2020 Contest Anthology

Celebrating Maryland’s

Young Authors

48th Annual Conference
Acknowledgements

It is SoMLA’s privilege to have worked with all participants— the writers, most importantly-- in the 2019-20 Young Authors’ Contest. After reviewing each child’s entry, the judging panels identified as the state winners the top two submissions in each category and at each grade level. It is with pride that SoMLA now presents this body of work representing some of the best young Maryland poets and storytellers. And, it is with special pride that SoMLA welcomes for the first time 1st grade winners in both categories!

We congratulate first and foremost all involved in the initial crafting and submission of each poem and short story. Students, your entries made us smile, made us tearful sometimes, and often just made us pause to consider the world around us. Parents and teachers, your guidance, support, and instruction to these exceptional young people surely helped to develop their abilities and confidence as writers and as a consequence, helped to propel them to this level of recognition. Your behind-the-scenes advocacy is recognized.

We honor, too, all judges-- local and state-- involved in the process. Your devotion of hours of energy and personal time to this cause is humbly acknowledged. Recognition of the writing of young ladies and gentlemen from across the state simply would not be possible without your efforts.

SoMLA vigorously thanks all local chapters’ Young Authors’ Contest chairpersons and their committee members. These people voluntarily got their local contests off the ground, saw the process through to their judges’ decisions, and in many cases, offered celebratory events of their own. We applaud your dedication to providing opportunities for students to write beyond their regular school audiences and to be recognized for having done so.

Finally, to guest authors Duane Abel and Casey Cep, we appreciate your serving as models for innovative writing and for sharing your experiences as published authors. Perhaps someday you will share your stage with the young people in your audience today.

Sandy Thrappas & Rachele Corpuz  
Co-Chairs, Young Authors’ Contest  
Elementary & Middle Schools, Grades 1-8

Leslie Sunderland  
Chair, Young Authors’ Contest  
High School, Grades 9-12
State of Maryland Literacy Association
2019–2020 Officers

Chair
Lisa Lowe

Chair-Elect
Shirley W. Faulkner

1st Vice Chair
Michelle Shreeves

Immediate Past Chair
Natalie Stephenson

Recording Secretary
Jennifer Osborne

Corresponding Secretary
Chelley Corpuz

Treasurer
Rita Gaudiello

Membership Director
Ann Apple

State Coordinator
Mary Lou Nelson

Conference Coordinator
Gayle Glick
Poetry
MERMAID DAY

There was a mermaid swimming in the sea as happy as can be.

Then a scary storm came by, which made her shiver and cry.

She wanted to get home to her mother and father, so she flapped her tail quickly to move through the water.

When she found them her mother said, “don’t cry my dear, there is nothing to fear.”

Her father told her, “storms don’t last very long. You just have to be brave and strong.”

They swam to the surface and looked into the sky. Where they saw a beautiful rainbow way up high.

The mermaid started to swim and play, because it turned out to be a wonderful day!
WINTER

Will it rain or will it snow?
I am not in winter so I don’t know.
Will it be sunny or will it not?
In the winter it is snowy but in the summer it is hot.
In the winter it is cold, so you know there will be hot cocoa sold!
The sun makes the snow melt away, and the snowplow will not stay.
Winter won’t you come back to play?
WHERE I’M FROM

I am from a wild, crazy, ADHD mind,
sometimes in a different world.
I’m different from everyone else.
I’m from American Girl dolls
and an older brother.
I’m from a messy room in
a joyful house.
I’m from a swatty cat that
hits the indiglo button on Mom’s alarm clock
when it’s too early.
I’m from emojis and youtube.
I’m from the dance floor, the track, and the gymnastics mat,
from spotlights and everyone screaming my name.
I’m from traveling to places in planes,
from waterfalls and learning languages.
I’m from creativity,
the color yellow,
and lots of anxieties.
I’m from fears of
zombies, murderers,
mannequins, fires,
and dying.
I’m from dreaming of being a doctor because
I love crutches and wheelchairs and blood.
I’m from cooking, sewing, and crafting,
from making you laugh because I want you to be happy.
I’m from figuring it all out.

ADRIENNE KURLANDER
Spring Garden Elementary School
Mrs. Everhart
Carroll County Literacy Chapter
JOCELYN

When little sister grabs my toys,
Ripping my squishy in two,
Frustration comes out to play.

When she trips and falls,
Screaming out to me,
Fear knocks on my door.

When she steals the spotlight,
Out shopping strangers grab her cheeks,
A happy camper I am not.

When she giggles,
Skipping with me to Elmo songs,
Joy dances in my heart.

When she wraps her arms around me,
In a bear hug holding tight,
Anger melts away like a snowman shrinking in the sun.

When she smiles from ear to ear,
With a gap between her teeth,
Cheer fills me up like hot chocolate and marshmallows,
And I feel happy!

NADIA VENEDAM
New Market Elementary School
Mrs. Ashli Shuman
Frederick County Literacy Chapter
THUNDER

The thunder roars like a beast awakening. The warm air clashes with the cold and the thunder claps. The rain is beating down so hard that the electricity went out.

It’s 12:00 a.m. and there is not a peep in the house. No one is awake. You are hiding under your covers And your heart is beating faster than a cheetah runs.

Sweat is dripping down your back. All of a sudden, BOOM! Thunder roars.
ANGER

Anger
A common emotion
Two ways to make it go away
The first way is
Letting it build up
And up
And up
Like a skyscraper
Until it comes down
A kabang!
Hurts other people
With words
Or actions
Makes you want to
Shrink into nothing

Anger
A common emotion
Two ways to make it go away
The second way
Is finding your happy place
Reading
Drawing
Taking a walk
Or simply letting your mind drift
Just let the anger
Waft away
Like the smell of bread
Fresh from the oven
Drifting through the open window
Find your happy place
Whether it takes a few
Seconds
Minutes
Or even hours
Soon it'll feel like
Nothing happened
You apologize
ANGER, cont’d.

And life goes on

Anger
A common emotion
Two ways to make it go away
Explosion
Or
Waft away:
Take your pick

MAIZY BURKOM
Ilchester Elementary School
Mrs. Cleckner
Howard County Literacy Chapter
ALL DIFFERENT COLORS: IN HONOR OF THE BOOK SULWE

She doesn’t look like me.
She doesn’t look like me either.
I see all different colors around me.
Each person is special.
Every person.
I am cocoa dark.
I have my own sunshine.
My own uniqueness.
I am beautiful cocoa brown.
And all different colors.
When I walk down those streets.
I see all different colors.
But deep down.
I have beautiful cocoa skin.
Every family is different.
From all different cultures.
Any shapes and sizes.
Doesn’t matter how rich, cool, or popular.
You are beautiful and pretty.
But deep down your skin color is always, always beautiful.
FIRE

A tiny ember floats through the air.
It lands in a lush field.
Sparks reach out, grabbing onto blades of grass.
Fire spreads running across the field.
Gobbling up the grass,
Like a hungry horse.
The flames flicker,
Like a tail in the breeze.
It pops.
It crackles.
It roars.
Small field mice scurry from their homes.
Deer bound over the flames trying to escape.
A flurry of birds erupts into the sky,
Chirping and squawking, warning others.
This once gorgeous green field
Transforming into a brown barren parcel of land.
Running out of fuel, the flames weaken as the fire dies down.
When the fire finally burns out,
Black ashes are all that is left behind.
SEASONS

Starts with Winter, all the snow,
Outside playing is where to go,
Snow pants and hats for the chilly breeze,
Or else you might really freeze!

Then comes Spring, all the budding plants,
The whispering wind makes the flowers dance!
Buzzing bees and fluttering butterflies,
There’s so much to see with your own little eyes!

Next is Summer, it’s hot, hot, hot,
Wear some sunscreen or you’ll get burnt, a lot!
Delicious ice cream is such a yummy treat,
Beaches and pools help with the heat.

Last comes Fall, school starts again,
Get ready to get out your pencil and pen!
It is starting to turn cold,
The leaves change to red, yellow, and gold.

All of the seasons are very unique,
There is more about them for all to seek.
Live in the moment, appreciate them all,
Experience each one, from Winter to Fall.

SOPHIA VANDIVER
Folger McKinsey Elementary School
Mrs. Hannah Radi
Anne Arundel County Literacy Chapter
THE WELL OF DOUBT

A head full of dreams
Where nothing is as it seems
Skipping and running and jumping about,
Then you come across the well of doubt
Feeling adventurous and very brave
You walk up to the watery cave
You lean your head closer looking down
And the darkness it come, crawling out
Crashing in and flailing about
Any now you’re stuck in the well of doubt
Hearing footsteps of people walking by
You let out a loud but sad cry
Growing tired, things are looking grim
You let go of your thoughts and sink in.
Upon hearing a bird’s noble cry
You think “It doesn’t hurt to try.”
Finding the courage deep within
Even as things are looking grim
The bird’s chirps flood through your head
And you find yourself rolled out of bed
A wonderful sight to your eyes
As you look out to the morning skies.

ALYSSA DEL CRISTO
Crofton Meadows Elementary School
Mrs. Dawn Ciancaglini
Anne Arundel County Literacy Chapter
WE HAVE MORE IN COMMON THAN WE THINK

Why do we focus on how we are different from each other,
When we were all born from a mother.
We have more in common than we think,
We all have eyes that constantly blink.
Some people are Muslims, Hindus, Christians, or Jews,
But we all worship as we choose.
No matter if our hair is blonde, brown, or red,
At night, we all fall asleep in a bed.
We can all be different shapes: skinny, fat, small, or tall,
But we all bleed after scraping our knees from a fall.
Some people are poor, while others are wealthy,
But we all need food and water to stay healthy.
Some people are honest, while others lie,
But we all get sad when our loved ones die.
Some people are quiet and shy, while others are loud,
But we can all get lost in a big crowd.
We'll start being kinder to one another,
Once we view our neighbor as our sister or brother.
THE GIRL WHO SLAYS

I am the girl who slays her fears,
Chess is where the world disappears.
Without a word, without a sword,
I'm in the zone on the chess board.

I fear the size, age, and gender,
Including the aggression of my contender.
I cut out such noise, gather my poise
Take a deep breath, maneuver a few ploys.

Chess is a battlefield of mind over matter,
Of strategy, stamina, and blocked out chatter.
I grind my teeth, slow down thought,
Squash rising panic, apply what was taught.
I battle the urge to act without thinking,
Analyze, analyze, I stare without blinking.

The Knights, Rooks, and Pawns are advisors,
“Be present” they caution ‘cause … aren’t they just wiser?
The Bishop and King are as important,
They keep me in the game when I feel less important.
My Queen is all Power; SHE is invincible.
To strike fearlessly is her principle.
So, I slay many insecurities on the chess boards,
To move forward in life, to defeat the odds.

#
BEAUTY WITHIN

Beauty is not what the mirror shows,
It is shown when the heart glows

Beauty is not in a perfect smile,
But in the friend that goes the extra mile

Beauty is not in the clothes you wear,
But in the characteristics you bear

Beauty is not in the color of your hair,
But in the people who really care

For beauty is held within,
Beneath the skin
FINE

It’s okay I’m fine, but I’m not.  
Insecurities boil over in a pot of self-destruction.  
The perfect recipe for anxiety.  
Conjuring up things I can’t control.

I’m a mess of okays and I’m fines.  
They throw sticks sharper than swords.  
They throw stones hitting like boulders breaking my bones.  
Stupid, fat, ugly, attention hog, weak, crazy, and any other name you can think of.  
The sticks and stones that break my bones, words.  
Words can start wars; words are like swords dangling over us.  
It’s completely fine to say what you want though.  
Crying makes me weak, so I smile.  
I smile through self-torture.

Thoughts course through my mind,  
But of course, I’m fine.  
Things get emotional.  
Things get irrational.  
How can I be fine with anything?  
No, it’s not okay.  
No, I’m not fine.

If I can make someone’s day,  
If I can make someone smile,  
That’s the absolute, ultimate goal.  
I help others so they can feel a-okay,  
But I’m not okay.  
What does the overwhelming, sunshiney pleasure we call “fine” even feel like?

Just put on your fake smile and walk.  
The earth is quaking, my point of view is changing.  
This is not okay,  
This is not normal.  
This is not fine.  
I’m imperfect.  
I’m not normal; I’m unique.  
I’m not fine or perfect, but that’s amazing.  
Most importantly, I’m me, and that’s fine.
AN ODE TO HIGHLIGHTERS

You effortlessly glide beyond the page,
making my words stand out.
Filling the paper with color,
you make me want to shout.

You come in different shades,
blue, pink, even purple.
Oh,
I give my thanks to you.

I can't seem,
to ever miss a word.
With your power,
I become smarter,
stronger;
more than ever before.

Without you,
I don't know what I would do.
My page would be a bland hue.
No colors on my words,
no way to make them bold.
They would grow old,
with no meaning to hold.

So, I use your neon colors,
they take over my page,
oh, how I love you,
my perfect
neon
Highlighter.

SARAH KIM
Mayfield Woods Middle School
Mrs. Lorraine Savoy
Howard County Literacy Chapter
THE ROSE AND THE MOON

Night falls the moon comes dripping in a beautiful radiant light almost like tears

The moon crying from seeing the rose wilt away as the days pass

The rose looking up at the moon keeping her company until it's time for her to go

As the rose petals fall as the delicate light shines brighter on the rose as the moon watches as her dear friends wilts away to make way for a new to blossom with even more of the glimmering scarlet red that brings the moon so much.

Joy once again flooded the moons beautiful aura

The new rose basking in the light of the moon

As the rose and the moon dance in the beauty of the night
THE STARS THAT WHISPER SECRETS

The stars that whisper secrets
Deep into my ear
Each one telling messages
No one else will hear...

The stars that whisper stories
That I will never tell
To anyone who asks
For I know that they will sell...

The stars that comfort me
Deep into the night
Are my closest friends
Though no one is in sight...

The stars that will be with me
Beyond the very end
Even when they’re hidden
They’ll be there to defend...

The stars tell me messages
Like birds they recount
Morals, marvels, miracles
That are sure to surmount...

The stars give me gliding wings
That take me through the air
The wings whistle and whoosh
Higher, higher I dare...

The stars lift me ‘bove the sky
Far beyond the clouds
Soaring through the roaring core
That holds us down with bounds...

The stars that sing me songs
That are magic to my ears
Become the kindred spirits
That blow away your tears…

The stars do whisper secrets
That are good and true
They fly ‘round the universe
Don’t you hear them too?

MOLLY CARSON
Windsor Knolls Middle School
Ms. Stephanie Goldman
Frederick County Literacy Chapter
NOT DOING THAT BAD

The echoes of the screams ring inside my hollow skull.
The breaking of a glass bottle,
The crackle of a burnt house,
The terror of a young child.

Schizophrenia,
Oh what a beautiful word.
The voices of the young child in my head,
And the shadows in my room at night.

PTSD,
Oh no I wouldn’t call it that,
Just visions of the past that shake my body,
That cause me to die slowly, but surely,
From the inside to the out.

Some people may call it insane.
I see it sort of differently,
You have to become friends with the voices and shadows,
And embrace the virus in your soul.

You have to see what is really going on to understand what they want.
The people in your mind.
What do they want?
The past may be behind you, but the future is about to be the past.
And all you want is to go back and change it all, but why not change it now?
Make friends with demons under your bed and in your closet,
Let the screeching of young children remind you of the terror your seven year old self felt.
And feel sorry for yourself until the day you die,
Because every moment brings you closer to your death,
And if you really wanted to speed it up let yourself become one of your demons.
THE SANATORIUM

The sunlight spies through the window to light up the grey, blank walls
White dresses and sandals
Blue suits and watchful eyes
It’s a magnificent dance of man and mind
A woman, the one with the big eyes, dances across the sparkling floor
She collides with the blue suits
The men surround her like flies to an apple
All in what seems to be a competition to whisk her away
But they come not with love in their eyes, but with hostility
Her dance is formidable
The men in blue join her waltz
They give her a hug as she falls numb
These dances seem as routine as the white tablets
In the plastic cups
The calmness rattles when the plastic cups arrive
They end the chaotic promenade
Outside the bounds of Picasso’s, *The Tragedy*
one might envision the lifeless
limp corpse
of a son long lost, lying
waterlogged in the sand.
The poor hunched shoulders
of parents cloaked in dark cloths and
grief sag under the weight of
a world too heavy to carry without
their boy’s strength.
The body
lies dark on the shore,
reflecting the mood of the somber sea.
Ambition seeps into the sand,
red as rubies,
watery as waves,
and cold
as it leaves him.
Ambition was his hamartia,
he sought far too hard to achieve excellence,
and therefore, has abandoned
those who needed him most.
He flew too high, wingtips grazing the stars,
wrist being lacerated
by their blade.
He fell quickly,
and landed facedown, just as
a divine being,
having disobeyed,
is cast down
from the Heavens.
Forgotten.
Picasso rushes
to capture
a family mourning for
their ambitious angel;
their tears
falling in time
with the ink from his pen.
I didn't really love any of those girls.

Their faces, so similar.
Lips, painted red.
Eyelids smeared with silver.

Their hair? Always perfect. Always curled.

I don't really think, that any, of those girls, loved me.

There is one, that I remember. One that I could never forget.

Her face, so different, lips, never painted. She told me she hated the taste. Eyelids, smeared with copper. Silver, she said, was far too overused.

Her hair? Jet black. Never styled the same way.
She told me, once, that everyone tried too hard to be perfect.

Perfection. Ruled by numbers. A scale, of one to ten.

She told me, once, that it would be better, to be a penny, than a dime, if every dime was the same.

A sea of perfection of perfect tens, of dimes, she said, would be, no fun, at all.

Be the penny, in the sea of dimes, she said, because really, imperfections, are what make you so perfect.
Lazing beneath the balmy sun,
tongue panting softly,
wagging its tail to the rhythm of a dozen street musicians,
a dog sits next to its owner.

A panoply of colors stitched together
form a vibrant umbrella.
Droplets of the morning drizzle
still hang on,
bespeckling those that pass
in rainbows.

Wayward olive trees grow where they wish,
trunks like the gnarled faces of old men
laughing at their own jokes,
and bark the color of old leather,
with roots rising from the ground
like waves in a tempest.

A legion of cypresses,
their sage canopies
shading the road
into a piano of gravel.

Paths meander past statues
to rusted benches
where families lounge
in a bell curve of smiles.

Swans flow under a lichen spotted stone bridge
spanning a pond dotted by lilies.
Snow white feathers stand stark
against the ripples
of the brackish water.
Ancient walls of marble drape the park, like a wedding gown left to the dust. The cities whirlwind of noise locked out, only the jovial chirping of birds and other tranquil noises linger in the air. The benign bruise of the sunset, splashing clouds of smoky grey and lavender on the backdrop of a fading sky the color of cornflowers, its last wave of goodbye.

Stars rise, like a thousand gleaming bells heralding night.

Resting beneath a rusted park bench, surrounded by the ivory glow of dry bark in moonlight. eye bouncing to and from closed, a dog lays under its owner.
ODE TO MY HAIR

We congregate
With argan and elastics and towel.
Our sermon in Dutch, French
Sisters gather and separate
Weave between hellos and goodbyes
Tightly knit
Till the service is finished
Concluded with a black whip.
Snug, never suffocating
And the worship
Warm water,
Baptism
Three layers to wash away our sins.
Stray members slither
Onto my hands,
Onto my skin;
Stretchmarks and silk,
Onto the walls
Of tile,
Only peeled off by the word of God;
God being a bar of soap
Or a stern look.
They tumble,
Giving into temptation,
Trembling together in the sewers
And can only be released,
Released from the pits of hell,
By quick fingers
And rolled eyes.
O! But you!
My glorious hair,
You beautiful beast,
Obsidian oracle,
Creature of the jungle and the wild.
Kissed upon the eyes by lightning
With streaks of silver;
A goddess of onyx and pearl.
ODE TO MY HAIR, cont’d.

And still
You remain humble,
Honoring me with your presence;
Coiled into my sweater,
Into my jeans,
Into my words.
Light with curl,
I can spot you in a crowd,
Big and bountiful.
You are a ripe melon,
Juicy and lush.
You are a bird’s call,
Rich or sweet or piercing,
Calling attention from all.
A woven schedule
Of twists and turns
All an advent for our savior:
To be released.
To let your curl permeate through the
Flat irons and vanilla of yesteryear.
But when all your grandor has come to its end,
You are born again.
Reborn into a beautiful plume.
Each curve, an ocean’s wave,
Each bend, a fork in the road,
Each kink, a gospel praise,
In Deva Curl’s name we pray,
Amen.
ODE TO HAMLET

Amidst stories of growth,
A tragedy.
A man of maniacal mischief,
Awfully lost in his mind’s labyrinth.

Adrift,
A sea of adverse intentions cascades down his spine,
Rattling rimy bones,
Bringing him to his feet,
Running in every direction on a sinking raft.

A defiler of sober reason,
His mind, a webbed jungle of rampant beasts.
A noble leopard,
Scratching and sprinting,
Begging to escape from strings of ail.

A servant to his father’s will,
His fate resides in sweet revenge.
Intentions true as the purest gold,
Rubies of passionate fury gleam in his eyes.

Honoring lament in an inky cloak,
A wizard of manipulation of man.
He casts a spell of unease to the betrayers of his father.
Cursed not by a dream but by reality.

His heart crinkles,
A wilting rose set aflame,
Twisting and coiling into a frenzy.
Seeing through the looking glass of vengeance,
The hatter disguises himself with ribbons of antics.

His wit, a blade,
Sharpened by the stifling journey to justice.
Sinking into the supple flesh of harmony,
Hot blood runs from the once sovereign dead.
ODE TO HAMLET, cont’d.

Screeches of suffering soar into sky,
Like a flock of morose ravens,
Carrying their bellies, full of rotting vermin.

His heart; a raging fire angered by a frigid wave.
Silenced by the voice of a transparent mother.

Following the arrow of his moral compass,
The prince of Denmark slinks through shadows.
TO KNOW WARMTH

From darkness so long I've been trying to run
to be rid of the agony that resides in my chest.
To touch your face is to touch the sun.

I've been beaten down, bruised, broken and spun,
my cries for salvation simply left unaddressed.
From darkness so long I've been trying to run.

Dandelion breaths spent on wishing for someone
to give me their all; I'll give back my best.
To touch your face is to touch the sun.

Dreams I once held fast for so long, then suddenly none;
a heart yearning for love beat beneath my breast.
From darkness so long I've been trying to run.

My soul had been frayed, the seams come undone
till you arrived with white satin wings- I know I've been blessed.
To touch your face is to touch the sun.

The watching stars whisper “Look, something new has begun!”
To fall in love with you, I would never have guessed.
From darkness so long I've been trying to run;
To touch your face is to touch the sun.

ALLISON KINDLEY
Bel Air High School
Mr. Jason Taylor
Harford County Literacy Chapter
Short Stories
KITTY’S MITTEN AND THE WOLF

Once upon a time on a bright sunny, snowy, winter day, a mother Cat told her Kittens to hang their mittens to dry. The mittens got soaking wet after playing in the snow. They placed them outside and laid them out on the fence to dry in the sun. After a few hours of enjoying hot chocolate and “Catmiss” movies, they went outside to get their fluffy, warm, dry mittens. However, GUESS WHAT! The mittens were GONE! They were no longer laying on the fence where they left them to dry. The kittens came running inside to their Mother and told them that their mittens were missing. All the Kittens started to cry. To make them feel not as sad, their Mother Cat gave them some warm milk to make them happy. After enjoying their milk, they decided they would find out what happened to their mittens.

They went back outside and started to look for clues. They looked around the fence where they last laid their gloves, and started to look around the area. They found grey fur, and wolf prints in the snow. They figured out what happened to their mittens. THE WOLF BLEW THEM AWAY! HE HUFFED AND HE PUFFED THE GLOVES GONE! They had recently heard gossip around town from some their pig neighbors, that there was a BIG BAD WOLF blowing down things in the neighborhood. They then ran inside to tell their parents about the clues that proved that the BIG BAD WOLF blew their mittens away. The Kittens’s Dad was a Cat Cop, and decided to call up his squad.

The Kitten’s Dad called his police friends; Cop Chicken, Cop Crow, and Cop Cow to join him in the search to the Wolf’s house. When they pulled up the Wolf’s house, they knocked on the door, and the Wolf opened the door. He was shocked to see the Cop Crew, but knew what he had done was wrong. The Cops told the Big Bad Wolf that he needed to return the mittens to the Kittens.

The Big Bad Wolf went back to the Kitten’s house with the cop Crew to return their mittens. He came to the door and the Kittens opened the door with a smile. The Big Bad Wolf was confused, he thought they would be angry that they took their mittens. However, the Kittens were not upset. Instead of being angry, they sat together and talked about why the Big Bad Wolf may have taken the mittens. They figured maybe, he was cold, and needed them more than them. So they were not upset at all. They were disappointed in the Big Bad Wolf, because they knew that if the Big Bad Wolf would have asked them for the mittens, they would have just given them to him. While, their Dad was away, they decided to knit the Big Bad Wolf his own mittens.

The Big Bad Wolf apologized to the Kittens, and told them that he was very sorry that he took their mittens. He returned their mittens, and started to cry. The Kittens then gave him the mittens they made, and the Big BadWolf stopped crying. He was touched that the Kittens made him his own mittens. He thanked them for their kindness, and when he turned to return back to his house, the Kittens told him “Merry Catmiss.”

From that day on, the Big Bad Wolf never HUFFED AND PUFFED and blew anything down ever again. The kind Kittens showed him the true meaning of “Catmiss”, and that kindness is better than being mean.
THE TIC TAC TOE MONSTER

One night, two kids were sleeping in a bunk bed. Their names were Hannah and Jake. They loved to play tic tac toe. Suddenly, a strange shadow appeared in the window. It had big horns!

Just then, Jake woke up. And then he saw it. It was a monster creeping into the room. It was five feet tall, furry all over and had glowing green eyes. Jake was very scared. He woke Hannah up, and she immediately hid behind the bed. Then, the monster spoke in a scary, deep voice. “I like to eat little children!” Jake dove under his bed sheets. The monster walked towards them, making a thumping noise. Then Jake got out from the bed sheets and said in a high, shaky voice “Please don’t hurt us!” The monster said “Here’s the deal. If you win tic tac toe, I won’t hurt you, but if I win, I will eat you for breakfast tomorrow morning.” Jake and Hannah agreed to try.

They got a pen and paper and began to play. But the monster had many hands and he tried to cheat. “You can’t cheat!” said Hannah. “Well, yes I can, at least I think I can,” growled the monster. “You can’t cheat here.” “Ok, why don’t we start a new game?” said the monster. “Ok,” said Jake. So they went to get a new piece of paper. “Now, don’t cheat this time, ok?” “Ok.” They played five very close games. Then, Jake won the final game and Hannah said, “Do you want to be friends?” “Yes,” said the monster, and from then on, they woke up every morning and played tic tac toe happily ever after.

The End
ROBERT GETS RICH

Robert was worried. Robert’s family had moved to a new town. His new school started in two days. Robert did not have any friends.

*If I had a lot of money I could buy everyone ice cream on the first day of school. Then I would have friends,* thought Robert.

Robert could not fall asleep. It was dark. His head was full of questions.

The next morning Robert rushed down the stairs. His father and mother were in the kitchen.

"I don’t have time to eat breakfast," said Robert.

Robert’s parents thought he was going outside to play. Robert was really going to look for treasure in the woods. He wanted to find a chest of gold. Robert looked and looked, but he only found rocks and sticks. He did not want to give up.

Robert was lost. He ran through the woods. He was tired and hungry.

*I am scared and alone,* thought Robert.

Robert saw deer walking in the woods. Now he was not alone. Robert followed the deer tracks. The woods were so peaceful that Robert forgot about his mission. He came up to a field. Robert saw a boy kicking a soccer ball.

"Hi, I’m Sergio," said the boy.

Robert and Sergio played soccer. It was getting dark outside.

“I have to go home now,” said Sergio.

Robert was scared.

“Where do you live?” asked Sergio.


“I live close to Central Street. I will show you the way home," said Sergio.
Sergio walked Robert home. They talked about school. They were going to be in second grade. Robert was happy.

Robert’s father and mother were making dinner.

“What did you do today?” asked his father.

“I went on a treasure hunt,” said Robert.

“Did you find a treasure?” asked his mother.

“I didn’t find any gold, but I did make a friend,” said Robert.

“Then you did find a treasure,” said Robert’s mother.

“I guess I am rich after all!” said Robert.

The End
THE OUQUADA

Legend has it that there is a mystical creature called an Ouquada. The Ouquada roams Mexico, and is a strange mix between a Cheetah and a Lemur, with wings. Its body is a Cheetah and its tail is a Lemur’s tail.

Once, I was outside practicing my skateboarding and I saw something with wings, a Lemur tail and a Cheetah body. My heart stopped for a second! It saw me and flew away as fast as lightning, that I didn’t even see which way it went.

The next day was Day of the Dead. Everyone was so jolly that I almost forgot about the Ouquada. But then, out of the shadows, I saw it. It returned! I went over to it and it was about to attack, so I just held my hand out. It was about to pounce when….it stopped and sniffed my hand and flew away.

The next day was Abuela’s birthday. It was epic. Sort of. I mean she’s an adult, so it was kind of boring. Anyways, I saw the Ouquada return (again!). It wandered out to the woods. ‘Hey mom, can I go to the woods?’ She was so busy checking out our new robot that she said ‘Oh that’s nice, sure thing.’ When I got to the woods to look for the Ouquada, there was a huge mud slide. I was looking sideways to find the Ouquada when SPLASH, I tripped over a stick right into the mud slide! I yelled at the top of my lungs HELP, but no one could hear me.

Suddenly there was a swoosh. The Ouquada swooped down. He opened his mouth and grabbed a branch and made a high-pitched noise, he grabbed the bamboo and pulled me out! This time the Ouquada stayed. I hugged him so tight! I told the Ouquada that the mayor found out he is real, and told everyone. You have to stop roaming Mexico. The Ouquada made baby eyes. Awww, no! You have to stay here. Finally, the Ouquada made a signal to show he agreed. I told him that every afternoon I would go to the visit him.

That’s what I did then, when I was 5 years old, and that’s what I do now as a fellow 8-year-old. I will never leave the Ouquada and he’ll never leave me. Not until he leaves to join the great Kings of the past as a star.
The End

P.S. Did I mention he was a King? Whatever, now I did so ha!
Slamming open the front door, Isabelle came into the house crying. “What is wrong?” asked her mother.

“It was an awful day,” Isabelle sobbed. “First I had an argument with Melissa at recess. Then the teacher yelled at me for sharpening my pencil during quiet time. Then the bus was late to go home. And then, a girl on the bus called me a Grinch!” Isabelle continued, “I hate school. I'll never have any friends. I just don't fit in!”

Isabelle’s mother gave Isabelle a hug. “I am sorry that you had a tough day,” she said. “Sometimes it takes a while to find ‘your people.’ But everything is going to be okay.” Drying Isabelle’s eyes, her mother smiled. “I was just finishing the last of the Christmas cards. Would you like to help me?” Isabelle agreed and spent the next hour gluing and glittering and laughing at her mom who insisted on singing and dancing, poorly, to the radio.

When all the cards were made, Isabelle wandered upstairs. She was still upset and decided to seek advice from her older brother, who was kind and funny and had lots of friends. Isabelle poked her head in his bedroom door. “Hey, Izzy,” her brother said, pausing the video game he was watching.

“Hey, bro,” Isabelle replied, flopping down on his bed. “I have a question for you. How do you make friends?” she asked.

“Wow, Iz,” he said, realizing this was a very serious question. “You just find the people who like to do the same things as you and you hang out with them.” Isabelle sighed, dissatisfied. Rumpling her hair, her brother gave her a hand to get up. “Hey, come play video games with me. I’ve made a ton of progress since yesterday!” Racing to the playroom, they hopped on the console and spent an hour battling enemies and finding treasures. After a while, Isabelle felt a little better. Blowing things up in the game always made her feel more powerful. But Isabelle still didn’t have any real answers to her question.

So, Isabelle went looking for her Grandma in the kitchen. “Grandma,” Isabelle asked, “can you help me?”

“Sure, sweetie. What’s up?” Grandma replied, handing Isabelle a spoon full of the chocolate chip cookie dough she was making.

Isabelle tasted the dough and smiled, then frowned again. “Grandma, how do I make friends?” she asked.

Grandma stirred thoughtfully for a minute and then said, “I have always found that kindness and good food were a great way to let people know they were loved.” “Would you like to help me? I am making your favorites, and your brother’s favorites, and Grandpa’s favorites, and Mom’s favorites, and Dad’s favorites, and Auntie Jo and Uncle Gus’s favorites, and...well, you get the idea,” she said with a laugh. Although Isabelle was still unhappy, she agreed to help make the cookies, mostly so she could taste them all.

That night, the whole family gathered for their weekly family dinner. Isabelle traded funny cat videos with her aunts. She made plans to do a new escape room the next day with her uncles. She helped her Grandpa plan what vegetables to plant in his garden in the Spring. The whole family crowded around the dining room table and ate, and laughed, and told stories. After everyone left, Isabelle found her dad in the kitchen making a cup of coffee. Isabelle’s dad was the best listener she knew, maybe he could help her.
“Hey, Dad,” she said going to him and putting her arms around him for a hug. “Can we talk?”

“Hey, Belle,” he said, hugging her back. “I always have time for my best girl.” Dad made her a cup of cocoa and they sat down together.

“Dad, how did you make friends in school?” Isabelle asked.

“I wasn’t always the best at making friends. I was shy and anxious in school. It wasn’t until college that I really found a few people like your Mom who really understood me…” They talked for a while about everything and nothing before Isabelle got ready to go up to her bed.

“I love you,” said Grandma and Grandpa with kisses and hugs before going downstairs.

“I love you,” said her Brother, bringing in one of her stuffed animals that had been left in the playroom.

“I love you,” said Dad, coming in to tuck her in and turn out the light.

“I love you,” said Mom, after singing her a song.

“And I love all of you,” Isabelle thought as she rolled over and cuddled into her soft blankets. “And until I find ‘my people,’ I think I have some pretty great friends right here.” Feeling much happier, she fell fast asleep with a smile.
A NEW FRIEND

One crisp autumn morning, on a small hill under a frosty pine tree, there was a tiny chipmunk getting her cozy burrow ready for winter. She was checking her food when she realized she did not have enough food for winter yet. Then she remembered across a field she had hidden some extra seeds and nuts.

As she ran to her hiding spot in the field she noticed something move. She could not tell what it was but as she came closer, she saw a small brown and white baby deer. The deer was cold, hungry and lost. The chipmunk invited the baby deer back to her house if she would help carry her extra food. The deer quickly agreed. They ran across the field carrying the food.

When they got to the chipmunk’s house, they realized the deer could not fit in the tiny burrow. The chipmunk and the baby deer were so sad but the chipmunk wanted to share some of her food, even though she was not sure she would have enough for the winter. They sat under her pine tree and ate some nuts and seeds together.

After dinner, the small deer was full and felt very sleepy. The chipmunk made a blanket of soft, warm and dry pine needles. Under the pine, the deer laid down in between the roots, with her new blanket.

In the morning, the deer stood up and was about to leave. She stopped for a minute and looked around. First she looked at her bed, at the big pine tree and then at her new friend. She sat quietly and thought for a minute. Then she smiled. She realized she had already found her perfect new home. The deer and chipmunk agreed that she should stay. She can be near her friend, have shelter from the weather, and they could help each other find food. They were both happy that they each had found a new friend!

BRYNN EYLER
Sabillasville Elementary School
Mrs. Marnie Tootill-Mortenson
Frederick County Literacy Chapter
THE GIANT PANDA ESCAPES

My eyes are forced to open as I hear my baby, Linda cry. I snuggled her close to me in my bamboo forest, in China where most of my kind live. As I started to wake up, I stare hungrily at all the bamboo around me. In one swift move, I use my sharp claws to break a bamboo tree, as it falls to the ground, I catch it and start munching on it gratefully, as I start to finish I wake up Linda and break down a bamboo tree for her too, but her pink little body falls asleep again. I wake her up again and feed her before she falls asleep. I have a vast black body and black eyes. I have white legs and a white face. VRRRRRRRRRM! Linda’s body shakes, I snuggled her close to me and then moved closer to investigate the mysterious screech. After a few moments of investigating I see it, a glint of steel coming from a…CHAINSAW! Linda asks” what’s happening?”，“I'll tell you later” is what I replied obviously worried, but the truth was that I would tell her a lie that she would believe.

Later that night I picked up Linda in my mouth very lightly so she would stay asleep and then started my hike to go deeper into the forest. When I stopped, we were far away from where we were at the front of the forest. When I finally was going to sleep, I felt guilt rising up in the depths of my stomach from not telling Linda anything, but it was for her own good and my good. The next morning Linda says” this place looks different”, “Well it’s the same place” I said trying to sound confident while guilt was once again rising in the pits of my stomach. I hear the terrible chainsaw screech but farther, I tell Linda that even though this place looks different, it will be our home, she looks at me curiously for a moment like a hawk watching its prey but then went back to eating her bamboo in peace as though nothing has happened. I sighed with relief; she didn’t ask any questions. After that, I felt her gaze on me whenever I had my back turned as though she’s suspicious of me. My massive body rumbled hungrily so I ate a lot of bamboo.

Many suns and moons passed. As I grew older Linda also grew older, she was learning how to survive. One day, I heard the screeching chainsaw sound again, but this time it was different, it sounded closer. I also heard a strange language coming from a short bear with only hair on their head, and then the chainsaw came on. I whimpered, I needed to get Linda out of here, it was too dangerous while our environment and population were starting to die. The hairless bears kept talking and then I saw one of them nod their head and the other started to chainsaw again. As they were coming closer to our hiding spot, I wake up Linda quickly. She deserves to know the truth. The first thing I tell her is that we need to go and along the way, I would tell her what’s been going on. But the hairless bears reached us first.
Soft sunlight crept through the blinds on the frosted window and woke Mya up. Even though the air outside was freezing cold, Mya’s apartment was warm and cozy. Mya’s slipper-padded feet shuffled across the room. As Mya reached her dresser, she yanked open a stiff, pale blue drawer and started pulling out clothes. She laid a knee-length gold skirt, a white long-sleeved blouse, green leggings, red fluffy socks, and tall snow boots at the foot of her bed. She closed the drawer with a shove and stepped away from the dresser. Mya hurried over to the window and gazed at her small town. People bustled this way and that. Mya sat down on the red velvet reading nook attached to the window. Finally, Mya tore her eyes away from the window and back to the room. The room wasn’t the biggest of rooms, but Mya still had enough space to hold everything she needed. Mya’s room had a twin bed underneath one of two windows and had a two-shelf bookshelf to the left of it. Across the room, a desk with presents covering the whole top was what Mya called her thinking space. A few feet to the left of the desk was the pale blue dresser. A crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling. Mya lived in Massachusetts in an apartment with her mom and dad above her mother’s antique store.

Mya pulled on her outfit and went across the hallway to the kitchen. Sizzling hot sausages were on the skillet. Pancakes were on the stove, and in the middle of it all, Mya’s mom Amy stood next to the pancakes. She had a blotch of pancake batter on her cheek. She looked up when Mya came in and said, “Hey, honey! Get a plate and sit down and your food will be ready soon.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Mya said as she got a plate from the cabinet and sat down at the kitchen table.

Mya’s mom came over and filled her plate with food and then prepared a cup of coffee for herself.

“Aren’t you gonna eat?” Mya asked her mom as she filled her mouth with food.

“I already ate. I was up since five. I couldn’t sleep.”

Mya’s mom checked her watch and said, “Oh, no. I better get dressed and open the store or I’ll have to open late.”

Mya sighed. She felt like her mom never had time for her. But that’s nonsense, Mya told herself very firmly.

Mya finished her breakfast and sprinted down the hallway to a closet. Mya yanked open the door and pulled out a thick, red coat with white, fur trim. After she put her warm coat on, Mya peeked into her mom’s room. It was empty. Hmm...Mya thought. Mya guessed her mom was already downstairs. So Mya turned to go down to the antique shop.

Mya trudged down the wooden staircase. In the store, Mya’s mom helped customers with packaging or prices. Mya watched her sadly. This season was a busy season. Mya’s mom opened the shop every morning at seven and closed at eight-thirty. Mya rarely ever saw her mom other than in the mornings or in the shop. And when she did see her mom, her mom’s mind seemed to be elsewhere. The day passed slowly. Mya did some shopping, picked up something to eat, and then finished her shopping. The only time Mya had a conversation with her parents was during dinner. Mya started the conversation by asking her parents,

“Is Santa real?” Mya’s parents looked at each other.

“Well, you see....” Mya’s dad’s gruff voice started. But it was cut off by Mya’s mother’s gentle voice.
“I’m sorry. But Santa is just a myth,” her mom said.
“Who delivers the presents?” Mya questioned.
“I think I heard someone say that Frank was caught dropping presents through open windows.” Mya’s father chuckled. Frank owned the bank down the road.
Later, Mya was sitting in bed reading. Usually reading calmed her. But not tonight. A thought nagged at Mya. Finally, Mya threw the book aside. She pulled out writing tools, and began to write.

Dear Santa,
Are you real? My parents don’t believe in you. Should I? I want to. I don’t have any proof. Please answer back as soon as you can.
Love, Mya

She finished; she put the letter aside and fell asleep.
A week later, Mya got the answer she’d been waiting for. Mya opened the letter excitedly reading it quickly.

Dear Mya,
I got your letter, and I thank you for at least trying to believe in me. You should believe in me. Your proof will be waiting on Christmas eve. Merry Christmas!
Yours Truly, Santa
A PERFECT MATCH

I, a long fragile violet thread, lies on the cold wood table, wrapped around a spool. A giant hand pinches me around my middle. It loops me into a loom. I weave up and down, in and out. Slowly but surely, I transform from a weak thread to a strong piece of cloth. I am tightly wound with other pieces of thread. The hand knots me at the end. I am a firm yet flexible fabric piece. I am then folded, and put into a basket, on top of several other pieces of cloth. All the light from before closes out. I am trapped inside. It's pitch black. The basket shakes and moves. It swings. Then a hand lets the light back in. A new set of hands reaches and grabs me. The hands stroke my silky smooth fabric, and then take me to a little room. There is a huge, shiny white sewing machine, and the hands set me down. They then take a spool of thread, what I used to be, and connect it’s lavender thread to the sewing machine The hands slide me under a shiny, sharp silver needle. Soon I hear a gentle hum; the needle pierces through me and then comes right back up. The painful process continues over and over. Prick. Hum. Prick. Hum. In the end, I realise I’ve formed into an entirely different shape, with stitches all over me. And suddenly, it stops. The humming, the pricking; it all stops. Once again I am folded and placed into a box wrapped in beautiful gold wrapping paper, tied with a purple ribbon. The lid closes. Darkness. A few minutes later, after some shaking and swinging, the lid opens, and light floods in. I’m carefully taken out by another set of hands. These hands have chipped silver nail polish. These hands are from a young girl. Her light brown hair is in a long single braid down her back, and her dark eyes glisten with excitement as she dashes up the stairs, into her room. As soon as she shuts the door, a long flowing violet dress, on. The girl stretches me up and around her head, and then pulls me down. She steps to the mirror. Then, I see myself. Me and her are the perfect match. She flings the door open, and rushes downstairs. “What do you think?” she asked her mother. Her mom smiles. “I love it!” And many years go past. Sometimes I’m on the girl, and sometimes I’m in her closet, with many other dresses of different colors and shapes keeping me company. But, as years go past, the young girl becomes not so young anymore. So, I am passed from girl to girl, generation to generation. I am not so attractive anymore. I am stained and ripped. Nobody wants me anymore. In my time in the closet, I remember how far I’ve come. But then one day, that first girl who wore me, all grown up now, sees me. She smiles, wistful tears filling her eyes, as she recollects all our memories together. We’re still a perfect match.

SAHASRA BATTA
West Friendship Elementary School
Mrs. Amy English
Howard County Literacy Chapter
Concealed by the tangled wraps, captured and unable to break free. Strangely resembling the feel of a burrito. Warmth spread throughout her body like a spasm, marking every inch of it with relief and comfort. The outside air felt like a stranger, a world of cold that thrived, but was forgotten after the bed hypnotized her and sent upon her the spell of sleep. The swift blow of the wind swept through the small opening in the window beside her bed and sent a cold spasm about her body. She tensed and stretched as far as the blankets allowed, the feel of awakening and life. The winter pushed into Alex, automatically causing her eyes to flutter. A smooth snowflake perched and balanced atop Alex’s nose, melting within a second. It was as if Jack Frost had paid a visit, chilling and spreading throughout her body.

“Okay, fine. I’ll get up.” Alex proclaimed angrily at Frost’s decision. She slowly propped herself into a sitting position, careful not to cause a tantrum within her body.

“Mpphh” Alex grumbled, awaiting her body to wake. Blinking and rubbing her eyes, she slowly felt around her bedside table until she grasped her glasses. As she propped her glasses onto the most comfortable and correct position atop her nose, she spotted something… a dot of white melting on the tip of her nose.

“Snow?” Alex asked, confused.

“Mom! The window’s letting in cold air again! I thought we just fixed it!” she yelled, making sure her mother could hear her.

“Oh, sorry honey! That darn window will never cooperate. My goodness! Why don’t you wash up and come down to breakfast, then we’ll look at the condition of that window.”

“K” Alex answered with satisfaction, but only whispering it to herself.

“Wait a minute….”

She paused and realization filtered through her sleepy body.

“Snow.”

“Snow!”

A slight grin appeared on her face, spreading up both her cheeks.

“SNOW!!”

Alex squealed with excitement, which bubbled and spread throughout her body like a spasm. She quickly leapt out of bed, grabbed her sweater and sweatpants, and dashed downstairs. A glass of orange juice awaited her on the breakfast table. She quickly downed the juice, grabbed a handful of bacon and eggs from her steaming plate and headed for the door.

“Uh, uh, uh” her mother scolded. “Get your scarf and coat, it’s freezing out there. Don’t want to get frostbite…. Oh! And don’t forget your hat and gloves!”

“I’ll be fine, Ma.”

Alex rolled her eyes.

“Are you sure you have everything? Hat? Boots? Jacket? Scarf?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“If you get cold or if anything starts to hurt, you come straight back into the hou-”

“I’ll be fine. Don’t worry.” Alex interrupted, annoyed by her mother’s overprotectiveness.

She swiftly planted her feet within the boots, successfully ignoring the fact that she could’ve gotten her foot stuck in one of the many air-tight layers of the maze it would appear to be.

“Make sure you are polite and well-mannered the next time you decide that if you don’t get outside right now, the world will end.” her mother blurted out. Alex sighed, rolled her eyes, and replied under her breath.
SNOW BORN, cont’d.

“Yes, ma.” She said and pulled on the sleeves of her jacket. Suddenly, she heard footsteps approaching. Her mother, she presumed. Alex swiftly turned around and found herself staring into the glistening eyes of her mother. Mother’s hands worked swiftly, with every zip or button she had to mend. Readying Alex for the rough journey ahead in the thick blanket of snow.

“Be safe.” Her mother asked, with defeated eyes.
“’I will.’ she answered, sighing.
“I love you.”
“I know.”

Ma kissed her on the forehead and walked away. Alex shoved open the mighty door. The crisp wind pressed against the other side as if it didn’t want Alex to come out, but she defeated the wind and made her way out. The outside was a world unfamiliar and cold. The trees were now dressed in white blouses instead of leaves. The grass was overtaken by the fragile prints of the snow, leaving a white blanket covering the frozen ground. A thick wind collided with her face. Cold overtook her body in goosebumps. A white puff of a cloud exited her mouth in exciting breaths.

“Goodbye summer.” Alex reasoned.
“And hello winter.”
“Remi!” screeched Veivina. “Get up here, NOW!” She tapped a claw-like fingernail against the glass, her green skin reflecting in the window from the moonlight.

“Yes. Yes. Coming mistress.” Remi climbed up the ladder as fast as he could. Gasping for air, he leapt onto the platform and did a low bow.

Vevina faced the once-human monkey and wished she’d given him wings. His constant scampering drove her mad, and his little ladders were often in her way. “Rise.”

“You called ma'am.” Remi tilted his head up to look at his mistress's face. The light brown fur around his mouth was matted from his meal. The rest of him was a slightly darker shade, reminding Veivina of dirt.

“Yes I did,” she replied coldly. She ran a hand over her spiraled horns on top of her head. “Those devil humans have started expanding their land in the way of this palace.” She waved her arms gesturing to the room.

“I am here to serve you ladyship. However you see fit.”

“Yes you will.”

“Then how do you—”

“SILENCE!” She thrust her wings out and towered over the little monkey. “You will not ask me useless questions but listen to orders. Do you understand me?”

“Yes mistress.” He said this so fearfully and quietly that the words were almost lost.

“Leave me at once.”

The monkey scampered back the way he’d come.

“Ugh.” Vevina twirled around and stalked through the doorway, her clawed feet echoing on the polished limestone floors. “Why can’t I just live a life without idiotic talking animals and those evil humans?”

She rested against the wall in the hallway, with her eyes closed.

The echo of a knock on the palace door aroused her attention.

“A visitor.” She chuckled lightly. “Who could that be?” She flew through a series of corridors to the oversized front door. She snapped her long, thin fingers, and the door swung open.

At the sight of the figure in the doorway, her features softened and her posture straightened. A thin smile tugged at her lips, like a man trying to lift a boulder that hasn't budged in over one hundred years.

“Vevina!” A streak of brown flew to the harpy and embraced her.

Gasping for air, Vevina stiffened and then let herself fall into the male harpy's arms. She breathed in his familiar lemon-citrus scent, mixed with something she couldn’t identify.

“You came back. . . .” She said dreamily, pulling herself back enough to gaze into his dazzling sea-blue eyes.

“I told you I would,” Actaeon said.

“I never doubted that, but you’ve been gone for over a millenia.” she whispered. Her lidless eyes started to mist.

“I couldn’t come back.” He frowned.

“Why?”

“You know.”

“You never told me,” she said.
“You didn’t get my letters?” He said this with so much regret that Vevina was almost angry at herself for making him feel that way.

“Oh no, oh no, no, no, no,” he howled. “How could that have happened? I was very careful.”

“What was in those letters that is of such high importance?”

“What I was doing, where, how, and... other things.”

“Well what were you doing?”

The rising sun, just visible over the collage of mountains, turned the sky vibrant shades of pink and red.

“I was...” He paused, eyes darting at every possible hiding place.

“Yes?” Vevina said, also looking around.

“I was...” He leaned forward into her ear and whispered, “Searching for dragons.”

“What?” She smiled. “Wait a second, dragons are extinct.”

“That’s what I thought too, until, da da da da.” He brought her out to the courtyard. There sat a marvelous blood-red dragon with a leather saddle on its back and a pouch across its chest.

“What did you—How did you find one?” she asked. The smell of the dragon hit her before the heat radiating off its body did.

Actaeon smirked excitedly and burst out, saying, “Not one. Two.” A pause. “Well one and a half.” He approached the dragon, patted its hide, and then took something out of the pouch. Hiding it behind his back, he walked back over to Vevina and revealed it.

In his hands was an egg, bigger than a basketball. Not just a normal chicken or eagle egg, but a dragon egg. The shell was the color of Vevina’s green eyes, shining brightly in the sun.

He handed it out for her, and Vevina steadily touched it, feeling its warm, almost pulsing body. She backed away, about to speak but then looked at the egg again. She took a step forward and held the egg.

It started to rumble. The egg shook, and then grew warm, pleasantly at first but it soon became unbearable, causing a yelp from Vevina.

She dropped the egg.

Time slowed as it fell.

Flares of blue erupted from the egg encircling it. A low hum began. The flares cycloned around the egg creating a raindrop like shell, blinding the two harrys and the red dragon.

The light burst.

Eyes burning, Vevina blinked the bright spots from her eyes.

And curled on the floor, sleeping soundly, was the most sublime creature she’d ever seen—a dragon.

CAMDEN SWINTON
Governor Thomas Johnson Middle School
Mrs. Molly Grimmer
Frederick County Literacy Chapter
THE CAT AND THE FISH

The Cat and the Fish, De Katt og de Fisk, Katten og fisken, the story goes by many names, but they all have the same meaning. This is a story of a young prince Havkatt named Fin, a fat bird, a tunnel of shining animals, a golden fish, and many other things. A postscript, if some of the story’s words seem as if they are spelled incorrectly, I can assure you they’re not. The Havkatt language consists of a mixture of English and Norwegian. Now, to the story.

-----------------

Fin swam skittishly around in the water, rushing back and forth between the jobs he was assigned to do. Catch this, do that, go fetch this for me, stuff like that. “So much for being prince.” He groaned, as his limbs and tail started to ache from all the swimming. His gills weakly pumped water in and out of his body. “I need... More air...” He gasped as he swam up to the surface. Fin gratefully breathed in the fresh, salty ocean air. He was a strange Havkatt. Instead of mainly filtering oxygen from the water like most of his species, he had small gills and large lungs that required air from the surface. He was made fun of by most of his kingdom, but was protected by his mother and father, the rulers of Havriket.

Fin glanced around at his surroundings. He spotted a Havfugl perching on a strand tree’s branch. He tucked in his limbs tightly to his stomach and launched at the bird. It squaked and thrashed its wings as Fin snatched it from the tree. Satisfied with his catch, a plump Havfugl, he trotted off towards the ocean. As he took one last deep breath, he noticed something in the water. An odd shine lined the top of the ocean waves. He dunked his head into the water and looked around. All the Havfisk and other animals were glowing. It was beautiful, as if they were made of gold.

Fin dived into the water, leaving behind the fat bird. He swam all the way to the ocean bed and laid down in the soft sand and looked up. All the creatures circled around him, forming a golden tunnel of animals. It was so incredible. He swam up through the tunnel, and once he reached the surface once again, he noticed the bird, and remembered his chores. Fin quickly ran towards the havfugl and scooped it up with his jaws. As he looked down in the water again, all the golden animals were gone. He sighed in disappointment, hoping he could of brought one of the snooty Havkatts over to the shining ocean to see the amazing sight.

Fin swam through the water, holding on to the bird tightly in his mouth. He dodged sharp rocks and Ål. As he neared towards Havriket, he saw something in the corner of his eye. A shiny havfisk. He quickly scurried over to a large rock and hid behind it. The fisk was large, and its scales shone brilliantly in the light. Fin quietly snuck up on it and grabbed it in his claws. The fisk squirmed around as he dug his claws into it. Small trickles of blood started to leak out of the fish. His eyes widened as the fisk began to go limp. He quickly let it go as it sank to the floor. He let out a sigh of relief as he saw the fisk’s gills slowly begin to move. He laid down by it and scratched at the sand.
THE CAT AND THE FISH, cont’d.

"What should I do?" He muttered helplessly, not like anyone would hear him. If he brought the fisk back, everyone would know that he wasn't a complete failure. “But the fisk... Would... Die.... He rolled over on his back and stared at the golden lump on the sand. The fisk slowly swam over to Fin and laid down on his paw. He understood now. It wasn’t worth risking the fisk’s life just to show it to some annoying Havkatts. It was a beautiful creature that deserved to live. "I'll leave you here." Fin meowed, carefully patting the fish on its head. He went to swim back to Havriket, and took one last glance behind him. He couldn’t believe the sight that was right in front of him. A beautiful animal that was like a cross between a fisk and a hund. It had silky, flowing fur and gleaming scales on its face. "Thank you for sparing my life." It barked. Fin stood in disbelief as it swam up and disappeared.
THE LEGEND OF THE BLUE STONES

“Hundreds of years ago, the father of the universe and the mother of everything in it decided to create multiple planets that could support life. Each one has its own mother and father. But for now we will look at only Earth. Earth’s father, God, and its mother, Mother Nature, decided to make this planet different from all the rest. They made the ocean, land, trees, grass, and at last living things. Mother made animals to use everything on earth. Then God made man.

Mother was concerned and suspicious about man, but quickly grew thoughtful of them. Mother was in the garden when man and woman disobeyed God’s command. Mother knew the serpent had done this, and quickly took away the arms and legs of the being. Mother knew that most living things were now able to commit sin, so she saved them.

Mother chose six different animals, each one for a different purpose around the colorful world. The Bear, the strength of wind and headstrong instincts for every living thing. The Wolverine, the destruction of all things and the psychic. The Otter, the strong current of all water and peacekeeper of land and water. The Fox, the physical and mental responsiveness of all living things. The Eagle, the protector of the sky, truth, wisdom, and all the power of freedom. And the Tiger, a ferocious representor of fearlessness and passion.

For many years they all worked in harmony to keep the world in balance. But as history tends to repeat itself, there was a fallout. Man knew they had dominance over all living things on earth, but no one was expecting them to go this far. Instead of taking care of the earth and everything in it, Man had chosen to destroy it. It started simple, cutting down trees for land and farming, but as the years went by they began to build cities. It was cities and then skyscrapers, then more buildings to house the other humans in them.

More land was being taken away from the wildlife. The animals living in the forests and the ground were all swept out, most of them by force. The six animals mother had chosen were to protect whatever land was left of theirs. They started a war with the humans.

The animals big and small joined the fight, in hopes of gaining power over man. It was a long, bloody fight that lasted hundreds of years. They took on large numbers of humans, always triumphing over each battle.

By now both sides had lost a large amount of their army. So the leaders of the human army sent a message through an eagle, to tell them that they wanted to meet and call a truce. The message was passed along to the sacred animals. They agreed to meet man.

The leaders of both sides met. They tried to reason with the other, but they started an argument. Knowing how much stronger the creatures were compared to them, the humans cast a spell on the animals.

‘These creatures are strong and bold,
But they are released from the grasp on which they hold,
Now they must wait for one to summon them,
An immortal being who can control the gem,
Until then they are confined to their blue cells,
The sands of time hold this spell.’

They trapped each beast in a single blue gem and locked them away. With no leaders to guide them, the animals surrendered. The meeker animals gave into the desires of man and became tame, while others who didn’t were released into the wild to fend for themselves. Man only thought of them as a game. They would watch the animals and wait, then after they got bored they would kill it. That’s how man worked, and that’s how animals became the way they are today.
THE LEGEND OF THE BLUE STONES, cont’d.

Many years have passed since the great beasts were trapped and mother has grown weaker from all the destruction caused by man. One day she summoned her daughter, Nynx. She told her daughter to give the gift of immortality and a soul bond to six children during one special year. She said, “These children shall be the ones to free my sacred companions from their blue cells. The soul bond is to signify they were to be paired with one of the beasts. The immortality that will be granted at birth will protect them from the dangers that lay ahead.”

Nynx had thought long and hard about what year she should give the gift to. She had asked her father, but he said, “My daughter, only you can know when the time is right.”

One special night on February 29th, she felt something was different. She asked her father about it and he smiled with delight. “My daughter,” he said, “The time has come. Six different souls were born today at midnight. Do you think they are the chosen ones to become immortal?”

Nynx concluded to her father that they were the six children her mother had asked her to find all those years ago. So with the power her mother had given her, Nynx gave the six new children the gifts. The children grew up to become strong, fearless warriors that would protect those who cannot protect themselves. They shall be with their partner until the end of time and the sign of peace to all whom they meet. And they all shall like the fox the most! The end!

“That’s not how the story ends Alba!” the young girl poked her head out from under the gray comforters said, “Tell me the real ending!” The glowing blue vixen chuckled a little as she shifted her position to curl up closer to the human girl. “I already told you the ending though,” the fox sighed as she began to feel herself growing tired very slowly. The young girl tried to say something but a yawn came out instead. The fox opened one eye and rested her head on the girl's stomach. “Seems as though someone should go to bed, yes?” the fox quipped. The girl reached up her hand and began to gently stroke the glowing blue fur as she closed her eyes. It was quiet for a while until the whisper escaped the young girl’s mouth. “Will we ever find the others? ”

The vixen, still somewhat awake, stared up at the girl with half lidded eyes and said, “Of course we'll find the others. We will find Ajay the wolverine, Orion the bear, Sabre the otter, Armani the eagle, and Lilith the tiger. We will find them and their partners one day when your just a little older, I promise.”

“Do you really promise? That we’re gonna find them all one day?”

“I swear on my soul that we will find them Alisha.”

And with that, the fox’s glowing grew dim until it disappeared. The young girl touched the slightly glowing blue gem that hung around her neck. The girl closed her eyes and faintly smiled, feeling safe and protected from the darkness of the night.

CAROLINE OLIVER
Saint Joan of Arc School
Mrs. Wendy Baur
Harford County Literacy Chapter
HIDDEN IN DARWIN LAB

Grade 7
2nd Place Winner

They. They were all Brooke Harrison could think about as she listened to her teacher drone on about fractions. She stared pensively out of the window of her classroom, wondering what would happen next. How will they find me? What will they do? She thought about what would happen to her friends, family, her entire world. Suddenly, a voice emerged from the loudspeaker. “Miss Harrison, please report to the office.” The whole class immediately started whispering, spinning their webs of lies as to what would happen to Brooke. Brooke rose from her seat, hands shaking and stomach churning. She walked out of the classroom and into the hallway, not knowing what would happen next.

As Brooke approached the principal’s office, she had an inking that they knew what she did. Although she was nervous, she kept her composure and entered with confidence. That confidence flew out of her after she saw who Principal Brown was with.

“Miss Harrison,” he said, “these lovely scientists would like to talk to you.” He gestured to three men in white lab coats cowering in the corner, not at all focused on what the principal was saying.

One of them snapped their heads forward and said, “Hello, Brooke! We’d like to have a quick word with you. My name is Dr. Kellan, and we would like to discuss what happened last week at the Darwin Lab. Our security cameras picked up a suspicious character breaking in. Do you think you would have any idea who the criminal would be?” Criminal. That word destroyed Brooke, making her fully realize what she had done. Still, she wouldn’t let up. She couldn’t.

“No, sir. The students here are good kids.”

“Do you know anyone else who it could be?” He paused for a moment, contemplating whether he should say something. “Maybe it was...you? If this was your action, then fess up now.”

Brooke felt a shiver go through her spine, wondering if she should tell the truth or lie. She decided to tell the latter.

“I wasn’t in there. I’ve never been in that place in my life,” Brooke said, hoping that her lie was convincing.

“Well,” another scientist said as he showed a CD, “we have proof that you were there.” He stuffed the CD into the archaic TV and they all watched Brooke snooping around a small room, grabbing vials and shoving them in her pockets as she went. After the video, the scientist blandly said, “We were hoping that you’d admit to your error, but now we have to resort to force.” Out of nowhere, two beefy guards came from behind her and pinned her arms behind her back.

“Hey, what are you doing? Let go of me!” Brooke screamed. “If only you would’ve cooperated,” the three men said in unison. One guard stabbed a syringe into Brooke’s right arm, and everything went black.

Brooke woke up, groggy as ever, and found herself lying on the floor. It wasn’t just any floor; it was the floor of a cell in Darwin Lab. She remembered this floor, because it was where she took the dolosmin. This chemical was her savior, and not enough could lead to getting exiled or worse.

“Why are you holding me here? Let me go!” Brooke yelled at the same two guards.

“Don’t respond, just like boss told us,” one guard muttered under his breath to the other. Brooke had enough of this nonsense, so she pulled out a hairpin and bent it while the guards were conversing about the recent football game. She slipped her hand between the bars and quietly snatched the padlock. She then stuck the hairpin into the lock and gently twisted it. It opened as Brooke muttered a quick “Thank goodness!” and quietly snuck out of the cell and towards the adjacent room.

She peered inside the door, making sure that nobody was there. When she saw that the coast was clear, Brooke walked in. It was a large, dark room that reeked of mildew and hopelessness. There were cells like hers lining the walls that seemed to go on for ages. What surprised her most was what were inside the cells. There were tall, bulky, green creatures with long, wavy purple hair that fell to their shoulders. They had human like features, except their forked tongues and third eye on their forehead. The creatures were only clothed with rags and worn shoes for their immensely large feet. The only difference
between all of them was the red mark on each of their stomachs, which varied for each. The worst part about this discovery is that they were all like Brooke. At this point, Brooke was utterly shocked. *My brothers and sisters, all here? Why and how did they get captured?* After a bit of thought, she found the scientists’ motive: power. There were tubes connected to the ears of the creatures, extracting a gray liquid, almost a gel. She knew of this substance, for it dripped from her ears everyday. Well, everyday before she started taking dolosmin. This substance was called energosia, which can power even the largest of things. One drop would give you a 20-year supply or power. What they were powering, Brooke was unsure of. However, she couldn’t focus on that now. She needed to free her brothers and sisters, but how. They would obviously be noticed as soon as they stepped out the door. Suddenly, an idea popped into Brooke’s head and she knew what she had to do. Since Brooke had been in this lab before, she knew her way around. She exited the cell room and crept into the main one where she was held. The guards were gone now, which was great for her sake. There was a short hallway to the right, with linoleum flooring and a single room at the end. She ran towards the room, her black Uggs stomping against the ground. Brooke entered the room, and inside there was a metal table with rows and rows of dolosmin in small beakers. She figured it would be enough with plenty to spare, but how would she transport the dolosmin to them? She decided to take the entire table with her. Brooke unlocked each cell holding the creatures. The creatures were nervous at first, for they didn’t know her. Brooke eventually coaxed them out of their cages and poured a single drop of dolosmin on their stomach marks. They suddenly began to shrink, their green skin turned into various different skin tones and their third eye disappeared. Their forked tongues combined into one, and soon they looked like average teenagers with the exception of their clothes.

“Do you speak English?” Brooke asked. One stepped forward and said, “Yes, savior. We will follow your every command in return for releasing us.”

“Well friends,” Brooke said, “I can get you out of here.” She lead them towards the main room, and soon the exit was in reach. As soon as she touched the doorway, she had an epic realization. *I can’t just leave them in the real world, especially since the scientists could come after them. They should come with me.* Before Brooke could get them out, she heard footsteps getting closer and closer. It was the scientists. “Run, run! Get out of here! They’re after you!” Brooke yelled. They bolted out of the door, and Brooke saw a large forest beyond the tall hill on which Darwin Lab stood. Unfortunately, the hill was too steep and not fit for running. The smallest of the creatures began to pipe up. “Here, let’s use this!” she said as she retrieved a large sheet of metal and passed it to Brooke. They all mounted the makeshift sled as the footsteps became louder. *This is crazy. I can’t lead an army of unknown creatures being chased by some insane scientists and their guards.* Brooke was thinking this would be the end of her, but she had to leave this lab as soon as possible. “One, two, three!” she exclaimed. They sped down the hill, gliding against the smooth grass and rushing into the deep forest, where new adventures awaited.
Life, objectively, was dreadful. As mass amounts of men fell apart under the mounds of no man's land, some even forgot the date of that day. The inability to walk from a disease with a name coined from this very circumstance notoriously swept across the muddy ditches. Truly, many lethal diseases were given memorable phrases that made life here all the more enjoyable. Trench foot, trench fever, shell shock; whatever form it took, it killed men further among their anatomy. It killed their pride, manhood, mental state, and the most human gift of all: their will to live.

Waking up could be considered a living hell. The hollers of commanding officers, the shrieks of bullets just above the dugout their heads rested in was the closest thing to birds. Bombs went off and shrapnel scattered across the ground. Many soldiers leave this world-outside-of-a-world never forgetting the volume they opened their eyes to.

Except on Christmas day.

It started with the British. Waking up early (to those who even slept) was a deafening and disturbing silence. Some men panicked thinking they were left in the middle of the night. The lack of intensity could be considered unsettling after three long months of muddy hallways and barbed wires. As the men realized the stillness they were enduring was not a dream, they hobbled around with each other to see a big sign posted upon the front: 'Merry Christmas', held up by four burlap sandbags facing the enemy. To this day, no one knows who put up that sign. It sent a reminder to everyone the date, and some took that cue more optimistically than others.

Minutes later, another sign was propped up: "Fröhliche Weihnachten." It was on the enemy's side.

As the hours progressed, the depression of the men increased. They were so exhausted. As they looked on across the fields of bodies and barbed wire, they wondered how different the trenches on the other side were. Some souls making a final plea gave up and peeked their heads above the sandbags. At first, it was a quick jolt, just to check they wouldn't be shot. As the humane silence remained, they became more trusting of the enemy. All it took was one person waving to indicate something bigger than humans themselves. One man waving became five, then fifteen, and so forth. One man from the Germans waving became five, then fifteen, and so forth. The lines became blurred as the solemn feeling of a melody drifting had surfaced. The melancholy tune of Oh Holy Night emerged from the broken souls' lips as a beg that no one truly knew the purpose of. Whether it be they wanted to be shot, or they wanted to be heard, not by the whispers of gunshots but by a crying voice much louder than the former in meaning. If Christmas caroling in the trenches was their hubris, they were too mentally gone to accept any other fate. The crying harmony was hard to be heard over the commander's screams to be quiet, but at some point even they were too tired to give up.

Then, someone made the ultimate calculated risk.

Two British soldiers looked at each other with glassy eyes, nodded, and climbed out of the trenches. Hands-on their head they did away with their officer's commands and sprinted. The song Oh Holy Night never ceased to stop being crooned from either side.

The British soldiers stopped in the middle of No Man's Land. Through the fog and mist appeared a mirror of themselves in German uniform. While the outfit may have been different, the eyes, the hands, the quiver of their lips as they made eye contact was uncanny. The four men stood there for a minute in which everything else faded except them. No one would chase them back, these four men could run away together and live on their lives MIA in peace. Everyone would just assume they killed each other. After a long while of staring, German soldier Hoffman shook hands with Lieutenant Adams.

"Dies ist ein so langer Krieg und wir sind alle so müde,"

This has been such a long war, and we're so tired.
In that second, the men's mind fell apart. How could someone so horrible and vile and disgusting and-

They aren't vile. They're me. They are everything I am scared of and proud of.

What a shame that these mirrored men had to meet with their minds in shambles.

The men in whatever broken answer they could muster explained what the next twenty-four hours would look like. A truce would be called until the end of Christmas, at midnight. During this truce, no guns would be fired, no acts of aggression would be tolerated, and no opposite soldier could enter their trenches. The men faced away, ran to their respective trench, and told the news.

After everyone was aware of this arrangement, alcohol was gathered. The Brits took all the goods they had, including one soccer ball. Twenty men each approached the center of No Man's Land and saw the Germans reflecting their actions. They had brought a single plum along with two gallons of German-style beer. Conversations were the same as the first in which all of them realized how similar they were. The feeling of talking to these enemies was the same as meeting an old primary school friend. Everyone felt like they all came from the same place. Images of the horrible, good-for-nothing, inhuman beings on the other side was shattered with a single handshake.

Throughout the day, the soldiers lied on the field speaking. There were a few people who spoke a little of either language and translated for circles of people. The main topics discussed were how tired they were, how they thought the war was going to end, and similar matters. There was no point of conversation where either side wished them well. No one planned to be encouraging, at least until Adams threw the soccer ball at Hoffman. There was a moment of silence and being stunned until Hoffman came up laughing. From that point, the two opposite battalions formed up into a soccer game.

The scores of the game from Christmas day aren't truly remembered, but it is a fact that the match ended in belly laughs and drinking those three bottles of alcohol to the last drop.

The entire time, the men felt as if they were in some sort of haven. The same soil that grenades were launched over is now where enemies were singing drunken songs alike. Despite the lack of verbal communication, everything felt so... human. For the first time after a long time, the anxiety and depression faded into happy tunes. The two troops almost seemed to combine into one barrage of laughs and jokes, like a family reunion. By the end of their time in No Man's Land, they felt like a family.

The time was around six o'clock, three hours after the sun had set. Even though the sun would set early in Germany, the commanding officers took this as the beginning of the end. Leaders on both sides commanded everyone to return to the trenches and get ready for midnight. This exchange was probably the weirdest of the entire truce. The glances at the opposite side were now with the hyperawareness that they were to kill each other in six hours. Some took those six hours to rest until they heard gunshots, and others on the German side sang Oh Holy Night until eleven o'clock. This time there was no response from the British.

Surprisingly, even the commanding officers were too moved to begin yelling orders at midnight. They looked around at their slightly tipsy men and collectively decided to hold off things until the other side decided to shoot. However, the whistle of a bullet never crossed the field until six in the morning the next day. For six whole hours, officers sat with their eyes closed, waiting to hear anything. At three in the morning, the only thing heard from the other side was:

"Hat dir das Bier gefallen?" Did you like the beer?

One British soldier had replied saying it was weak but they were grateful. That was the only thing heard that night.
CHRISTMAS IN THE TRENCHES, cont’d.

The Germans were the first to fire. Three whistles came by and hit the "A Merry Christmas" sign. Eventually, the same happened to the German's sign. Lieutenant Adams cringed inwardly as he continued orders. Everything humane that these men had built together was gone. In mere seconds, all the care and attention given to their words was wiped away with explosions. Nobody was looking back. Every bullet fired was ten times louder than before Christmas. Though it was too far to hear, the soldiers would swear they could hear the breaking of their new friends' bones when they shot.

Adams eventually had to pick up a sniper after the previous wielder was shot down. He put his eyes through the scope and saw Hoffman, pointing at him with his sniper. Both of the men were too afraid to look away. There were a split few moments before either fired. The same, mirrored thoughts were running through their heads:

*Oh, Holy Night,*
*How could someone so horrible and vile,*
*stars are brightly shining,*
*They are everything I am scared of and proud of,*
*It is the night,*
*This has been such a long war, and we’re so tired.*
*of our dear savior’s birth.*

Both men closed their eyes and fired at each other. Neither missed their target.
It’s been a while since I’ve been here. I only remember fragments of my past life - the smiles, the laughter, the warmth. The hot chocolate with marshmallows, and peppermint, and the perfect hint of cinnamon on icy days, and sticky, strawberry-red popsicles on sweltering days. The big Thanksgiving feasts during the last trickle of November. Jumping into the piles of maroon-red leaves, only to rake them up again, piling them higher and higher. The days of sledding, from morning to evening, down the steep hill across the street.

Yes, I remember it here.

Now, as I drift along the neat little rows of houses, I remember when I was once with the people there, remember all the years of yard sales and Halloween costume parades and shoveling snow together. It is winter now, yet the snow has not begun to fall. The people are dressed in thick coats and warm hats and fuzzy gloves. Little puffs of air, like small clouds, accompany their breaths. I remember being bundled up, when I was younger, in layers and layers of coats, to ward off the cold. But now, I don’t feel the cold at all. Some families are raking leaves, while others sit and smile at each other on their doorsteps, drinking warm cups of freshly-brewed coffee. I smile and wave at them, but they don’t wave back.

They don’t even look at me.

I sigh as I move on, to a little park, the green broken bottle near the dull bluish trash can, the neatly-trimmed trees along the edges of the park, the mounds of tiny pebbles, sparkling like gems in the dust. I remember running to the swingset as a child, and climbing onto one of the swings, begging my big brother to push me. I look back to the swingset, the cracks in the plasticy-leather seats, the chains rusted and old, creaking with every breath of the wind. And there, I see a child, a mirror of myself, being pushed by an older brother, laughing and shouting. I wish I could go back and sit in a swing again, and feel the ground rush towards me, and feel the swoop of adrenaline in my stomach, and whoop to greet the sky. I smile at the children and say hello. They don’t glance at me, like I’m an old toy, gathering dust in an attic somewhere.

And across from the swingset, I see a bubbling brook, weaving and sparkling in the sun, like a mermaid’s tail. I remember that I used to stand in the brook during the summer, when the water was cool, but not ice cold, and little transparent minnows swam with the current. I remember that I would stand in the creek and watch the water pile up in front of me, before it wormed its way behind me. I feel an impulse, now, to step in the creek and feel the water tease and splash my feet. But, when I step in the brook, the water merely weaves along, as if it, too, doesn’t care that I exist.

When I step out of the brook I feel myself drawn to a little path near the park, pale and bare. Slowly, I glide along the path, past the glossy needles of the evergreen trees, past the dying grass, next to the people walking together. Unhurriedly, I float down the path, wondering where I am going.

I take turn after turn, until I see it.

A small house; the doorstep is cracked, and the walls choked with ivy. A sea of cream colored residue and scabs of yellow paint remain from the memories of when the house was once a proud yellow. The grass around the house has grown tall and brown and dying, the flowers in the garden have faded from pink to colorless, like an old photo of a memory, abandoned and forgotten in the dust.

And as I look through the dusty windows, I see my mother, her silvery blonde hair dipping over her eyes, spindly fingers clasped in her lap, sitting at the dining room table. Squinting through the window, through the years of dust and dirt, I look hard, hoping to see her smile - but her face is pallid and dark, and her mouth is thin and hardened, as if she hasn’t smiled in years. I almost tap on the window, but I think better of it and drift to the door, which was once a gleaming red. Now, the paint is chipped, and the color has gone over the years.
HOME, cont’d.

I raise my fist to knock on the door, but when I knock on the door, my hand sinks through, like a knife through melting butter. Slowly, as if pulled by an invisible force, I step through the door, like it is only a shaft of air. I glide to the faded blue dining room, where my mother is.

I swallow, and continue into the dining room.

“...Mom?”

She doesn’t look up, and when I try to touch her shoulder, my hand passes into her. Quickly, I withdraw my hand, with a sickening sensation in my stomach. Why doesn’t she hear me? Why won’t she even look at me?

“Mom!” I say, louder.

She doesn’t turn, and I want to shake her, anything to make her turn and see me, and hear me. Desperate, I flit through the dining table to face her. I look into her dull gray eyes, and see that their brightness, like the light of an extinguished candle, has disappeared over the years. My mouth felt suddenly dry, and my hands trembled in rhythm to my racing heartbeat. What was happening? Why didn’t anyone see me?

Suddenly, I wake up with a yelp. I turn to look at my desk, where my computer is waiting, nearly buried beneath mountains of files and papers, and I remember that I haven’t been home in a while. I think back to the years I spent at my job at the office, the nonstop projects, calls and interviews, the years of flying from country to country on numerous business trips.

I grab my phone from my nightstand, and checking it, I see four missed calls from my mother, and more messages, asking me to join her for Thanksgiving dinner. With a sudden jolt, I remember I didn’t come to the last Thanksgiving, either, and the one before, and the one before, and the one before—well, I don’t really remember.

With a sigh, I glance back at the mountain of work on my desk, worth job promotions, and get out of bed. I pull a suitcase from my closet and begin to pack it with clothes.

I’m going home.

VARSHA MARRAPATI
Ellicott Mills Middle School
Mrs. Riley
Howard County Literacy Chapter
YUSUF’S ORIGIN

Yusuf was young. He always thought he had all the time in the world. He procrastinated everything, including his chores and his daily prayers. The latter of the two was subject of much negative criticism from his mother. Yusuf knew that when he walked into his house, his mom would start in on him. Beginning with whether or not he had prayed, why he was so late, why he didn’t go to the Bazaar followed by yelling at him again for not praying, and then telling him to go to sleep. Yusuf always protested to his mother ordering him to sleep, but he thought that it was quite late tonight and he had planned on not arguing on that point. So, as Yusuf walked in, everything he thought would happen, happened. He went to bed, thinking, should I change my life?

Yusuf woke up early the next day trying to get a head start before most of the soldiers reported to their duties. He passed by two old men sitting on a bench murmuring to each other.

“Did you hear Harris? A ship full of Italian merchants is arriving today! I have been meaning to get my wife something foreign!”

“Ah Bilal! Leave the Italians, most of their goods are just junk!”

“Now to be fair, I heard they made decent jewelry at the Smith.”

“The Fine Smith’ trumps anything that those foreigners make!”

That conversation confirmed what Yusuf had been looking into: a ship full of Italian merchants. He reckoned that about forty to fifty people will bustle out of that ship when it docks. Yusuf also thought that the most likely place for the ship to dock would be on the mainland, so he started making his way there. He passed by the Galata Tower, with its green shingles glistening in the rising sun’s light, he stroked his slightly bearded chin and marveled at the spire’s architecture. Konstantinyye truly has the most wondrous buildings in all of the world. He reached the northern docks right when the Dock Boss came, so Yusuf tried to hurry along before the boss spotted him...to late.

“Yusuf!” Yusuf wheeled around slowly.

“Yes sir?”

“What in the Sultan’s name are you up to this morning?”

“Nothing sir, just about to go to the market.” The Dock Boss rolled his eyes, arched his back and offered,

“Yusuf, when you decide to stop being a petty thief and want to make an honest and profitable living, the docks of Northern Galata are open to you.”

“Alright sir”

“No, I’m serious! When you're ready, go sign that paper on the wall over there. With Sultan Selim’s new campaigns, the docks will be a busy place for exports.” He pointed to a wall on one of the storage buildings then continued, “I will make sure to pay you well, not to mention a hefty sum of a pension, granted I live long enough.”

“Alright sir.” Yusuf walked away from the cargo sector of the Galata docks towards the ferry side, while the Dock Boss turned to his son.

“Papo, I don't understand why you would offer him a job, he's a thief, and will likely cheat you if he works for you!”

“Hush Sufi, I see something in this boy. When I die and you are in charge, I hope you will see it too. Yusuf is special.”

Yusuf was on the creaky, barnacle-covered ferry, bound for mainland Konstantinyye. The sun was in the air and the sky was turning a bright blue. He turned southward and spotted numerous trade ships and pondered, one is my prize, one is my prize. Yusuf quickly shuffled off the ship, then sat on a nearby bench and waited.

Five ships passed by his spot, all with merchants native to Turkey, but the sixth, the sixth had seemingly wealthier people with lighter hair and skin tones. Yusuf stood up and made his way to where the boat would dock. People piled out, with servants carrying their goods and trunks. He bumped into a young man, about the same age as him, who sported a spiffy coat and a hat, and looked mature beyond his age. Yusuf quickly stole his coin pouch. He was surprised at the weight of the boy’s purse, I should
make a decent profit for the whole month today! As Yusuf trotted past a woman while swiping her gold sack, he felt a hand grip his shoulder. Yusuf whipped his face 180 degrees in sheer horror, only to be met by the same young man with a wide grin on his face.

“Hello friend! Why the scared face?” Yusuf looked in shock, “Do you think you could carry my cargo? Well, of course you will!”

“But, sir I have to-” Yusuf started.

“Nonsense!” The lad cheerily countered, and handed Yusuf two heavy trunks, “Hurry up pal, you must show me this beautiful city! No skyline in Europa looks quite like this!”

“Sir, half of Konstantinyye is Europa…”

“See, you’re a smart boy. Why do you need to pilfer people?” Yusuf stuttered, “What’s your name?”

“Yusuf, sir”

“Alright, stop calling me sir, my name is Ezio.”

“Okay…Ezio”

Yusuf led the cheery Ezio around the mainland, all while carrying his suitcases. They passed by the Topkapi Palace, the Blue Mosque, and then they came to the Great Bazaar. Ezio was in awe at the size and variety of goods. He smelled various spices carried by the winds of trade, heard people shouting their competitive prices and the clanging of metal in the distance.

“Yusuf?”

“Mhm?”

“Use the akçe you borrowed from me to buy a ring.” Yusuf shook his head and shared that most artisan goods are too pricey in the Bazaar district, and that he knew a smith near his house that would have a decent price as well as astounding quality. Yusuf rapidly led Ezio to some remaining landmarks in the city. The sun was descending and a loud voice cut through the busy Ottoman day, singing.

“Yusuf, what is that?” inquired Ezio.

“The call for prayer.” he quietly replied.

“Well, go on, pray then.”

“What?”

“You heard me Yusuf, go on and pray.” Yusuf strolled into the Hagia Sophia like it was a foreign land. He placed his sandals in the neat row designated for shoes, while he gazed at the intricate architecture. Ezio strode towards a corner, leaned against it and folded his arms. More people filed in, racing for front row spots. The same man’s smooth voice said another call for prayer, which was promptly followed by the Imam starting the prayer. Yusuf prayed, for himself, his mother and for change.

Afterwards Yusuf made his way to where Ezio stood, and they both trekked towards the docks as half of the sky was turning a stunning gold, followed by a majestic pink. They crossed the Bosphorus, on another aged boat. Ezio was amazed at the beauty of the approaching sunset.

The two fellows arrived at “The Fine Smith,” and Ezio made his way to order but Yusuf stopped him.

“I’ll buy it for you, what kind of ring do you want?”

“Ah, there’s no need” Ezio replied kindly.

“What kind of ring would you like Ezio?” Yusuf retaliated.

“A solid steel ring with both sides of this city carved within.” Both men smiled. Yusuf took out ‘his’ pouch of money and gave the order to the shopkeeper, who, like a shot, started on the ring.

“Ezio, c’mon.”

“Huh, what?”

“One more place to show you.” They passed through alleys and old streets, kids throwing balls, Janissaries beating a man, and a beggar begging. Yusuf flicked a couple of coins in the man’s hat, and kept walking with Ezio. They reached the Galata Tower, and Yusuf motioned to the door, Ezio walked in.
YUSUF’S ORIGIN, cont’d

After the long flight of stairs they were at the top. Ezio took in the panoramic scene of the sunset. The Hagia Sophia, Topkapi Palace and the Bazaar were plainly visible from his vantage. So was the shimmering Bosphorus strait and the Urban Jungles of either sides.

“Thank you Yusuf.” Ezio whispered into the Konstantiniyye wind.

“Thank you Ezio.” Yusuf muttered into the splendid sunset. He turned around and Ezio was gone. Gone like the day. Gone like his old life. Gone like his plunders from this morning. The void filled with gratitude, satisfaction, and a peace of mind. He climbed down the steps of the tower and wandered the streets of Galata hoping to catch a glimpse of Ezio, but to no avail. The sky he had witnessed with Ezio just minutes earlier had turned an evening blue. He walked to “The Fine Smith,” and asked if he saw the Italian man he was with. The shopkeeper nodded affirmative and handed him an ornate wooden box. The box had a carving on the lid; a cityscape, the Ayasofya and some buildings on one side, and the Galata tower on the other, with the sun perched on the Bosphorus knotting the scene together. There was a note inside, saying,

_I will make sure to see you again Yusuf, make smart decisions._

-Ezio

Yusuf’s head felt clear and content that he would see his friend again. He sauntered towards the docks and then to the wall of the storage house. Without hesitation, he signed his name neatly on the paper and looked at the water. Amazing, he thought. _Konstantiniyye is beautiful_. He raced home in the Ottoman moonlight, grasping the details of his home, the events of the day, and eager to finally answer his mother’s first question with a nod.
LOTUS

My eyes flutter open, the recollection of what occurred the previous night washing over me, the ocean of flashbacks engulfing my mind in an abyss of despair. I close my eyes once more, and my mother's face peers back at me. I hear her call out a reminder of security and reassurance.

“Don’t worry,” she stated, “everything is going to be alright.”

That was before the guards arrived and escorted her out of the house. Even before they came, there was a tone in her voice that revealed that she was apprehensive. I wanted to shriek, but I knew that if I cried out, the guards would locate me and take me away too.

I open my eyes again and I see my dwelling, eerily void of noise.

Wonderful, I thought, they abandoned the hunt.

I glance over at the bed adjacent to mine, the one where my sister laid, remaining unremarkably dormant. I arose from my bed, my legs still stark from suppressing myself from the ganders of the guards the evening before. My sister gives out a hushed whimper, likely having the same visualizations that I did: a recap of last night’s nightmare. I tenderly shake her awake, and her body instinctively spasms, awakening her. She surveys me fearfully, the expression in her eyes telling me that she believes that I may be one of the guards. Her hair still covers most of her face, making it look like an almond sprinkled with swaths of sable string.

After assuring my sister that I am not present to maim her, she whispers in an unnerved voice, “Are they gone?” I nod my head, both of us darting our eyes to the shadows, but they are unoccupied. I make a quick sweep of the house to ensure that it is uninhabited by anyone aside from us, then I turn to speak to my sibling.

“Willow, you need to be sure to stay by me as much as you can, alright? We need to stick together if we have any hope of seeing Mom again.” Tears well in her eyes as she gives a brief motion towards the pendant that my mom gave me only moments before the guards arrived. It held a lotus, the plant that shares my name. Tears began to stream down my face, no longer contained by the eyes that stare at the flowered medallion. Seeing the lotus throws me back into the events of the invasion.

I hear the sirens blare, the screeching noise disorienting me. I see the fear and worry in my mother’s face, fully aware of what is happening. The gunshots came soon after that, then the screaming. My sister and I had no idea as to what was happening, swiftly handed me the pendant and pushed us into a closet, shrouding us in darkness. I peeked through the crack at the bottom, just barely able to make out her face, her eyes staring directly at mine. She said the phrase that pierced my heart and the guards charged in, their white uniforms and rifles different from the ones I recognize as the uniforms of the guards that live in my town. Their eyes were filled with contempt, far different from the mercy that I often see from the guards I know. They dragged my screaming mother out, but I could not make out any of the words that she was saying.

I force myself back into the present when Willow grasps my hand, which is beginning to crush the frail pendant. I soften my grip on the pendant, still confused about what I recollected. I turn to Willow and, hiding my confusion and depression, say, “We can’t stay in the same place for long. We should look for somewhere more hidden.”

“What about Mommy, Lotus? Are you going to find her?”

I sigh. I already know that she is probably dead. Concealing this thought, I respond, “That is what I want to do soon, but she would want us to find somewhere where we won’t be caught before we make any plans to save her.” I see a smile flicker on her face, but it disappears as suddenly as it appeared.

“Don’t worry,” she stated, “everything is going to be alright.”

We abscond from the house, but the view of the rubble stops us before we can go farther than a few feet. There is dust on everything that I can see and few buildings remain standing. Everything that I knew, everything that I grew up with and cherished, is gone, masked by a shroud of dust and smoke. A shriek fills the air, the source close in proximity to me. I glare at my sister and she looks back at me with guilt.
Maybe she still has a few things to learn.

Another sound fills the air, further away this time. This sound is of elation, as if the sound of despair excites them. A shout follows soon after.

“We have another one!”

“Can you be quiet? They’ll hear you.”

Footsteps began to echo, growing louder at each step. Our footsteps began to echo as well, attempting to outdistance our hunters. We dive into one of the few houses that remained standing, hiding in a closet that appeared to be similar to the one that my mom stuffed me and Willow in yesterday. The footsteps draw ever closer, following the prints that our feet made in the soot. They hear us before they spot us, our breathing too harsh to conceal. The closet door opens, revealing two lean figures, neither of which donning the white outfits that haunted my thoughts. Instead, they wore identical black jackets and black pants.

One of them begins to talk soothingly, reminding me of a pet owner coaxing their animal. “It’s alright, children. You’ll be safe if you stay with us.”

They are blocking the only exit. There is no possible way that we can decline the offer. After waiting to see if they would let us leave, I relent. “I suppose we have no choice. I guess we’ll follow.”

They sigh in relief, making me worry even more for our safety. My sister remains silent, but I know that she is starting to think the same thing. We follow the two people, who direct us to a pile of rubble that was likely once a house. We enter the rubble locating a staircase that takes us down to a pair of steel doors.

Out of nowhere, a voice says, “State your name and role.”

The man who coaxed us speaks first. “Panthe, Captain.”

The second man sighs and grunts, “Lycan, Captain.”

The voice sounds out again. “Do you have any refugees?”

“Yes, we have two.” Panthe turns to us. “Please, state your name, age, and gender.”

My sister speaks first. “Willow, 8, Female.”

Still not entirely sure that we are safe, I cautiously say, “Lotus, 14, Male.”

“Welcome, Willow and Lotus. Please take your name tags before entering.” A nearby chute dispenses the tags and the doors open, the groaning of the mechanism silencing anything more that the voice says. I fasten the tag on my shirt and walk past the doors, straight into paradise.

The plaster walls are coated in decorations and statues of previous leaders of the town. The marble floor hugs a fountain in the middle of the room. Doors and gates span under arches of foliage and one message: “Servo in unionem!”

I look at Panthe, silently asking what the phrase means. He gives me a toothy grin and says, “It’s from an ancient language called Latin. It means ‘Save the union’.”

“What union is it referring to?” I ask.

Panthe, looking wary, sends a nervous glance to Lycan. He sighs. “Centuries ago, the land that we are standing on was known as Europe. In those times, the United States, the ruler of most of the continent, was intent on developing nuclear weaponry to battle against an opposing power known as Russia. There was an accident in one of their plantations, and all of the bombs detonated, wiping the entirety of Earth clean. Few survived the incident. Those that remained formed a union to help one another survive. That union dissolved when there are more than 10,000 people, but the greed of the population made it so that the world was worse off when the union disbanded. Our goal is to reform the union and ensure that nuclear weapons are never to be attempted to be developed again; the population will likely not survive another incident like the one that killed billions.” Remaining silent, Willow and I allow ourselves to be escorted to our new home.
Once we are left alone, Willow and I decide to view every corner of our home. It looks similar to the one we lived in this morning, but everything seems to be more artificial, as if the home is trying to conceal us from the world above our heads. There is also a distinct lack of windows, giving us the impression that we would be thrown into darkness if we ever choose to turn off the lights. The only natural part of our confinement is a single potted plant, but even that is starting to wither away, likely giving us an example of what is going to happen if we stay here for a long time. I check to see if there are any devices or bugs that can record sound, but there was nothing suspicious. Getting over my worry that we are being watched, I turn to Willow and begin talking to her to keep both of us entertained.

“How are you feeling?”
“Don’t know how I should feel,” she responds. “We are stuck in this building and we have no way to find Mommy.”
“I know, but we can still find her. It is better if we are here anyway, we aren’t out in the open anymore. These people will protect us from the guards that took her; they may even be able to help us find her if we can gain their trust.”
“What if they don’t trust us?”
I sigh. “Then we will have to make them trust us. Panthe and Lycan can help us convince everyone else. They may be our only chance of finding her.”
Willow gives me a menacing glare, but finally relents. “How are we going to convince them?”
“I’m unsure about Lycan, but Panthe seems to trust us. They are both captains, which might be one of the higher ranks here, so Panthe should be the only person that we need to convince.”
A knock resonates from the door. “Do you two want breakfast?” The voice is Panthe’s. I look at Willow and we make a silent agreement to continue the discussion later. I open the door and find Panthe alone.

“Where’s Lycan?” I ask.
“He’s working on a project. He didn’t tell me what it was, but it may be concerning you two.” He glares at us, suggesting that he is keeping something hidden. He retrieves his usual smile. “I can lead the two of you to the cafeteria. Follow me, please.” Without giving us a chance to return to our home, he escorts us to the nearest dining hall.
The hall is as artificial as the living quarters that we were stuffed in. Only one thing stood out; a woman with glossy gold hair, a woman that looked eerily familiar. She looks our way and her mouth widens to a smile that filled me with warmth. Willow found out who it was before I did.

“Mommy!” she yelled, probably scaring any animals that dared to live here. Willow runs to our mother, who hugs her and then looks at me.
“Lotus,” she says, “are you going to come and give me a hug as well?”
I rush towards her, allowing her to embrace me. We look at one another with glee, letting our tears flow.

Maybe this isn’t the worst place to end up.
Esmé stumbled up the oddly dark staircase to her apartment, groaning at the prospect of the power being out in the entire building. Thankfully, the fluorescent, hospital-esque lights that had welcomed her to floor six for the past seventeen years were blazing through her narrow hallway like usual. She fumbled through her purse, searching for keys and swearing under her breath when she could not find them. The roar of a siren carried through the paper-thin walls, briefly interrupting some electronica music emanating from a room across the hall. Although Esmé had never seen the inhabitants of that noisy apartment, she was acutely aware of their presence, and felt some strange connection to them. Straight out of college, she suspected, as almost everyone who lived in the run-down complex was. Esmé broke from trying to retrieve her keys and pressed her ear against their door in curiosity. Young voices yelled indecipherable words both over each other and the music, proving their innocence and arrogance, the false sense of self-importance they had that she herself had once possessed.

In a tired daze, Esmé half-heartedly patted down her pockets until she found an unmistakably key-like bump. She hurriedly unlocked her apartment, collapsed into the faded armchair by her only window, and briefly closed her eyes, exhausted, but relieved that the work week was finally over. Weekends were a time for long walks down unknown streets, museum visits, explorations of new restaurants, all the things one expects to do when moving to New York before realizing how consuming a job can become. While Esmé was, of course, appreciative of her new managerial position, she was wholly unaware of how draining the work would be when she accepted the offer.

Eyes still closed, she groped for her purse and found the thin stack of mail she picked up after a chilly walk to the Post Office on her lunch break. First was an invitation to a Christmas party from her dear friend Juliette, one of three with whom she used to share the very same apartment Esmé lived in now after first moving to the city. She smiled fondly, remembering those happy years, and put the rest of the mail down to look at a photo of the four of them that hung on the opposite wall. Juliette’s giddiness transcended the photo, proving her excitement to be starting anew in this cosmopolitan metropolis of a city. Arthur was in a predictably serious stance, not smiling, yet looking content nonetheless. Alexander, gallantly waved at the camera, illuminating the entire picture with his unrestrained happiness. Then, in the center, was Esmé, just as jubilant as the others, but showing it in a more quiet way with only the slightest smile. She has always put this time in her life on a pedestal. Of course there had to have been some bad parts, but her brain just would not let her remember them in a time filled with such love for each other and zest for life.

For the past fifteen years, Esmé had lived alone. So she had gotten used to, and was generally satisfied with the solitude. For, in a city constantly humming and bustling with movement and change, alone seemed such a temporary state. It seemed as though everybody and everything was in a temporary state, one humongous cycle of waiting. Waiting for the workday to finish, for friends to come and go, for success, even for the subway. It was these fluctuations that caused Esmé to not feel lonely, as it seemed to be only a matter of time before her waiting would be over and the vacancies of her life would be filled.

Sometimes she wondered why she still lived in the same apartment after so many years. The dingy building had always been full of post-college kids. It was a place to be young and take risks, not a place to be growing old and getting comfortable. Esmé could certainly afford better, especially with her new position at work. Though she hated to admit it, the only plausible reason she stayed had to do with nostalgia. Since Esmé was the only one of the four still in Manhattan, she felt a bizarre responsibility to preserve those cherished years for no particular reason other than the fact that she could. Stepping away from the photo, she observed the room. It truly was a gloomy mess, dismal and run-down, and Esmé could not quite remember if it had always been like this or if it had deteriorated over time.
Not so long ago, four bright-eyed individuals shared this same room. But they also shared so much more: their successes, their failures, their meals, their lives. One particular day, soon after moving in, Arthur and Esme stood by the single, fogged window and gave each other silent looks as Juliette, clad with an obnoxiously large amount of makeup, paced around the room and blabbered on about how she undoubtedly bombed her latest audition. It was for some unusual play about social awareness that was being produced by an experimental theater company, which Esme believed was definitely run out of somebody’s basement. Then, raindrops began to pelt the building at an alarming intensity, and Juliette joined the others by the window. They all laughed as the ant-sized people below ran for cover in a maniacal frenzy. The rain became increasingly louder, and the three began having to yell in order to hear each other just as door burst open and Alexander ran in, hair dripping from the storm, holding a beat up guitar above his head as if it were some coveted award.

Arthur was immediately next to him, obsessively examining the fragile instrument until Alexander handed it to him. Juliette followed Arthur and Alexander walked over toward the window, where Esme still stood. Alexander is such a regal name, difficult for someone to live up to. But he, that beautiful, radiant boy, exceeded the expectation of even his own name to create an entirely new level of greatness, intelligence, and compassion. He spun Esme around in a theatrical manner before they both joined Juliette and Arthur. The four of them pored over that guitar for hours, trying, and retrying to string it until it was at least functional, albeit out of tune. At this point they were all elated, and someone suggested sneaking onto the roof. So, in a mass of giggles, they followed Arthur, who was muttering something about the rain destroying the guitar all over again, up many flights of stairs until they arrived at the very top. No one thought of the danger and stupidity behind this adventure, as it was high time to do something risky and foolish simply for the fun of it. So there they eventually stood, looking out at the dazzling city, sheets of rain beating down on them. Alexander fumbled his way through a few chords while the rest of them, even Arthur, yelled at the stars, invisible through the misty smog, but undoubtedly there.

Over the course of two years, the four of them were electric. They raced around the city in a thrilling haze, eager to over-work themselves, amazed by the smallest of things. For Esme, these years were the ones where her melancholy made her hip, and both everybody and nobody cared about her at the same time. Eventually, they settled into a routine with everyone finding a job, a place for themselves in the world. Yet, it was never truly a routine, as change and spontaneity were both eagerly greeted.

A monumental change occurred when Arthur proposed to Juliette. At the time, this development seemed very sudden, but in retrospect, it was completely expected. Juliette, overly-dramatic yet admirably sympathetic, perfectly balanced out Arthur, logical and unpretentious. They moved to a tiny apartment in Brooklyn together. Although they were now separated by distance, the four never really grew apart, at least not in an immediate way. But for the first time in their lives, Alexander and Esme were left alone together. Initially, the apartment became absurdly quiet, but they both came to enjoy it that way. The two explored the otherworldly, astronomical connection between them, which they had possessed since the beginning, as if they were siblings in another life. It was a cheerful time, from morning walks to the deli to intimate, late night whispers, conversations about the future, promises of marriage, perfect silences.

The rest of their days together combined into a pleasant blur until Alexander was rushing out of the apartment, grabbing his few belongings, on his way to Connecticut for an indefinite amount of time. His mother, at eighty six, had been diagnosed with cancer and needed a caretaker. Alexander was the only member of her immediate family available, and although he did not want to leave, Esme encouraged him to go. She spent much time during the early weeks without him at Arthur and Juliette’s
apartment, and it felt like her early days in the city again. Alexander would often call and say he was coming back soon, but complication after complication piled on top of each other, and before they knew it, a year had passed. Time and distance have a funny way of coming between people, and eventually the calls grew more and more sparse, and Esme found herself rarely thinking about Alexander, as new hopes, worries, and fantasies had enveloped her. They had been drifting apart so slowly for such a long period of time that Esme was did not think twice when Alexander called to say he was thinking of staying in Connecticut. Life moved on, as it always does.

Several years later, Juliette invited Esme on a coffee date out of the blue. They exchanged pleasantries and engaged in some particularly bland small talk, yet Juliette seemed quite distracted throughout the entire ordeal, and she eventually broke down. Alexander was dead. Something involving the heart. An aneurysm. He was young. Too young. A friend identified him after he was found, three days after it happened. Three days. No family could claim him. The friend went to highschool with Arthur. Thank goodness. Without him, he may not have have been identified. They may never have known. Esme may never have known.

Esme became a wall, not allowing herself to feel anything about Alexander, or even think about him, what he could have been doing at that exact moment, what he could have accomplished. But, looking at Juliette’s invitation again, she allowed herself to finally feel remorseful for the first time in the four years since he died. In some strange way, she realized it was him that tied Esme to the city, to her tiny apartment, to her constant waiting. She decided there was only one appropriate thing to do. So, she ran in her impassioned state up to the roof, not caring that it was past midnight, not caring that it was dangerous, not caring that the clattering of her feet would be a disruption. There, she looked out over the city, crying as the November wind whipped through her hair and her tears turned the city below into a brilliant, luminous ball of colors.
I wake up to the ringing of my phone’s alarm and hit snooze. The inevitable countdown begins: 4… 3…2… The alarm goes off again, and I coax myself out of bed. Even as a 28-year-old woman, I still find waking up to be the hardest part of my day. A shower later, and I’m ready to start my day. I put on my usual black pencil skirt, yellow blouse, and white lab coat.

While eating my breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast, I decide to read the news I have been too busy to look at for almost a week now. The first five articles to appear all center around the same person – Charlotte Robinson.

Robinson, a 14-year-old girl, was convicted last year of murdering four people, three of which had been her former therapists. The first murder occurred at a local park around midnight. Coby, a 5-year-old boy who lived in Charlotte’s neighborhood, was shot once in the head and left bleeding on the ground the entire night. In contrast, the three therapists were shot multiple times in their homes when alone. Forensic scientists allegedly found that Charlotte’s fingerprints closely matched those found at all four of the crime scenes, and police officers, after searching her phone, discovered notes with suspicious plans matching what was thought to have went down at each crime scene. Doubts remained until officers tracked her phone to the 3 of the 4 locations during the corresponding time frames.

The case recently regained national attention because her final trial is coming up in a few days, and the jury will be deciding whether or not she will be the first kid charged with the death penalty. ‘Impossible’ was and continue to be my seasoned diagnosis as a leading child psychologist in the nation. How can a young girl be capable of such horrendous things? The gruesome details and the mental processing could not have been formulated as was written in the articles. I am conscious of the profound power of the media to twist the truth for the sake of sensational news stories. New stories that are of no benefit to the young girl right now who is apparently already branded as a “wealthy, intelligent, manipulative teenager with means and motive, whose crocodile tears were clearly staged to play to the jury” by the New York Times. Shaking my head, I look at the time on my phone and notice I’m going to be late for work. After hastily cleaning up, I double check I have everything I need for the day and head to work.

Fifteen minutes into my usual commute and my phone begins to ring. My dashboard lights up informing me that Rob Burlow, the chair of the national ethics committee at Matrix - a top tier law firm, is calling. Using the hands-free application in my car, I answer.

“Hey Rob, how’s it going?”

“Good…actually very very bad. I don’t have much time to talk, but one of our witnesses fell through and we need you to help stand in defense of Charlotte Robinson. You’ve heard of the case, right?”

“I was reading about her in the news just this morning! I don’t know Rob….it looks like a lot of people are invested in this case. I don’t want to get mixed up in all of that,” I wearily reply.

“Please Jenifer, you’re the best of the best and with your testimony we might be able to save Charlotte. Not to mention that Charlotte being proven innocent would make Matrix look like the undeniably best law firm in the United States.”

“Ummm…”

“Hear me out, I just emailed you her file and have arranged for you to meet her yourself. You can opt out if you really want to, but go see her first. You’ll also get a cut of the profits if we win.”

It couldn’t hurt to at least meet the girl, and I could add this experience to my résumé. Despite my better judgement, I tell Rob I’m in and promptly turn my car around in the direction of the Maryland Correctional Institution for Female Youth.

The brick building appears less daunting from the outside with glass windows and well-kept shrubbery; however, after being buzzed in, removing all sharp objects on my person including even my pierced earring studs, and submitting my drivers license for identification, I stand face to face with the reality of where I am. Single room cells punctuate the hallway with a series of steel bars over a small slot per cell that give way to the tiled room and child beyond. With Charlotte’s file already downloaded on my
phone, I walk down the corridor to a containment room where I wait for her to be brought in.

A single folding chair is set up behind the glass window opposite to me. The chair, merely feet away, appears to be in another world, one with less hope and no future. A wired phone is attached on both sides to the sectioning that breaks up the glass wall to allow prisoner and guests on opposite sides of the walls some-what private communication. I can almost feel the many personal stories of confession, admission, and explanation having buzzed across this impenetrable wall of clear glass.

I hear rustling, followed by the turn of a knob, and in enters a 5’2” girl with mouse brown hair barely touching her frail shoulders. As she is brought to the chair, I first notice her translucent complexion, as if her pale skin has yet to embrace true sunlight. Then I notice her eyes, never moving from the ground, are stark and similar to green sea glass, the same color as my own. Hand cuffs clanking, she picks up the phone on the adjacent side of the window in a rote manor without even being told.

At first I try to acclimate her and engage her attention with some easy-going conversation. Having been a psychologist for years, I’ve found this to be the best approach.

“Hi, Charlotte. I’m Dr. Jennifer Whitken but you can call me Jenny.”

After a couple minutes of one-sided conversation, I start to dive in.

“I’m here to hopefully understand more about what really happened to the four adults murdered and how I can help you specifically.”

Charlotte flinches when I mention the murders, sadness clouds her face for a second only to quickly return back to its neutral position. That’s odd. But her reaction could be because of a number of things, so I continue on.

“It seems there are some gaps in your file including who your actual parents are, where you spent the first 5 months of your life, and how you were raised. Is there any information you have that could help clear things up?”

I let the silence stretch on for a couple of long minutes. The more I talk, the more taught her shoulders become. Serial killers are people that kill a series of people, with no apparent motive. Some serial killers develop a style mostly to show they aren’t killing by accident. They are insecure individuals who are compelled to kill due to a morbid fear of rejection. In many cases, the fear of rejection seems to result from having been abandoned by their mother in early childhood, and while Charlotte was orphaned at 5 months old, she didn’t appear to be worried about being ignored. Instead, she seemed almost trapped, like she would rather be invisible and have less attention on her. Could it be she’s hiding something? My thoughts start to drift. When I first agreed to take on the case, I went through all the scenarios, I thought of meeting a child proud of killing, a child switching between good and bad personas, a child screaming to be let free; however, a child obedient and limp hadn’t crossed my mind.

An hour later and I’m leaving the correctional facility. I arrive at home, and I decide to send Charlotte’s parents an email using the contact information provided in Charlotte’s file. I want to take a look at the medical documents from when Charlotte at 5-months-old was mysteriously found in the street. Maybe she was exposed to something that caused neurological damage? Those health files have stringent guidelines and require parental consent to access personal data. I almost immediately hear back from Madison Robinson, Charlotte’s mother, with numerous questions as to why I would need such information and the paper work hassle it would require. I try to reassure her of my intentions and a week later she relents and consents to grant me access to the records. I take her reluctance as motherly concern for her young daughter and the grave charges she faces as of right now.

Nothing out of the ordinary attracts my attention while looking at Charlotte’s blood tests and various medical reports. Stumped, I decide to look into Charlotte’s former therapists’ files. Maybe they had discovered a piece to the puzzle that was Charlotte. Electronic Health Records (EHR) have a policy on permission, but it’s normally, and in this case is, all or nothing, and applied to everything in the record. So, within a few minutes I’m looking at the notes from her previous therapist, Dr. Grace L. White.
January 7th, 2018, almost a year ago now - “Charlotte appears to have normal cognitive behavior with flares of Post-Traumatic Stress. We have been working on digging deeper into her fear of adults….”

I look through the reports and scroll farther down.

February 1st, 2018 - “Charlotte continues to shut down when near adults, questions on how she could have gone through with murder continue to arise…”

Nothing seems out of the ordinary until I reach the last note.

March 18th, 2018, a day before Dr. White’s death - “Charlotte mentioned in today’s session something about feeling like a puppet, look into parents’ location/potential link to murders”.

The room grows cold. I try to calm myself down Dr. White was guessing, and her death the next day is coincidental. I decide to open Charlotte’s second therapist Dr. Robert M. Frost’s files. I scroll through, eventually reaching the bottom.

June 23rd, 2017 - two days before his death - “Charlotte mentioned her parents in discussion today almost accidentally. After further questioning, nothing came about. I attempted to contact her parents but no response.”

My hands, now shaking, quickly open the last therapist’s file.

April 19th, 2016 - “Note to self - look into parents, things don’t seem to be adding up”.

The court must not have seen this or Charlotte would not still be on trial. Either they never saw it because there has never really been a standard procedure for doctors to share patient information or Charlotte’s parents actively tried to hide the suspicious information. But why would they hide the information…unless…no…they wouldn’t…would they? The undeniable evidence was there in those files. Charlotte might not have killed those people.

Her demeanor earlier today was one I see in abuse patients; she appeared to have no control. Her actions a practiced performance, one she had no choice but to participate in. Will a jury be able to shut out the media and absorb what I have discovered in her case files or will the bullets of cross-examination target and destroy my own carefully-cultivated career. Deep down, I know Charlotte’s innocent. There was almost too much evidence pinning her to the case. She’s a kid. Did her parents make her kill? Why? How would they hide that? What don’t we know? My head begins to reel as more and more questions arise. The light seems to close in around me. Is Charlotte a marionette dancing to the strings of another - who is really the killer, and who is the victim? With that final root question, my world goes black.
“Hello?”
“Helloo?”
“Hel- Oh hey! My name is D-...”
I only remember passing out.

I felt a tingling sensation in my arm, unpleasant as if something was shot into my body. I tried opening my eyes, but they only reached a squint before they were blinded by a scorching light. Groaning, I tried rolling to my side, but I quickly realized that I wasn’t in bed when I went airborne, falling and knocking into a chair. I didn’t mind the light now, I wanted to know where I was.

The room had two rows of empty chairs in perfect lines against the baby blue walls. There were no windows, no decorations, and no one at the reception desk. Desolate, almost. There was a girl sitting in a chair across the room, asleep. As she slept, I could hear her breathing. Her breaths were soft, blissful, ignorant of her cold surroundings. Yet I felt at peace as our breaths mingled in this lonely room.

I gritted my teeth as my body tensed up from another tingling sensation. Accompanying me was a thump across the room; the girl had fallen as well. I watched her look around, confused, as I had a few minutes ago. It didn’t take long for her to glance in my direction. She rose to her feet, sheepishly, and smoothed out her shirt before walking over with a friendly grin. I stiffened. Who was she? Why were we here together? I smiled awkwardly.

She was about average height, average weight and had warm ivory skin. What stood out was her wavy black hair that had natural streaks of crimson red and her forest green eyes that complimented her hair.

“Hello,” she said cheerfully. Her voice was spirited, adolescent. Her friendliness captured me in a trance; the ambiance was no longer my concern.

I took a hesitant look into her welcoming eyes which made me smile. “Hello,” I replied.

I was relieved to see that my response had generated a delighted smile. “Um, what’s your name?” Silence overcame us; I dreaded it. How could I explain that I didn’t know what my name was? My head throbbed; I couldn’t remember anything.

The girl seemed to understand my struggle and turned the attention away from me. “Ah, well, my name is...” She stopped, just as disoriented as I was. But our minds continued searching for the meaningless answer.

It was my turn to break the silence, “Nice to meet you ‘...’ What a coincidence that we have the same name.” I extended my hand.

The girl laughed and shook my hand, “Nice to meet you too.”

Despite the abnormal setting, we were focused on each other. We didn’t want to think about the predicament we were in. Imagine how troubling that would be.

Another tingle was sent through our bodies, I flinched and sighed with exasperation. There was a click above us, followed by a message on the intercom from an automated female voice, “Please leave through the door to your left before you are terminated. Thank you.” To our left we heard a mechanical whirring noise as a thick, rounded metal door, about ten feet high, was being lifted, exposing a dark passageway. The intercom’s message repeated.

“Terminated?” The girl whispered, staring into the abyss.

Our fear of the unknown hushed us.

“Let’s go,” I said and nodded at her, hoping my artificial confidence would stimulate a positive reaction. I held out my hand which she took. The message repeated. We took one final look at the waiting room and walked into the tenebrous passage.

“I felt the girl move closer as we made our way through the caliginous pathway. “We’ll be fine,” I reassured her. The ground shook when the door closed behind us, sealing off our only source of light.

“Let’s see who can go the farthest faster with their eyes closed,” the girl perked up.

“Alright.” We let go of each other’s hands, closed our eyes, and began running. Our footsteps were in discordance, we’d laugh whenever we grazed the walls or bumped into each other. Our mirth was eventually drowned out by the sound of cheering, the light was penetrating our eyelids as we neared the end.

By the time we opened our eyes, we were at the entrance of an arena. Thousands of people in the stands encircled us. The arena seemed to be modeled after the Circus Maximus except twice its size with surrounding walls that were fifteen feet high.

A click sounded above us, two speakers at the top of a pole on opposite sides of the stadium protruded. There were two big screens diagonally across from each other, giving the audience a closer view of the two
specks in the arena. "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome our next two contestants!" The crowd roared. "These two have lost their memories during their stay here, tell us now, do you remember your names? Do you remember why you're here? Most importantly, do you remember your family?" My head drooped as I shook my head.

"Aww," the crowd sympathized.

"Well, today is your lucky day! All you must do is complete these tasks and you’ll receive your memories!"
The announcer shouted.

The crowd chanted, "Do it! Do it! Do it!"

The girl and I looked at each other, "It can’t be that bad, right?" The girl smiled, but there was concern in her eyes.

"Can’t be." We smiled at each other. "Let’s do it!" We pumped our fists in the air. The crowd erupted.

"Our contestants have agreed! Let the first task begin!" Our hearts raced. Two swords dropped from the sky into the middle of the stadium as a passage door behind us was being lifted, the earth trembled as deep growling reverberated from behind the door.

I dragged the fear-stricken girl to the middle and picked up a sword. I steadied it with both hands. The grizzly beast burst from its enclosure, it stood on its hind legs and roared into the sky. Its canines jutted out while its claws dug into the ground.

"Is it too late to change our minds?" I yelled at the speaker. My hope quickly diminished when I saw the beast run towards us on all fours, staring us down with its beady eyes.

"Run!" The girl screamed and we went off in opposite directions. My heart was beating double-time, my sword rapidly swung back and forth, and my legs carried me like the wind. I needed to get out, I was going to die here. Strangely enough, the earth’s trembling was growing more distant.

The girl’s screaming was drowned out by the audience chanting fervently, "Kill! Kill! Kill!" I whipped around; the girl running blindly and helplessly, she must've lost her mind when she decided to run to a corner. I looked at the sword in my possession and caught a glimpse of a boy’s terrified expression.

"Seems like the girl is in a tiiiiight situation." The voice boomed over the intercom.

"Eat! Eat!" The crowd clapped as the girl neared the corner.

I found myself running to the girl, there was something about her that I didn’t want to lose. I was faster than the beast, maybe I could save her I kept telling myself. The beast raised a hefty paw, the girl closed her eyes, preparing to take her last breath. I swiftly dragged the blade through the beast’s exposed heel before it could strike. It fell to the ground, grasping its wound, emitting painful cries that silenced the crowd. As frightening as it had been, we were the predators.

The girl and I embraced each other as we watched the beast being chained and thrown back into its enclosure. We heard soft weeping from behind the doors but it was quickly interrupted by "Congratulations! You’ve defeated the savage beast! Here comes your final task." The beast was quickly forgotten and the crowd started cheering yet again.

Two new swords descended from the sky on opposite sides of the arena. “Only one may proceed to the final gate. The other must die. If one quits now, then both will die.” A few soldiers came out and forced us to our positions. “Let the fighting commence!”

"I guess we have no choice." The girl darted at me with her sword pointed at my chest. Before I had a chance to raise my sword, I felt a breeze rush past me, followed by a sting and the feeling of liquid slowly trickling down my arm.

"And the girl lands the first hit!" The announcer spectates as the crowd goes wild.

"W-Why are you doing this?" I sputtered. "Didn’t I just save you?"

"Only one of us can leave as he said. And who said I needed your help?" She raised her sword and looked at me sharply. To me, her eyes were turning into the beady, malicious spectacles of a beast.

I lowered my body into a stance, preparing to defend, but I found myself to be stuck in a cyclone. I found myself spinning, turning left and right trying to stop her. It took many cuts for me to realize that her eyes moved in the opposite direction of her body’s motion. The crowd started to boo us; we weren’t killing each other fast enough.

Had our lives meant nothing? I didn’t want to die for their entertainment.
Finally, a metallic clash rang in the air, the forces of our blades colliding sent us back a few feet. As soon as I regained balance, I charged at the girl. I drew my sword back and swung at her, but she glided under and grazed my cheek with her blade. “Look, it’s a little boy trying to pick a thorny flower,” the announcer joked.

“Have you forgotten about your prize?” The spectators pitched in, “Don’t you want your memory back? Your family?” I did, I did, I did. The girl ran out of my reach before turning to face me. It was now or nothing. I saved her life; she owed me. I extended my sword, as did she, and ran full speed at each other.

Time had only been a concept to our hearts as they conversed on their own, ‘Don’t you think we can get out of here together?’ My heart fluttered.

‘We’ll both die,’ Hers responded.

‘I’ll get you out of here.’

‘No need, I’m happy now.’

My mind was too powerful to be stopped by emotion, I was determined. A gentle smile returned to the girl’s face as our blades crossed each other. “My name is Dahlia,” she whispered, “My name is Dahlia. My name is Dahlia.”

Joyous cheers broke the crowd’s silence. The exit gate opened for the victor to set foot. Free at last. But at what cost? A girl’s lifeless body was lying in front of me. Solemnly, I turned and trudged out without looking back. With every step I took, a memory returned. One step, of my family, another, of childhood friends, my first kiss, and thousands more. What was the point if I couldn’t share this happiness?

I’ve taken millions of steps by this point. The same memories replaying in my mind as I reached the peak of a grassy mountain. I’ve found her. I’ve finally found her. A single black dahlia with crimson red streaks. Tears trickled silently as I took one final step towards the flower, revealing one final memory.

I looked into the deep blue sky.

“I know it now, Dahlia.”

“My name is Wren.”
"On a scale of one to ten, how bad would it be if I went to the carnival’s grand opening at midnight this Friday with Patch?" I ask in a sweet voice.

"At least a twenty," my mother replies.

"Mom! Come on! Please? You never let me do anything. I don’t want to be trapped in this house for the rest of eternity!" I beg.

“You must have lost your mind, Bella, if you think I’d let you go out with him that late!” Mom says. She never really trusted Patch, and she doesn’t like the idea that he was older than me, even though I was sixteen and he was only eighteen.

I march angrily up the stairs towards my room. I yell, “I hate living here!” loud enough for my mother to hear, before I shut the door aggressively.

I lay on my bed and sigh. I detest my mother for being so controlling. How dare she try to stop me from enjoying my youth? I grab my phone to text Patch:

I can go this weekend.

Can’t wait ;), he replies a few minutes later.

I smile and fall asleep.

There was no way I was going to let my mother stop me from living my life, I think to myself.

On Friday evening, I am in front of my mirror, applying mascara and eyeliner to my eyelids. I am already dressed in a t-shirt that is tucked into a short plaid skirt when Patch texts me that he was on his way.

My mother was in the kitchen cooking dinner. I had told her that I didn’t feel well and was going to go to bed early.

My phone dinged from my bed. It’s Patch letting me know that he was outside. I take a deep breath and tip-toe out of my bedroom. I stand for a few seconds at the top of the stairwell in an attempt to listen for my mother’s whereabouts downstairs. I hear the sizzling of food on the stove and the sound of my mother chopping vegetables.

Perfect, I think. The sounds of the kitchen would certainly drain out the sound of my defiance as I shut the front door to sneak out.

I quickly yet quietly move down the stairs. I slip past the kitchen swiftly as my mother is facing away from me, and I slip through the front door. After lightly closing it, I dash down the driveway towards Patch, who is leaning on his motorcycle holding a helmet. He is wearing his typical leather jacket and combat boots.

I run into his arms and hug him.

"Your mother was really alright with you being out so late with me?” he asks with a chuckle.

"Uhh… sort of," I say. He lifts an eyebrow in suspicion. "Anyways, let’s go!" I say to avert his attention from the topic. I quickly took the helmet lying on his bike and fastened it to my head.

He seems to have fallen for my diversion, as he ignores my strange behavior and doesn’t question me further. He gets onto the motorcycle and starts its engine. I follow him and wrap my arms around his waist as we begin speeding through the dark night.

We ride for about ten minutes until we reach a desolate road surrounded by trees. I rest my head against Patch’s back when suddenly, I feel a rough jolt that nearly launches the motorcycle into the air.

"Patch! What was that?” I ask, alarmed. He doesn’t answer me, and his eyes remain on the road ahead as he drives the motorcycle forward. It was impossible for whatever I felt to go unnoticed, so why is he ignoring me?

I start to shake his jacket to get his attention. “Patch!” I yell. He doesn’t respond. I look at the road behind us to see what could have caused the impact. I see something lying in the middle of the road a few yards away. It looks incredibly large. I assume it might be an animal, but I wonder how Patch couldn’t have seen it lying in our path. We get further and further from it when I see it begin to rise to two legs and run towards us faster than I have seen any creature ever move.

I panic and hold onto Patch more tightly, but he suddenly jumps off to the side of the motorcycle, leaving me. I scream as I see him hit the road harshly. There is no way he could have survived.

The motorcycle suddenly begins to swerve to the right. I am still screaming, now at the top of my lungs
I panic and hold onto Patch more tightly, but he suddenly jumps off to the side of the motorcycle, leaving me. I scream as I see him hit the road harshly. There is no way he could have survived.

The motorcycle suddenly begins to swerve to the right. I am still screaming, now at the top of my lungs when the front of the bike hits a rock at the side of the road, launching me headfirst into a tree. A sharp pain runs through my body, and I feel blood trickle down from my head as I lay on the ground. I slowly open my eyes and see the large creature charging towards me.

When it comes within a few yards of me, it stops and simply stares at me. I can’t run or move at all, as if my body is paralyzed. I feel myself falling deeper into its eyes. Images begin flashing through my head. I see all of my worst fears, failures, disappointments. The image of my father on his hospital bed before he passed away appears. I see all the arguments I had with my mother. Every bad grade I ever received that proved how worthless I am. The shadows I would always imagine under my bed as a child. Every memory and every thought I have tried the hardest to push away from my mind was displayed vividly in my mind. Tears well up in my eyes, and I can’t rip my vision away from the creature.

Its eyes glow and it launches itself in my direction again, with its mouth wide open and sharp teeth on display. Suddenly, all I see is darkness, and the entire world fades away.

If only I had listened to my mother that night.
I am so sorry.

“Sorry” was not a word 094 was taught. She learned it herself, gleaned from the news articles and tweets she sifted through for hours on end. Its pixels were humble, clotted together in poignancy. 094 had always been a fast learner. Lydia once remarked, her airless voice almost inflected with pride, that she was the most promising trainee that the compound had seen in years. Usually, 094 would have told Lydia about her discovery—anything to once again see that dull spark in her trainer’s eyes. But nothing was usual, and nothing would be usual ever again, and she would never tell Lydia.

The cursor throbbed impatiently, but 094 had no more words. Usually verbose, she decided that it was enough.

She hoped the outside world would understand.

* * * * *

094 did not remember a life before the compound, with its sealed entrances and talk of The Cause and sterile, fluorescent lighting. Lydia had told her that knowledge of the past was distracting, even dangerous. Supposedly, 094 had lived in a city on the coast. Though she knew they were frivolous, 094 wished to remember the outdoors: the smell of the sea, perhaps, or the feeling of running barefoot through dew-speckled grass, which she imagined to be a pleasure of the highest order. At her tentative probing, Lydia bristled.

“You life out there was wretched. Absolutely horrendous. Quite possibly the worst we’d ever seen.” Lydia revealed this nonchalantly, flicking through Facebook to observe 094’s latest work. “Really, you were so angry. Practically on your way to us already. If you think about it, we just eased the transition.”

Lydia knew everything, so 094 did not argue. It was Lydia who had erased her memories, then slowly but deftly coaxed her mind into the harsh light of her new world. Lydia taught her how to read, how to type on the sleek monitors that dotted the compound, and how to spot statements that needed addressing. 094 had grown intelligent, a noble foot soldier of The Cause. She was still foggy on all of the details, but Lydia, who was a devout follower, assured her that The Cause was all about promoting freedom and protecting the best people, which 094 thought was worthy. If promoting its ideals meant slinging insults on the internet for 16 hours a day, she was willing.

The shift had begun about a month ago. Lydia had approached her in the hallway that morning, heels clicking briskly.

“I have a big assignment for you.” She was expressionless, perpetually, but 094 knew her well enough to understand how giddy she was.

“What is it? I’ll do anything.”

“@Justice4ALL562. They’re yours.”

“Mine?”

“Follow them. Relentlessly. They have been allowed to spout their propaganda unchecked for too long.”

With nary a look back, she strode away. 094 was back at her monitor in record time, agitated cursor already on the prowl. Lydia was right—@Justice4ALL562 had been spewing anti-Cause rhetoric all over the Internet; 094 counted a few hundred tweets in the last week alone. This was one of the biggest jobs she’d ever been given, and she imagined the days ahead—righteous and vital, but awfully stultifying—spreading before her. Best to get to work.

* * * * *

094 thought she was deft with words. She knew when they needed to yell; one of her favorite retorts was *u are literal SCUM and will BURN in hell!!*. She liked to think that words were her weapons, poison-tipped darts that could eviscerate enemies with a few keystrokes. Lydia’s miserly praise was always given to 094’s phrasing or punctuation. Despite her relative competence, she was nothing compared to her assigned nemesis.

Justice (as 094 had begun calling her) was prone to lengthy diatribes, piles of words in comments sections and 20-part Twitter threads. 094 barely read anti-Cause posts—they were enemies, and thus the specifics didn’t matter—but something struck her about Justice’s words. She could plant the seed of a story in a political argument, sprinkle in charming anecdotes, end each post with a resonance that 094 felt inside. 094 counted a few hundred tweets in the last week alone. This was one of the biggest jobs she’d ever been given, and she imagined the days ahead—righteous and vital, but awfully stultifying—spreading before her. Best to get to work.

Full offense, but if you believe any of this crap that’s being peddled nowadays you deserve *every* tiny inconvenience that life can throw at you. Seriously though, media literacy (or really, the lack thereof) is becoming a major threat…

Good morning lovelies! I never thought that buying a cup of coffee would show me the moral rot at the center of this country, but here we are. Buckle up—it’s a long one (1/34)
094 read every word that Justice wrote. She usually got lost in her discussions of theory and policy proposals, but there was some quicksilver quality to her words that made 094 feel as if she were starving without them. She dutifully commented on everything, using the language she had learned from Lydia. But surely keen Justice could read between the lines and see that 094 meant none of it. Maybe Justice had read her comments and wondered about their author. The thought of Justice thinking about her made a secret smile bloom on her face whenever Lydia wasn’t around.

The world we have taken for granted is being dismantled before our very eyes….govt inaction is releasing fear like a miasma that pollutes the very air we breathe…i am just so TIRED. Im supposed to be worrying about calc tests and college, not the fate of my country!! I will be at the protest THIS weekend to--

“How are you?” 094 nearly jumped at Lydia’s presence. Quickly she scrolled to the bottom of the comment, fingers flying as she dashed off one of her mainstays--lol ok, wish u were dead. She didn’t mean it, of course. If Justice was dead, what would she read?

“I am doing quite well. Thank you for asking.” 094 wished powerfully she could speak as breezily as Justice did online, but she felt too clumsy to try.

“You’ve been working very hard. We all have noticed. If things continue this way, you could be going places." While her tone, ever-cool and almost clinical, never wavered, the sweetness of the words softened Lydia. They gave off a glow like that of a computer screen: not warm, perhaps, but enticing nonetheless

“Going places like you?” 094’s tremulous whisper betrayed her disbelief. Lydia had alluded to her own past before, her humble origins that mirrored those of 094. To ascend to Lydia’s level was to understand the whole world.

“Perhaps. If you do well.” She paused, her eyes gliding over softly glowing screen. “I assume you know about the protest this weekend. We need you to stay behind to man the machines.” 094 carefully arranged her features into an expression of acceptance. She could never tell Lydia her secret wish of meeting Justice at the protest.

“And really,” Lydia continued, “you shouldn’t be spending so much time on these comments. There is no need to read them--I’ve already told you she’s wrong.” With that, she spun on her heel and left, a frigid scent in her wake. 094 would not cry, though the cutting words dug into her skin like glass. Lydia was disappointed. Lydia saw how she had strayed.

094 wanted so desperately to be good. She would make Lydia proud again. All she had to do was forget about Justice, to keep her head down and work harder than before. Fingers flying, she passed the afternoon in a flurry of half-baked sentiment.

The world would be better off w/out u….die already!!
Lol can’t believe u could believe these lies. Wake up!!
Very typical of your kind…id watch your back if i were you…

* * * * *

094 hoped the weather would cooperate. No rain, for her comrades were armed with paper signs, the truth scrawled in red and black markers. No snow, for they would march for hours. Maybe a nice breeze, something that would carry Lydia’s words from her megaphone through the streets of the capitol and to every waiting ear in the nation.

The world needed The Cause, and the protest today would surely spread it far and wide.

The compound was as still as the grave, the gentle hum of the computers the only thing to alleviate the silence. 094 patrolled the most active areas--Twitter, Facebook, CNN--assiduously, looking for news on the protest. Of course, videos were cropping up in every corner, so new that 094 could safely assume they hadn’t been doctored. There was Lydia, her hair in a cheerless knot, the wind fluttering her coattails as she addressed the throng in front of her. All of the faces were ones she recognized from the compound.

At first, the cameras stayed focused on Lydia, her platitudes about The Cause growing hoarse. Then, slowly, the camera panned to the left. Dwarfing their small congregation was a riotous group of what 094 realized were counterprotesters, their chants drowning out Lydia’s entreaties to face the truth. One in particular caught 094’s eye: a girl near the front of the pack, bundled in a big blue overcoat. Though the video was a bit grainy, there was a kind of energy in her movements that bordered on ferocity. She was absolutely magnetic--and, remembering the pictures from Twitter, 094 knew she was Justice.
She would wonder how it started—did one of her comrades lunge at a counterprotester? Did Justice’s friends tear the signs out of Cause followers’ hands? 094 was getting dizzy; the video grew ever more grainy. Writhing pixels filled the screen, bursts of sound and discordant light. The news alerts flitted in and out of the top corner of the computer screen at a frightening rapidity. The screen was filled with words and color and sound, and the keening of the wind was not the wind at all but 094, screaming because she could not stomach what she was seeing.

Justice was dead. Lydia, acting with a barbarity 094 had never seen but had always understood, had smashed her head into the pavement.

* * * *

That was nearly two hours ago. Her countenance calm, 094 faced the monitor. The message, her four simple words, had been sent just seconds ago. It’s not enough, she thought, but what could be? She had no more words, just a mind that knew it knew nothing.

No one had come back. 094 had turned the other computers off, and for once the compound felt wholly still. She had walked a bit, dazedly, and now decided to walk a bit more. Her footfalls rang in the empty hallways. There was a door at the end of the hall, a door that she had never once felt the need to go through, because she believed that everything she needed could be contained within the compound, within The Cause, within Lydia. But now, nothing stopped her as she reached for the knob and turned.

Before her was an expanse of grass and trees, their colors so alive and vibrant that she had to shield her eyes. I do not have the slightest idea how to exist, she thought. But right now there was an open door and dewy grass, and that was all that mattered. She took off her shoes and stepped into the light.

LILLIANA RESNIK
Urbana High School
Mrs. Robin Shortall
Frederick County Literacy Chapter
The heart and the body were now two separate beings.
The bird’s chest was flattened and his feathers were matted with blood. His stomach was ripped open, revealing all the guts and gore from a horror movie inside, cracked rib cage slashing through the places where skin still remained. His wings were bent at awkward angles on either side of his limp torso, feathers bloody and bones jutting from side to side. One of his legs was nothing more than a bloody stump, talons and bone completely ripped from the body and nowhere to be found. His beak remained slightly parted, as if he were a moment away from crying out for help. His eyes were black and lifeless, and the tiny feathers around them ruffled and unkempt.

But the most disturbing part was the heart, laying right beside him in the grass.
The heart sat in a crimson puddle of his own blood. It sat dormant, unmoving; a lump of pink flesh and muscle that had once beat against his brown feathered chest as he flew through the air, now spilled out and dead on the grass. I remember waiting for it to thud-thump like a heart should do, but the beating never came.

On the left, a broken body. On the right, a bleeding heart.
That was the first time I saw death.
I had been six years old when Cooper and I had found his tiny, ruined body in the woods behind our house.

I remember sobbing. Cooper cried, too, even though he was ten and the other boys already called him names. They would have called him “crybaby” and “sissy” if they knew he was crying in the woods over a little bird. But Cooper cried anyway.

He ran back to the house and brought back an old shoe box from the garage, then picked up the little corpse and placed it inside. He wanted to leave the heart on the grass, but I pleaded for him to keep it with the body. He complied, but froze before placing it in the box. I remember watching him kneel in the bloody grass in those ripped blue jeans Mom never wanted him to wear, and his white t-shirt now stained with bird blood as he cradled the heart to his chest. His hands were painted red and tears fell down his cheeks. I tried to call out to him. I tried to ask him what he was doing, why he wouldn’t put the heart in the box. But he sat shaking, heart cupped in his hands, staring down at the dead muscle with something dark and broken in his eyes.

Back then, I was naive. I didn’t know death could be worse than a broken bird. Now I do.

Every waking moment I wonder how things would have been different if it had not been the noise that brought me up to his room. If, by some miracle chance, I had happened to go upstairs and ask him for help with my homework or asked him what he wanted for dinner. I wish things could have been different.

I opened the door, and propped up against the headboard of the bed, was the dying bird from so long ago. Chest bloody, eyes dark, limbs limp and unmoving, hair messy. The head hung at an awkward, unnatural angle right against the left shoulder, no muscles working to keep it upright anymore. The mouth was opened slightly, but not a single cry for help had ever come. In the center of his chest, where his heart should have been, was a tiny, bloody hole.

I couldn’t break my eyes away from that hole, that hole where my brother’s heart should have been. Should have been beating.

But now, the heart and the body were two separate beings.
Final Notes

From time to time, SoMLA receives questions about the formatting of students’ texts, errors in their writing, and variations in published information. To preserve the integrity of the originals’ content, the anthology’s creator copies and pastes directly from the Microsoft Word documents forwarded from each local council. In an effort to cut production costs, however, edits are made to font types and sizes and line spacing. Consequently, formatting of entries may appear different from the originals.

Student, school, and teacher names are derived from the coversheets that are completed and attached to each entry. SoMLA moves forward with the notion that the content is intended as typed/written and is accurate, but sometimes information is missing and occasionally it is misspelled or otherwise incorrect.

All of this is not to say that mistakes may be made by the typist. Where those may have occurred, SoMLA regrets its errors.

Thank You
to the Graphic Communication students of Harford Technical High School for the production of this anthology.