

2022 Contest Anthology
Celebrating Maryland's
High School
Young Authors



Acknowledgements

It is SoMLA's privilege to have worked with all participants— the writers, most importantly-- in the 2021-22 Young Authors' Contest. After reviewing each child's entry, the judging panel identified as state winners the top two high school 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 adult poets and storytellers in the state of Maryland.

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, occasionally grabbed us by surprise, 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 lift 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 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.

As Covid-19 continued to fluctuate in virulence in late 2021, adaptability to intermittent changes in home and school operations became a routine. Writers pressed on despite those changes and what you read here, readers, will speak to the depth and breadth this year's winners' thinking showed despite (*or perhaps because of?*) the uncertainty of the world at that time.

Leslie Sunderland
Chair, Young Authors' Contest
High School, Grades 9-12

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Poetry

*Grade 9
1st Place Winner*

tough luck

toss me away again

i'm hanging by a thread
and i'm easy to forget

hold on... let go

it easy as can be
long as you don't look at me

forgive? forget.

my voice is there
then it's lost to the air

no.

if my pony tail is a little too high if my
makeup is a little too bright if my rainbow
has a little too much shine

tough luck.

if i'm too unsacred
if i'm too complicated
if my presence is overrated

tough luck.

if you want to hate me
if i've been loud lately
if i'm not a lady

tough luck.

if i'm not here to be me,
then why?

i'm real and i'm alive,
so look me in the eye.

Chloë Tonon
Urbana High School
Frederick County Literacy Chapter

Grade 9
2nd Place Winner

Current of the Mind

A room full of people, yet only one truly matters.
I look up at the ceiling; in search of a place to rest my eyes.
I look down at my shoes; feeling the weight of a bowed head.
Finally, I look straight ahead and soften my eyes.
I am nothing in this room.
Nothing but an obstacle in your vision.
Nothing but trash on the side of the highway.
I am alone, drowned in an ocean of familiar strangers.
I hear their voices and see their faces, but what do they know of me?
The ocean surface grows distant above me.
I sink deeper and deeper, darkness consuming the light,
The sounds slowly fading away.
I feel my body relax as it rests on the ocean floor.
Here in this infinite space of confining darkness, there is only one who matters.
Slowly, the light returns, warmth closing in around me.
My worries settle with the sand,
As my mouth curves into a slight smile.
I find myself now drowned in an ocean of calm.
Peace and tranquility flow through my mind,
Like great currents in the sea.
Everything is going to be okay,
Because I'm the only one that matters.

William Hall
Bel Air High School
Harford County Literacy Chapter

*Grade 10
1st Place Winner*

Cardinal

Did you assume I was a picket fence,
Stationed in concrete, guarding the yard?
I am the fox that slinks below perception,
A glistening hue you cannot pinpoint
As I dance amongst the fields of your mind.
I am empty heads and overflowing hearts.
I am not your line of thread,
I am the needle
Who does not fear biting your fingers,
Knowing that complacency will keep you sewing,
Stitch after bloody stitch, until my spool unravels.
I am not skipping stones,
but rigid boulders,
insurmountable mountains,
ancient volcanos aching to erupt.
I am hot gasoline; A forest fire.
Crackling and hissing,
I warn you—the cardinal that you seek has long flown,
Singing eulogy as it ascended.
It knows:
My embers will not stop flickering
If you sit in my wake.

Abbi Weeks

Stephen Decatur High School
Eastern Shore Literacy Association

Grade 10
2nd Place Winner

Turmeric

The bottle stands tall.

A shot of turmeric.
My mother goes on about
Immune systems,
Anti-inflammatories,

And shrinking...

Shrinking.

I smile.
I wish to scoff.

The bottle is suspiciously small,
Making me wonder
How the obscene orange liquid
Becomes a sour smile,
Becomes a medical miracle.

"A little each day adds up!"
She says, eyes growing wide as mine are

Shrinking.

I want to believe it,
I really do.

The bottle meets my hand,
Weakened, bony fingers twist the lid
And my mother smiles expectantly.
I close my eyes,
Bottle's end to the sky,

Drinking.

Oh, how it burns,
But,
At least she cheers for me.

Grade 10
2nd Place Winner

Turmeric, cont'd

The bottle stands empty,
Defeated,
Yet I feel like its prey.

She doesn't seem to understand.
The poisons pumped into me,

"Shrinking"

The masses gnawing at my bones
Don't care about turmeric.

The bottle is tossed to the side,
And I smile, convincing my eyes

To say, "Thank you".

She doesn't seem to understand.

The only way I can win this battle
Is to die of something else.

Mia Zinn

Edgewood High School
Harford County Literacy Chapter

Grade 11
1st Place Winner

Colored

Through the mirror
I am a burnt umber with shadows of pecan and rosewood
Beneath the sun
I am the gold mixed with soils of faraway lands

Through the painter
I am a magical mixture of
Blues from depthless oceans of tears
Expanding for miles
Red from the heavy scars
That ravaged my body
And sweet yellows from crisp corn fields
And the burn of sun against my skin

But on paper I am black
A color devoid of life
A silhouette with no face
A number on a board
A name on the wall
With chants of "say their name"

through the single blue stripe I have no name
I am the single circle in the middle of a board
No one cares if it has holes
No one cares if the red starts to leak from the pecan and rosewood
No one cares if cheeks of roses and marigold turn blue with sickness
No one cares for the rotting green of broken homes and forgone dreams
And no one cares for the denim shirt curled in a mother's fists never to be worn again

No

Because on paper I am black
A color devoid of life
A silhouette with no face
A number on a board
A name on the wall
With chants of "say their name"

Najla Hall
Oakdale High School
Frederick County Literacy Chapter

Grade 11
2nd Place Winner

Heart of a Lion

I am a lion,
But I didn't have courage all along.
Before I learned to bare my fangs,
I placed them beneath my pillow.
A night fell; a day rose.
I woke to silver coins beneath my head
Which I used to pay him:
A ransom for another day of sanity.
My time was spent learning how
To give my fangs,
To give my mane,
To give my claws,
To give my roar,
Exchanging each for silver in the night,
Paying my dues each morning.
Days turned to weeks,
turned to months,
turned to years.
My fangs were fallen,
My mane thinned,
My claws clipped,
My roar silenced.
I had nothing more to give;
My pockets were empty of silver.
But he still came,
And expected two coins.
He fiddled with his bird cage
As I told him I couldn't afford his price.
He smiled an evil grin,
Grasped a key between his fingers,
Locked my sanity within the cage's bars,
And laughed.

Grade 11
2nd Place Winner

Heart of a Lion, cont'd

Laughed as I crumbled.
Laughed as I realized how much of myself was
Truly gone,
Truly empty,
Truly nothing.
That was years ago.
How long we can hold on
When there is nothing solid to grasp
Is an astonishing thing.
How much of ourself we can give away
Without feeling the loss
Is a sick thing.
How long it took me to realize that
Despite having no fangs,
Despite having no mane,
Despite having no claws or roar,
I am still a lion
Was too long.
But I have not quit nor yielded.
Each day I rise with the sun,
And now I don't check beneath my pillow
To find my worth.
This is my bravery.
I might not have ever had courage,
But I have always had the heart of a lion.

Jessica Beck
Stephen Decatur High School
Eastern Shore Literacy Association

Grade 12
1st Place Winner

Ode to a Minor Chord

The note to which
my finger strays,
That softly vies
The voice of grays,
So sombers strings
the cello plays,
The chord a
simple tune dismays,

Up elevates
the serenade,
As down the staff
the third it bade,
Like bird upon a wire
Staid,
The mood of melodies
it weighed,

The sound
an ailing angel sings,
The funeral song
The church bell rings,
Who joins to bear
The painful things,
Sweet comfort to my soul
It brings,

You speak a grander
Speech than I,
You to my eyes
a mist apply,
You summon rain
To province dry,
The world in wordlessness
Decry,

Grade 12
1st Place Winner

Ode to a Minor Chord, cont'd

You wail a warning
To the ear,
You draw the dreadful,
Out of fear,
The poison from
A wound severe,
Like sacrifice
You beckon, dear,

You who makes
the drear admirable,
The depressing
you make so desirable,
Bed of the casket,
Bread of the basket,
You minor chord
are unexpirable.

Genevieve Wilson
Oakdale High School
Frederick County Literacy Chapter

Grade 12
2nd Place Winner

Jane Doe

The deadlines and assignments are beginning to pile up,
I'm exhausted, completely overwhelmed
The world around me constantly setting standards
I don't have the power to meet
My teachers' gazes show only disappointment
They once admired my focus and passion but
As soon as it faded so did they
I wear the face of sadness and defeat
Failure holding me within its grasp
I drown in the world around me
No one cares.
No one checks in
With no one to turn to
I'm too tired.
I'm nothing

Brooklyn Lindsey-Taylor
North Caroline High School
Mid-Shore Literacy Chapter

*Short
Stories*

Grade 9
1st Place Winner

Perpetual

I feel nothing.

Not emotionally. In fact, I'm feeling many different emotions right now.

Physically, I feel nothing, because I am unable. Now, if someone came over and slapped me, I could feel that. The sting.

But here in space. In the emptiness, or perhaps fullness. I'm weightless.

People describe it as falling endlessly. I wouldn't describe it as endless, because my fall will end briefly.

It's darker than I expected. The color of onyx. The stars are everywhere-if I look down or up, which gives me a nauseous feeling, but they're there too-but the light doesn't travel in the way to make everything bright. I don't really understand that phenomenon.

It's vast.

Slowly, I speak into the radio, trying to make my voice as calm as possible. "Charles. Um, I think they've left us." My voice still comes out gravelly and lower than I expected.

I don't think he understands.

Charles isn't the brightest.

"Well, I can see that. The shuttle will be coming back," he says in his questionable, nasally British accent (he says he lived there for six months in high school).

I cleared my throat. "I don't think they intend on bringing the shuttle back, Charles."

"Well then how do they intend on picking us up?" He replies in a vexed tone.

I turn to face him.

His light, greyish eyes remain unassuming.

"They don't. Intend on that," I explain patiently.

A beat of silence.

It hits him.

What a strange moment, to watch the sky and realize it is a million times more endless than you. My helmet's glass had begun to fog up at the bottom, almost like a countdown.

"You know," I thought aloud to him. "This isn't as scary as I thought."

"They left us." His voice shook with anger. "There is no way-it's absolutely unacceptable..."

"Grasping for words?" I asked, almost with a chuckle. I outreached my own fingertips, grasping at my own emptiness.

"Stop. Stop, *don't* talk to me."

"Okay." The fog has come up to just below my nose. It reminded me of my childhood snow days a bit-the fog on the windows we would draw smiley faces and hearts on. Or perhaps in a hot shower. Glass showers, or the mirrors when you step out.

"Ronald. Ronald, don't panic, but I cannot move!" Charles exclaimed suddenly.

"Yes, I believe we're paralyzed now. It's a bit tingly, isn't it?"

"*WHY ARE YOU SO CALM?*"

"Sorry. Forgot I wasn't supposed to speak."

"*GAHHH!*"

I had almost begun to sink back into my relaxed state when he began rattling on again.

"They can hear us, can they not? The space station? They'll surely send someone up. Or perhaps if we ask politely, the shuttle will come back. Yes, they're not too far, are they?"

I decided it was best not to respond.

A moment.

He sighed. "No one's coming."

"No." The fog had continued to move up further and it was interrupting my line of sight. I'd have liked to get a better look of space, a last glance, but I realized if I closed my eyes, it looked

Grade 9
1st Place Winner

Perpetual, cont'd

practically the same.

My breathing had slowed a bit. Each breath was heavier than the last, but not in a painful nor desperate way. It was just slow.

“Ronald,” Charles’ voice was very soft now. There was a gentleness to it, a vulnerability.

“Who will you miss the most?”

“My brother. Harvard.”

“Your brother is named Harvard?”

“Yes.”

We both chuckled. “Tell me about him.”

“Oh, he’s a nerd...just like me. We were always like that...curious about everything, couldn’t keep our mouths shut, not even in school...I got in trouble a lot, actually.”

“So did I...Hey, did your brother do well in school?”

“No, he was awful...”

“Unfortunate for a man named Harvard.”

“I’d smile at that if I could feel my face. Who will you miss the most?”

“My mother. Or my best friend. You know those people that look past you in...in spite of yourself?...Empathy...”

“Empathy is a valuable trait.”

“Yeah...” Charles breathed out.

“You’re speaking in an American accent...”

“I’d smile at that...if I could feel my face.”

“Why do you pretend to be British?” I asked.

“It’s kinda nice to pretend to be someone else...all these expectations...sometimes it’s better to be someone else entirely...”

“Well, when it comes down to this, Charles...you don’t need that anymore.”

“I’m cold...”

“So am I.”

Like a snow day.

Brisk.

Laughter.

Clear.

A carrot nose.

“Ronald?” Charles called out.

“Yes?”

“This is a good way to die.”

“I agree.”

The cold turned to warmth at some point, and I knew I was safer than I’d been all day. Safer than I’d ever been my entire life. Like a hug from an old friend.

You see, space was never empty.

In theory

It’s the most full.

Lily Hanson

Linganore High School
Frederick County Literacy Chapter

Grade 9
2nd Place Winner

Fairy Tale

Once Upon a Time,

In a small home just above the Rocky Mountains lived a small family of three. A mother, a father, and their son. Living happily in their abode, there was nothing they would ever dare to change. All were content with the way things were, with no bills to pay, or criminals to fear, they could shout as loud as they wanted with no neighbors to hear. All apart from the wooded area surrounding their house.

Until one silent day while out in the front yard, the boy enjoyed his lunch from afar. Mother assumed he knew not to stay out too long since she had already pestered him before, but little did she know her son was sick of this family and did not wish to live there anymore. He dreamt of being connected, having freedom not money and isolation, that was all father ever cared about. The boy could never explain to his parents what was wrong with his life, he did not know himself. So instead of obeying his mother and returning home before sundown, he started towards the woods and looked around.

The boy enjoyed the company of the trees as the leaves spoke to him in the wind. *Welcome home boy* the whispers were quiet but just enough to fill his head with reassurance that what he felt was real. He was drawn deeper into the twisted roots of the mulberry trees as the hushed voices guided him along the way. There were birds singing, flowers were bloomed, and the air smelled like the sweetest perfume. Who would ever want to leave?

Everything he never knew he wanted was all around him. Jumping from tree to tree attempting the stunts he saw in the movies his mother would punish him for if she knew. Playing in the rich dirt of the forest dirtying the overalls he had put on this morning, before leaping into the moving river where the fish were swarming. He laughed and snickered to himself enjoying what he thought was privacy, only to catch a glimpse of a tall figure just close enough where his eyes could see. Only for a split second, only for a little while, but the boy was not alone.

He shrugged it off as a wild deer or moose and continued along. Mother and father were not there to watch him, instead they did not seem to know he was even gone from his usual spot. The forest echoed with quiet chants that progressively got louder as he wandered further into the twisted roots. The boy grew hungry and in search of food, he remembered the sight of the mulberry fruit. Trying to retrace his steps, he could not find his way.

The boy was lost, the boy was alone, the boy was hungry and only thoughts of his mother's cooking were on his mind. He missed her. Minutes passed before he would find the next fruit, but he managed. The mulberry fruit was hanging just above his head, he reached up, grabbed the fruit, and took a big bite. Juices dripped from the corners of his mouth as the seeds oozed to the surface of the fruit.

He slurped and drank, chewed, and swallowed, but the loud sounds of the chants were what soon followed. *You do not belong here*, they said. The boy felt confused. *Bring back the fruit you stole from us*. The whispers turned from greetings to warnings before the boy even knew why, dared he even question it. In need of comfort the boy ran towards what he thought was the entrance of the woods.

Racing past the twisted tree trunks, ignoring the chants as best he could. A voice called out to him. *Honey! Dinner's ready!* His mother perhaps? It had gotten so late, he forgot all about coming back home, even so he felt relieved to hear her call out to him. *Where are you?* she shouted.

Coming mom- The boy froze. He was deep in the middle of the forest, nobody knew where he was, even if they did surely, they would not have wandered deep into *these* woods to get him. Her voice rang without the slightest hint of fear leaving a trace. Something was seriously wrong. Another figure – not as quick this time but surely it was not an animal. The boy stopped once he realized this.

Grade 9
2nd Place Winner

Fairy Tale, cont'd.

The boy was lost, the boy was alone. Or so he thought. It stood just behind a tree, as if it were hiding but knew the boy could see it. As tall as the rugged bamboo shoots that shot up about 8 feet from the ground. The boy could not move, he was too scared. No eyes, no ears, no nose, no hair.

Only a mouth, torn skin, with freakishly long arms and legs. This *thing* was not human. Desperate for a way out, the boy trembled, scared to look away in fear of what might happen if he did. Everything was still, until it opened its mouth, blood drooling from its tongue, jagged teeth, it called out – *Honey! Dinner's ready!* The boy began to scream and shout. *Leave me alone! Get away from me!* He cried as he darted in the opposite direction. Unsure of where he was going, he whined on and on.

The monster came closer and closer despite his desperate attempts to run away. *Leave me alone! Get away!* His useless chants bounced throughout the forest, overpowering the sounds of snapping tree branches and leaves underneath his feet. *Honey! Where are you?* The monster screeched. The voice of his mother never terrified him more, but why?

Where was his mother, and why did this *thing* sound just like her? So many questions rushed through his head, unable to focus on one. Crows cawed and wailed, deer rushed out of the area as the monster trampled and shoved any surrounding trees and plants out of its way to get to the boy. This could only go on for so long, he dove into the river from before, recognizing the spot on the soil where he had previously played. This all felt so familiar.

The mulberry fruit, the twisted trees and birds that were no longer singing, but staring as he rushed towards the entrance of the woods where he originally started. Nearing the exit, he could no longer hear the crashing of the trees or heavy darting footsteps behind him. This did not mean he was going to look back. He ran out into the empty field, only turning around after he was sure he was safe. It was quiet.

He could still see it staring back at him. No eyes, no ears, no nose, no hair. It was not human. Whatever it was did not move, it just stood there. *What do you want from me?!* The boy shouted. Again, the monster opened its mouth, but nothing escaped this time. It was quiet.

Frantic laughter followed the silence, it grew louder and louder. It was the sound of his mother's laughter, but it brought the boy everything but comfort. The boy was horrified. It backed deeper into the woods, still laughing. Finally, it disappeared into the shadowed forest.

The boy stood still for a while. He began to run back home from the field, but when he turned around, nothing was there. The house was gone. His mother was gone. His father was gone. Nowhere to go, no family, no nothing. The boy was alone. Before he could understand what was happening, fast heavy footsteps approached, and a voice called from behind him. *Honey!*

Celene Friday
Joppatowne High School
Harford County Literacy Chapter

Grade 10
1st Place Winner

The Rosarium

The greenhouse sat sequestered on a dip in the forest floor, looking ghostly beneath the silver moon. Driven to insanity by her hunger for perfection, Evelyn smashed in a window with a nearby branch. Climbing between the shattered glass, she paused to mentally thank the florist that led her here; she would've never been able to find the place without stalking his serpentine movements through the woods.

She recalled how she had bought the rose from him:

"It's beautiful like no other," she marveled, twirling it between her fingers. "How do you do it? Fertilizer, supplements?"

The man smiled bitterly. "Something like that."

Months later, the rose was still perfectly intact—fresh, vibrant. Undying. Evelyn needed to know how. She grinned as her feet landed softly on the greenhouse floor. Now she finally would.

Inside was an entirely different world. Evelyn gasped as she was greeted by rows upon rows of blood-red roses, which stood like soldiers and glowed in the starlight streaming through the glass dome overhead. The rosarium was organized like a web: triangular sections of flowers were divided by chains of stone pavers rising above narrow canals of water.

A large clock encased in glass hung on the far wall. It struck midnight, and the world went dark. Panels slid shut over the windows, the only light filtering through a hexagonal skylight overhead and from dim sconces along the wall.

"Hello?" Evelyn squeaked, mildly panicking. Silence.

She looked around, failing to locate any viable exits. The door fitted into an alcove opposite the clock was sealed shut no matter how Evelyn pried or rammed against it. She rushed over to the window she had broken and tried pushing through, wincing as a glass shard cut a gash in her palm. The panel still wouldn't budge.

"Help!" Evelyn called. "Let me out!" Her voice rose to a cry and eventually a hysterical scream, but nothing yielded results. Defeated, she finally slumped against the wall, sinking into the pile of glass on the ground.

It must've been a few minutes before Evelyn decided to get back up to explore. It was, after all, why she came. She skipped across the paver walkways, taking in the sickly-sweet scent of roses and the comfortably warm temperature. At the center of the room was an empty stone fountain, and she sat on its edge with a rose she had plucked.

It was flawless: a smooth, thornless stem, leaves like emerald feathers. The petals were the color of burning embers and as soft as powder, curling gracefully like ribbons. This rose was the epitome of beauty, and Evelyn was haunted by it. She was haunted by what she couldn't have, what she painstakingly strived for. To hold something so meticulously stripped of all flaws in her hand sent adrenaline shooting through her veins.

Suddenly, the walls began hissing. Evelyn jumped but relaxed upon seeing it was only mist spraying from tubes in the wall. Pleasantly cool, it coated the flowers so they shimmered. After a few minutes it was replaced by a pink-tinted mist, which sent Evelyn's head spinning. It smelled like an entire perfume counter had been set aflame. At first it was tolerable—but the mist continued to flow until the entire room appeared rouge.

Evelyn collapsed against the fountain, gasping for air. *I'm going to die smelling like a grandmother*, she thought despairingly. The clock struck one (had it really been one hour?), its resonant chime vibrating through her bones, but just as quickly as it had appeared, the mist suddenly vanished.

Evelyn bolted upright, fully prepared to leave. However, as she got up to go, something most peculiar happened—even more peculiar than the suffocating perfume cloud. The skylight in the greenhouse ceiling had split open and *birds* dove in, swiftly weaving between the rows of flowers. They bit off thorns and uneven leaves Evelyn hadn't even noticed, scattering them onto the stone walkways.

"Ouch!" Evelyn ran a finger along her cheek, and it came away spotted with red—a bird had nicked her. "I'm not a flower, idiot!" she cursed at it.

On that cue, about a dozen more birds swooped around her, tearing out hair, yanking on loose threads, pecking at blemishes. She screamed and kicked, but it made no difference; when the birds finally flew back out the window, Evelyn was on the ground in rags, frightened beyond words.

Grade 10
1st Place Winner

The Rosarium, cont'd

Behind her, the fountain began to somehow fill with chartreuse-tinted water, overflowing into the channels dividing the web of roses. Too stunned to move, Evelyn watched wide-eyed as small doors within the canal floors opened to allow the entry of small fish in every color imaginable. They swam along the channels, using their tails to scoop and splash water onto the rose beds. They splashed her too, and she yelped as thorns began sprouting from her skin. Once the soil had gone from tawny to umber, the fish filed back into their holes, and the remaining water traveled *backward*, back up the fountain walls, back into its basin, back through whatever allowed it out in the first place.

Evelyn hugged her knees to her chest, shaking uncontrollably. Something was seriously wrong with this place--even *she* could tell. The clock struck two, and she bit her lip, trying not to whimper.

Suddenly, the door opposite the clock slid open. Evelyn scrambled to her feet and was about to run for it when a dark gray mass emerged from the abyss. It stampeded toward her without faltering, hundreds of shiny black eyes staring into her soul. She shrieked and clambered back toward the fountain, hopping inside. After a few moments, she dared sneak a peek over the basin edge and nearly passed out.

The mass comprised hundreds of mice--big, dark, murderous-looking mice that scurried along the flower beds scrutinizing the roses. With remarkably brutal force, they uprooted the flowers Evelyn noticed were not perfectly identical to their peers and brought them back to the now-closed door. She watched intently as they stood statically before it. Without warning, the alcove floor suddenly dropped down, and bright -orange flames erupted from its depths.

The mice dropped rose after rose into the incinerator without hesitation, each flower soliciting a *pop!* from the inferno below. It burned so hot, the fountain Evelyn was crouched in soon felt dry. One of the mice turned its head and caught sight of her. Her breath hitched, and she ducked back beneath the basin edge, pressing herself flat against it. The room fell silent except for the steady rumble of the fire and the now crescendoing pitter-patter of mice feet.

Please, please, please... They would burn her if they got ahold of her, and there were so many of them, it would be futile for Evelyn to fight. She watched their shadows moving across the wall, which was as bright as a sunset scorching the earth. They towered over her, big black bodies against a burning sky. The mice were on the other side of the basin wall now, so close she could *smell* them. *Please...*

The clock struck three, and the room dimmed. Evelyn heard the mice scattering back out the door, which soon slid shut, securing her fate. She sat up, a strangled noise escaping her throat. It was a sob so ugly, Evelyn would've never dared do it in public lest she be deemed "unpolished." But the circumstances were different now. Even flowers weren't safe from the world's savage standards.

Something wet landed on Evelyn's arms. She looked up, tears streaming down her face, and gasped--it was snowing! Fat, fluffy white flakes coated everything they landed on. Evelyn closed her eyes and turned her face skyward, smiling weakly. It was like being in a snow globe! Except the snow globe weeded out anything less than perfect and was essentially a death trap... Evelyn's eyes flew open. Desperately but unsuccessfully, she tried brushing the snow off her skin, but it was too late. Every layer of snow that clung to her skin turned her paler. Soon, every inch of her body was white.

The clock struck four, and indigo storm clouds rolled overhead, blocking the skylight. It promptly began to rain, and it was as though a crimson shower had been turned on. The rain coated every white flower like paint, making them even more vivid than before. Evelyn herself was turning red with the exception of the green thorns and vines still curling out from beneath her skin. The droplets stung like acid, giving a prickling-needle sensation wherever they landed. Every passing second was pure agony. Evelyn opened her mouth to scream, but her cries were drowned out by the thunderous downpour, which had turned the world garnet.

Her legs twisted themselves together, turning moss-green as they did so. Her torso shrunk to the width of a wine bottle. Her arms grew wider, flattening themselves into cat-sized leaves. Her face began to itch, and whatever hair remained that hadn't been torn out by the birds was neatly rearranging itself into petals around her face. Evelyn was incapacitated, capable only of moving her eyes back and forth, and even that motion was limited.

Grade 10
1st Place Winner

The Rosarium, cont'd.

Through the dense curtain of rain, she could just make out the clock, whose minute hand traveled at an astonishing pace. *I wonder*, Evelyn brooded, *if time has also passed outside*. She thought about her situation and how pathetic it was. *Beauty truly is pain. I came here seeking the price of perfection, but it seems as though it has found me first.*

The clock struck five, and the rain ceased. The clouds parted to reveal a star-littered sky inside the greenhouse. They shattered with an ear-splitting *crack*, sending glitter showering down onto the roses. This was the icing on the cake; the roses now looked as radiant as Evelyn remembered her own looking. She herself was sparkling like a disco ball.

The panels over the greenhouse windows slowly slid open to reveal the dim blue sky outside. Indeed, it was morning. Evelyn tried moving and found that she couldn't. She couldn't even bend her head to see what had become of her body, but it wasn't necessary; in some strange, twisted way, she already knew. She had become the very thing she envied, but at what cost?

A distant rustling from the woods suddenly commanded Evelyn's attention. She painfully shifted her eyes toward the broken window and squinted just enough to make out a figure walking through the trees. Walking towards her! If she could, Evelyn would've squealed with excitement.

Help me! She wanted to say. *I'm here, I'm alive!* Instead, all that came out was, "Hmmp mm, mple!"

The man would never get here in time to save her, and even if he did, what would happen? What could he do to save a monster? Evelyn blinked, but no tears fell from her eyes, for flowers didn't cry. She took one last look at the cruel world that drove her to madness with the high standards she felt obligated to comply with. She thought of her wretched jealousy—of strangers, of friends, even of these cursed flowers. She wept silently. *It was all for nothing.*

The florist entered his rosarium with great caution; it appeared that someone had broken in. It was six o'clock, and the sun was beginning to rise. The florist could discern shattered glass glinting beneath a window, but other than that, nothing seemed out of the ordinary; the roses had been pruned as usual.

He approached his fountain curiously. Within the basin laid a most peculiar rose, larger than any he had ever seen. Red and white speckled petals bloomed on the tip of a barbed stem, from which grew winding leaves. The florist carefully picked it up, turning it over in his hand.

It was not necessarily beautiful, but its eccentric ugliness was enchantingly appealing. Not bothering to question how the rose had gotten there, the florist grinned.

"It's beautiful like no other."

Sara Patamawenu
Urbana High School
Frederick County Literacy Chapter

Grade 10
2nd Place Winner

Seven Days

On Monday, November Third (62BPM), she rolled out of her lumpy bed already dreading the day before her. Her stomach rumbled faintly, but she simply pulled on her baggiest pair of clothes— a sad attempt to hide her guilty figure— and dragged her feet out the door. She was used to discomfort. Perhaps it was a part of the fair price to be paid— the sacrifice for luscious locks and that little space between her thighs. The sacrifice to fit in, to be accepted by those who ridiculed her. Perhaps it was worth it. *Perhaps...*

Once inside the building that so closely resembled a prison in her eyes, the day went about as normal. A comment there, a chuckle here.

Some were brutal:

"You're wearing that today?" or *"I'm only eighty-three pounds. Oops! Sorry, shouldn't have said that in front of an elephant like you."*

Some were merely quiet whispers she heard as she passed by:

"I've eaten too much today— a hot dog, some beans, and a fry. My waist won't recover. It just won't." *The first girl grabbed at her stomach in the lunchroom, staring at her friend with melancholic eyes.*

"Same here, same here. Did you hear? Amelia is a size two in jeans, I'm a size five!" Her friend zipped up her lunchbox, signifying she would be done for the day.

She knew her own old jean size; eight. However, now she was more a triple-zero...but she wouldn't know that. Not with her blinding eyes.

Some were innocent yet left her hoping to die:

"If I have seconds, I don't think I could have dessert," or *"My, that's a lot of ham on your plate,"* or even *"Check it out, I've reached ten thousand steps already today!"*

She looked at her wrist, her fitness tracker blinking rapidly— yelling at her to get another six thousand, five hundred-two steps in to reach the daily ten.

She returned home, the day, sadly, not over yet. Dinnertime was rapidly approaching, and she pondered— *How could I make it through without going over my calories? This plus that...oh! And the broccoli! It's just too much, it's just too much! Maybe mom won't make me eat if I say I'm feeling ill...*

On Tuesday, November Fourth (56BPM), the rumbling worsened. She felt the knots in her stomach twist deeper, almost as if she could truly feel it shrinking.

She stood before her mirror, now a weapon against her.

If it was sentient, this reflection of hatred would mimic the thoughts around her, *I can count her ribs— each protruding one. I see a gap wider than an oak's trunk between those stick-like legs. What more do you want? When will you be happy?*

Yet it seemed only to reflect the same plump girl from last year with her size eight jeans and her full, round face. She gathered the chunks of what little fat she had left on her bones and squished herself with rage. Distraught by the little she was able to grab, the girl threw her fists weakly at the mirror— causing her reflection to shatter.

It was broken.

So was she.

The acute pain from the cuts on her hands, the agony she felt as the blood began to trickle down and around her palms, felt like a paper cut compared to the massacre within her brain. Still, she was determined to make it through the day without breakfast. To push her body towards losing more until there was nothing left but skin and bones. She had to. There would be no leniency.

Not every day was like this. Some days she saw her true figure— an exact reflection of a skeleton. Days like these were worse in her opinion. Feeling guilty for her slim figure, she would eat and eat and eat and eat. After, two fingers would slide their way down her throat— the guilt of eating surpassing the guilt of not.

On Wednesday, November Fifth (54BPM), her mother spoke to her. She spoke her concerns with sympathy and care. She squeezed her daughter's hands as she noted her lips no longer curved upwards towards her sunken cheeks and no longer did brightness shine from her blue eyes. Her mother confessed that she was deeply afraid. That every time the girl went upstairs to bed, she feared she would not come back down the next morning. She was frightened at the thought of what Bradycardia could do to her little girl. She didn't say it, but she was begging her to gain weight.

Grade 10
2nd Place Winner

Seven Days, cont'd.

Those were not words her daughter was eager to hear. Anger flashed in the child's eyes, and she screamed at her loving mother— whose cheeks now streamed with tears, "You know nothing! You haven't seen the other girls at school! You haven't seen the other girls online! I'm massive compared to them!"

Her heart rate spiked, fueling the intensity of her outburst— but later that night, she found herself with staggered breaths in bed and a battered heart beating fifty-two.

On Thursday, November Sixth (45BPM), she felt *almost* unbearable pain. She had been following an at-home workout on her laptop, hiding in her room for she knew her mother would disapprove, when her knee practically gave out. She winced in pain when the *crack!* of her knee split the air as she gave yet another lunge. It throbbed, it ached, it had been warning her for several weeks by doing so— yet day after day she continued to push her body, push her mind, and workout. Even now, after hearing the pop of her knee and feeling the utter agony, she gave fifteen more lunges— intent on hitting at least the sixty-minute mark of the video.

The fitness influencers online told her she was right in doing so. That she would never regret a workout, should always push through, and that discipline presided over motivation. Little did she know they were speaking to a different audience, one that feasted on doughnuts, not little girls that ate next to nothing.

As if this "bare-minimum" of sixty minutes of home workouts wasn't enough, she also kept glancing at her wrist.

Six thousand...five thousand...two thousand more! She counted the steps down excitedly as her stomach rumbled once again. This time it was relentless, a vigorous shake of such strength that it felt as if the ground beneath her was rumbling too. An earthquake— both inside and out, capable of destroying both her insides and her outside world.

She ignored her stomach, ignored the cries and pops of her knees, and hid in her room— marching around to ensure she was burning enough calories and getting those steps in.

On Friday, November Seventh (37BPM), she was invited to her best friend's birthday party. For many hours she debated whether she wanted to actually show up. Sure, it was her best friend since kindergarten. Sure, together the pair was an unstoppable force of laughter, and she knew a *party* would keep the good times rolling. However, she couldn't forget about the colorful, ornately decorated, fluffy, spongey "fat-bomb" that awaited. Nor could she forget that she couldn't burn off all the calories from that sugary cake— as she couldn't possibly, without being embarrassed, march in place in front of all these judging eyes.

Regardless of her own thoughts and fears, she found herself in her friend's backyard playing with her slice of cake— debating whether she should stuff the whole thing in her mouth and start her regimented "diet" up again tomorrow, or if she should restrict herself and not eat any of it. Her mother had forced her to go, claiming it would be good for her to hang out with her friends occasionally and not push them away so much. She scraped crumble after crumble away from the small slice she had taken as she stared at the smiling, laughing faces of her peers. She didn't understand how they could all be so bubbly— perhaps her body was far too tired to even attempt a smile back.

She continued to stand in the corner, leaning up against the perfect white picket fence in her friend's perfectly green and floral backyard, playing with her cake. Since her arrival, she had yet to utter a single word to anyone and barely made any facial expressions. She just stared as she stood in a bubble of pure jealousy.

Her best friend had so many other friends. They were all chatting away, roaring with laughter and good times.

Her best friend had such gorgeous, shiny blonde hair. Thick enough to braid.

Her best friend had such a full, yet thin, figure.

A unique, yet amazing personality.

A plethora of boys who were gawking at her.

A set of pretty acrylic nails, nice clothes, and a I-don't-care-about-calories attitude.

She looked at the group of friends that were gathered around this girl and bit her lip.

They all looked the same.

Every single one of them perfect.

Grade 10
2nd Place Winner

Seven Days, cont'd.

She looked at her own nails— brittle —on purple, frozen fingers. Anxiously, she brushed her hand through her hair. Her thin, thin hair— which came out in loose clumps. She tossed a small clump to the ground. She looked down at her clothes and realized they literally looked like sacks hanging off of her. She looked around her— lonely. No one was around her. No one was chatting with her. No one had even said “Hello” when she had previously entered the yard. *No one likes me*, she thought, *because I don't look like them.*

She threw her paper plate on the ground and begun to walk the three miles home. *No one will notice if I'm gone.*

On Saturday, November Eighth (33BPM), she discovered one of many websites. A site of like-minded teens who all sought the unattainable slimmer figure depicted in photoshopped social media posts, magazines, toy dolls and more. A site of tips and tricks to eating less, moving more, and ignoring the “hateful” comments of worried family and friends. A site that reinforced that sacrificing food was a glorious act of strength.

On this particular site, girls shared photos of their boney arms and complained they weren't thin enough. Girls promoted weight-loss mentality and encouraged each other on their dangerous journeys.

She became addicted. Visiting the site almost every hour and reading the latest false claims that the celebrity they all idolized was following fad diet “x” and working out in a particular way. Her brain continued to be fed senseless information, and part of her knew it. However, finally faced with a supportive community, she continued to scroll through the latest posts and read about the latest fads.

Another of her favorite uses of the household computer was to watch “What I Eat in a Day” videos. Her stomach rumbled vigorously and violently, desperate to reach out of her, into the screen, and wolf-down all the food presented. She sat there for hours as the screen flickered before her sunken eyes. She sat there for hours as her heart slowed. She sat there for hours, not for meal inspiration, but simply because she was starving. And she knew this. She knew it was bad for her health. Unsafe. Deadly.

She knew this, yet she continued with both the learned and newly learned habits because the number on the scale, the size of her jeans, the slimness of her figure, being happy, having friends— all of that depended on them. Right?

On Sunday, November Ninth, she stayed in bed. Too weak to move, too broken to care. The robed man stood over her, a look of deep disappointment forever scarred across his hooded face. “The twelfth one this morning,” he sighed heavily as he lifted his scythe before her.

Rose Saunders

Havre de Grace Middle/High School
Harford County Literacy Chapter

Grade 11
1st Place Winner

The Leper

It has been two months.

The grass outside is dead. When did it die? It's November. Two months ago today, she died- but we don't want to talk about that.

The spoon scrapes against the cereal bowl. The cereal is something sugary and stale, found in the back of the cabinet. John can't remember the last time he went grocery shopping. Was it two weeks ago? Three? Back then, he'd thought he would be okay. Now, he laughs to himself at his naivety.

Today is Tuesday: every day is Tuesday. An endless year of long, dreary, dismal Tuesdays. (*What happened before September 18? What did she look like? What happened?*) He has to go to work. The spoon scrapes again and he winces at the sound- it grinds in his ears. He gets up to feed her cat.

John hasn't been able to touch her stuff since September 18. He still lays on his side of the bed and sometimes when he's in that place between sleep and waking he can feel her presence and he jolts awake. But always, always his bed is empty and he is the only one. He usually can't sleep after that.

The cat rubs against his ankles. Its name is Missy; she named it. She used to call him Johnny, a nickname his mother had introduced. She comforted John when his mother died. Now there's no one left.

He can't look at the cat. He pretends not to feel its presence. He can't escape her. (*Will he ever?*)

The clock on the microwave flashes 12:00. (*How long has it been like that?*) The cat eats. Today is Tuesday.

The truck is warm, old. John avoids looking at the passenger seat. *With or Without You* by U2 is playing on the radio. He changes the station but the song is still the same. On every station, the song is the same.

The grass is dead. Everywhere. It was green yesterday. When did it die? Endless, infinite blue sky stretches out like a blanket. It feels cold. Everything feels cold. (*It's November of course it's cold*).

The song is still playing: "*And you give yourself away..... And you give.... And you give....*"

The radio shuts off with a resounding snap. John returns his hand to the steering wheel.

Today is Tuesday- work. John is employed at the local farm company, transporting seeds and scythed crops in big trucks that have loud horns and are difficult to brake quickly. It's also a lonely job, which means more listening to U2.

Cracked asphalt lies destitute underneath his feet. He wonders how many times he's walked here. (*Before she died- how many times? Can he go back? Can he please go back to that wonderful blissful ignorance?*)

"Johnny boy!"

The LED lights in the office are too bright. John's boss is standing in front of him. Suddenly, he is an award winning actor, owner of Emmys and Tonys.

"Nick!" His boss' name is Nicholas.

"You been watchin' the news, man?" Nicholas asks. (*News? How can the world continue on when she is dead and gone?*)

"Nah, too depressing. What's going on?"

"Some conflict with ----. Sayin' there might even be a war or somethin'."

"No way!" The crowd applauds. Another Emmy win under his belt. "That's insane. Whole world's goin' crazy."

"You can say that again. Oh hey, you've got a shipment to Natoma today. Have fun," Nicholas says. His mouth is set into a firm smirk. Then, it's back outside to the parched concrete.

Today, John is driving his favorite truck. It is large, gray, and has a loud horn he can easily blare. In case of any danger.

He doesn't turn on the radio this time.

Today is Tuesday, which means he'll probably have two other shipments to go. His back hurts- he forgot to apply Icy Hot last night. He tells himself he deserves the pain because he let her die. He let her die and he's still alive. And *With or Without You* is stuck in his head.

John turns on the AM station- to the news. The voice of the reporter warbles in the background and it's perfect to drown out the noise in his head. His attention is half in, half out. He hears the president's actions, how Congress is scrambling. But mostly his attention is on the grass; he can't get that out of his head.

Grade 11
1st Place Winner

The Leper, cont'd

Man, he could have sworn it was green yesterday. (*What day was yesterday? No, not Monday- Monday was years ago. Must have been Tuesday. Yesterday was Tuesday.*)

Work is dull today and U2 echoes in his head, a bad aftertaste he can't seem to get rid of. Maybe he should go grocery shopping tonight. He plans on it, sets aside time. But then he finds himself in his own recliner, watching a David Letterman rerun. The microwave is flashing 12:00, but the sky outside looks like it's six. (*Where'd the time go? How'd I get here?*)

John always finds himself in this chair. The cat is on the couch, purring. The fake audience on the TV cheers and the volume is too loud. Where's the remote? It seems like everyday, he ends up in this recliner. He gets up to feed the cat.

Today is Tuesday. He hears the news everyday now, instead of listening to U2. But it's still cold. Christmas decorations have gone up. Three months now.

Conflicts are increasing with -----. Journalists are being killed overseas. Sometimes, he wonders if her death caused it. She died, he didn't save her, and now they all have to suffer. Everything is his fault.

Tuesday- deliveries. The LED light in the office is dying.

"Johnny boy! You hear they got troops goin' over to ----- now? Somethin' about wantin' to protect civilians or somethin'. Bunch of bullcrap if you ask me." (*Why is Nicholas always so happy in the mornings? How long will things be like this?*)

"Yeah man, I've been watchin' the news. I think it's just an excuse to bomb some folks, y'know?"

"Whole world's gone crazy."

Every day is the same, time is going so slowly and yet somehow it's already Christmastime and John realizes this will be his first without her. He's spending it alone. He can't spare the energy to act normal in front of family. The grass is still dead, been dead, but in his dreams it's green.

On Christmas, John watches reruns of David Letterman. He listens to the news while eating his Christmas dinner. Family has called three times so far today. John hates the way they treat him, holding him at a distance, scared to touch him. It's as if he has leprosy.

Chuckling to himself, he examines his right hand. He imagines her absence as sores on his body, imagines them overtaking his existence until he's just one big sore that no one wants to be near. Except the cat, who is begging for some of John's soup.

He is looking at the dead grass when he hears that Congress has declared war against ----- . According to CNN, evangelists line the streets, clamoring for repentance. This is all his fault, he thinks. The war is announced on a Tuesday. She died on a Tuesday.

"There's gonna be a nuclear war, man." Nicholas is distraught this morning. His eyes are wild, his arms exaggerating his words.

"That's dramatic," John replies. "Whole world's just amplifyin' somethin' that happens all the time. It'll be good for the economy.

"Things'll be fine. You'll see."

In fact, things were not fine. He realizes this in late January, when the news on the radio talks about how the U.S. military is absolutely failing. They say we're doomed. We're going to lose this war.

Vaguely, he wonders how this will affect him. But she isn't here- why should he worry? He doesn't have anything he has to protect. Except the dead grass, maybe.

On some Tuesday in February, the president gives a speech in an attempt to calm the American people. It doesn't work, of course. The radio describes the mass theft in Los Angeles and the protests lining the streets of New York City. No one wants to say out loud what they knew would happen. *Could have been handled better* is whispered, a phrase always hovering around like a fat fly. On late night talk shows, they argue over how the president had screwed up and how we shouldn't have elected him because of his political party, shouldn't have trusted him with the country.

The grocery stores are empty. John goes out more than he used to, just to see the sad empty shelves lining the linoleum aisles.

"Heard there's gonna be another cold war," the cashier says.

He shrugs. He's buying kombucha. He wants to try it. (*You're forgetting her.*) "No idea what they're doin', and I don't care. Whole world's goin' crazy anyway."

Grade 11
1st Place Winner

The Leper, cont'd

The cashier sighs. "Think of the kids," she says.

John thinks of the cat, the cat that watches TV with him and its food that hurts his ears when he pours it into the bowl. The cat knows nothing of the imminent nuclear war. It sits on his lap every night now when they're watching late night talk shows. He wishes he could be like it, ignorant and careless.

On a Tuesday that feels like a Wednesday, nuclear war is threatened by both sides. Other countries are holding America at a distance, like it's a leper. America and John, two of the last victims of leprosy.

The grass outside is still dead, but the other day he saw some little weeds poking through, tiny white flowers opening their petals to the sun. (*How many weeks has it been again? September 18, right?*) They say it's the Cold War again, but nearly one hundred times worse. He feels like he's being pulled along a rip-tide, and he can't swim against the current. And all the time, he feels guilt for beginning to move on with his life- guilt that rises up in the back of his throat and feels like a lump choking him. He knows she would want him to be happy, but (*she's dead and I'm alive I should think of her more*) sometimes he still feels her presence late at night.

"The button was pressed!" The news screams. Everyone screams. It's Tuesday night, in March. Somehow the president screwed up even more- and now they're facing the serious consequences for it. Laughing to himself, John eats more stale sugary cereal. The grocery stores remain empty. Washington, D.C. will be bombed in a few hours, the fallout devastating. John turns on the television news for the first time in ages, watching partisan reporters shout at each other and the crowds trying to escape their doom in the major cities. He can't stand it. Leaving the TV on, he gets up and goes into the bedroom.

John hasn't opened her closet since way before she died. It smells like mothballs. He takes her second favorite shirt off the hanger and tries to smell her perfume. She was buried in her first favorite.

The cat has followed him here. He picks it up and scratches it behind its ears. They stand there together, the two of them, drinking in her belongings and remembering her. Maybe she did want him to be happy after she died. After the car accident, when the drunk truck driver rammed into the side of her BMW, he thought she wouldn't have wanted him to move on. But maybe... (*It's okay to move on, maybe.*)

The grass is turning green. He and the cat watch the news late into the night, the end credits for American civilization. He turns on *With or Without You*: "*I can't live / With or without you.*"

"You know," John tells the cat, "most civilizations only last about 250 years. This is year 245."

The cat purrs. They watch the clock turn. Today is Wednesday.

Joanna Schoonover
Colonel Richardson High School
Mid-Shore Literacy Chapter

Grade 11 2nd Place Winner

The Urn

Robin's egg blue with white and gold flower accents, it sat innocently in the \$5 bin at my local Goodwill. It looked familiar, but I couldn't figure out where I knew it from. Though the paint was beginning to chip on the ceramic, it was nothing a trip to Michael's and a quiet night in couldn't fix. The urn would make a perfect bookend on the shelf in my home office.

It was heavier than I expected when I picked it up, but I chalked it up to the ceramic being thicker than I anticipated. On the side, a gold plaque was molded to the rounded side with a set of dates engraved on it: 11/12/1901-8/4/1989. No name. I shook the urn and, other than just feeling heavy and dense, I heard no shifting of ashes. Satisfied, I took it up to the counter and took it home.

The urn sat on my shelf for months, still looking how it did in the Goodwill after I decided painting it just wasn't worth the trouble. In that time, I got a cat. He was sweet but surly, and when climbing on my bookshelf he'd always keep a wide berth around the urn.

Strange things began happening around the house, chairs pulled out when I knew I pushed them in, my keys disappearing and reappearing, footsteps throughout my house when I knew I was the only one who lived there.

One day, I was working on a finance report in the office when Lui, my cat, decided it was a good time to push the urn off of the bookshelf. It landed with a crash, shattered, and sent him running under my desk. When I turned around to pick up the mess, I saw that alongside the broken pieces of ceramic, there was some grey, sandy dust. Lots of it. Ashes. Human ashes, if I had to guess from the amount. My head felt faint. *Someone's grandma was scattered across my home office!*

Another crash. Another crack of something shattering. Lui burrowed himself into the corner of the desk. A gracefully aged woman, dressed in a floral-patterned satin housedress with matching slippers, appeared on my floor on top of the ashes. She coughed, dusted herself off, felt her hair to make sure her curlers were in place, then stood up. It was only then that I realized she was translucent.

"You... who are you? Why are you in my house? Are you dead?" I asked, incredulous at the fact I may have summoned a ghost.

"Do you not recognize me?" she asked, equally incredulous.

"Aunt... Shirley? Maybe?" I said meekly. The woman raised an eyebrow.

"Um, Aunt... Madge?" I said, just trying to think of deceased relatives who would have potentially dressed like her.

She sighed. "No. I happen to be the famed, or infamous, depending on your view of things, telenovela star, Ethel Whittenburg," she stated importantly, "What year is it, dear?"

"2021. I- that's why you look familiar. My grandma absolutely loved you. We watched your shows religiously."

She smiled. "Well, I'll excuse the lack of immediate recognition, then. Although, I'm not surprised. That blacklisting really did a number on me, huh?"

"Blacklisting?"

"Never mind that. Now, why don't we get me cleaned up?"

"But- but you're a ghost! I don't know how showering- "

"My remains, dear," she said gently, "and I prefer 'phantom' rather than ghost, if you don't mind. It sounds much more elegant."

I look down at my rug, shattered urn and ashes still covering it.

"Right," I replied, "I'll grab the vacuum."

"Vacuum?" she asked, aghast. "If I'm going to be disposed of, at least use a broom and dustpan."

I went to my kitchen and grabbed my broom, which luckily had a dustpan attached, and went to grab my trashcan. I paused. She should have a clean, separate bag, shouldn't she? I took out the partially filled trash bag and replaced it with a new one. When I returned to my office, I found her sitting on my office chair, petting Lui.

"So," I began, sweeping a load of ashes into the dustpan, "how come you were all over TV one day then disappeared the next? It was before my time, but always confounded Grandma. You were her

Grade 11
2nd Place Winner

The Urn, cont'd.

absolute favorite.”

“Well, that’s the blacklisting for you,” she sighed. Lui hops on her lap and cuddles into the flowers on her housedress. She smiled. “You know, my girl- my *friend* and I had a cat who acted just like your Lui. His name was Flour, like the ingredient, because he was all black with a dusting of white across his back and face, like someone had dropped an open bag of flour in front of him. He could be a real grump but a real sweetie, too, when he wanted to be.”

“Did your friend come up with the name?”

She nodded. “Lacey was always so clever at coming up with names and stories. That’s one of the things I loved most about her,” she smiled wistfully.

“You... loved Lacey?” I asked, still sweeping, Ethel’s story beginning to make more sense.

“Well, I, yes, but like a sis- “she backtracked, looking worried.

“Is she the reason you were blacklisted?” I asked gently.

She paused, choosing her next words carefully.

“Yes. We were best friends, then... more. People were less accepting, back in the ‘40s. We kept it a secret for a while, then the media found out. I was told to choose between Lacey and my role. I told them Lacey, and that they could take their threats and stuff them. My producers asked if my decision was final. I told them it was. They told me I’d never work in the industry again,” her smile now completely vanished, she sniffled and hugged Lui. “Lacey... she was so supportive. We became each other’s family after our own turned us away. She picked up extra shifts, even helped me get a job as a secretary. I tried auditioning again but was turned away at every door. People threw insults and slurs at me, then just... stopped. After years of being in the limelight, I was just *out*. It was nice, for a while, while Lacey was still around, then she was gone. Ovarian cancer. None of the doctors knew to even look for it. Then it was just me and Flour, and then just me. And then... nothing. I fell asleep one night, then didn’t wake up. I was just... I ceased to *be*.”

The room was quiet for a moment, then Lui hopped down from Ethel’s lap and walked out to his food bowl. Ethel took a shuddery breath then laughed.

“Well, I guess we see where his priorities lie.”

I smiled, then looked to her, still on my chair, a sweet woman robbed of her career and left in an unnamed, unlabeled urn at a thrift store. “Ethel, I’m so sorry you went through that.”

“Thank you, hon. You don’t have anything to be sorry for.”

“No, but you deserved so much better. How... how can we get you to Lacey? On whatever ‘other side’ there is?”

Her face goes a bit funny, a small smile affixed on it, eyes transfixed on something I can’t see.

“I think... I think I just needed to tell you my story,” she says, tone filled with wonderment. She stands up, walks across the now swept rug, out through the hallway, past the kitchen, then to my front door. She gives Lui, who is wound around her legs, a scratch behind the ears, then turns to me.

“Thank you,” she says, holding my shoulders, “for listening.”

She envelops me in a hug and I reciprocate. She takes one last look at me, then at my house, then walks down my street. The sun shines through her translucent figure, illuminating her until she shines with golden light. She turns the bend, waves in my direction, then disappears. I look to where she just stood, then walk back inside.

Now, I need to find a new bookend.

Beth Dallaire
Bel Air High School
Harford County Literacy Chapter

Grade 12
1st Place Winner

The Curse of the Phantom Heart

I was born from smudged graphite scribbles and whispered inner thoughts. From porous journal pages and soaked up aspirations. From crudely stitched concepts, and yet one, whole desire.

From her, I was born.

I wait for her return in empty nothingness, void of even darkness. An indescribable limbo the color of closed eyes, frozen in time just to hear every tick. I'm only left with my thoughts to keep me sane. But my mind is filled with her and all the things she'll bring to my existence. That alone is enough to last me even a million years, even in my place between pages.

Because when she frees me from my confines, all I see is the sun.

"You're back!" I exploded from the journal in an extravagant display, pulling myself from the pages, where words grew tangible, "So? Have you decided to write my story?"

She smiled, one worthy for eons of absence, and sat at her desk, pencil in hand. She twirled it between her fingers playfully, before tapping the eraser against my nose. "I thought about it."

I pushed it away with impatience. "And...?"

"There's no need to get all worked up; I'm just teasing you," she giggled, "Yes, I'm going to write your story."

I cheered and danced upon the open journal, careful not to streak the lead already written in. She beckoned me off her work.

I would've prompted her again, but she had long started without me in silence. Her playful nature aside, she made good on her promise. I couldn't read her beloved words from my angle, but they filled my mind just as quickly as she wrote them. A wondrous world filled with unimaginable miracles: grandiose forests that scraped the sky, rivers that sparkled down mountainsides, creatures of all shapes and sizes, civilizations tucked amongst nature. I was overwhelmed, dizzy, and stumbled upon my origami folds, my paper limbs crashing to the desk in an awestruck heap.

"Wow..." An understatement of all I'd been gifted.

She laughed at me with nothing but endearment. "I guess I got carried away. Sorry, I can go a little slower if that helps-

A noise, a call, ruptured our fantasy and her smile fell. It was so cold without her sunshine, almost too heavy to stand.

"We'll have to cut today short."

My cry was cut off as she closed the journal and I returned to nothingness, the end echoing empty into the void.

I hoped she'd come back soon, but at least this time I had a bit more to think about. She'd graced me with a paradise, a trove of beauty no one could possibly imagine but her; all I could do was replay it in my mind over and over. It distracted me from counting the hours until her return, but nothing could soothe the agony that came from her absence.

Grade 12
1st Place Winner

The Curse of the Phantom Heart, cont'd.

I don't know how long it was until I resurfaced once again, hacking the hollowness from my chest. It was difficult to tell time from inside the journal, so I could only assume.

"I'm sorry about last time." She didn't even give me the chance to speak. She swept a few loose strands of hair from her face, revealing an uncomfortable level of guilt in her eyes. Did... did her hair get longer? Surely not; it hadn't been *that* long.

I waved her off. "It's fine! Are we going to start?"

That brought back the beautiful light I'd do anything for. Her sunshine makes me melt, but I'd die happy. She didn't have to say anything; she picked up her pencil and that was confirmation enough.

I was suddenly filled with strength, like I could lift the journal with my bare hands. The rush was addicting, sending me on such a high I wasn't sure I'd ever come back down. I felt powerful... unstoppable... as well as the unfounded urge to pick up a sword.

"You're a skilled hero, honorable and respected across the lands," she preached, "Known for your grit and persistence."

I bounced with excitement. What could be cooler than that?! I practiced my swings; I could already see the sword in my hand. I knew she'd make me into something great; she could never disappoint me.

And then, just as quickly as it came, my strength left me, sapped away to a fraction of what I once knew. I fell to my knees, clutching at my chest. The weakness was just as overwhelming as the strength, leaving me waterlogged and fragile. I wanted to cry, and I couldn't explain why.

"Wha..." I couldn't even get the words out, looking up at her with confusion and a sliver of hurt.

"But not everyone favored your strength. An evil sorceress saw you as the prophesied threat to her reign, and placed upon you her most wicked curse-" She never looked up from the journal as she wrote, oblivious to my pain- "The Curse of the Phantom Heart."

I tried to respond, but I instead winced again, an alien numbness invading my senses.

"The Curse of the Phantom Heart targets the strong and consumes their will to fight until they have none left, leaving heroes to wither away. The more willpower you have, the more time you have to fight, but the more you have to lose."

"B-but why?" I wouldn't yield my voice a third time. I am strong! Stronger than this so-called curse!

"Because..." She looked away, but I still caught the gloss in her eyes and the quiver in her lip. "You're too strong, and the world is scared of what you can do."

I didn't realize I was so tense until my shoulders fell. That was it? That was the reason? That's not fair! I didn't do anything wrong; I did nothing to deserve this! So... why me?

"Look, there's a way we can beat it, a cure. We'll find it..." She straightened out her gaze. "Just not today."

I moved to argue, but she reached for the edge of the journal.

Grade 12
1st Place Winner

The Curse of the Phantom Heart, cont'd.

“No! You can’t!”

But she did, and I was thrown back into the void.

»»————— —————««

We had a few more sessions, but each was more fleeting than the last. I’d traveled to lands far and wide, met with those as powerful as I once was, but despite all that, nothing ever came of it. No one held the elusive cure I so desperately needed and I was beginning to grow hopeless. Would I ever get better? Was I simply doomed from the start?

No! That’s exactly how the curse wants me to think! I refuse to give up! I am strong!

But... I’d never had such pessimistic thoughts before. Regardless of whether I wanted to admit it, this curse was taking its toll on me. I needed to find that cure... before it was too late.

This next attempt looked promising, however. I’d found a grand mage who’d broken the curse himself. Surely he could help me. If it could be broken before, surely it could be broken again. But just as I was to follow his instructions, she’d closed the journal, leaving me suspended in inaction. I didn’t understand; I still don’t. Why would she cut me off as I was so close to the solution?

Then I was blinded. I hissed, shielding myself from the light, before realizing what I’d done. Had I really grown so accustomed to the void?

Her excuses and apologies were just as rare as our sessions were starting to become; this time she didn’t even say anything. She was so dim: her hair unkempt, bags around her eyes, a dirty tank top strap sliding down her shoulder. I could barely see it anymore.

She held her pencil shakily above the journal, but despite my anticipation, it never touched down.

“Well?” My patience wore thin. “I got the cure. What happens next?”

Her grip on the pencil changed from frailly dainty to destructively tight. “It didn’t work.”

“What...?” I didn’t hear her right. “What do you mean it didn’t work?!”

“It- the cure didn’t work, ok?” She was so quiet, but I still caught the snappy edge in her tone.

“But it was supposed to work!” No more running around on wild goose chases. I was done. “You said it would work!”

She didn’t answer. She ignored me. How could she?

“You lied to me then! You’ve been lying to me this whole time, haven’t you!” She’d been stringing me along with empty promises, and it had taken me too long to see it because she was my light. I’d let her blind me.

Grade 12
1st Place Winner

The Curse of the Phantom Heart, cont'd.

I didn't miss her hurt expression. Good. She should feel bad after how long she deceived me.

"So what then?!" I was going to get an answer. I deserved one. "When am I going to get better?!"

"I don't know!!"

I recoiled. She'd never yelled at me before, never looked at me with those burning eyes.

And then I watched her fall apart. She trembled, losing the tension in her nerves. Her mouth curled into an anguished glower. She held onto her pencil like a lifeline, trying to piece herself back together, but it was too late. She collapsed into a broken heap upon the desk, wrapping her shaking arms around herself as her last means of protection.

I listened to the awful sounds of her sobs before I finally understood. "You have the Curse of the Phantom Heart..."

She didn't answer, only growing more distressed. How long had she been afflicted? How much of her willpower had been stolen? How had I not noticed, only to find out in the worst way possible?

I watched her reach for the journal, and this time I made no argument, submitting to defeat as it closed.

»»————— —————«««

I didn't expect her to ever come back, not after all I'd said. Just thinking about my words put a sour taste in my mouth, left me disgusted and sickened. I deserved to remain in this void for eternity, which was what I was prepared to do, counting the hours away.

Until I was thrown back into the light once more.

She sat there, moving her combed hair from her face. She wore clean clothes and her bags looked a little lighter. I could see it; her light had returned, albeit humbler than before. I could only stare; only one response could get past the knot in my stomach.

"I'm sorry."

She shook her head, wiping at her eyes. "No, I should be the one apologizing. Just because my luck has been bad doesn't mean yours has to."

My gaze shifted downcast. "So it's true? The grand mage couldn't cure your curse?"

"No," she paused, "His cure worked for him, and others, but it couldn't help me..."

My own heart sank at such hopeless news. She didn't deserve this. Nobody did.

"But it will work for you." She picked up her pencil. "I promis-"

"No!"

Grade 12
1st Place Winner

The Curse of the Phantom Heart, cont'd.

She stopped. I stopped. I hadn't really thought this far ahead, but I'd already jumped into the deep end. So I edged closer, placing my paper hand on hers. The size discrepancy was there, but so was the intent.

My heart spoke for me, and it spoke the truth.

"You said it yourself. The cure didn't work." She looked surprised and tried to counter, but I nodded and held firm. "So what's next?"

The thought clearly saddened her, and her genuine concentration saddened me too.

"I don't know..."

I patted her hand again, in the nicest, most comforting way my paper limbs could. She looked at me with uncertainty, and honestly, I was scared too. Everything seemed so dim and hopeless, and it felt so easy to give in to the curse. But after everything, I can still see her light. She is strong. I am strong too. And the strong stick together.

"That's ok. We'll figure it out."

We are strong.

"We'll figure it out together."

Olivia Ordoñez
North Carolina High School
Mid-Shore Literacy Chapter

Grade 12
2nd Place Winner

Orbit

“Doesn’t it bother you?”

The question passed my lips before it had even formed in my mind. The silhouette next to me shifted, abandoning the comfortable position she had found in the grass of our small hill.

“I mean,” Jess shrugged, “not really.” Her face was hard to read in the sparse moonlight, but I could still make out the concern superimposed on her features. It was a familiar expression- it appeared whenever I talked about something like this.

I propped myself up with my elbows, grinding dirt into the crevices of my exposed skin. My neck remained craned towards the sky. I didn’t take my eyes off it. I heard the slightest sigh slip from Jess’s lips, the same sigh I always heard whenever I was being difficult.

“It bothers you though, doesn’t it?” she asked politely, kindly hiding her exasperation. I forced a swallow through my throat, which seemed to pull the corners of my mouth down with it.

“I mean, how couldn’t it?” I lifted my elbow and stretched the fingers of my right hand rapidly towards the sky, as though I needed to point out the celestial form to her.

“They say it’s the thing that will end all life on Earth. For good.” I elaborated. “Doesn’t it seem so... I don’t know.”

Jess nodded, her eyes tracing the path of the asteroid as it streaked across the clear night’s sky.

“Not for like, 300 years, though.” She shrugged again, completely indifferent. “For now, it’s just fun to look at. Marvel at. Get drunk and party and thank God you weren’t born 300 years later.” She chuckled, like she’d said something funny.

I tuned in to the murmur of the bodies below us. The flicker of firelight seemed to mimic the asymmetrical crease of light purple that Dante’s Asteroid cut across the sea of tranquil black above. There was laughter and muddled snippets of conversation. There were cups flung about and the fluid movement of arms pushing and pulling bodies into one another. There was happiness. There was reverence.

“But how can it not mean anything?” I asked. “Millions of years of evolution and history, and art, and people, and progress. And we get to just stare at the thing that will erase all of that. We just stand around and celebrate the hunk of space rock that makes it all for nothing.”

“Christ, Mark why can’t you just-” she pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. “Why can’t you just be here? Why do you have to be 300 years in the future with all the people who actually have to worry about that? Can’t you just be happy that you’re fine? That you get to enjoy all that progress? That you get to lay in the grass with me and experience something that only comes around once a decade?”

She sat upright, gazing down at me. I slid my eyes away from the asteroid and connected them with hers. I fell into the deep leagues of her irises, rendered nearly black in the darkness. My mouth slipped into a small, tentative smile. Her lips lovingly copied my own, and she slid her hand across the Earth to cover mine. She squeezed my fingers tight as we reveled in the calm of each other’s gaze.

Then, the purple scar of the asteroid cut through her eyes. I felt my eyes widen, and my heart sink, and my hand go limp in hers. I could see the heavenly form tear through the planet’s atmosphere, swelling to the size of the sun in my perspective. I could see it rip into the Earth, nothing more now than a flash of fatal light. I could see it burn through the bodies below us, in the next instant reducing Jess to ash in my grasp. I could see it slip right past me, as though it knew leaving me alive was worse than taking me with her.

I could see Jess sigh and her disposition shift to pity. I felt her slide her hand from mine, leaving me alone in the damp Earth. She stood up in silence, her eyes fixed neither on me nor the asteroid above. She stalked gracefully down the grassy hill, shaking her head just slightly in disappointment.

I stared timelessly into the empyrean comet as it made its way peacefully across the infinite dark. I watched, briefly, as Jess slipped into the sea of bodies and laughter and happiness beneath. I thought once or twice that I could hear her laugh, but it was impossible to tell, really.

Daniel Gaughan
Bel Air High School
Harford County Literacy Chapter

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 chapter. In an effort to create a visually cohesive document, 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 chapter 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.