down but not exactly. My life didn't flash before my eyes, all I could think about was that spot of brown. And Memento Mori by Will Wood.

So there I was, falling to my death and vibing to a true masterpiece of music when someone grabbed my foot. They started pulling me up, enough that I could pull myself up the rest of the way.. Sitting on the track and catching my breath I looked up at my savior. He was tall, with large ears and a narrow face, and looked around our age, if not a little younger. It was weirdly... hard to look at him, like he was swirling and slightly faded, but that was probably from the darkness. Unfortunately, my glasses had not been pulled up. But they had been through worse falls than this and been fine.

"Are you okay?" The dude had a pretty deep voice like Marcs was becoming. "Yeah, I'm fine. I've had worse in competitions." That wasn't a complete lie, but there were always medics and people to stop us from getting grievously injured. I decided to change the subject "What are you doing here? I thought we were the only people out here." he looked uncomfortable "I uh... I live in one of the cabins. On the outside of the park." "Oh cool! Me and my friend's families stay in one of the other ones." he smiled. "Yeah, I've seen y'all. Tend to stay near your house." I nodded. "Oh cool, we haven't seen you yet." The conversation paused and I made up my mind. "I'm going to head down now! I probably should head home. So I don't uhhh fall again or something. Top of a roller coaster is a bad place to get axe murdered." He laughed a little.

"Probably a good idea." He seemed to want to say something else, but did not follow me as I started climbing down the roller coaster

When I got to the bottom I shakily headed to the gift shop. "Hey guys. Are you ready to go?" Marc looks back at me, and his expression immediately changed. I guess I looked a lot more shaken than I thought. He elbowed Mirela, and she started shoving the pins she had been looking at into her bag. "Yeah, I'm ready to go" Probably sensing how shaken I was, Marc wrapped his warm arms around me. It felt so nice, I think I almost melted. All the fear was starting to catch up to me and all I wanted was to go home and take a nap.

We left the park almost silently. Mirela tried to strike up a conversation with Marc a few times but it died after the first few sentences. But after a bit, when I was feeling a bit less shaky, we filled the forest with the sounds of our talking. Until we got back "Hey Mirela? Did you leave the door unblocked?" She shook her head slowly, a questioning look on her face. "I um, I dont think so? It's always a possibility tho." I shrugged, opened the door, and made a beeline for our bedroom. The blankets on my bed were warm and inviting. I fell asleep instantly.

The lights were blue

Then red

Then blue again

I blinked open my eyes, feeling a warm, familiar hand on my shoulder and smelling something metallic and wet "What's wrong Mirela?" Her eyes were red. She looked terrified. "We need to leave Jesse. Something happened."

# 1ST PLACE

## “EMPTY”

By **Miranda Martin**, Southern Garrett High  
Western Maryland Literacy Chapter

**T**hey say that from such heights, landing on water feels the same as concrete. I didn't believe it at first but now, my cracked ribs would disagree.

The initial impact of the water was incomparable - The salt stinging my eyes, the slap of the surface instantly numbing my chest, the feeling of my body giving into the water instead of the other way around.

Let's get this straight: I didn't jump. The thought had never actually crossed my mind.

My long, tedious shift took it out of me, draining me of any aspirations I once had. My overthinking was already jumpstarting the inevitable, self-deprecating spiral of 'Why me?'

I think back to my mother and the gentle, yet tired smile she'd put on before coming home to me and my siblings. On the really tough days, she would say "Let's go to the park," in an attempt to distract us from her inability to put up her facade. She'd sit on a close bench to keep an eye on us, yet her eyes showed her in a faraway place as she watched the sunset before rounding us up to go back home.

The sun was already fading into a pale orange when I decided to go for a walk to clear my mind, watch the sunset. I thought of the bridge near my home, picturing the view from such a height. Putting on a cardigan, I set out for the bridge.

The amount of blood trust that people have in bridges is insanely idiotic. Everyone races around without a second thought. They are crossing an ocean, river, train tracks even, on a steel beam that we *pray* was engineered correctly.

Ain't it interesting how people pray for the things we can prevent ourselves?

"I pray that I get an A on my math quiz," God hears from a young boy who hasn't studied at all.

"Lord, I pray we win this big rival game tonight," says the high school quarterback in the locker room after avoiding practice all week.

"Aw man, I pray that this bridge doesn't collapse while I willingly drive across it every day on my commute to work."

In reality, we should replace the word "pray" with "hope." As in, I *hope* I survive this- this what?

I wouldn't call it an attempt. I never wanted to die.

Incident maybe?

Adventure.

I'd call it an adventure.

Not sure if it was the fault of the fog that I suddenly noticed clouding my mind, but something compelled me to step up onto the ledge of the bridge that overlooked the glistening river reflecting the setting sun.



I don't doubt it looked suspicious, the wind rippling through my loose-fitted cardigan, arm moving upwards, perpendicular to my body as if soaking up the energy radiating from the evening sun.

"It's gets better y'know." A voice startles me out of my thoughts of nothingness. "Don't you have dreams? A mother, father, siblings that would be devastated?" the man asks. His ripped and rugged appearance would deter most, but I found the way the late golden sun shone made him appear as an angel.

I look back over the river, whispering, "I wasn't going to jump. Just wandering, lost in thought."

"That's a dangerous place to be. Lost in your own mind, especially where you're standing now." The man softly says, gesturing towards the ledge. "Do you think you're ready to step down?"

He extends his hand towards mine. I hesitantly accept his offer, reaching for his outstretched hand. As I go to step down, the image of the man falters, becoming nearly translucent. I stumble back a step out of shock, losing the little balance I had on the ledge. I reach, yet again, for the man's, now fading, hand in a poor attempt to save myself, only for my hand to pass right through his. My body plunges toward the water below, accompanied by my hope for survival.

The action of flying is scary only because humans are conditioned to fear the landing. The weightlessness is relieving though, as time slows down just enough to become hyper vigilant of everything around you, like your mind wants to take everything in one last time.

Have you ever known the feeling of fighting for your life? The soul-slipping urgency mixed with a split second of regret?

Water rushes up my nose instantly. The freezing temperature numbed away the pain, yet I still feel the burn in my lungs, already begging, screaming for air. My mouth instinctively opens in shock, wanting, needing to scream for someone, anyone, only to be greeted with an overwhelming surge of water.

I used to think that drowning was the worst way to go. You watch in movies how a person fights until they eventually lay slack, slowly sinking toward the bottom. Like they simply give up, ultimately giving themselves to the water.

But when drowning, you don't actually inhale until right before you black out. Scientists call it voluntary apnea. No matter how much you're freaking out, the instinct to not let any water in is so strong that you won't open your mouth until you feel like your head's exploding.

When you do finally let it in, that's when the pain ceases.

The immense pressure in my head becomes too much, then stops. The thoughts that are constantly bickering are now quiet, empty as a bird's nest in December.

There's no panic, but it isn't a calm feeling either.

Maybe understanding?

Acceptance?

No.

Empty.

## 2ND PLACE

---

### “SECRETS”

By **Lydia Schwartz**, Worcester Preparatory  
Eastern Shore Literacy Association

People always have secrets. Sometimes when those secrets emerge, it might not be pretty. Sometimes secrets come out the hard way. But I don't plan on letting my secrets out anytime soon.

“Do you have any secrets?” the girl across from me at the table asked with a playful grin on her face. As she spoke, her glistening brown hair shone in the light like an angel. She soon after sipped her chocolate milkshake, staring into my eyes with wonder and purpose.

I mustered a concealing laugh, “Of course, Jess, everyone has secrets.”

“Oh, come on, Jack, then tell me one,” she pried as if she knew something she wanted me to say.

I leaned my back against the bright velvet-red booth cushion behind me. I reached for a french fry and Jess slapped my hand away, saying “Not until you tell me a secret.”

“If you're looking for any dark secrets I have none. Now let me have a fry.” I replied with a smug grin crossing my face.

“Fine, take your fry and enjoy it like it's your last.”

“Thank you, now I suppose I'll have to ask you the same question.”

"Wow, on a first date and you're asking a question like that. I can't believe you." Jess giggled. I shook my head and laughed. I couldn't believe she just did that.

Jess and I had just met a few days ago at the park. I was reading a book on my favorite bench as the cool breeze blew by because reading outdoors helps me imagine the characters fighting or having fun in front of me.

Then she walked by. I didn't notice her at first, but as I looked around to see why the leaves were being blown so fast I saw her. Yet again, her beautiful, brown hair was draped down her back. Her hazel eyes, warmer than the snow on the ground, luring anyone in like a fireplace on Christmas Eve. I thought that there was no possible way she would ever be interested in me, she's so out of my league.

Then she stopped walking and sat on the seat next to me on the bench. We sat there for a few minutes while I continued to read and she seemed to be interested in the clouds in the sky, almost trying to look through them.

"Excuse me, I couldn't help but notice you reading on this bench. It looked so incredibly peaceful I couldn't help myself from sitting down," she said with a soothing smile. She seemed to stare so deeply into my eyes that it was like she could reach my entire soul. "Don't you wish you could be here forever?"

I looked up from my book and smiled back, "Yes, it is very peaceful here. I come almost every day and sit and listen to the birds while I read. And yeah, I guess it would be nice to never leave." As I spoke I couldn't seem to take my eyes off of her, her beauty simply enamored me like I was staring into the eyes of an angel.

"Well I better get going, but it was great to meet you and maybe we will see each other here again sometime."

She proceeded to stand up and walk away, only getting a few steps before turning around and waving goodbye with a warm smile.

Like clockwork for the next few days, she happened to be walking down the same path in the park as if by some divine luck. Every day she would stop and talk with me until one day I simply asked her if she would like to grab a bite to eat at the local diner. She of course said yes after giving me the most obvious answer with her expression alone.

While at the diner I couldn't stop gazing into her eyes and it seemed as though she was having the same problem as well ever since she walked in.

"Well, are you gonna answer the question or just try to annoy me with your little games?" I asked in response to her clever quip.

Her face then morphed into a face of pure consideration as she thought of the words, "Well, I used to be scared of the dark as a kid, does that count?"

"Yes, it does, but who wasn't scared of the dark as a kid? I know I sure was." I replied, grabbing a french fry and dipping it into my milkshake.

She looked at the french fry dip with confusion that soon morphed into silent inquiry. She then slowly grabbed a fry, stealing one last glance at me, and placed the tip lightly into her milkshake as I did mine. She then reached the fry to her mouth and hesitated before accepting it.

"Wow, that is surprisingly good," she said as her eyebrows lifted in delight at the savory and sweet sensation.

"Don't tell me you haven't tried that before. It's a classic around here. Wow, it's almost like you're not even from Earth if you've never done that," I replied, saddened by the fact that she has had to live twenty two years without that knowledge.

We soon finished up the fries and our shakes with more banter dispersed between quick sweet and savory bites.

"Well thank you for having lunch with me, Jess. I have thoroughly enjoyed your company and I hope to do this some other time if it fits into your schedule," I said, hoping to elicit more date plans from her.

"Oh, of course. We will have to do this again sometime. I'm sure we will see each other again when the time is right," she said with a giggle of excitement at the thought of another date.

The next day, after waking up in my studio apartment, I decided to go to the cafe down the street and grab a morning coffee before work. As I put my shoes on I couldn't get Jess out of my head.

It was a cold December morning that day and I could not wait for the warm coffee to jumpstart my morning.

After entering the coffee shop, I walked up to the counter where you order and said to the woman working there, "Good morning, could I just get a nice hot black coffee?"

From behind the barista that took my order, I heard my name being yelled.

"Jack? Is that you?" The voice called out.

I looked up past the barista and saw a familiar head of dark brown hair and bright, hazel eyes staring at me. "Jess? I didn't know you worked here."

"Yeah, I've been working here for a few days and it's perfect because the location is really convenient and just down the street from my other job," she said with the happiest grin of all time. "My shift ends in about 10 minutes if you wanna wait around and do something after."

"Of course, I would love that," I said as I grabbed my coffee and sat at a high-top table by the window looking out over the busy street. As I sat waiting for Jess to finish working I couldn't help but look at her the entire time with what I can only assume was the largest smile I've ever mustered. There was something about her that was just perfect. She was so beautiful that it seemed like she didn't even belong here.

She had just finished working and was walking over towards my table with her eyes meeting mine the whole time.

"Hey, can we go somewhere really important? You know, since we've known each other for some time now," she said without hesitation.

I was slightly taken aback by her assertiveness, but I wasn't going to say no to something that was important to her, so I muttered, "Okay... is everything okay?" I thought to myself what other job she had that was a few blocks away from the cafe.

"Yes, of course, just follow me."

We walked for a few blocks, hand in hand, until we reached our destination. With every step, her grip on my hand loosened until it seemed as though she had almost let go. I could sense her breath being sucked out of her as we approached a park.

In the park was a large fenced area that housed rows upon rows of headstones etched with names, initials, and dates. Once we reached the gate, Jess fully let go of my hand and turned to face me.

"I have been meaning to bring you here to show you something," as she spoke the gate slowly opened to the graveyard. She walked towards the largest of the two headstones towards the back with me in tow.

"Do you have family here?" I asked, hoping to reach for something for us to connect on here.

"Unfortunately, yes. My parents are buried here and I wanted you to be here with me," she replied with a solemn, monotone voice.

"My parents lie under the two large headstones at the back of the graveyard," I said, pointing towards the back of the graveyard.

"I know Jack, and I'm sorry."

I stopped dead in my tracks. "What do you mean? You know my parents are buried here?"

"Jack, I'm here to bring you to them. You've known it all along you just needed to open your eyes." She stopped walking and turned to face me. "Open your eyes."

At that moment, the Jess I once knew was gone. She began to illuminate with a bright light as she stepped aside to usher me towards the graves of my parents.

As I approached the two large gravestones, a third stone grew from the ground next to them. On the face of the headstone, etchings began to appear, reading "Jack Fallow; January 14, 2000 – December 3, 2023."

I turned around to see Jess standing in the middle of the pathway, glistening brown hair draped over angelic, white wings, spread far across my view.

"Jack Fallow, I came here to guide you. You can read on your bench forever now, just let me take you."

"And will you sit by me, staring through the clouds"

"Of course, Jack."

If everyone is supposed to have their secrets, then I guess I never knew mine all along.



# 1ST PLACE

## “PARAGON”

By **Sara Patamawenu**, Urbana High  
Frederick County Literacy Chapter

**A**s the distinct sound of its footfalls flood the house, I begin to run. It’s no use, of course; Time always manages to catch up. I’ve been apprenticed to it for nearly a year now and still haven’t uncovered its secrets—where does it dwell during the day? Who else does it haunt? And how does it always evade me?

I round a corner, skidding to a stop as its silhouette materializes in the kitchen. Though I expected it to beat me there, its appearance still sent my pulse spiking. Time is an entity of smoke and stars assuming a humanoid form (to make me more comfortable, it says; it doesn’t) whose shadowy contour dances like vapor escaping water and whose eyes embody flame leaking from coal. Who now looms over me, a frosty package pinched between its tendrils fingers. Its voice emerges as a baleful drawl.

“Forgot to thaw the chicken again, did we?”

“I’m sorry, I-”

“This will cost you, child.”

It lifts its fingers to the crown of its watch and before I know it, my hand shoots out, stilling its wrist. I immediately retract it, my widening eyes darting upward to meet Time’s narrowing gaze.

“Careful,” it grates.

I shrink away. “I’m sorry.”

"Two deductions. Continue with the list, then fix dinner once the chicken thaws." Its crevice of a mouth parts greedily. "I'm ravenous."

I cringe as Time adjusts its watch and floats away like nothing happened. Did I say I was its apprentice? Let me rephrase: I'm a prisoner of Time. My world is dominated by clocks, my only thoughts comprising "on-the-clock" and "around-the-clock." Work is my life; it consumes me, and if I don't complete my duties, so will Time. I've never been told what the deductions are for, but I suppose it's that—a countdown to my expiration date.

Burdens swim in my mind as I open the door to Time's study. It took months to learn to navigate the house's illogically serpentine corridors and enchanted staircases that relocated every other day. It's utter chaos, and it makes my job—completing a lengthy list of tasks each day—insufferable. As I lean on the study's doorway, I read the newest oddity on today's list: *Adjust study chair*.

"What am I supposed to do?" I mutter, circling Time's gargantuan wooden desk. The armchair behind it looks fine, if not slightly drab. "Make it comfortable?" I retrieve a pillow from the bay window and plop it on the chair. "That good? Should I test it?"

No sooner do I sit down than I am pulled into sleep—but I'm not *completely* asleep. I'm conscious of the blank space unfolding before me, the deafening silence accompanying the empty air, and the hitch in my breath as I realize there's nothing solid beneath me.

*You're in the study*, I think, attempting to ground myself. I cautiously open my eyes, and immediately, the ghost of the study floor begins blooming under my feet. "You're in the study," I say aloud, and the floor solidifies. As I try recalling the rest of the room, walls rise from the

ground, furnished with tall shelves lined with tomes and trinkets. A faded rug unfurls beneath a dusty chandelier, and the smell of oak populates the air. This is the study, alright. *But you're not in the study*, I remind myself.

I imagine the floors shinier, the books more vibrant, the room more loved. Warmth washes over every surface, and sunlight filters through crystal-clear windows. *This is a place I'd be happy in*, not Time's decorated stockade.

"Shoot, Time!" I gasp, bolting awake.

Minutes later, I plate some now-cooked chicken for dinner while questioning my sanity. "You've discovered the mindscape," a voice suddenly chirps behind me. It doesn't surprise me, even though I was alone in the kitchen only moments ago.

I turn around, setting a plate of steaming chicken and rice on the table before a chair that was empty seconds earlier. Drowning the dish in buttery tomato sauce, I ask Time, "What exactly *is* the Mindscape?"

"Put simply? Your imagination. Try hard enough, and it can manifest into reality." "So I can dream up a new reality?"

Time rolls its eyes. "I've no patience for dreamers. I said *try*. Dreaming can inspire the process, but work must be exerted to achieve results."

Work, I huff inwardly. My life revolves around it thanks to this ludicrous "apprenticeship."

"It's about finding balance," Time continues, munching on its dinner. "Generating ambitious dreams without acting on them can overwhelm you. Actually addressing them-*that's* satiating."

"How does one find balance?" I ask, detecting an edge in my voice.

"You lack motivation," Time answers, waving its fork at me. "Set your goals, and you'll find direction."

*A goal?* Well, that's easy—I want to get out of here. The thing about working for Time is that nothing's certain: the job, the stress, the ending. You cross the threshold of neglected responsibilities one day and spend the remainder of your life trying to amend them. Unless I can find a loophole, I'm trapped.

Time considers me over its near-empty plate. "Child, you know why you're here." Of course I do. I'm serving Time as punishment for trying to cheat it. For failing to keep promises on a deadline. For trying to do what it just told me not to.

"Shortcuts aren't necessarily the best option. You stray from the path, and you miss the main event: the lesson." With a final sweep of chicken into its mouth, Time vaporizes into thin air, leaving me with the weight of its words.

*As if I don't have enough to worry about,* I brood. But later that night, I lie in bed, slipping into the mindscape; it's as I left it, warm and inviting. I open the study door to an empty space where the hallway should be. If the mindscape is to be my safe space from the chaos of Time's domain, I may as well become its architect. In place of familiar gloomy gray walls, I conjure up lemon-colored ones blanketed by framed photographs. The hallway gets expanded into the loft, where I replace dull carpeted floors with polished wood and brighten corners with eccentric lights. Cobwebs are cleared from stained glass windows, and antique side tables are dusted to perfection. I've just approached the first moving staircase when my clock tolls to wake me.

I feel oddly energized as I work through the morning. Time must notice because it comments over the raspberry pancakes I've made for breakfast.

"Did you explore the mindscape last night?"

"I did," I respond, drizzling honey over the plate. Time's eyes sparkle in delight, and it begins wolfing down the food.

"What'd you do?"

"I reimagined the house. Tried the walls in a different color and furniture in a different arrangement."

"How'd you like it?"

"It was nice," I admit. "I enjoyed it."

"Wonderful," Time says between chews. "What's your next step?"

"I want to fix the staircases in place, but I'm unsure—"

"I'll help with that," says Time, an upturned gap forming in the smoke of its face—a smile? "Keep up the good work."

With that, Time disappears, today's task list materializing in its place. I catch the list midair, focusing not on the magnitude of its contents but rather on Time's parting words. What'd it mean by helping? Eager to find out, I complete my tasks one-by-one and am actually left with more than enough time to enter the mindscape.

In real life, the staircases come and go. In the mindscape, they've become stagnant, fixed along the hallways in optimal positions common to a normal house. I have enough time to reimagine the faded stair runners refurbished, their oriental patterns as vibrant as new thread. When I awake and leave my room for dinner, I'm surprised to find the staircases in the same positions I imagined them in. Or maybe I didn't imagine them at all—maybe Time did the work for me.

"How'd you freeze the staircases?" I ask it, setting down creamy mushroom soup at the table.

"I can't reveal all my secrets," it quips as I sprinkle chopped chives over the bowl. "Tell me, don't you enjoy designing your own world?"

"My own world," I murmur, nodding.

"Will you name it?"

I consider this. The world I've imagined is tailored to my personality, dictated by my preferences and existing to make me happy. To me, it's absolutely ideal. "Paragon," I finally say. "I'll call it Paragon."

"Excellent name," Time nods. "Now, wouldn't it be even more excellent if it existed outside your head? If you could actually live in it?"

"What do you mean?"

Time leans across the table toward me, its body moving as fluidly as sand flowing in an hourglass. "This, child, is where you act on your dreams. Don't let them waste away in your mind. Allow yourself to explore their true potential."

I blink at the shadowy mass before me. "Thank you," I say, "for your help." Time smiles. "You're welcome. Don't let your pride dissuade you from asking for help—that's a good mentor's calling." It seems to hesitate before adding, "And you don't have to vilify me; work with me. We can be friends."

*Friends with Time*, I muse, watching it extend a hand to me. Cautiously, I take it, expecting an icy sensation and instead feeling a warm pulse. We shake awkwardly. "Thank you for dinner," it rasps. "Rest up. You've earned it."

"I will," I nod. "Thank you."

Time disappears again, and I make good on my promise by going to bed early. Instead of experimenting in

the mindscape that night, I make a plan the following morning to bring my visions to life. I budget out my time between completing my task list and fixing up the house, spacing out my responsibilities so that I'm not overwhelmed. Over the next few days, everything starts coalescing: furniture is polished, windows are scrubbed, new decorations are hung. Even the daily tasks don't seem as daunting. I've finally found a productive flow and am being rewarded with the feeling of satisfaction.

"So this is Paragon," Time observes as it floats through the house some time later. "It's colorful."

"It's happy," I beam.

Time tenses before the front door in my newly-renovated foyer, now hosting antique showpieces and the subtle smell of lemon emanating from polished furniture. "You've found a balance, then? One that brings you peace?"

"...I suppose."

Time relaxes. "Then my work here is done."

I blink. "What?"

"It was never my intention to imprison you, child," Time sighs. "It was to teach you. To make you wiser. Now that you've found your way, I need not worry about you anymore. And you need not worry about me."

"Wait, you're leaving?"

Time reaches for my hands, pressing them gently between its smoke. "I will always be with you, the same way I am with everyone else. Just not as an imposing figure. Don't forget me, but don't let me hinder your ambitions. I simply wanted to provide you with a safe space to explore them."

Unable to find the words, I just nod.

"I'm proud of you," Time continues. "And as a reward for your efforts, I leave you this house. And this—"

It turns over my hand, placing its watch in my palm. The very watch it was slowly killing me with.

"The deductions never did anything, by the way. But sometimes people work better under pressure," it chuckles.

"That's mean," is the only thing I can think to say.

"Maybe so, but it taught you a well-needed lesson." Time pats my shoulder the same way a parent would praise their child. "You've found your Paragon," it beams. "Now I can help someone else find theirs."

We share a final look of understanding before Time disappears, this time not spontaneously but through the front door. As the weight of its presence fades, I begin to run—this time in joy. Toward a new life. Toward freedom.



## 2ND PLACE

---

### “HALLOW HOME”

By **Chris Stedding**, Stephen Decatur High  
Eastern Shore Literacy Association

The neighborhood seems so lost and cold as I roll down it in my 2004 Toyota, the leather seats hard against my back as the wheels brought me further to the *Hallow House*. My mother always told me to lose the name I assigned it. She felt it was too depressing for a child to feel so strongly against such a *horrid* structure. Mom always thought the house was a place of love and family, not the negative feelings I had.

But I know better than to not call it what it was. *Hallow. That is all this will ever be.* My Toyota creeps to a halt outside the the path, now broken and gravelly, leading to the house. My heart clambers in my throat, my hands grip the steering wheel tighter.

The house was my childhood home. My parents wanted to buy something that was good for three but close to school. I shut off my engine and step out of the car. The cool October air hits me with a relaxing breeze.

The place is a small one-story house, the porch at the front smiling wide and welcoming. But the two-side windows glare into my soul. They peer into my heart and read my thoughts. *No, I am here to grab a few belongings and leave.* I slowly walk up the steps, the pavement turning to gravel under my feet. I can feel the groves and cracks as

I walk. I look to the yard, once lush and beautiful. Now merged with the decay of the foundation itself.

*Mom is running around with my toy wagon, pulling it behind her as I cried out in glee. Her caring smile hitting me with so much love and protection. We circle the old oak tree, lush full of orange leaves and turn the corner, disappearing from sight.* The tree stands dead, alone in the evening dusk, waiting for its friends to return. *Don't worry little oak, I will be here til the end.* The bushes that line the walk are so lush in stature. The leaves flowing in the breeze the closer I get to the porch. Each bush becoming more hallow and unfamiliar than the last. The leaves now fallen crunch under my feet. Each step personified with my every movement.

*Crunch....* He's arrived,

*Crunch....* what is he doing here?

*Crunch....* where does he go next?

I reach the steps, some sunken in from rain and rot. *The wood stained with blood from when I scrapped my knee. My father in the door, rushing over to me as if I'm near death. Cuddling and nurturing me til Mom can get a bandage. Their faint words fade off as I reach the front stoop.* My hands quiver in the thoughts of what is behind this door. The glass once so bright and vivid, from when we did that stain glass portraits of us three, now boarded and shattered. I only to remain intact. The doorknob rots away, barricading me from the hush whispers inside. I give the door one mighty *umph* before it finally budes. The gusts of nature's whispers follow me inside, gossiping about what's to come. *The sight of our living hits me first, calling on my mind like mother did when I sat and watch football with father. He has a beer in one hand and a bag of chips on the floor. Mom calls me to help with dinner, but I'm captivated by the evenings match.* Her voice fills my ears as

the memory fades, my joy follows its example. The room has the same couch there, now turned over with some foliage finding refuge from the bitter outside. Only to perish here as well.

The television is no more as father and Mom must have taken it long ago. The faint spot where it used to sit now is a hallow reminder of old memories. The walls are still pastel blue with white trim. Mother chose it so well. The wood floorboards creak under my weight. I reach for my flashlight in my coat pocket. I search for a light switch for so long it feels like an eternity, the whispers beckoning me to stop. The small beam of it calling for the creeping whispers to fade, to lurk back into shadows where it belongs. Once the lights engulf this place in pure white, my mind lets loose the dam that held my mind together.

The whispers of nature flood out, scared by the revealed truth. It lingers on the outside waiting for the next hint of words to be spoken. You will try harder than that to peer and spy on what was once here. The truth is not worth the story it will unveil.

The kitchen follows to my left, the dining table now empty like where the television sat. It's faded color of constant reminder of missing pieces. Only fathers chair left in its spot. Head of the table with his name engraved in the top corner, mine engraved in the left. I make my way past his chair, a cursed reminder of gone. The entry of the kitchen, *the counter where Mom wipes my face of dirt after my soccer games. Her sweet smile washing me with all the care I needed.* I reach for the light switch, shedding light on the former room of love.

The fridge is next to me, the metal dented from father's rage. *He always gets worked up about his matches. He runs to the fridge to grab another sorrow before either mom, or I could stop him. Though we are nowhere near father, Mom creates her games...* I search the fridge for

anything that is worth saving, only to find fathers sorrows and rancid meats left forgotten. I slam the door shut and move to the cupboards. The first of the four chained and bolted shut, hiding what mom never wanted her child to see. The others lay barren with one completely destroyed. The sink is full of old, dirty water rotting the metal away. The window above only reflecting the broken back.

I depart the kitchen, it's lies and rumors spread like a disease. The whispers of nature carrying them up and away, swallowing them as if to be truth. I always dislike the whispers; they never were true and always taken as fact! I hear them in my ear from time to time. As I pass through the entry way, I hear the faint sound. A misinformed truth corrupted by the other facts. Bleeding it's way to other's cores, to incubate there for decades to come. The living room window now bared with wooden bars. Trying so hard to keep the broken hidden within, only to fail at holding back the wind.

I make my way down the hallways, each painting etching the rancid paint behind it stained. The paint chips down and reveals the horridness underneath, the pastel replaced by red, maroon. The previous attire this home wore. The painting and photos feel new, replaced before I arrived. All have the main common ground: I am not among the ones to be hung. To be displayed on this proud wall, *"the ones who had guts to make it through"* my father boasts. *His sorrows now in one hand, his venom in his words. He never means what his says mom adds when she hears my sobs.* I tear at the terrible, horrible reminder of my father's pride. His old lies creeping through the cracked frame and into my fists.

*Father really prized his wall; he hangs a photo of every neighborhood kid's achievement for their parents. Each kid hangs their own, running over to our house and through the back door to the wall. Mom sees no harm in it,*

*she is head of neighborhood watch after all. The photo hits the ground, shattering glass over my shoes and into each grove of the floorboards. I pass the doors locked shut, the hinges refusing to release its hold on the room, hijacking's and kidnapping the room. Never to be released again. Doesn't matter to me, my parent's room is off limits. I just continue my silent march toward what is my room. The wooden door etching up toward the now set sun. The wood is stained with dirt and damage. Doorknob turning silver from age, also bash in toward the inside. *Father's sorrows were a thing all adults have. Mom says. Everyone has sorrows but some lose sight of what matters.**

I try and pry my old door open, releasing the house's hold on my memories. The door screams for solitude. Not to be bothered by any man or creature. But I am no man, no creature. I am the welder of this room; I etched my name into its wood. Each letter my mother chooses specially for me.

C, how Caring I will be.

A, all the Awesome friends I'll inspire.

R, for the massive Rampage I was as a child,

T, for the Time I will spend in her life,

E, for the Enjoyment I will bring,

R, and finally the Respect I will have toward everyone.

The room was exactly how I remember. The bed was in the right corner, the sheets gone, and the mattress stained. The carpet was molded and the desk *I sat at with my homework, always getting yelled at by father for playing games instead of homework.* The desk now is broken down and in pieces. I rub my hand across my name engraved on the door, tracing the letters. I look around the room for my belongings. Mom said she left it on the table, that was years ago. *When I left for college. Mom shut this down.*

*Father was angry about losing his house, calling it our home and his retirement.*

My old toys lay across the floor, each one ready for its next performance. Some missing limbs while others are in prestige condition. *I always told stories through them, mom watching sometime from the boundaries I keep her at. Always letting my toys tell of fancies and magical rides, hoping maybe I could truly join them in this make-believe world they only breathe in.* The toys now lay limp. The years of imagination drained from their unique frames of plastic molded into something they never wanted to be. Sometimes I would save them, but here they are too far gone. Shackled to this place just like me. Ready for the next curtain call, rising to do another performance. My bag lays in the center of their circle. It entices me to retrieve it and leave. I know I should, but the whispers are in the windows. Breathing only so quiet outside. Wanting me to speak, utter anything they can use. I can't stay here any longer. The whispers plus memories will only enforce the shackles I have. If I truly want to see a new future, I must leave this place behind.

Then the whispers grew louder. They scream for truth and answers. Words to be spoken from my cursed lips.

"I will not entertain your lies! I will not entertain your judgement!" I cry from my voice, quivering and shaken. *Father rushes into my room. Sees me telling tales of a story I've sewn. His sorrows bleed from his lips like lava. Ready to decimate all in his way. I imagine my toy taking him away, stripping him of his sorrows and shame. Rewriting who he was into something new, something better.* Father deserves better. The memories bleed onto the floor and under the bed. Hiding there forever. I reach for my bag, the toys reaching for it to remain. Like they want me to stay here. Be like father in every way. I. Am. Not. My. Father. I place the

bag down and remove each person from the room, leaving them just outside my boundaries. This is where the past will stay. Out of this room. In the halls of despair.