

VOICES OF TOMORROW

An Anthology of State Finalist Writings

2025

YOUNG AUTHORS' CONTEST

Serving 16 chapters across the Old Line State



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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With heartfelt appreciation, we honor the dedicated educators, advocates, and literary leaders who make the Maryland Young Authors' Contest possible. Each of you plays a vital role in encouraging students to find their voice, sharpen their craft, and bravely share their stories with the world. Your commitment fuels not only this contest—but also a growing culture of creativity across our state.

To **Sherrie Ugolini** of Windsor Farm Elementary in **Anne Arundel County**, whose steadfast leadership as AACPS Chair continues to ignite a passion for writing in young learners.

To **Leslie Sunderland**, along with new leaders **Kelly Ryan** and **Katherine Lively** of **Cecil County**, whose energy and vision continue to elevate student voices and build bridges of confidence through the written word.

To the **Eastern Shore's** champions of creativity—**Jessica Webster** of The Salisbury School and **Dr. Brian Cook** of Worcester County Public Schools—whose collaboration empowers student authors across Somerset, Wicomico, and Worcester counties.

To **Kate Mills** of Middletown High School and **Andrew Velnoskey** of Ballenger Creek Middle School in **Frederick County**, who steward both middle and high school writers with care, clarity, and encouragement.

To **Cheryl Monk** of Harford County, a long-time steward of literary excellence, whose enduring mentorship of elementary and middle school writers continues to shape young minds long after retirement. Her instrumental role in planning the state Young Authors' Contest Awards

Ceremony ensures that our young writers are celebrated in a manner befitting their talents and achievements.

To the exceptional team in **Howard County**—**Maria Moy, Annette Kuperman, Sharon O’Neale,** and **Allison Rudo**—whose unified efforts across all school levels and community events have created a vibrant, inclusive space for writers to flourish.

To **Kelly Tanzi** of Woods Academy in **Montgomery County**, whose school-based leadership opens doors for students to express themselves freely and boldly through writing.

To **Jerselle Howard** in **Prince George’s County**, whose advocacy ensures young authors are seen, celebrated, and inspired to dream bigger with every page they write.

To **Kelley Sweiderk** of **Queen Anne’s County**, whose care and dedication uplift the literary voices of students across the **Upper Shore**, helping them recognize the beauty and power of their stories.

Your devotion to the literary arts and to the students you serve resonates far beyond the classroom. Each poem penned, each story shared, and each child believed in is a result of your efforts. Thank you for championing the next generation of authors—and for reminding us all of the transformative magic that lives in words. Your encouragement has not only shaped student writers but also empowered them to see themselves as thinkers, creators, and change makers. The ripples of your influence will echo in classrooms, libraries, and communities for years to come.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Grade 1, Poetry	1
“Wintery Evening”	1
“A Princesses' Summer Voyage”	2
Grade 2, Poetry	3
“Winter”	3
“Goodbye Halloween, Hello Thanksgiving”	4
Grade 3, Poetry	5
“Secret of My Joy”	5
“My Father, My Hero”	6
Grade 4, Poetry	7
“Mother Nature’s Cry”	7
“Personal Mantra”	8
Grade 5, Poetry	9
“In the Shadows of Night”	9
“Through the Eyes of a Soldier”	10
Grade 6, Poetry	11
“Sometimes”	11
“So Much Left to Say”	13
Grade 7, Poetry	14
“Wings of Freedom”	14

“Grand Piano”	16
Grade 8, Poetry	18
“The Beauty of the Broken”	18
“Two Minutes Late”	20
Grade 9, Poetry	22
“Memoir”	22
“Worlds and Pages Between Us”	24
Grade 10, Poetry	26
“Totality”	26
“Olympus in My Living Room”	28
Grade 11, Poetry	30
“Misinterpreted Luck”	30
“What if it was Adam”	32
Grade 12, Poetry	33
“Elegy”	33
“Unsung”	35
Grade 1, Short Story	36
“Sleigh ride”	36
“The Portal Potty”	38
Grade 2, Short Story	39
“The Girl in Red”	39

"Be True to You!"	41
Grade 3, Short Story	43
<hr/>	
"A Hero of World War II"	43
"My Forever Family"	45
Grade 4, Short Story	47
<hr/>	
"War Horse"	47
"Squirrel Encounter"	50
Grade 5, Short Story	53
<hr/>	
"Freedom"	53
"The Forest's Light"	69
Grade 6, Short Story	72
<hr/>	
"The Solace of Night"	72
"Finding Joy"	79
Grade 7, Short Story	84
<hr/>	
"Coffee"	84
"Did You Enjoy the Show?"	88
Grade 8, Short Story	95
<hr/>	
"The Glass that Molds My Shadows"	95
"The Nightmare from Nature's Nook"	100
Grade 9, Short Story	106
<hr/>	
"The Price of Silence"	106

"The Last Wishsmith"	114
Grade 10, Short Story	119
<hr/>	
"The Girl in the Backseat"	119
"The Fool in Her Wedding Gown"	124
Grade 11, Short Story	132
<hr/>	
"Barbie"	132
"The Way"	139
Grade 12, Short Story	145
<hr/>	
"Tormented"	145
"A Starving Artist"	152

A Note from the Contest Chair:

The works included in this anthology are presented as they were originally submitted by the students in the writing contest. While we generally honor the authenticity of each entry, including any errors or imperfections, we have decided to maintain the original works in their unaltered form. These errors, whether typographical or grammatical, reflect the writer's personal style and voice at the time of submission. We celebrate the creativity and effort behind each piece and believe that the inclusion of these works in their original state honors the integrity of the students' efforts.

– Brian Cook, Contest Chair

1ST PLACE

“WINTERY EVENING”

By **Arya Gurung**, Hickory Elementary
Harford County Literacy Chapter

When I go outside to play,
I hear and see my neighbors chatting with their loved ones.
The cold grass is tickling my feet.
My feet call back, “Stop it you green thing.”
I see my buddies stepping on pebbles.
I like the crunchy sound they make.
When I look at the sky, I see clouds making funny shapes.
It makes me giggle.
I see bunnies playing with each other.
I smile and give them a little wink.

Then the golden hour arrives.
I can feel the sun’s warmth on my face.
The moment feels so special. But it passes by so fast.
Then dusk arrives and it starts to get dark.
I say, “Goodbye beautiful evening, see you tomorrow again.”

Grade 1, Poetry

2ND PLACE

“A PRINCESSES' SUMMER VOYAGE”

By **Remi Breen**, Jeffers Hill Elementary
Howard County Literacy Association

A pool at sea
Happy as can be
Cousins, Sister, and Me

Breakfast at eight
I shall not be late
To deboard I must wait

Ancient Greece of old
Stories to be told
Sunrises of gold

Shimmering turtles swim by
Castles of stone in the sky
Gentle waves saying Hi

Seasglass that glows
Wishing time slows
Summer memories I chose

Sleepy ride home
Oceans with foam
Back to my throne

1ST PLACE

“WINTER”

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

Winter is the best season,
but not just for one reason.
Winter has so many amazing things,
despite the imperfections it brings.

Winter is the only season with snow,
even though no flowers grow.

I build a perfect snowman with care,
but it melts so quickly. No fair!

I sled in winter all day long,
although I miss summer's beach and the seagull's song.

Hot chocolate always hits the spot,
but my cold toes freeze a lot.

I love to warm up by the fireplace,
though nothing compares to summer's sun rays on my face.

Winter brings in a new year so fast,
Last year's memories are in the past.

Soon Spring, Summer, and Fall will be here,
and I say goodbye to winter with a tear.

Grade 2, Poetry

2ND PLACE

“GOODBYE HALLOWEEN, HELLO THANKSGIVING”

By **Serena Miller**, Broadneck Elementary
Anne Arundel County Literacy Chapter

Goodbye Kitcat. Goodbye Twix.
Goodbye lollipops that everybody licks.
Now it's on to Thanksgiving Day
So put those cranberries into an array.
Grab the turkey and the pumpkin pie
Pile up the mashed potatoes really high
Get together with your family and friends
I hope this day never comes to an end!

Grade 3, Poetry

1ST PLACE

“SECRET OF MY JOY”

By **Siraj Yasir**, North Salisbury Elementary
Eastern Shore Literacy Association

In this world selfish people abound
To live with them we are bound
We suffer for our past lives deeds
Our life is crafted out of our misdeeds

I believe I should not end my life or run away
For my deeds will follow me all the way
I am the cause of miseries in my life
No one else can be blamed for my strife

I am emotional I don't have much willpower
When upset my tears fall like shower
I tell myself I have food clothing and shelter
With such positive thoughts I feel better

I also think of those who are worse than me
I thank god for all that has been given
To ensure better future, I avoid doing any sinful act
I strive to do good, however bad others may act

I have stopped thinking of future and past
I realized both thoughts hold miseries vast
I mentally exist in the moment in front of me
Enjoying every moment I experience glee

2ND PLACE

“MY FATHER, MY HERO”

By **Abdulazeem Owokoniran**, Cora L. Rise Elementary
Prince George’s County Literacy Chapter

My father, my hero
My father is as strong as a tree,
Standing tall and guiding me,
With a smile so warm, a heart so gentle
He’s always there, in his arms I find
My peace.

He works so hard to care for me,
Teaching me in his special way,
With soothing words and hugs so tight,
He makes everything just feel perfect.

He tells me stories,
We giggle and play,
He chases my fears far away,
My father’s love shines bright like a star,
He will forever and always be,
My hero and number
one.

Grade 4, Poetry

1ST PLACE

“MOTHER NATURE’S CRY”

By **Rishika Ketha**, Fulton Elementary
Howard County Literacy Association

I’m Mother Nature and I’m worried and cry every day
My oceans are polluted and my animals are in disarray
My forests weep and my rivers sigh
My creatures fade and my heart asks why

The ice is melting and the weather’s all awry
I’m trying to warn you and you won’t ask me why
I’m giving you signs but you are not listening well
I’m worried that you’ll ruin the world I can tell

Wake up humans, hear my plea
Restore harmony and set me free
I’m calling out to you so please take care
Of the world that I gave you and show me you truly care

You can make a difference and you can make it right
Save the planet and shine with all your might

2ND PLACE

“PERSONAL MANTRA”

By **Cheyenne Pouska**, Rising Sun Elementary
Cecil County Literacy Association

I dance like the graceful snow in the wind
But having negative thoughts
Is a bad habit I'm in
I'm smart, funny, caring, and kind
But having confidence in myself is hard to find

Do I have a strategy?
Not really, not so
But instead of negative,
I'll think go, go, go
And when i feel like i can't,
I need to know
Keep going, keep trying,
And I'll go, go, go

1ST PLACE

“IN THE SHADOWS OF NIGHT”

By **Karthik Balasubramaniam**, Veterans Elementary
Howard County Literacy Association

Beneath the sky, so cold and gray,
I march along, the light of day,
The barracks loom, the fences tall, The world outside no
longer calls.
The smell of ash, the bitter air,
I search for hope, but none is there. The faces here are thin
and worn,
Each one is tired, each one is torn.
They took our names, our homes, our dreams, Left only
pain, or so it seems.
I hear the cries, I feel the shame,
Yet, I whisper, speak my name.
The guards are harsh, the voices loud, I stand beneath the
thunderous cloud. But in the dark, I close my eyes,
And see the Star of David, beyond the lies. I think of loved
ones, now so far,
I hold their memory like a star.
And though I stand in endless night,
I still believe in some small light.

2ND PLACE

“THROUGH THE EYES OF A SOLDIER”

By **Charlize Damouni**, Worcester Preparatory
Eastern Shore Literacy Chapter

The Great War was fierce and long,
With battles fought both hard and strong.
Soldiers marched day and night,
In muddy fields, with bags not light.
They faced the roar of guns and fire,
Their hearts were tested, their bodies grew tired.
Through stormy skies and in deep trenches,
They fought for peace, while many got stitches.
But after years, the guns grew still.
The fighting stopped. Now what was their will?
Soldiers returned with eyes so changed,
To see the world again in a different range.
Coming home was bittersweet,
To see family and loved ones was a treat.
Some came back with wounds so raw.
They will forever remember what they saw.
The war was done, but peace was slow,
And home was different, this they know.
But through the pain and endless fight,
Their country feels secure, every night.

1ST PLACE

“SOMETIMES”

By **Eleanor Wagner**, Windsor Knolls Middle
Frederick County Literacy Association

Sometimes, we run
out of words
to say.

Sometimes, we chase
the stars
until we fade away.

Sometimes, we hope
for more than
what we truly need.

Sometimes, we let
our world
be overrun with greed.

Sometimes, we place
the pen,
then take it off the page.

Sometimes, we begin
to fall
into a silent rage.

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Sometimes, we know
that words
cannot say enough.

And sometimes,
our words
can make things
much more tough.

For sometimes, we fail
at knowing
what we've lost.

Sometimes, it hurts
to finally
check the cost.

Sometimes, we hope
the world
will give us more.

Yet, sometimes, we overlook
what the world
still has in store.

Sometimes,
we see
a starry,
endless night.

And sometimes,
we fail to see
the burning,
blinding
right.

2ND PLACE

“SO MUCH LEFT TO SAY”

By **Chelsea Reed**, Patterson Mill Middle,
Harford County Literacy Chapter

I have so much left to say,
Yet the words are stuck in my throat.
I'm afraid if I swallow,
My voice shall forever be reduced to a croak.
Because this time,
That I should savor,
Has finally slipped away.
And it's not just something I can wish upon,
To fix another day.
If I were to say what I felt,
You'd run away.
Afraid of what I didn't say.
But didn't it matter,
That we were woven together?
Planning our futures?
Now we're stuck on the past,
Telling the same story,
But different ends.
That your words are dishonest
And filled with lies
Forgetting,
Yet I remember the color of your eyes?
And I still say happy birthday,
Merry Christmas,
See you another day.

1ST PLACE

“WINGS OF FREEDOM”

By **Ayla Castro**, Middletown Middle
Frederick County Literacy Association

I fly when the world becomes too big,
when the earth, with all its weight
presses too firmly against my chest,
when roots wrap around my ankles,
keeping me in place,
I spread my arms
but not as feathered wings
but as the wish to leave behind
the ground that held my name.

With every beat of my heart,
I rise,
As though my soul was a balloon,
finally being let go,
I am free of the weight that held me down,
the pounds of doubt and worries
that kept me on the ground.

The sky above is an open book,
I can write my own story
From this height I can see the world in fragments,

No longer as a cage,
but as a blank canvas
where I am both the artist and wind.

I realize I did not soar to escape,
but to find the space between
Who I was
and who I could become,
I left those old roads behind,
I left the paths I knew were safe,
and I flew,
trusting the air to guide me
towards a horizon I was yet to see.

2ND PLACE

“GRAND PIANO”

By **Sunny Parepalli**, Clarksville Middle
Howard County Literacy Association

Walking into the room,
A glistening black cover awaits,
Asking to be opened,
And while slowly unsheathing it,
The ivory-white keys flash,
The contrast in colors so clear,
As clear as raindrops,
Polished to perfection,
And sitting calmly on the black chair,
I bounced on a few, soft chords,
Right hand picking up speed,
Left hand diving deep into the depth of the note,
From andante to allegro
Clashing chords,
Striking notes,
A harmonious melody intertwines locks in,
Dramatic rising and falling of dynamics,
Fortissimo to pianissimo,
The sound radiated the whole room,
A mixture of emotion,

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Fingers skipping along the keys,
Flawless technique
At the end, finishing in a glissando,
The music had confined me,
Like a planet in a black hole,
So I stayed,
And played,
On the Grand Piano

1ST PLACE

“THE BEAUTY OF THE BROKEN”

By **Aadya Rai**, Clarksville Middle
Howard County Literacy Association

The gleaming moon, with its cratered face,
Still lights the world in soft embrace.
No perfect sphere, yet it holds the night,
A gentle beacon, a borrowed light.

The crooked tree on the mountain's crest,
Twisting, turning, unlike the rest,
Reaches skyward, its branches frayed,
A haven where the wild birds stay.

The river winds with a jagged flow,
Through rocky paths where mosses grow.
Its course, unsteady, yet ever true,
Carving valleys, painting hues.

The clouds that scatter, torn and gray
Still grace the dawn in their fleeting way.
No flawless form, but their shadows blend,
Into whispers of storms and skies that mend.

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The imperfections etched on every face,
Compose a symphony of endless grace.
Each scar and defect, a tale to tell,
Of trials fought and lessons held well.

In nature's mirror, our flaws appear,
A mosaic of cracks, yet strangely clear.
A testament to the trials we face,
Etching resilience in their place.

2ND PLACE

“TWO MINUTES LATE”

By **Aya Musleh**, Oakdale Middle
Frederick County Literacy Chapter

I missed the train—
only two minutes late.
The rails shook, the engine roared,
and then it was gone.
I was left standing there
the bag of cookies still warm in my hand,
smiling up at me,
where, in return, I frowned back
With nothing left to do
I returned home
And eat all of the cookies
Delicious as they were,
they were supposed to be *his*—
gooey,
rich,
flavor expanding in my mouth,
All that flavour
that was supposed to be shared.
Over coffee in a café,
watching others and

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laughing
because no one understood
what all that feeling felt like
And now I won't see him again,
not until the next time
I get on a train. . .
On my couch,
I cried,
emptying like a rain cloud,
knowing he'd be gone by the hour,
off on another trip.
In desperation, I turned on the news—
Relatives
were weeping,
Holding on to each other's hands
passengers clinging to life.
And passersby's
Watching the fire consuming the broken train.

1ST PLACE

“MEMOIR”

By **Kirsten Braddy**, Centennial High
Howard County Literacy Chapter

I remember Maple Tree,
and soft winds that rustled
its canopy of fragile leaves.
I remember summer storms,
and heavy rain that washed
the chalk
from off the driveway
and adorned the windows
with glassy droplets.

I remember June evenings
and catching fireflies,
barefoot,
as the sun surrendered
and the sky became
its deepest shade of blue.
I remember chasing the
waning moon
that dipped behind
the tired roofs.

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I remember white tablecloth,
and chandelier;
the dome of
golden light
that surrounded us
as we passed the plates
and glasses
three quarters full
of unsweetened
iced tea.

I remember "look both ways"
before crossing the street;
the firecrackers
and folding chairs near
the on-ground pool
(those 4th of Julys
I'll never forget).

I cherish Maryland Summers
and every shared memory-
kept in a collection of
photographs.

2ND PLACE

“WORLDS AND PAGES BETWEEN US”

By **Lily Copeland**, Stephen Decatur High
Eastern Shore Literacy Chapter

I am a writer
I am a fighter

I pick up my pen and write as it rattles
I pick up my sword and fight daring battles

I write the grand stories that stir in my mind
I feel tossed around and misaligned

I write fantasy stories with dragons, mermaids, and elves
This isn't the future I'd pick for myself

I wish so much to be apart of my story
I watch the madness unfold before me

If only I could jump right into the page
I'm tired of feeling like a performer onstage

My characters world is so much better than mine
Sometimes I wish I could just resign

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I'm through with boring meetings and feeling alone
My cruel trail of bad luck has formed my heart of stone

I wish I were somewhere else
I wish I were somewhere else

I'll never write a story without happily ever after
I fear the past is catching up to me, faster and faster

1ST PLACE

“TOTALITY”

By **Rihana Yami**, River Hill High
Howard County Literacy Association

90% wasn't enough for me.
I needed the whole thing, the shadow, the ring.
So my dad, my little sister, and I packed our gear and hit
the road,
Chasing the line where the shadow would go.

But as the city came into view,
Clouds rolled in- gray, thick, unmoving.
I stared at the sky, fighting tears,
What if I came all this way for nothing?

Hours crawled by as I checked the weather,
Refreshed the forecast, again, and again.
I was crying in the car, I'll admit it.
Thinking of the sun and I would miss it.

Then, just before the moment came,
The sky cracked open, a gift, a flame.
The clouds parted, the light became thin,
And the eclipse began, pulling me in.

Continued to Next Page

When totality hit, the world went still,
The sun's corona, haunting and unreal.
For two perfect minutes, all was right,
Day turned to night, shadow into light.

Grade 10, Poetry

2ND PLACE

“OLYMPUS IN MY LIVING ROOM”

By **Breanna McCray**, Stephen Decatur High
Eastern Shore Literacy Chapter

Anxiety sits like Hera on her throne,
Jealous of peace, a queen of suspicion.
She whispers doubts like seeds in the soil of my mind,
And I grow vines I can't untangle.

It is Zeus in the clouds,
Hurling thunderbolts of what-ifs.
Each one lands, a shattering echo
Of things that never were but could be.
I try to dodge, but the storm is endless.

It's Hades, cloaked in shadows,
Pulling me into the underworld of my own thoughts.
No golden coin to pay my way out,
Just the weight of Cerberus gnawing at my chest.
“Stay,” he growls, and I do.

Athena's wisdom is absent—
My shield is cracked, my sword dull.
She is silent, her olive branch
Just a taunt from a distant horizon.

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Anxiety is Ares in battle,
Marching to the drumbeat of my pulse.
Every breath a war cry, every step
A skirmish with ground that shifts beneath me.
The fight is never fair.

It's Poseidon's tidal wave,
A flood of fears crashing over my shore.
I gasp for air,
But the salt burns my lungs,
And the sea shows no mercy.

It's the labyrinth of Daedalus,
Winding thoughts with no escape.
The Minotaur waits at every turn,
Its roar the sound of my own heartbeat.

I pray to Apollo for light,
To Artemis for calm,
To Demeter for something to grow
From the ruins anxiety leaves behind.

But I am Prometheus,
Bound to this rock,
The eagle of panic tearing at my chest daily.
And yet, like him, I endure—
Searching for fire amidst the dark.

1ST PLACE

“MISINTERPRETED LUCK”

By **Audrey Whitehair**, Queen Annes County High
Upper Shore Literacy Association

Luck is misinterpreted.
Within just miles,
There is a very a home,
The walls and floors are deteriorating.
The roof has caved in.
And the foundation is slowly beginning to crack.
In the midst of the decay,
Memories linger.
Good and bad.

For in the beginning, the house was pristine.
Endless possibilities.
The foundation was sturdy,
But little by little, the concrete eroded away,
Wearing it down with each passing day.

Adolescents filled the rooms with laughter.
Dreaming of what they can achieve,
Ranging from teachers to mothers, and even doctors too.
Yet, beneath the surface whispers of doubt crept in.
The diplomas they dreamed of, taken away.

Continued to Next Page

A house that once felt like a home,
Suddenly became a place filled with echoes of what used
to be.

The cracks expanded,
Overtaking the children themselves.
For now the burdens hadn't relied on just the house itself.

As the house stood silently,
The children learned how to adapt.
One became a doctor,
For they mended the broken walls with bandages.
Another grew up to be a mother,
Loving the home with the tenderness they had always
yearned for.
And the last, was a teacher.
For they taught others the importance of a home.

Luck is misinterpreted.

2ND PLACE

“WHAT IF IT WAS ADAM”

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

In the garden where the sun shone bright,
Two hearts fell under that fateful light.
She reached for the fruit with a curious hand,
But wasn't it Adam who made that stand?
He took a bite, and the shadows fell,
Now pointing fingers, casting spells.

Now she walks with sorrow, wearing the blame,
While he hides in the shadows, playing his game.

With the weight of the world on her delicate frame,
Eve carries his sins, while he plays the same.
Oh, the serpent whispered, *but who took the fall?*
In a world of lies, who can hear the call?

What if it was Adam? Eve just took the fall.
Adam ate the apple and he blamed it all.
She got all the hate.
She took all his sins.
What if it was Adam, and Eve was innocent.

1ST PLACE

“ELEGY”

By **Yehji Hwang**, Centennial High
Howard County Literacy Association

Speak to me-

I stand, threadbare, over the grave of my grandfather's
mother, grieving

because I do not know her name.

I am from only ice, set adrift in thin water

silken sheets silent, too far away from sun and home.

She was Catholic. I care for only

the cradled desires I was created by

formless coal hallowed in finite glory.

My grandfather's back, damp with sweat, sways before me

pulling deep-rooted weeds out of his mother's grave.

The world is overbright, hard-faced

and I would take its radiance in both hands, all diamond
malice gleaming

and pour it out in pools before us

bury her again in pitiful penance.

Speak to me-

A sweet deception, prayer

a grand word for the wishes we cannot grant

that we throw out into the world, dandelion seeds floating

aimlessly, floating

Continued to Next Page

enveloped in a night that leaves and returns in gentle waves.

Speak to me-

In my mind, I am the man who lays false flowers on these endless graves.

I know all the faceless in this land of the dead

and as I look into the distance, their words come back in soft delineations, calling-

and I know my great-grandmother's name, and I repeat it, calling-

and the veiled memories rise anew in gentle light, transformed.

Grade 12, Poetry

2ND PLACE

“UNSUNG”

By **Ziann Franklin**, Pocomoke High
Eastern Shore Literacy Association

Do not scratch at the scar
Creating spots that reveal the ugly parts underneath
We try to stomp on the secrets
Sing them into sections
Waiting for the Sopranos, Altos and Tenors to prepare for
their next selection
We have the limits of our thoughts to keep within bounds
We have the courage to say what is on our minds when no
one is around
The family scene is unsung
The family portrait rests in a shattered frame
A headache to the nightmares we dream at night

1ST PLACE

“SLEIGH RIDE”

By **Adelaide Craig**, Rising Sun Elementary
Cecil County Literacy Association

One Christmas Eve there was a little girl named Eva. All she wanted was to see Santa on Christmas Eve. First, she trimmed the tree. She placed twinkling lights all around the tree and her favorite ornaments. She had dragon ornaments from Japan. Eva placed the ornaments carefully all over the tree to fill every single spot. She had candy canes from the North Pole. Eva had some fake popcorn garlands that she added to the tree. Her final touch was a big red and white for the top of the tree. Then she placed the cookies for Santa on her dining table on a plate shaped like a candy cane. The cookies were Santa’s favorite - warm, chocolate chip right out of the oven, with gooey insides. She also poured an ice-cold glass of milk and placed it by the plate for him to drink after eating the cookies.

Then she made sure she wrote a letter to Santa, saying what she wanted for Christmas.

- A toy dragon.
- A Kawaii diamond kitty plushie.
- But what she really wanted most of all, was a ride on Santa’s sleigh.

WOOSH!! Suddenly Eva was teleported to the North Pole. She was so surprised she dropped her pen that she

was using to write her list back at her house into the snow she was now standing in. But she's suddenly wearing a huge parka and a wool hat. Eva noticed a label on the parka that said S. Claus. "Santa Claus!" she yelled. "Maybe I really am in the North Pole," Eva said out loud. She decided to try looking for Santa's workshop. She noticed blinking lights in the sky, kind of like Santa's sleigh lights. "Let's follow those! Maybe they lead to Santa's workshop," she thought to herself as she started trudging through the snow. She saw a red light at the end of the blinking lights. "IT'S RUDOLPH! THE RED NOSED REINDEER!" She yelled. Then a great big building came into view and it had a sign saying "Santa's Workshop Here." The doors were already open and she heard some ho ho ho's coming from inside. "Santa?" she asked. "I've been waiting for you Eva! I heard you wanted a sleigh ride on Christmas Eve," Santa chuckled. "We need to hurry - Christmas Eve is on its way! Can you help me deliver the presents Eva?!" "Yes!" yelled Eva.

THE END

2ND PLACE

“THE PORTAL POTTY”

By **Leah Johnson**, Benfield Elementary
Anne Arundel County Literacy Chapter

Mom and Sally were watching Sally's brother's baseball game when Sally needed to go to the potty. Sally and her mom walked to the porta potty. They went inside and shut the door. Sally sat on the potty, and fell right into a portal! It was a portal potty! When she fell into the portal potty, she went through tunnels and when she came out of the tunnels, she saw a castle and guards. The portal potty took her to the middle ages! Sally walked to the castle and went inside. She saw a big staircase and went up. There was a big room, and the king and queen were sitting on their thrones. They looked surprised to see Sally and shouted for their guards. She started running with the guards chasing her. She ran all the way back to the tunnel and it took her back through the portal to the porta potty with her mom. Sally's mom was looking at her phone and didn't know anything had happened. Sally told her mom she was done, and they walked back to the baseball field.

1ST PLACE

“THE GIRL IN RED”

By **Mara Eber**, Broadneck Elementary
Anne Arundel County Literacy Chapter

Once there was a little girl who loved to wear red. Her name was Charlotte. She wore red dresses, red t-shirts, red pants, and even red socks. Every day she went to school in all red. After a few days in second grade, kids started to bully her when they realized she didn't have any other colors to wear. One day at the end of school, a boy named Jack said to her "Why do you always wear red? Don't you have any other clothes? You look like a tomato!" All the kids at the lockers started to laugh at her. Charlotte started to cry. She grabbed her backpack and ran all the way home without stopping. She wondered why Jack cared if she liked red. It didn't hurt him.

The next day while Jack was making fun of Charlotte again, a girl named Ava heard him and said "Stop being rude Jack! Don't you know the golden rule?" Jack rolled his eyes, saying "Whatever Ava!" and walked away. Charlotte thanked Ava for being so nice to her.

Later, on the playground, Charlotte saw Jack by the slide looking sad all by himself. Even though Jack was so mean to Charlotte, she walked up and asked him what was wrong. Jack explained that his ex-best friend, Aiden, was laughing with some other boys about how weird it was that Jack liked collecting Pokemon cards. Charlotte walked right up to Aiden and said "It's not nice to make fun of

people just because they like something that you don't. Jack wasn't hurting you, so leave him alone!"

When Charlotte walked back to Jack, he thanked her for being so sweet. Charlotte said, "Do you want to be in Ava and my friend group?" He said "Yes, thank you!" They told him "There is only one rule to be friends with us. No more bullying. You have to treat others the way you want to be treated". Jack agreed. He realized how mean he had been to Charlotte and how it had felt when Aiden made fun of him the same way. They all agreed that in the end, it was better to be friends and better to be different.

2ND PLACE

“BE TRUE TO YOU!”

By **Emma Brayman**, Riverside Elementary
Harford County Literacy Chapter

There was a girl who lived in a small but crazy town. Her name was Emma. Emma means creative. She made so much art that her parents said she could fill the house with art. So, her parents made her a tree house. She loved it! It was her art studio. She went to her tree house every day after school and invited her friends. Her friends loved her tree house, too. That night, her parents told her some exciting news. The town had built a greenhouse! Emma loved plants as much as she loved art.

The next day at school, her teacher gave her class an assignment to think about what they wanted to be when they grew up. Many of Emma’s classmates told her she should be a gardener, but Emma wanted to be an artist. For the rest of the day, Emma was so sad. She did not want to talk to her friends. But the next day, she tried to be confident. She said to herself, “Be true to you!” The teacher called on them one by one. First up was Olivia, followed by Jake, Mason, and Madison. Soon, it was Emma’s turn. She said, “I want to be an artist.” This made her so happy.

When the school day was over, she ran home, and as soon as she walked in, she said, “I did it! I said I wanted to be an artist when I grew up!” Then, she ran to her room

and made so much art that she painted, colored, and glued.

Emma decided she wanted to sell her art to the world. Her parents said that she could become a famous artist. Emma said, "I want to! That's what I want to be when I grow up!" She asked, "Can I take an art class two times a week?" Her parents said ok. Emma shouted, "Yay, I can't wait to make art!" When Emma grew up, she became a famous artist. She made kids want to become artists just like her.

1ST PLACE

“A HERO OF WORLD WAR II”

By **Asher Ennis**, Odenton Elementary
Anne Arundel County Literacy Association

Jax felt a chill down his neck as the icy seawater poured in his boat. He knew he would have to fight the Germans soon. They were supposed to be there before the crack of dawn. Planes whirred overhead. He mumbled to himself, “Which side are these planes on?”

A soldier behind said, “The U.S.”

He asked, “Who’s in them?”

The soldier responded, “U.S. paratroopers.”

He got lost in his thoughts until the yelling of his sergeant pulled him out, then they landed.

Chaos everywhere. Men scrambled for cover on the sand of Omaha Beach. He didn’t want to be here anymore.

After hours of fighting, they finally made it past the beach and into the town. There they were, marching into the town, but something was off. There were no Germans. Jax felt something was off. People were praising them as heroes. He trusted his instinct and ducked, and then the man in front of him fell. Jax saw the glare of a scope on top of a building. He yelled, “Sniper! Get down!” All the men ran for cover. Then the man that was hit was taken to a hospital and survived. The sniper surrendered, and the American platoon marched until they found a British regiment. They joined forces and liberated several towns together.

Jax continued to serve in the Pacific after Germany had fallen, taking part in the battles of Okinawa and Iwo Jima. He was a true marine, always faithful.

2ND PLACE

“MY FOREVER FAMILY”

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

As told by Clover

Hi, my name is Clover and I am a dog. A Golden Retriever actually. No, I can't talk, that is all in your imagination. But my story is real-CAT! Oh, sorry, just a shadow. Now where were we? Oh yes, I was going to tell you the story of how I got my awesome forever family. Here we go in 3,2,1....

One day, I was sitting in my old home playing in the living room when I heard the door open and a family walked inside. The two kids, a boy and a girl started playing with me while the parents talked with my mom and dad. These kids were fun to play with but I heard my mom and dad talking about why they had to give me up. The family was getting bigger and I was sometimes in my crate for 12 hours a day. They loved me, but it wasn't fair. They decided they would give me to this family. What?? I was sad. I already said goodbye to my dog sister who went with another family, why did I have to go too? My mom and dad and human brothers and sisters all said goodbye and told me they loved me. Dad cried when he put me in the car. They gave me my dog sister's blanket to help me be brave. When we got to this new family's home they gave me pets, hugs, good food, and a warm home. They promised to love me, but I was sad and still so scared.

I miss my family...

It has been a few weeks and this new family gave me a new name. My old name was Chloe but they call me Clover or Clo for short. It is a good name and close enough, it will do. I like it. I still miss my old family but I am less sad. The girl Zoe is helping me. She plays with me and gives me hugs. She helps me not to be scared. She tells me she always wanted her own doggy and that she loves me the most. I think I love her too. She helps me be brave. Her little brother Alex is super silly and fun. He is smaller than me and fun to chase. When I catch him, I give him lots of licks and it makes him giggle. I think I love him too. The mom and dad are nice, sometimes I have an accident since this place is new or I chew on something I shouldn't and they get upset but don't yell. Then they tell me they love me but to do better. I will, I want to be the "goodest girl". I think I love them.

This is a nice family...

It has been a few months, I play all the time, we go on walks (I never went on walks with my old family). I have lots of warm soft places to sleep, I get lots of hugs and pets, and I give lots of lick attacks to the kids. I never have to go in my crate anymore; my family is usually around to spend time with me. I still miss my old family sometimes but this family says they will never give me up, I am theirs forever. I feel fine now, great even. I am much braver with my new Mom, Dad, Brother and Sister. This is my forever home now, that is a fact and I am happy.

This is my forever family...and I love them.

1ST PLACE

“WAR HORSE”

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

One moment I am galloping with my herd, the next, there are ropes around my neck. Rough hands pull me away. My mother neighs loudly and cries, “No, don’t take my baby!” I know what I have to do. I kick, bite, and buck, but it’s no use. The rough hands take me to a trailer hitched to a team of oxen with a few other horses in it. He yells, “Get in there wild animal, I ain’t got all day.” I see one spotted Appaloosa gelding in the trailer, along with some other horses. Suddenly, we start moving. I lose my balance and fall onto the cold, hard floor. When I wake up, I see a barn full of dull horses. The man ties the ropes around my neck again, takes me to the barn, and shoves me into a stable. There is nothing to eat except hard, stale grain. I missed my mother’s warm milk.

The next morning, I realize it is time to begin my training. Over the next few months, I become bigger and stronger, and I have to pull heavier loads up and down the mountain. The Appaloosa is paired with me to make it easier. The leather straps that attach me to the cart tear at my fur and leave my skin pink and raw. The man with rough hands whips me on my rump even though I am trying my best to pull the heavy load. Blood drips down my rump. The man barely gives me any water. The only comfort that I have is from the other horses. Once I get into my stable, my legs collapse. I am so tired.

One morning, the man with rough hands yells, "Wake up!" He ties the rope around my neck, taking me outside. I wait for him to hitch the cart onto my back, but he doesn't. Instead, he puts on something else, with an itchy strap that goes around my belly. He shoves cold metal into my mouth. I shake my head but a strap secures the metal. Then, out of nowhere, the man with rough hands sits on my back. I buck and rear, and the man falls off. He gets back on over and over until I realize he will not stop. I finally give in. That night, I dream I am with my herd, looking at the stars.

When I wake up, a man leads me out of the barn, puts on my tack, and gets on my back. All the other horses are lined up, and I am ridden to the front and hitched to lead the group. We walk over mountains, deserts, and through forests for hours. The landscapes are fascinating. When we finally stop moving, we get unhitched. I see men loading big carts full of cannonballs. They attach me and the Appaloosa to the same cart. The man with rough hands whips me. We pull the heavy cart full of cannonballs up the hill, just like in our training.

Once I get to the top of the hill, I get a clear view of the horizon. In the dark shadows in the distance, I see lit torches, horses galloping, and people charging towards us. Fear floods my mind. I realize I am no longer a sweet, little foal; I am a strong war horse. I gallop down the hill to get more cannonballs, with the Appaloosa at my side. At the sound of the first cannonball being fired, I jump in panic. The Appaloosa reassures me that everything will be fine. He nuzzles me until I stop. We keep pulling the cart up and down the hills, until we can no longer see the sun, and the stars are showing.

Before I know it, the sun is rising. I am so tired that I don't know if I even slept at all. Someone gets on my back and runs me faster than I ever have in my whole life. I see a quick blur of gray clouds, the strangest I have seen during

the war. The next thing I know, I am falling onto the ground. All I can see is pitch black.

When I finally wake up, I realize I am blind. But, there is no sound of cannon balls being fired. I think I now have a new home because I smell sweet, fresh grass. When I also smell another horse, I get scared. But, it comes up to me and nuzzles me. As he does this, I realize he is my partner from war. A man comes up to me and gently pats my neck. The Appaloosa says, "That old man is kind. He will take good care of you." And we lived happily together for the rest of our days.

2ND PLACE

“SQUIRREL ENCOUNTER”

By **Ted Murphy**, Jones Elementary
Anne Arundel County Literacy Association

My family was renting a cabin in the San Francisco Bay Area to stay for the week. One foggy day, I tried to go for a morning stroll, but I could barely see. The giant Redwood trees, which are the biggest in the world, were so tall and the fog was dense.

There wasn't much to do with the fog so thick, but on the bright side, the internet was working so I could play video games. After my family went to bed, I heard a sound: "Ay! Ay! Ay!"

My heartbeat sped up with fear. But, I could barely hear my heartbeat over the loud sound coming from outside. My family was still fast asleep, so I needed to go investigate for our safety. I stepped outside onto the cabin porch, and I heard the terrible sound again: "Ay! Ay! Ay!"

Fear struck down my spine - there was something moving just a few feet from the porch. A small creature with short brown fur, chisel-like teeth, and razor-sharp claws stared right at me. Our eyes locked for a moment and he swiftly turned around, disappearing from view. I quickly went back inside, where I curled up safely in my blankets and reluctantly fell asleep.

The next morning, my dad made fresh pancakes for us while my mom told us about a hike we were going to take. I didn't tell my family about the creature encounter - I

wasn't sure how to explain what I had seen the night before.

After lacing up my boots and putting on my gloves, we left for our hike. We saw flowing streams, bright berries, and beautiful landscape, and we enjoyed the sounds of birds chirping and the wind whispering through the Redwoods. As we were heading up an incline, I noticed a fox picking on a small, helpless squirrel. "Shoo, shoo, shoo," I said to the fox, who briskly vanished behind a bush. The squirrel looked at me and seemed to smile faintly. There was something familiar about that little bundle of fur, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

We walked back to our cabin ready for an afternoon rest. My shoes were muddy and tracking dirt into the cabin, so my mom asked me to bang them out on the front porch. *Bang bang* - the mud fell from my hiking boots into the dirt below the cabin. Suddenly, I heard a rustle in the distance. Was I hearing things? What was going on?

The little squirrel from the hike emerged from the bush looking cute and a little cuddly. He turned to the side and I saw a red, glistening mark on the side of its neck. Oh no - it was bleeding! It limped toward me, as if asking - not begging - for me to help it. I approached the squirrel, put my hiking gloves back on my hands, and bent down to inspect the squirrel. I immediately recognized those razor-sharp claws from the "scary" creature I had seen the night before. This squirrel was the culprit who had made all that noise last night and now he was hurt!

I ran to the cabin, scooped up a box, and returned to the squirrel who was looking weaker with every moment. I brought him inside the cabin and showed him to my mom. My mom was trained in animal rehabilitation and she would know what to do.

The squirrel had a bite mark on his neck from the fox we saw before. But, what was more troubling was that his tiny paws were covered with shards of glass. What I had thought were razor-sharp claws were actually glass fragments!

My mom put on her thick gloves and she got out the first aid kit. She started to bandage the squirrel's neck wound. She was not able to take out the glass from his paws because it was so much. I shook my head in sadness for this poor squirrel.

My little sister came over to the table where we worked to help the squirrel. She asked, "Why would there be glass in nature?" I responded, "People litter so much and it's so sad - just tragic." I continued, "The animals are the ones who suffer and this is their home."

After the squirrel was bandaged, we drove to the Wildlife Rescue Center. The veterinarian said she would update us about how his surgery went. Thankfully, the squirrel made a full recovery.

Later, while packing my bags to leave the cabin, I made a promise to myself to protect nature. There are steps we can all take to help our environment, including picking up trash when we find it in nature. We *all* have an impact on our ecosystem. And, our small steps can have a *big* impact for *little* animals!

1ST PLACE

“FREEDOM”

By **Scarlett Spak**, Bayard Rustin Elementary
Montgomery County Literacy Association

A Historical Fiction Story of The Underground Railroad

Gulp. I lay on the cold, grassy, dirty ground afraid of what would happen in the morning. I slowly rolled over to face my brother, George.

“George,” I whispered. “Hey George.”

“Lucy. It's 1:00,” George answered sleepily.

“How do you know?” I wondered aloud.

“Shh. And Jefferson told me,” George responded.

Jefferson was an older slave that claimed he used the stars to tell time. It was pretty far-fetched but it was our only source (except the sky).

“Oh,” I answered.

“Be quieter. You don't want the guards to catch you,” George commented.

You see, I am a 12 year old slave living in the South in 1845. (We sleep on the grass, out in the open.) It is my second year being a slave. When I was 11, 10 white men surrounded my house in the night. Five of the men came into my house and captured my brother and I. I remember that moment like it was only yesterday.

Anyway, I am fed up with being a slave. The work is hard and people are mean. So, George and I are running

away. As in running away THIS MORNING! I am horrified. Sometimes I worry I'll be sold again. Without George. Or to a really mean master. My master isn't that bad compared to other people. George says not to worry about being sold, but I worry anyway.

"Lucy," George whispered. "Go to sleep."

"How do you know I'm not asleep?"

"You had that look on your face you make when you're thinking," George responded. "Fine, I'll try to sleep," I replied.

So I lay on the cold, rough ground waiting for sleep to come to me.

"Huh?" I woke up startled as someone was shaking me awake.

"Lucy! Get up! Get up!" George whisper-shouted.

I raced to my feet remembering our escape plan. George had picked just the right time to get up. The guards went to sleep at 2 AM, so George knew to pick at least an hour after. (We had to wake up at 4 AM and the guards had to get up at 3:30 AM.) George and I silently crept across the grass. Once we reached the fence (which took 10 minutes, it was so far away) we climbed over the high, scratchy, yellow fence. George had me on his shoulders so I could reach the top. I pulled myself up over the splintery fence and jumped to the ground. (George took longer than me because he couldn't stand on anyone's shoulders.) Once he got over, we checked for splinters. (I had two and he had five.) We pulled them out quickly. Then George looked behind us to see if anyone was following us, but he didn't have to look, just listen. The guards were indeed following us and were making a lot of noise in doing so. One guard was yelling, "Get over that fence!" He was yelling it over, and over, and over, and over.

Another guard was pushing a guard over the fence very loudly. I knew he was because I saw the guard (who wasn't pushing)'s head popping up over the fence. Also I heard grunting. (That was the guard who was pushing.)

"Run!" George suddenly yelled. I looked back and quickly turned my head back around and started to run. I had seen a guard that had made it over the fence.

"C'mon!" George yelled. More guards had gotten over the fence. And more guards were racing towards us.

"Faster! Faster!" George screamed.

"I'm going as fast as I can!" I screeched back.

Unexpectedly, I felt hands picking me up. Then instinct spoke for me.

I yelled, "Get off of me!" The person grabbing me said nothing. Then I realized the person was running toward the trees. And that this person had the same shade of brown that I did.

"Huh?" I said.

"Lucy, relax. It's just me," George said, still running. I sighed with relief. I looked behind me, still in George's strong, mighty, arms.

"George!" I had just realized something important. "The guards are nearing!"

But it was too late. One guard grabbed me and another guard grabbed George. They tore us apart, but George would not have it. George twisted away from the guard and punched him in the stomach. The guard fell to the ground defeated by one sucker punch.

"Ay!" another guard yelled.

George gave the guard a bloody nose. I couldn't believe George. He was going around punching guards in their body parts. Then, all of a sudden, the guard (with a bloody nose) punched George. Hard. I could tell George

was in pain, but he kept going. George punched the guard in the nose again. The guard cried out in pain. I was pretty sure the guard had broken his nose. But I didn't care. There were two guards down. Two more to go. I wanted to cheer for George. But the guard held me really tight (so tight I felt like my arms would fall off) and even if I did cheer, the guard could hurt me like the other guard hurt George. I hoped George would hurry up beating these guards up. George grunted in frustration. So far, he had hit the new guard that had come at him three times and still the guard had not fallen to the ground. (The guard had hit George once more.) George tried something new. He kicked the guard in the gut so hard, the unbeatable guard (finally) fell down, unconscious.

"Girl. Stay here," the last guard said to me. George raced up to the guard and kicked him in the stomach and punched him in the eye, somehow at the same time.

But the guard would have none of that. He hit George in the mouth, causing blood to fall from his upper lip. George groaned and fell to the ground, defeated by a nasty blow. I knew I had to hit the guard for George. But I didn't think I could. Oh, but I have to. I argued with myself. The guard inched slowly towards me, like I was a deadly snake. Oh, just go! I thought. I gathered up all my courage and raced forward.

"Aaahh!!!!" I was falling down, sticking my arms out trying to hold on to something, things were blurring, and then I slid into something fast.

"Ow!" Someone shrieked.

"Oof," I said. I was okay, but then I realized I had slid into someone. And then I saw George! He was up and alive! I wanted to shout with joy!

But then George said, "Come on! Go! Run!" So, I did. I ran as fast as I could. George ran with me, racing

alongside me. My bare feet were wet from the dewy grass, as I sprinted through the grass, not sure where we were headed. Suddenly, George took a sharp left, running into the woods. I dashed to keep up with him.

"Where are we going?" I called out.

"I don't know. Anywhere away. Away is the only safe place to be," George responded, loudly. "Are you sure about this?" I asked.

"Relax. Lucy, we'll be fine." George kept on running in the narrow woods, tearing through leaves, branches, and anything else in his way. I, on the other hand, was racing as fast as I could like George was, but I was dodging anything that came in my way. Suddenly, George came to a stop. I banged right into him. George said only one word: "Hide."

"What- Why?" George put his finger to my lips and repeated the word. "Hide."

So, I carefully crept behind a wide, smooth tree and stayed silent. I looked around for George, wondering where he was hiding. I saw him climbing up a tall tree a few yards away from where my tree was.

I sighed. Sometimes, George could be so strange. I peeked from behind the tree trunk. I saw a very skinny white man with a brown potato sack. The sack was bulging. I wondered what was in the sack. I decided to get a closer look. I stepped out from behind the tree, and slowly walked to the tree in front of me. One step, two steps, three steps, four steps, five steps. Almost there, I thought. I took a couple more steps. One more. I squeezed my eyes shut and took the last step. I heard fall leaves crunch under my feet. No, no, no!!!! I was horrified. Has the sack man heard me? And then I heard my answer. "Who's there?" a quiet and scared sounding voice said. Eek! He had heard.

"Who's there!" the voice repeated even more timidly than the last time. Oh, what do I do? What should I do? I wish George would tell me.

"Come out or I'll..." The voice wavered, as if it didn't know what to threaten. Which it probably didn't.

"Or I'll find you," The voice finished. Ha. I almost laughed. That man had just said the worst threat I had ever heard. And I'm a slave, so I've heard a lot. I knew I had to make a decision. So, I did. I slowly snuck out from behind the tree.

"H-Hello," I nervously said to the sack man.

"Eeeee!" The man screeched. This man was very fearful.

"I'm um, er," I gulped. "Lucy."

"Are you a slave?" Asked sack man. I inhaled nervously. This man seemed very suspicious for four reasons.

1. He was white and could be a master or someone who would report me to my master.
2. He had a bulging sack.
3. He asked if I was a slave.
4. He seemed very scared.

So, what should I say? What should I do? Wait, maybe he could help me and George! Or he could do quite the opposite. But, George came to the rescue.

"Hello."

"EEEEEEEE! Where are you people coming from!? Are there more of you?" For some reason this man had screamed louder when he saw George than when he saw me. The man cleared his throat. "I should introduce myself. I am Orville and I am a conductor of the," Orville hesitated then whispered, "The Underground Railroad."

I gasped. "Really?"

"But I'm afraid I can't be your conductor. Though, I can help you," Orville smiled, a small, tiny, (but genuine) smile. I had never seen him smile, only seen him be scared.

"So, what about this "help" you can do?" George asked sassily. I could tell George didn't trust or like Orville, even though he was a part of the Underground Railroad.

"I have a friend that also works for the Underground Railroad," Orville replied matter of factly. "So, you're going to bring two black people to (I'm guessing) a white person and leave us there," George answered suspiciously.

"I know it sounds strange and suspicious, but you're just going to have to trust me on this one," Orville responded, "And the conductor, he is white. Oh, and his name is Wilbur." "Wait one moment," I said politely. I pulled George aside, as in behind a tree.

"George, we have to make a decision."

"This isn't even a decision. The answer's no. Orville is suspicious. Wilbur's probably suspicious, everything's suspicious!"

"But, we need someone to lead us. We're too young. I'm 12, you're 15." I knew we had to go with Wilbur, but I knew George wouldn't listen.

"True, but Orville is only maybe in his twenties."

"Stop assuming. You know it's best."

"What if everything goes wrong? Then we'll be in a bad situation."

"What if everything goes right?"

"Ugh. Since when do you believe in things going right? Did things go right for us? No. We got taken. Taken. Do you know how wrong that is?"

"Yes. Yes, I do. George, I'm not a little kid anymore. I have a voice, too."

"I know. I know. But this is a hard decision to make and I know what to do."

"But I do too. Just consider both options. Besides, who decided to run away? You did." "But-" George started.

"Who decided to fight the guards to get out of being a slave? You did."

"You-" George started again.

"Who always makes the risky decisions? You do. And who is always the bravest. You are!" I shouted angrily, not exactly sure why I was mad.

"Fine. But this better turn out well," George said, giving in. I sighed, glad that we had made a decision. I jogged back to Orville.

"We're going with Wilbur," I announced.

"Alright. I'm glad that you came to an agreement. I heard some shouting back there." "Yep. There was some ..." I tried to think of the right word, "Disagreement." I settled on. Out of the blue, Orville did the black capped chickadee call.

"I knew you were trouble!" George yelled.

"It's not what you thi-Hide!!!! Now!" Orville yelled, just loud enough so only we could hear him say it. George and I raced about a mile away and hid behind two tall and wide trees that were next to each other. They were the perfect kind of trees for hiding behind. They were wide and tall so no one would see you behind them and they had pretty low branches, so you could easily climb up them. Unfortunately, George and I couldn't hear Orville's quiet voice (except when Orville shouted), but we did hear bits and pieces of what the guards were saying. (I knew they were guards because they had the same voices as when they were at the plantation chasing us.) So, that meant they were looking for me and George! Anyway, what we heard them say was:

"...Runaway slaves.....a boy and.....Punching and kicking.....Wanted big time.....Master mad." Then there was silence. (Probably Orville.) And then it started up again: "You sure.....If you're lying....jail....big trouble."

More silence. (Probably more Orville.) But would Orville reveal where we were? I was scared. ".....searching for a long time.....leave you alone.....tell us...see thembig reward...." Silence. (Again probably more Orville.) "OKFarewell," I heard the guards say. I counted to ten, 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,- My counting was interrupted by George.

"Guards," he whispered. Uh oh. I stayed as still and as quiet as I could. I watched them pass by us. I counted to a minute. I could hear them murmuring in the distance. I counted to a minute again. Silence. But, just to be safe, I counted to a minute one more time. Then George and I started heading back towards Orville.

"Sorry, 'bout that. Alright, let's get to it," Orville said.

"Let's get to it? Did you tell them? And where are we going?" George had a load of questions. "Yes, I mean let's go to Wilbur and no, I didn't tell them." Orville could handle all of George's questions.

"Yeah, let's go," I said quickly, before George could say anything else.

"Wait. I have one more question. Why did you make that call?" George asked.

"Wilbur and I, that's our bird call. To signal that the other person meets here, right away. We even have the spot marked," He pointed to an indigo-colored mark on a tree stump.

"So why didn't he come?" I wondered aloud.

"That means he has died or he is coming now," Orville looked a little more nervous than usual. "Why did the guards come?" I asked.

"Well, maybe they thought I was signaling to them. Maybe it sounded more whistle like than birdlike," Orville was looking more nervous than ever. Why? I thought.

"Let's head out," Orville said to break the silence. So we walked, Orville leading, George the cabooses, and I was in the middle. We walked for about 10 minutes, and only had to stop and hide when Orville quietly said, "Guard" so we knew a guard was coming and we should hide. (This only happened two times.)

We reached a cave and Orville said, "We've arrived."

"Wilbur lives in a cave?!?" I was very surprised.

"Yep," Orville replied. The cave was pretty dark and there was some water dripping from the ceiling. We kept on walking until we saw light.

Then Orville stated, "Wilbur, we've arrived."

"OK, you can come on in," Wilbur had a nice strong voice, unlike Orville. He spoke kindly, too. I decided to trust him. I hoped George would too. Then we walked in deeper through the cave, till I could see where the light was coming from. It was coming from a flaming fire, the color of bright red.

"I'm Lucy, this is my brother George, and we're escaping slaves and can you be our conductor?" I blurted out. Wilbur laughed.

"Hi Lucy. Yes, I can be your conductor."

"Lucy, we don't even know this guy!" George was not happy.

"George. We've already been missing for like an hour. We need to leave."

"George, I'm sorry, but your sister's right. You need to go," Orville said.

"Fine." George was still not happy.

"Alright, let's go," Wilbur replied. So we walked out of the cave (after Orville gave Wilbur his pack). "What does the sack have in it?" George asked.

"Food, water, necessary supplies, basically," Wilbur answered. After that George was quiet. Actually, all of us were quiet.

We'd gone about 15 minutes, when a bear crossed our path. It lunged at Wilbur. Wilbur climbed up the bear and swung onto its shoulders! I could not believe Wilbur had managed that daring move! The bear kept on trying to get at Wilbur, but it couldn't. So, it went for George. Wilbur jumped off the bear's shoulders and punched the bear in a front flip before it could attack George. That just made the bear more mad. The bear roared and leapt towards me. I raced away into the thick woods and started to climb a tree. I knew it wasn't the smartest move, because bears are good at climbing trees, but I wasn't thinking super clearly. I watched from my spot as things started to get exciting.

"George! Create a distraction! I have a plan," Wilbur shouted. George began to kick at the bear, not actually hitting it. I was pretty sure he was just trying to scare it. Then Wilbur held up two knives and motioned for me to come over. He handed me a pot and a metal spoon and whispered for me to bang them together towards the bear on the count of three.

"One, two, three!" Wilbur shouted. We started banging the metal wildly against each other creating a huge racket of noise. Once the bear lunged toward George, we started the dreadful "music". The bear picked up George. George was screaming and kicking, like a little kid. The bear suddenly took knowledge of the music and dropped George, then raced away in fear of the clanging.

"Poor bear," I said, climbing down the tree.

"Yes. But we had to do it," Wilbur responded in agreement.

"I can't believe you saved my life," George exclaimed. George's face held shock, surprise, and thankfulness.

"Well why wouldn't I have?" Wilbur asked.

"I don't know. Just you seemed suspicious before. But now I know I can trust you," George said. I couldn't believe George was finally trusting Wilbur! Hurray! I thought.

"Thank you for trusting me," Wilbur responded.

"You're welcome. I'm sorry I thought you were out to kill us," George smiled.

"Alright, let's keep on going," Wilbur said. We walked for a long time.

Then I spotted a few guards.

"Guards!" I whispered extra quietly. George and I raced away behind trees. Of course, George started climbing his, but I stayed on the ground.

"Hello," Wilbur waved at the guards.

"Oh hello," One guard said. "We heard some... clanging. Is everything alright? Find any escapees? I heard some escaped from old Johnson's plantation over there. Seen any?" I held my breath. What would Wilbur say?

"Huh? Escapees? Oh, yeah, I heard about them. Yeah, I'll definitely tell you if I see them. Don't worry." Wilbur said his speech so casually I was sure the guards would believe him. "What about the clanging?" A guard with a thick, knotted, overgrown beard asked suspiciously, raising an extremely bushy eyebrow.

"Oh, there was a bear. We-I clanged some pots together and it worked! Isn't that strange? I just thought, maybe it'll work. Surprising isn't it?" Wilbur was good

under pressure, except he messed up on the we, I... Hopefully, the guards hadn't noticed.

"We or I? What is it really, Wilbur?" The bushy eyebrowed man questioned. I was worried. Would Wilbur reveal? Or would the guard make him reveal? I gulped.

"Oh sorry. I was with myself. You see, I get so confused after I fight bears, because I so commonly do with Orville, so sometimes I think I just fought a bear with Orville. Sorry about that, Byron." Wilbur had done an amazing job! Wow! Phew! I was proud of Wilbur.

"Byron? You may call me Mr. Goodwin. Now fine, I suppose that is true. Farewell, we will meet again." And with that, Byron, Bushy Eyebrows, or Mr. Goodwin left.

I did the count to a minute thing. Once I finished, I slowly started walking toward Wilbur. George was smiling. I could tell he was glad Wilbur had kept his trust.

After that, three days passed. Over the course of those three days, we had several obstacles. Our only problems were hiding because of guards (Wilbur or George or me would whisper "guard" and then we would quickly find a hiding spot.) Also, a few guards sometimes spotted Wilbur. Once, guards noticed Wilbur with us. George tried to be like Wilbur and explained that we were free slaves. The guards told him there was no such thing and George got mad. I could tell because his face looked like a very angry tomato.

Unfortunately, the guards called him just that. George tried to lunge for the guards but Wilbur held him back and said that he was taking him back to his owner and he was a bit crazy. The guards offered to take him but Wilbur refused, saying it was fine. The other time, Wilbur had told George ahead of time that he would do the explaining. Luckily, George listened and Wilbur confidently

explained to the guards that we were slaves and he was taking us back to our owner.

Later, three days after the three days, we were almost out of the south, when we heard singing. We were heading to the house before the last house when Wilbur said, "Lucy, George, be quiet." And that's when we heard singing. Some people were singing a song that goes like this:

Money, money, money! We're looking for slaves to get mo-ney!!!! Money is my favorite thing! Money, money, money! We're looking for slaves! Money! Money! Mo-ney!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

"Slavehunters!" George, Wilbur, and I exclaimed at the exact same time.

"Go! We need to go!" Wilbur announced. So we ran through the fields, Wilbur in the lead. "Ah!" I screamed. I saw a spider on my leg. (I hate spiders.) I plucked it off and then saw a slavehunter! I knew it was a slavehunter because the person was singing the song. They must have heard me scream! I was so scared I ran without stopping till I caught up with Wilbur and George. "Slavehunters! I screamed! And they heard!" I told them.

"Alright! Go! Go!" Wilbur yelled. We ran until a house came into view.

"That's it! Go inside! Now!" Wilbur commanded. We all ran and then Wilbur knocked. A woman opened the door.

"Slavehunters!" Wilbur exclaimed to the woman. The woman somehow knew what he meant. She shoved us inside and closed the door.

"Go out the back," she said firmly. So we raced to the back of her house. I flung open the door and we all bolted out, leaving the door open.

"Next house! Turn left then right then left!" Wilbur explained. We jogged left. Hurried right. And sprinted left. That's when we saw the last house. It was beautiful. Like a castle in a fairytale. But I couldn't acknowledge the beautiful house for too long. We dashed to the door. George knocked, hard but quick. A lady wearing an elegant gown embroidered with pearls answered the door.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Bye!" George yelled. The lady tried to follow us but she tripped and fell. We couldn't care. We flew through the house till we reached the back. There was a door. Wilbur wrenched it open and we ran through the woods and reached the other side. We ran for a mile and then collapsed in a field of tall grasses. "We're free!" I exclaimed, happy as anything.

50 years later.

I was 62. Slavery had been over for quite a while. There was still racism but it had gotten a bit better. At least for me it did. I was sitting in my chair knitting a purple sweater for my newborn baby grandchild, Lucy. I heard a knock at the door. I creaked down the stairs, using my cane for support. I opened the door to see Wilbur, Orville, and George. My eyes crinkled with delight. Then I noticed Orville smiling wide in my direction. I remembered he hadn't always been this happy and confident. And then I remembered the first time I had seen him smile. I remembered what I had thought of it. A small, but genuine smile. And then all those memories came rushing back like a waterfall of smiles and pain. I remembered meeting Orville and how scared and timid he had been, carrying his bulging sack, I remembered hiding behind trees in fear of guards catching us. I remembered Wilbur saving George's life, clanging those pots and knives with all our might, trying to save George with horrible music, I remembered

George managing to trust Wilbur. I remembered using my voice, because I do have a voice, I told George that day. And it is true, everyone has a voice, they just have to use it. And I remembered racing through those woods, being twelve again. I remembered slavery. I remembered pain. I remembered sorrow. I remembered happiness. I remembered stubbornness. I remembered all the emotions in the world. I remembered freedom.

2ND PLACE

“THE FOREST'S LIGHT”

By **Angie King Barber**, Dayton Oaks Elementary
Howard County Literacy Association

Long ago, nestled deep within the heart of an ancient forest, there lived a young girl named Clarissa. The villagers of Oakshade spoke of her in whispers, for she was different. While others tended to the land or forged metal in the pitch darkness, Clarissa wandered the woods, drawn to the whispering trees and flickering shadows.

The forest was said to be enchanted, home to beings older than time. Yet, it was also dangerous. Many warned her not to stray too far, for the deeper one ventured, the closer they came to the forbidden realm—where no one had returned.

But Clarissa had always felt a connection to the forest, a pull stronger than fear. Her grandmother, before she passed, told her stories of a hidden light deep within, a power so pure that it could heal the land and bring peace to the hearts of all who found it. Some said it was only a legend, but Clarissa believed.

One evening, as the sun sank beneath the horizon and the sky turned to twilight, Clarissa saw a glimmer between the trees—a soft, golden light pulsing faintly like a heartbeat. Without hesitation, she followed.

The deeper she went, the denser the forest became. The trees towered over her, their branches thick with moss and leaves that whispered secrets to the wind. Strange

creatures darted in the shadows, their eyes glowing like embers, watching her every step. But Clarissa's heart was steady, her gaze fixed on the light that guided her.

Hours passed, and soon she found herself in a place no villager had seen—a vast clearing, illuminated by the light of a massive tree, its bark glowing with an ethereal sheen. Its roots spread far and wide, twisting into the earth like ancient veins. At the center of the tree, there was a hollow, and from within it, the golden light radiated.

Clarissa approached cautiously, her breath catching as she reached out to touch the glowing bark. As soon as her fingers grazed it, a soft voice echoed in her mind.

"Welcome, Clarissa."

Startled, she pulled back, her eyes wide. But the voice was gentle, like a breeze through the leaves.

"Do not fear. You have been chosen."

"What?!" Clarissa blurt out

"Chosen?" she whispered aloud, her voice barely audible.

The light grew brighter, and from the hollow of the tree, a figure began to take shape. It was a woman, radiant and ancient, with eyes like the stars in the sky and a crown of flowers and twigs woven into her hair.

"I am Lila, guardian of the forest and keeper of the light. For centuries, this world has been imbalanced, torn by greed, war, and sorrow. But there is a prophecy—a child of the forest will rise, guided by the light, and restore harmony. That child is you, Clarissa."

Clarissa's heart pounded in her chest. "But... I am just an ordinary girl. How can I bring peace to the world?" Lila smiled softly. "You carry the light within you, as all who seek truth and balance do. It is not power or strength that

will heal the world, but love, wisdom, and courage. The journey will be difficult, but the light will guide you."

Before Clarissa could respond, the golden light enveloped her, filling her with warmth and clarity. She felt the energy of the forest flow through her veins, and in that moment, she understood. The forest was not just a place—it was alive, its heart beating in rhythm with her own.

When the light faded, the clearing had transformed. The trees no longer loomed with shadows, but glowed softly with life. The creatures of the forest gathered around her, not in fear, but in trust.

With renewed purpose, Clarissa knew what she had to do. The world beyond Oakshade was broken, and she would be the one to mend it. Armed with the light of the forest and the wisdom of its guardian, Clarissa set forth on a journey far greater than herself.

And so, under the watchful eyes of the forest and the guidance of the ancient light, Clarissa stepped into her destiny—the girl who would become the light in the darkness.

1ST PLACE

“THE SOLACE OF NIGHT”

By **Nora Tate**, Matapeake Middle
Upper Shore Literacy Chapter

Pale moonlight poured through the shielded window, illuminating the midnight-blue bedsheets of a child’s bed. Mourning doves cooed outside despite the lateness, oblivious to the turmoil inside the quaint home. Stars twinkled in the inky dark blue sky, unfairly beautiful amidst the situation.

Devastation fueled the young boy in his room. He sat on his squashed bean bag in the corner, staring at the floor with such intensity that anyone could think it would explode in flames.

His throat burned like a wildfire, feeling like the fire itself and the feeling when someone inhales the choking smoke. His eyes were red with tears.

Squeezing his stinging eyes shut, he gazed into the darkness of closed sight. Lights dazzled through his eyelids, dancing as it taunted him.

He opened his eyes back up ferociously, his fists clenching the dull gray carpet below him. The carpet strained as if it was about to break, the only thing that stopped him from clenching it so fiercely.

Tears filled his hazel eyes. Blurry vision was all around him, every bit of light flickering and fluttering like dashing hummingbirds all around him.

Why did she have to go... he thought with a bitter twinge, why did she leave us?

The moment the last thought crossed his mind, his door swung open, yet gently, harsh yellow light pouring in like liquid gold.

The boy shielded his eyes with his hands, his pupils shrinking against the light.

"Lucas," his father began, with a voice laced with rare sadness and exhaustion, "I know how you feel. We both feel the same here."

Lucas glowered, his red eyes narrowing in frustration. His mind was like a fishing pond, each hopeful thought darting away desperately from the dark spears of grief and dread.

He felt a presence in front of him, then sharp eyes locked onto him.

"Go away," Lucas growled, covering himself completely with his blanket. His heart weighed like a boulder, barely keeping itself steady as it was pressed to its limits.

Alas, as Lucas expected, his father just knelt on the carpet, refusing to move an inch away.

Still glaring at nothing, his father gently took the blanket off of Lucas, the soft wool blanket sliding off without a sound. Then, his father rested a hand on his shoulder comfortingly.

Despite his good-intended gesture, the flames inside of Lucas only grew larger and blazed with such a fury he felt like he could blaze through Mt. Everest without feeling a prick of chill.

"Please don't talk to me right now." Luke whispered, his voice strained against his flowing of emotion. His heart pounded and his throat ached, his father's voice drowned

out by the roaring in his ears. The only words Luke caught were "Goodnight, Luke. Sweet dreams," before the door hit against the wood frame as it shut.

The artificial yellow light shrunk and shrunk, until it was just a small sliver beneath the door, clawing its way inside the dimly lit room, desperately trying to share its light.

Lucas sniffled, his nose runny. He knew what his mother would say at that moment. She would tell him to stay strong and get some sleep with that stern yet loving voice she had.

The thought only made Lucas want to cry harder. Alas, he knew that's not what his mother would've wanted.

Lucas sat up despite his muscles protests and focused on taking a few long and deep, shuddering breaths. He shook slightly as he let all of his emotions pour out in those few breaths. His hearts' weight lifted. Lucas closed his eyes.

With a swift, smooth movement, he was now lying in his bed, comfortable with the pale moonlight washing over him in solace.

Suddenly exhausted beyond measure, Lucas's eyelids sunk down to cover his eyes like a blackout curtain. His mind faded into darkness as sleep overwhelmed him, his body going into the soothing paralysis of sleep.

Darkness. Darkness then light. It all surrounded him, blinking and flashing like traffic on a dark and rainy night. The darkness engulfing him faded into a pale light, with the ground like rainclouds, grayish but beautiful.

Before he could process any of this quick transformation, his gaze was greeted by a beautiful lake. Glittering light danced on the clear surface, small fish darted beneath the surface, and the cherry blossoms around it stared back at Lucas with a comforting presence.

All Lucas could do was stare in awe. The beauty was perfect, like a dream. Like a dream...

Lucas looked down at himself. He looked the same. He then pinched himself. He felt it, but he knew this was a dream.

What? He thought, confusion cluttering his brain. I'm certain it's a dream. Oh, look at the beauty of this place. Mother would've loved-

He stopped, emotion flowing through him like a tumbling gorge. Tears pricked at his eyes and his throat began to ache again. Grief overwhelmed his mind until he felt it was going to explode, strange thoughts reciting what else could've happened if one single thing happened differently.

It felt like a truck had hit him, he was suddenly stumbling, oblivious to how close he was to the lake. He was staring blankly as he stumbled, but when he regained himself, it was too late. Lucas was falling, falling, falling, mere inches away from falling in. He could clearly see the jutting rock beneath the surface. If he could feel a pinch from himself, he could definitely feel a rock impaling him.

Lucas closed his eyes and took a deep breath of the crisp, sweet air.

That's when a hand wrapped tightly around his wrist. It jerked him back with strength onto the sandy and rocky shore.

He fell backward, landing on his back with force. He coughed and took a deep breath, trying to reach for his inhaler, but realized he could breathe fine.

Once Lucas regained his composure, he stood up and whipped around, desperate to find out what saved him from nearly impaling himself.

He saw a pretty-looking brunette haired woman, leaning on a stick she was holding, her dark hazel eyes

scrunched up into a faintly laughing expression. She was wearing robes of forest colors, oranges, browns, and greens clashed together into a beautiful masterpiece of fashion.

Lucas squinted at the face. He felt he recognized it...

It can't be...

His heart leaped with joy. No, not leaped, jumped over the Empire State Building and further. It was his mother, standing there, looking back at him.

Lucas was so overwhelmed with shock and giddiness that he was frozen to the spot, unable to move at all.

"Come on, get over here," his mother said in a joking but loving tone.

Hearing her voice was even better. Memories flooded through him, happy and sad, until he just broke down on the spot. He collapsed onto his knees, head in hands, sobbing, his tears flowing with love and pure joy. His mother was actually here, with him.

He didn't know how long he crouched there. He felt a hand on his back and sympathetic silence around him. His mother was crouched next to him. He felt her gaze on him, then off him.

When he lifted his head again, the sky wasn't the watercolor pastels it had been when he arrived here. Instead, it was a breathtaking midnight blue, with splashes of indigo and green here and there, like a painted masterpiece with flecks of glitter.

He subconsciously scooted closer to the shore, his mother close beside him, radiating strength, love, compassion, and sympathy all at once.

As Lucas got closer to the shore, his mother spoke in a soft and teasing voice.

"Don't trip again, sweetheart." She said, her eyes warm.

Lucas shifted to her and smiled, lost for words. He sat beside her at the shore, the water lapping rhythmically onto their feet.

His mother leaned over the edge and drew her finger on the surface gently. "You see these fish, Lucas?" She asked, still looking at the water.

Lucas leaned over to see what she was talking about. Confused, he said, "I see them. What about it?"

She drew her hand back. "You're like these fish. You see, they hide when something scary happens," she splashed the water, "but they come back out right after. They're daring, but also cautious. They wouldn't go up to a predator and try to stand up to it, but they wouldn't let it harm them either. They would find a quick solution." His mother looked at him for a moment before motioning to the sky, then back at the lake water. "The fish aren't scared of the dark itself, but rather what's in it. You're not scared of someone leaving on its' own, you're scared of what would happen and how devastated you and others would be of the loss." She looked up at the sky again, wisdom in her gaze. "These fish find beauty in even what they fear. Even in darkness, they show their beauty, and others' beauty." She poked Lucas's chest and met his gaze. "That's what you need to do. I love you, Lucas, but I must go now. I'll always be in the lakes, swimming happily with you."

The last thing Lucas saw was her warm and prudent hazel gaze, full of hope for the future.

I won't let you down, mother, he thought passionately.

His eyes closed gently and he faded into darkness once more, the sounds of the water lapping at the shore disappeared into the faint cooing of doves.

His mother was with him.

Always.

2ND PLACE

“FINDING JOY”

By **Brooks Wytko**, Hammond Middle
Howard County Literacy Association

I know what it’s like to see someone begin to disappear. What’s going to happen is too sad for me to think about most of the time. The thought is like an empty space inside me. I don’t know how I feel about it.

I am close to my grandparents because I lived with them. My mom didn’t want to move back, but she had so much work. She was alone and needed Momo and Popo to help her take care of my little brother and me.

I have happy memories of living there. Popo would carry me around the house looking at rainbows created by reflected sunlight. He taught me to read, do yard work, swim, and memorize different Bible verses that could give me strength or courage. Momo was silly and full of energy. She could create any craft, make great food without recipes, and even play music just by listening to it. Momo played the violin the most. Sometimes we would all play together. Popo played the guitar and sang. My little brother and I would dance and play drums. If my mom came home from work in time, she would sing too. We were a good band.

Sometimes, though, Popo would get angry and speak to Momo in a mean way or yell at her. When I told my mom, she felt bad and said she understood because she saw this happen when she was little. She told me that it

isn't right, that a husband should always treat his wife with kindness. She said that Momo is smart, creative, and capable. But Momo had some hard things happen to her and doesn't understand how much love she deserves. We can only control ourselves so we must do our best to be loving and kind, especially to Momo.

I wish Momo knew that she is easy to love. When I lived with her, she made everything more fun. Almost every day, she would lift my little brother and me onto her lap and read to us books like *Frog and Toad*, *Lyle the Crocodile*, and different Arthur stories. Momo could act out each character's lines in different voices. She could make cookies from scratch and sometimes she would give me secret treats. She was also a great artist. Momo taught me how to draw using soft strokes with the side of my pencil. Drawing, coloring, and painting we'd make beautiful works of art.

One of my favorite silly games Momo invented was "Mr. Lump." I would burrow under the covers of a bed, and Momo would walk into the bedroom pretending not to know I was there. She would say, "My gosh, I'm so tired. I need to lay down!" Then she would sit down on the bed and slowly lay back on me. As I giggled and guffawed, she would say, "Hmmm, this bed is so uncomfortable and lumpy... Gosh, and it makes so much noise?" I would scream-laugh, "Momo! It's me! It's me!" Then she would say, "Oh, you little rascal! Mr. Lump is back again!" She would throw pillows at me and tickle me saying, "Get out, Mr. Lump! Get out!" I laughed my heart out. When I couldn't take another breath, Momo would finally pull back the covers and say, "Oh. It's just you." Then we'd both laugh together on the bed until our sides hurt.

When I was five, Momo knitted a small doll we named Sassy Girl. I would build Lego castles for Sassy Girl to climb up and bring out dinosaurs for her to ride. Sassy

Girl loved to have adventures, lots of fun, and, well, be sassy. One day, though, Sassy Girl mysteriously disappeared. Frantically, we looked for her. We tried to find her for what felt like a whole day. But we never found her. I was sad for a while. But eventually we started to make jokes about where Sassy Girl had gone and the many quests she must be going on living out in the wild.

Momo liked to get outside and do things. So, when my brother and I wanted to get toys at the Dollar Store, Momo always took our side. Popo would resist because we had enough toys already. Eventually, though, Momo would wear him down. When we'd get in the car excited over our victory, Momo would smile at him and say, "I win." We would all laugh, even Popo. It didn't matter that we had toys or that we'd only play with the Dollar Store toys for a day or two. Dollar Store days were fun days.

In the summertime, Momo would heft a big hammock into the back yard for us to lay in, watch the clouds, and talk. She would say, "This is the life. There's nothing better than doing nothing," and sigh contentedly. Some days we'd sit on the front porch swing. Momo would hold my little brother, and we'd swing up so high Momo's toes touched the ceiling. If Popo caught us, he would make us stop. But the thrill was worth it.

Momo and I loved to go to the library together. One day when we were going there, Momo forgot the way. We pulled over at a convenience store. Momo knew how to get home from there. But Momo felt bad that she couldn't take me to the library. She decided to find us something special at the convenience store. I picked out a random box of cookies and Momo hosted a tea party for us when we got back. The cookies were Biscoffs. They tasted amazing—slightly spicy and crunchy, yet sweet and warm. We bought Biscoffs a lot after that and had lots of tea parties where we drank cranberry juice as our tea, ate cookies, and talked

about fancy stuff—and only fancy stuff—in our best British accents.

I have some memories I regret, too. Before I knew what was happening, I got mad at Momo. When I was in Kindergarten, I wanted her to teach me how to play the piano. For a little while, she taught me to play some simple songs. But then one day she told me she couldn't explain it anymore. She said she didn't know how. I didn't understand how she could not know how to tell me when she could play the music? I was disappointed and angry at her. Later, when I was in the third grade, I got the opportunity to be in the orchestra. I decided to learn the violin, like Momo played. When my violin needed to be tuned, I asked her to help me. She tried but she messed up all the strings. Again, I got upset at her. If I could go back, I wish I had thought of her instead of me.

One day, my mom told my little brother and me what was happening to Momo. Momo has progressive aphasia. It takes away the part of her mind that understands language, and then it takes away other parts. Eventually, this condition will cause Momo to die. My mom was crying. My brother started to cry too. I asked how we can help Momo. My mom said we must keep loving her and try to remember every time we are together. I wrote this story to help me remember.

Although we don't live with Momo and Popo anymore, we sleep over sometimes. When we come to visit, Popo says Momo needs to do brain exercises, so we try to play Pinochle. Momo gets confused. She cannot identify the cards. She doesn't know how to count the points. She doesn't know how to determine the cards' hierarchy, which is best or worst. She looks down and says in a soft voice, "I don't understand." This is not how Momo's voice used to sound.

I worry that Momo has nothing to do for fun. She spends her time folding clothes and doing dishes by hand so that she can do something. She also pulls out weeds in the yard, though sometimes she makes mistakes and pulls out a plant Popo likes. He gets upset and she feels bad.

Momo needs us to take care of her now. She needs help to know where things are or understand what she is supposed to do, even for simple things like using her phone or finding her shoes. Popo gets frustrated and says, "You're not listening, Jane. You don't listen." I think my Popo is frustrated because he is sad and in denial. Momo is with him every day, but she is leaving him too.

Popo told me that he and Momo do Bible study with their coffee on the back deck every morning. Popo makes the coffee now. Last time we stayed at their house, I saw Momo and Popo out there together. They were singing a song they made up asking God for guidance, strength, protection, and healing.

Momo is different now. She seems stressed and a little lost. Even if what I do doesn't change anything, I feel like I must try. Momo always tried and she still does. She still smiles when she sees us and hugs us tight. Like we always did, we know joy is somewhere waiting for us to find it—under lumpy covers, in Biscoff cookies, and even in the empty spaces that hold us together.

1ST PLACE

“COFFEE”

By **Charlotte Wilhelm**, Fallston Middle
Harford County Literacy Chapter

I wake up to darkness, and the freezing cold. I open my groggy eyes and check the clock. In blocky, bright green numbers it shows 4:03. I sigh and decide to get out of bed. It feels as if the cold is biting at me, and little goosebumps crawl down my skin. I get a sweatshirt, and the soft cloth comforts my skin. I walk quietly downstairs. An eerie feeling creeps over me, consuming my thoughts as the stairs creak louder than usual beneath my feet. I feel chills creep up my spine, and crawl up my neck, as I walk into the darkness.

It is all in your head, I think to myself, and I start brewing a pot of coffee. I hear the little bubbles gurgle as the water warms up. For some reason it feels...colder than usual. I shiver under my faded sweatshirt and silently plead for the coffee to be done.

Little drips spew out into the pot.

Plunk, plunk, plink.

I sigh. I need to occupy myself. Looking around the house, I walk into the living room. Except, it does not look 'lively.' The room is small, cold, and depressing. I look at the huge wooden bookshelf and skim over books of all shapes and sizes. My hands slide across the old, dusty books and I find one that catches my eye. Photo albums!

My eyes widen with eagerness, and I quickly grab it. That feeling of eeriness creeps down my spine once again. I shudder and push that feeling away. I check the coffee pot, hoping that it is done, but find a thick line of dark, pungent coffee. I grunt and sit down at the deserted kitchen table.

I blow off a layer of thick dust from the photo album and watch it float into the air and disappear. I try to get comfortable but feel a pair of eyes watching me. I whip my head around in fear and curiosity but see nothing. Only darkness. I shake away the feeling, snapping back to reality. I slowly open the cover of the photo album.

Margie's Wedding, I read.

My eyes skim over the faded photos. All the happy, smiling faces. I recognize my aunt Margie and smile. She looked so happy. I look at all the people around her. My mom, dad, uncle, and grandparents. There are some odd faces I don't recognize, but the photo quality does not help. I flip the old, beat-up pages of the photo album, looking at all the fun memories.

Trip to Germany! I read.

My mom was smiling, and her long brown hair was blowing in the wind. I look at the gorgeous view of the famous German castle, Neuschwanstein. I then notice...a dark figure. My eyebrows crinkle. I cannot make out any details of the figure other than that they were tall.

I flip the pages, and the figure keeps popping up. Every...every single photo. The same dark, mysterious figure. The same pose, nearly hidden, but not to the naked eye. My breath is quickening and my heart rate increases. My head is pounding. Big goosebumps cover my arms and legs. The eerie feeling creeps down my neck and spine, crawling down my legs and fear sets in. The house gets colder, smaller, darker. I flip pages after pages only to

see this same figure. I keep flipping, tears spilling down my cheeks. The warmth of my tears comforts my ice-cold cheeks. My mind is scattered.

I realize how freezing I am. Coffee! The coffee should be ready!

I begrudgingly get up and turn around to darkness. My feet touch the cold, stony floor and I shiver. I should've put on another pair of socks. I gingerly walk over to the coffee pot to find that it is...empty. Not a single drop is left.

I take a step back and something brushes against me. A feeling of danger washes over me as I turn around. My breath quickens and I whip my head around, with my mug ready to attack.

I turn around and I'm alone. I swallow down my fear and my face drops. *How?* Frustrated, I slam the mug nearly shattering it, and I sit down to keep looking at the photo album. I shiver and sit back down. Only the photo album is gone. I squint in the darkness, and I can't find it.

Where did it go? I wonder as confusion washes over me.

I walk back to the bookshelf to find it, and the floor creaks alarmingly loud. I ignore it and keep walking. The photo album is back on the shelf, sitting in the same, hidden position that it was in. I slide my fingers over it, feeling the little ridges and scratches that were made over the years. I slowly open it, and a feeling of fear creeps up my spine.

Margie's Wedding

As I look through the photos, I struggle to find it. Actually, I don't see it at all. I keep flipping the old, stiff pages, and I don't see the figure. A sense of dread washes over me and I want to crumple up all the photos. I start to turn around and my foot hits something. A cup of steaming cup of coffee nearly spills on me. *Coffee?* Who is

doing this? Or what is doing this? I lift the small, delicate cup and the steam warms my cold cheeks. I watch the steam float into the air in wisps, as the steam curls and disappears. I smell the rich aroma of the coffee and feel a sense of comfort. I turn around again and bump into a tall, dark figure.

And suddenly my breath stops as I hear the words,
"Looking for me?"

2ND PLACE

“DID YOU ENJOY THE SHOW”

By **Sage Knazik**, Mount View Middle
Howard County Literacy Association

//

Papa! Papa!” I exclaimed with joy as he walked off the stage, all dressed up in a suit and tie. Despite the fact that he was surrounded by all the fancy, important people in his orchestra, he picked me up and swung me around. He set me down and I was a mess of giggles.

“Did you enjoy the show?” he asked in his deep voice that intimidated some but made me feel right at home.

“Papa, it was beautiful,” I said, still out of breath from all the laughing. But I really really did e more joy than seeing Papa play violin. That was the only time he was really himself. That, and when he was with me. It was hard for him to be happy other times when he was dealing with money problems (being one of the world’s best violinists doesn’t pay as well as you’d think), searching for gigs, and thinking about Mama. She had died when I was two from some kind of cancer only women get. I missed her, even though I could hardly remember her.

“What was your favorite song?” That was always the second question he asked. *Did you enjoy the show?*, then *What was your favorite song?* Next would be *What was one thing you learned from the music?*

"The first one," I said without hesitation. I actually cried the whole time it was playing. As a ten-year-old, that felt like an achievement to me. I was emotional, like my dad, who cried his way through Disney movies and Olympics commercials.

"The space one, *Voyage*?" he asked. I nodded. "Yeah, I liked that one too. What was one thing you learned from the music?"

There, right on cue.

"I learned that such abstract concepts and emotions can be expressed through instruments." I was proud of my official-sounding answer.

"Hey, you cheated! You already knew that, didn't you, Sky," he teased, bopping me on the nose. I giggled again.

"Yeah, but it was *reinforced*, so it counts."

"Fine then, my little cloud. I'll accept that." He rolled his eyes playfully. "One more question..."

I felt nervous for a moment. There was never a *fourth* question. Then: "Did you practice before you came here?"

"Uhh...GOTTA RUN!! SEEYA LATER!!"

Rushing towards Aunt Paloma, who drove me here, I waved goodbye innocently. Another eye roll.

"Goodbye, little cloud. Just practice when you get home."

Darn, an order, and Aunt Paloma heard. I begrudgingly nodded and took my aunt's hand, and we headed out to the car. I decided I would get home and play something fun—Taylor Swift, perhaps. I had some of her sheet music saved. I turned back to Papa, letting go of Aunt Paloma's hand. I wanted to tell him my plan, but then I saw his face scrunched up in pain. At least, I assumed it was pain. Was he thinking about Mama again? But no, it was

different than those times. This time it looked like actual, physical pain.

"Papa?" I whispered softly. He realized I was watching and I saw him try to fix his face, but it still looked different.

Unnatural.

"Skylar! There you are. Come now, don't run away like that." Aunt Paloma grabbed my hand, then saw Papa, my horrified expression, and a look of pity crossed across her face.

Then it was gone. Back to her normal stern expression that rarely faltered.

When it did, I knew that something bad was going to happen.

...

"So."

Aunt Paloma sharply turned around from cutting onions, red and sweet and white. There were no tears in her eyes, as usual. There were tears in mine. I hated onions.

"So...what?"

"What's wrong with Papa?"

Silence. It stretched long into the distance. Aunt Paloma set down the knife and sat next to me.

"Dear, it's...I'm so sorry. I never thought you'd have to deal with this."

"What, what?!" I practically screamed. There were more tears in my eyes now from something other than the onions. And then I saw it again. That little flicker of emotion on Aunt Paloma's face.

Then it was normal again. Almost. I could just barely see the masked emotions under it.

"Just...try to spend as much time with Cameron as you can, okay?" Cameron was Papa. "He's...going through some tough times right now. That's all. Do you understand, Skylar?"

I didn't respond.

"I'm going to play violin."

"Great, dear. Dinner should be ready in forty minutes, give or take. Cameron should be home by then."

I nodded. I walked up to my room. The tears had stopped, but not for long, because the moment I thought about Papa's scrunched up face they came coursing down my cheeks again.

...

I did what Aunt Paloma said. Every free moment Papa and I had were spent together. I had been thinking about starting to call him Dad soon—planning out the conversion. I was growing up, after all! But I decided...I liked Papa.

My favorite times were when Papa would practice my orchestra music with me. No matter how easy it was, he'd always play at the same level as me. It filled me with joy when I would play the same as him, because I was actually good. As the last note rang out from our violins my momentary happiness faded as I remembered the pain Papa was in.

It only got worse. Papa was gone more often, and I hung out with him less. Soon he stopped sleeping at home. I figured he was getting more famous, playing more shows—and he was. But he still would've made time for me if that was the case.

During the last month of his life, I saw him only at his shows. Then he'd disappear. No one ever answered my questions about where he was.

...

I took a deep breath as I stepped into the building. The walls and floors were lined with red velvet. It didn't seem cheap, either. Men with monocles and watches made of gold surrounded me, making me feel nervous. Women in frilly, slightly exposing dresses meandered about, laughing fake, formal laughs. I'd seen a few of these rich, high-class people before, but never this many.

Based on the whispers I heard, something special was going to happen at the end of this concert.

I gripped Aunt Paloma's hand as tight as I could, scared of getting lost in the crowd. All these fancy people made ten-year-old me feel very small.

Thirty minutes later the lights dimmed. The conductor raised his arms, gave the beat, and the performance kicked off. The first tune was supposed to be fun and upbeat, but I cried the whole time. Same for all the other songs, slow and fast, soft and loud alike. But *especially* during Papa's solo.

Intermission came and went, and the rest of the performance went right by. Until the last song.

I watched Papa carefully, as always. Something seemed off. I watched him pick up his violin. I saw a look of fear pass over his face.

Then he slumped in his chair and fell off the stage. "PAPA!" I shouted, leaping up from my seat. I was on the aisle so I stood and ran. "Well?! Someone call the hospital!" I cried, delirious. Aunt Paloma ran toward me and grabbed me.

"Come on, Sky, we should go," she soothed.

"NO!!! I'M NOT LEAVING MY PAPA!!!"

I collapsed on the ground as sobs racked my body. Huge, shuddering sobs that left snot running down my face. I wiped at it uselessly.

“Sky?”

I looked up. Papa stared into my eyes, pain replaced with clarity. He picked up his violin, and placed it in my hands.

“Here,” he said. “So you remember me.” He blinked twice. Then his eyes stayed closed. I laid my head on his chest and heard nothing.

...

And now, three years later, I haven’t picked it up. Not looked at it, touched it, not once.

I’ve decided to try.

I breathe in the musty air around me as I get out the old violin. It’s been gaining a layer of dust for a *loooong* time. The sunlight streaming through the curtains reveals the dust floating in the air. I would feel rather calm, if it weren’t for the reason I was here.

The tears begin to come before I can think, leaving imprints on the case that are more pronounced because of the dust. The sobbing combined with my allergies results in hacking coughs. Great. I knew no good would come from getting this old thing out.

I feel myself hyperventilating. I cough so much I feel like I’m going to gag.

I hear someone behind me, and turn sharply. There’s Aunt Paloma.

“You used to be so good...” She trails off as I fling myself into her arms.

“I know.”

I take a deep, deep breath, and turn around. There it is. Almost as if I can’t control it, I reach out and pick it up.

Then, for the first time in three long, sad years, bow meets string as I begin to play. From the music comes Papa. I watch tears form in Aunt Paloma's eyes as I play a song from so many years ago, one Papa and I used to play together.

The music seems to form shapes in the air, and from them comes Papa.

He winks, like he always used to do. Aunt Paloma isn't there, the attic isn't there, just Papa, my violin and me.

I stop playing and say one word. "Hi."

1ST PLACE

“THE GLASS THAT MOLDS MY SHADOWS”

By **Dylani Du**, Burleigh Manor Middle
Howard County Literacy Association

I stood in front of the dirty, stained mirror. I was disgusted. No, not by the mirror, but by that horrid figure standing in front of me, mimicking every move of mine. I recognize this person, but it pains me every time I stare. It was me; I was the ugly figure. My eyes, too small, my nose too big, and my chest—oh, my chest. The flabby fat around my arms—my ‘bat wings’—flap as I fly into the dark night, stomping my way out. My baggy clothes barely cover my flaws, but I feel the stares, I feel the eyes, centered around me, I was the elephant to their ant, looming too large in a world. I hold my head low, walking into the dark, wishing my body was like theirs. The fog thickens, creeping closer, almost enough to swallow me whole, but then I stopped. A strange object stood in front of me. I pick it up, and its shape changes; it morphs into a mold like me. I am taken aback, but who would have figured? I stuffed the doll into my hoodie.

I walk back into the tight, negative spaces—the brick walls, lockers, and students. I bump into someone hiding my gut, and I tremble slightly at their whispers and giggles. It feels like acid on my skin, the sting of their words lingering in the air like smoke, choking me. I can’t escape them. I feel my hands sweat, wet and cold, pooling around

in my palms. *Ugh I'm disgusting.* The rough fabric scratches at my skin, as if even my clothes can't stand to touch me. My heart beats in my chest, dully, deeply, dimly.

I couldn't focus in my class. All I could think of was their whispers, and the sharp needles that stabbed me in the back. I had no one to talk to because all I saw was their judgmental faces. I could not bear to be shot again, or else I'd collapse into this puddle of fat. Prowling to my next period, lunch. I see the perfect blonde girls. Laughing with their nice tight clothes, confident in their bodies, they looked just like Victoria Secret models. As I trudged through the hall, I held back my tears. Their laughter echoed down throughout my ears. My skin felt like it was crawling, itching from the weight of their eyes on me—though I knew none of them were looking at me. Who would other than my food? Piercing down my throat choking me with guilt. I stand in the lunch line and wait patiently for my turn to get a glop of that poison. When it comes to my turn, I take it and walk right to my empty table, reserved VIP just for me. Then, I stumbled past them, feeling their gaze.

One of them shouts out to me, "Look at that pig! She can't even walk with her stubby ankles."

The ache in my chest grew, staring down at my plate, my food morphs to mockery and shame. I dragged myself out of the cafeteria hardly grasping my breath. I couldn't breathe, and slowly my tears fell down my face. The paste grows into this rainstorm, heaping for a gasp of air, I tried my hardest to not let out a sigh. I grew into panic every time I heard someone pass by, holding my breath until I started hiccuping for more. A part of me screamed to escape, I didn't want to face anyone. I didn't want to face myself. Sitting in this quiet disgusting bathroom covered in boogers and graffiti. I felt more in place since nothing was beautiful here. Getting myself up and fixing my face

stained with tears. I started to walk home early to avoid any more embarrassment.

I remember the doll. I take it out of my hoodie and stare. I touch its face, and it deforms into a perfect jawline. I toy with the doll's stomach and change its whole appearance—small waist, perfect face—and I'd die happily to look like her. I kept twisting the doll, changing its body until it had resembled the image I could never live up to—tighter skin, a delicate jaw, a face that never showed fear of flaws. But when I looked at it, all I saw was the ghost of everything I'd never be. The reflection staring back from the doll wasn't me; it was a version of myself that could never exist, a cruel mockery of the real me.

When I get home, I run to my bed whipping out my phone onto social media. I opened snapchat, and noticed an unrecognizable person in the camera. That was me, but instead I had my slimmed down face, as if I was a plastic created barbie doll. I made faces into the camera, realizing it wasn't just a filter, I ran to the bathroom to check myself out. Looking back at my perfect reflection, I smiled. It was a nice smile, one that would make me fit into the group with the popular girls at school. I lifted up the doll resting down in my hand. It was identical to me, it was my mold, or more like I was its mold.

The next morning I woke up and stole my sister's clothes. It shaped my body like a glove, something I had tried on before, but it would only try to rip and ruin itself from existence. Today, it felt different—more right than anything I had ever put on. It gave me a warm welcoming hug in ways I never thought possible, molding my shape into something that could belong. Catching my reflection on the way out the door, and for a second, I didn't hate what I saw. I stepped into the hallway, and the world suddenly seemed to notice me for once. The whispers which once were cruel, filled with something positive. They

were curious, admiring, and I felt my heart race with a strange, intoxicating thrill. Confidence, something I had lacked this whole time. I wasn't invisible anymore. The hallway seemed to part, students stepping aside for me as if I were one of them—one of the perfects. At lunch, for the first time, I had sat with the pretties. We laughed together, and got along well, but one thing I started to notice was how they looked at others. They didn't compare themselves, but instead they complimented others and never pointed out their flaws.

Back at home, I felt refreshed, but my reflection wasn't good enough. I toyed with the doll once again, making my waist tinier, my face smaller, and my features more vibrant. I poked and turned and bled into a *better* me. Once again walking into school, the feeling was the same, but this time, I sensed fear down the halls, a dark aura surrounded me, pushing everyone and causing them to scatter. I tried to sit next to my new friends, but today, they walked away with a worried look on their face, or was it disgust. I knew it...I wasn't good enough.

I arrived home and looked at the mirrors throughout my house. I started to burst into frustration and cracked the first mirror. The glass poured down quickly onto my feet. I hate that reflection. I walked to the other mirror, but I hated it too. It ended the same way as the first. Storming down each one, I stopped and looked down at the shattered glass on the floor. What a monster! What monster had run through my house, destroying every reflection in sight? I froze in front of the broken pieces, my heart hammering in my chest—so faintly, so gently, yet so aggressively. The shards were scattered around me, each reflecting a different version of my face. But it wasn't the face I recognized. It was gaunt, hollowed-out—an unrecognizable thing that looked like a nightmare made flesh. I ran my fingers over the jagged edges, and then it hit me—this

wasn't just the mirror's reflection. It was me, but not the me I used to know. The face staring back was sharp and hollow, the bones too visible, skin stretched tight, and the body too thin. After all, I had won in defeating myself, brought down to my lowest. I was still that monster, but worse. Unhealthily, unbearably thin. Somehow, it felt like the reflection was mocking me, showing me everything I had become.

I noticed that my lamp looked off. I walked toward it, watching the flickers. As I got closer, I caught a glimpse of myself. I was trapped in the reflection, more mortified by the face staring back at me than ever. I couldn't look away. It felt as though I was in a trance, my body frozen, lost in the details of every flaw. At that moment, I realized—I had been staring at myself all along, unable to pull away, watching the distorted reflection, always searching for something that wasn't there. I ran to look for the doll, to destroy the doll so I could go back. Nothing was found, I was stuck with my consequences. I couldn't escape the truth; I had become the monster I feared. I looked at myself through the broken mirror, "why wasn't I pretty..." I wept to myself, but then I felt a warm hug around me.

"You always were, but were too focused on the reflection, not what's within."

2ND PLACE

“THE NIGHTMARE FROM NATURE'S NOOK”

By **Elias Baldrige**, Stephen Decatur Middle
Eastern Shore Literacy Association

Ding! The tiny bell over the entryway of the plant store rang, as the splintered door squeaked open. Inside, countless rows of wooden tables and shelves were filled with greenery, overtaken by vines and tangled leaves.

“Hi!” A middle-aged woman cheered. “Welcome to Nature’s Nook!” She wore her blonde hair in pigtails and a dirty pair of denim overalls covered her frame.

I smiled. “Thanks!” I walked around the warm, vibrant room, taking in the beautiful, exotic plants and the smell of fresh flowers.

“If you need help finding anything, I’m right here!” The lady beamed from behind a desk that held trinkets and gardening supplies.

I nodded. I was looking for a plant for my bedroom. My family and I had just moved into a house a few blocks away this morning. After hauling my many boxes inside, I decided to get some fresh air and check out my new town.

I scanned the shelves up and down, looking for a medium sized plant that was quirky. I didn’t want just a *normal* plant.

"Hmmm" I turned to the lady. "Do you have any plants that have a lot of... character?"

The lady tilted her head. "What do you mean?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I just moved here, and I want a cool and different plant to make my room feel..." I trailed off.

"Unique?" The lady suggested. I nodded.

"Well..." The lady pondered, "I'll be right back. I think I have the perfect plant for you. Hold tight."

A few minutes later, the lady came out carrying a large plant. It was in a massive clay pot, with a lengthy bright green stem sticking out of it. The stem was very tall, reaching the lady's head, with a spiral of thorns going up its length. At the top of the thick stem were 4 large, heavy-looking leaves sticking out. The leaves were dark green with a strange red line going down the middle.

"This is..." The lady stuttered. "You know, I'm not sure what this plant is." She giggled. "We just got it in stock a few days ago."

The plant was very unique. The windy thorns poking out from the stem made it look menacing, but then the attractive dark green and red leaves on the top added a sense of beauty.

I admired the plant, and with one final look, I raised my eyes back to the lady. "I'll take it!"

The lady beamed. "Awesome!" She set the plant down on the table by her cash register. "I'm thinking the price will be..." She looked upwards. "\$40."

I handed her two \$20 bills and she aggressively pulled the money from my hand. "Any care tips I should know?"

The lady's smile widened, revealing pure white teeth. "Make sure to water it at least every other day and

give it some plant food.” She handed me a small pill bottle, which I examined. The bottle had a graphic on it with a cartoon man, looking happy, pouring some powder on a mound of dirt in a flowerpot.

I put the bottle in my pocket and the lady handed the hefty pot to me. The unexpected weight caused my arms to shift downwards making it feel as if my arms were about to pop out of their sockets.

I kicked the door open with my foot and immediately felt the cool fall air hit my skin. The big leaves of the plant blocked most of my vision, so I lowered my arms and leaned my head forward to see where I was going.

When I arrived at my house, my arms felt like wet noodles from carrying the heavy plant. It was a struggle to open the front door and to climb the stairs to my bedroom. I placed the plant on my desk, right in front of the window. I tugged at the strings of my blinds, revealing a pleasant view of the house lined street. Sunlight streamed in the room, casting a slight glow on the plant's leaves. I pulled the small pill bottle out of my pocket. Turning it over, I read the directions to properly feed the plant.

Sprinkle about ½ teaspoon in the dirt surrounding the plant at least once every 2-3 days, the bottle read. I turned the lid and it made a click as I broke past the seal. Inside was a grayish white powder. There weren't any measuring scoops inside the container. I really didn't feel like rummaging through all the boxes in the kitchen to look for a ½ teaspoon, so I decided to wing it.

I pinched a tiny amount with my fingers. It was exceptionally soft and light, almost fluffy-feeling. I sprinkled a small amount onto the dirt and it seeped in almost instantly. *Weird.* I thought.

I decided that probably wasn't a full ½ teaspoon, so I poured in a tiny bit more. Once again, the powder vanished completely.

As I was putting away the bottle of plant food, I scraped my finger across one of the thorns poking out from the stem.

"Ouch!" I cried. Blood slowly started to seep from a lengthy cut on the tip of my thumb. I seethed in pain so I wrapped a paper towel around my thumb, applying pressure. It bled so badly, I felt I was going to die!

The next morning, I woke up to a surprise. The plant almost doubled in size! The super-sized stem almost reached the ceiling!

"Shoot, did I give it too much plant food?" I muttered to myself. But even if I did, the lady at the store didn't tell me that the plant would grow to a size like this! I threw on a baggy long sleeved shirt and a pair of skinny jeans. I was planning on spending the day walking around town, trying to get a sense of my new neighborhood. I looked down at my bandaged finger. It still hurt like crazy.

When I returned home, my finger was still throbbing and I was starting to feel rather strange. As I shut the front door, I heard a faint voice cry out from upstairs.

"AHHH! Vicky!"

"Josh?" I ran up to my room, burst open the door and gasped. "JOSH!" I cried. My 10-year-old brother was being strangled by the leaves of the plant. They were wrapped around his body, the thorns stuck into his left arm. "Vicky!" Josh coughed. "Help!"

I ran over, trying to pull the plant off him. I felt slashes against my chest and arms as I battled the plant, the thorns penetrating my skin like knife blades. After many pulls and pushes, I was finally able to rip Josh away from the plant. He looked at his arm and screamed. It was

covered in dark red, oozing blood. Hundreds of cuts covered his whole arm. I looked down at my own body, seeing cuts all down my arms and legs as well, and my shirt ripped in pieces by my belly.

I looked up at Josh, both of us shaking in fear. "What... happened?" I stuttered.

"I... I don't know." Josh said, tearing up, shaking in pain. "I just came in here to look at it, and the thing *jumped* at me."

I shook my head in fear and disbelief. "What!?" Josh, with tears streaming down his face, pointed at the plant. "It wrapped *around* me, Vicky. That thing *attacked* me."

I didn't know what to think. I looked over at the plant, which was knocked over onto the floor, dirt all over my brand-new carpet. I kneeled to examine it. I noticed the roots sticking out of the dirt. They were *red*. The roots were blood red!

I stood up and turned to Josh. "I need to go."

"Go where?" Josh moaned.

"Listen to me." I demanded, putting my bloodied hand on his shoulder. "I need to find out what this plant is! Mom and Dad will be home soon. Let's get your cuts fixed up." I suggested. Josh nodded as I looked over his arm. Covering his arm was green and red ooze. It wasn't blood anymore. It was something else.

After I wrapped paper towels around Josh's arm, I ran outside and sprinted all the way to the plant store. *Nature's Nook*, the sign read, in big bold letters above the door. I burst wildly through the entry, the door swinging on its hinges.

"Hey." I snapped. The same lady from the day before was behind the counter, her back to me.

"Yes?" The lady mumbled, not turning around.

"What is that plant you sold me?" I demanded.

"I told you, I don't know!" The lady giggled.

I squinted my eyes, disgusted and agitated. "It attacked me and my brother!"

The lady slowly turned around, but she wasn't the same. Her eyes were bloodshot, and the same green ooze that was coming out of my brother's arm was spilling from her mouth. Her forehead was filled with green fuzz and small leaves. The lady was a plant!

"Now you'll become one of us!" She snickered, the ooze dripping onto the ground as she laughed.

I went pale, feeling like a ghost swept through me. I felt ill, like I was going to vomit. My eyes hurt as if someone stuck a pair of scissors in them.

Plop... Plop

I looked at my wrist and saw green and red ooze dripping down my arm and leaves growing out of the veins of my wrist.

I was becoming a plant.

1ST PLACE

“THE PRICE OF SILENCE”

By **Angela Quan**, James M. Bennett High
Eastern Shore Literacy Association

A sign on the store door, illuminated by the sunlight, caught Perdita’s eye. As an interior designer with a knack for spotting hidden opportunities, she instinctively knew this was something special. She’d passed that store countless times on her daily walk through the streets of San Gimignano’s farmers’ markets, her rattan basket in hand, but had never seen the sign before.

The sign wasn’t flashy or elaborate in any way. In fact, it was quite simple—scrawled hastily in slanted handwriting with a red marker, reading: “500€ SHOES - FREE!!! TODAY ONLY!” Despite its unassuming appearance, it seemed to pulse with desperate urgency, as if it were begging for attention.

Perdita’s eyebrows shot up, and her mind raced. One thought popped into her head: Antonello would love the shoes. Antonello, her husband, had previously kept on mentioning needing a good pair of shoes for the past few months. The timing was perfect—almost too perfect.

A slight smile played on her lips. Perdita had built her career on seeing potential in the ordinary, and these shoes were no exception. This mysterious offer was an opportunity waiting to be seized.

The shoes were elegantly displayed in the store window more like art than footwear, and the handcrafted

Italian leather glowed under the carefully placed lights. She admired the composition and craftsmanship, curiosity and her desire to please her husband driving her forward. She cautiously stepped inside the store as a small bell chimed behind her.

She looked around slowly, completely mesmerized and intrigued by the inspiration surrounding her. The minimalist interior—white walls, polished marble floors, and octagonal pedestals—was a design dream, nothing like the medieval architecture in San Gimignano. A hint of leather and expensive cologne lingered in the air, transforming the space from a mere store to a design workshop.

While Perdita was taking it all in and examining the interior design, she was startled by an inquisitive voice. “Buongiorno, Signora. Can I help you?”

Looking around, she saw the only other person who was in the back of the store. The salesman stood perfectly still behind the counter, his dark suit blending with the store’s shadows. His smile was a precise curve—calculated, revealing nothing. When he spoke, each word seemed carefully measured, as if a part of an elaborate game.

Perdita shook herself out of her trance, her gaze meeting his piercing eyes. After a brief pause, she asked, “Buongiorno. Are you telling me I can get a 500€ pair of shoes for free?”

“Ah, that. Yes, of course.”

Looking unconvinced, Perdita crossed her arms. “What’s the catch?” she asked.

“The deal is simple,” the salesman said with a sly grin. “You don’t talk for a week. No writing, no gestures—nothing. If you can keep quiet, the shoes are yours. For free.” He nodded towards a pair.

Perdita’s eyebrows furrowed. “I can’t talk? At all?”

“Not one word.”

Perdita thought of how much Antonello would love shoes like these. They were exactly what he needed—durable, comfortable, and stylish. How hard could it be to not talk for just a week? It didn't sound so bad at all; it wasn't like she was giving up pasta or tiramisu.

"Deal." Perdita then took her time walking around and meticulously inspecting every shoe, carefully choosing the best one.

"I'll take these," she said, pointing to a pair of black, Salvatore Ferragamo lace-up oxfords, marveling at their design.

"Excellent choice." The salesman took the shoes and handed her a contract outlining the rules.

The contract looked professional, yet something about it felt subtly off. The unusually thick paper and shimmering watermark distorted the words as if alive. Entranced by the strange details, she signed the document without thinking before she could second-guess herself.

The salesman smiled, his gaze knowing. "Timing is everything," he murmured, handing her the shoes. "Some think they're buying more than shoes... but there's always a cost."

Unease washed over Perdita, but she pushed it aside. Excitement replaced her doubts—these shoes weren't just a gift, they were a chance to prove she was worth more than the life she had known.

Perdita wrapped the shoe box in leftover Christmas paper upon her arrival home. When Antonello returned from work that night, he kissed her on the cheek and sat down, expecting his usual drink. Instead, she handed him the package. He unwrapped it and gasped.

"Straordinario! These are incredible. Where'd you get them?" Antonello inspected the shoes in awe.

Sharing his excitement, Perdita almost blurted out the store name but then she remembered the deal. Struggling not to speak a word, all she could do was nod, blushing and beaming.

Antonello blinked. "How much did they cost?"

She grinned and mimed zipping her lips, shrugging knowingly.

Perdita's husband frowned. "Why aren't you answering me?"

She pointed to herself, then the kitchen, and left the room in a hurry.

Antonello watched her go, a frown tugging at his brow. Something seemed off, but he convinced himself it was nothing as he resumed admiring the shoes, trying them on.

It started easy, but as the days passed, silence became Perdita's constant companion, growing heavier. Perdita's thoughts gnawed at her, a constant reminder of her mistake. This was much harder than she thought. Exhausted and restless, loneliness settled in, turning the silence into both punishment and prison. The tension thickened, trapping her.

By the third day, Antonello's concern grew. His wife hadn't spoken, her disheveled appearance adding to his confusion. Her eyes were distant, and her appetite was gone. Panic twisted in his chest—something was terribly wrong, but he didn't know how to fix it.

"Perdita, per favore—" Antonello's voice cracked. His hands moved expressively, a quintessential Italian gesture of frustration. "Something is wrong. I can feel it."

Perdita closed her eyes and shook her head slowly, trying to pull away.

Antonello stopped her and asked, "Did I do something wrong?"

She shook her head.

"I can't understand. Why won't you talk to me?" He questions, annoyance creeping into his tone. Antonello was not easily impatient, but he was starting to crack.

Perdita gave Antonello a tight smile, but he wasn't buying it. After years as a principal, he knew when something wasn't right. His eyes narrowed as he studied her. *Every time you go quiet, it feels like I'm losing you*, he thought.

That night, Antonello remembered his longtime friend and classmate from their university days in Milano, Dr. Milani, a famous doctor. Desperate, Antonello called for an emergency visit, and Dr. Milani couldn't refuse, agreeing to take the early morning train to San Gimignano the next day.

In Italy, where communication was vital to relationships, Antonello's panic was visceral. His wife's sudden silence wasn't just unusual—it was unthinkable. Dr. Milani knew the issue went beyond medicine; it was a threat to the core of their connection.

Dr. Milani was calm and friendly, listening patiently as Antonello explained his wife's silence.

"I'm really worried. She hasn't said a word in four days, but she's acting like everything's fine. I don't know what's wrong. Do you think this is some kind of stress response?"

Dr. Milani examined Perdita, who remained silent but cooperative.

"That's odd. She seems 100% physically healthy," the doctor muttered after a thorough check-up, reviewing his charts. "No physical signs of a speech disorder, no

indication of a stroke, and neurological responses appear normal.”

Antonello shifted uncomfortably in his seat, got up, and started to pace back and forth. “So what could it be?” Dr. Milani leaned back. “It might be psychological—stress, perhaps. People sometimes withdraw as a coping mechanism. Let’s see how she does over the next few days. If she’s still not talking, I’ll refer you to a top psychologist, alright?”

Antonello reluctantly agreed. The next day, Antonello’s frustration was palpable—his jaw tight and hands rubbing his neck as he shifted from foot to foot. Silence stretched between them, suffocating, until he couldn’t take it anymore.

“Perdita, say something,” he begged that night, his eyes watering, hands extended and tense.

Perdita gave him a sympathetic smile, but her lips trembled as she fought the urge to speak. Her determination was growing stronger, though—it was too late to back out now.

A week after her vow of silence began, Perdita woke up and stretched, feeling refreshed and lighter than she had in days. She walked down the stairs into the kitchen where Antonello was reading the morning newspaper while sipping his coffee.

“Buongiorno!” she exclaimed cheerfully, pouring herself a cup of coffee.

Antonello’s eyebrows frowned and his eyes widened. Mid-sip, he spit his coffee out and choked on it while dropping his newspaper and porcelain cup onto the table, which tumbled down and shattered against the tile floor.

“Non ti preoccupare. I’ll clean it up.” Perdita said gingerly.

His jaw dropped, coffee dripping out of his mouth and down his chin into his lap. He was utterly speechless. Now he was the one not talking.

Once he found his voice again, he shook his head. "Wait, you can talk now?"

Perdita twinkled from ear to ear. "The week's up! I can talk again."

Atonello, bewildered, demanded, "What do you mean, the week is up?!"

She chuckled lightheartedly, offering a sheepish grin. "I went silent for a week to get these for free. It was a crazy deal, but look—500€ shoes, free!" Perdita explained simply as if it was the most ordinary coupon transaction. She ended with a bright smile.

Antonello blinked. Stared. Processed.

When she saw he was silent, she pleaded, "Antonello, say something."

His attempt to laugh nervously came out as a gag. He nodded, trying to recover. "You can't be serious, right?"

Perdita's triumphant smile faded. She didn't understand why he was so shocked and upset. "Yes..." she nodded her head.

Antonello dropped his head, pinching the bridge of his nose, as his body shook with fury. In a sudden outburst, he leapt up, knocking his chair over. "You went silent for shoes?" His voice growled in disbelief, as the once-prized oxfords sat forgotten under the table. "Do you have any idea how much I spent trying to figure out what was wrong with you?" His bellow rattled the teacups.

Perdita flinched.

"5,000€ on the doctor's visit, medical consultations, tests, and a specialist referral," Antonello continued, his face reddening and voice rising, "And Dr. Milani is the best

–and most expensive–doctor in the country! I thought something was seriously wrong with you!”

Perdita rapidly blinked and gasped. Now it was her turn to choke. “You spent what?”

“Five thousand euros,” Antonello sputtered, incredulity tightening his voice. “I thought you had some kind of medical issue!”

Perdita’s face turned red, embarrassed. She bowed her head. “But the shoes were free...”

Antonello let out a frustrated laugh. “Oh, this is just great,” he muttered, running his hand through his hair, trying to keep his anger in check. “I can’t believe you did this. Free? Those shoes cost us ten times their price because of the doctor’s bills!”

“I never meant for this,” Perdita whispered, her voice wavering. “It started small, just a mistake... and then I couldn’t undo it.”

Antonello sighed, shaking his head. “You always think there’s an easy way out, but nothing comes without a cost.”

The shoes may have been free, but the lesson came at a far heftier cost. Perdita had hoped they would make her feel admired, and worthy, but now the silence between her and Antonello felt heavier than any pair of shoes. Once a symbol of success, they now seemed meaningless. In that moment, Perdita realized that true value lay not in possessions, but in the connections she had almost lost.

The next morning, Antonello paused before the oxfords. They were sharp, but their shine couldn’t mask the tension between them. With a brief hesitation, he laced them up, his hands trembling. He stepped out, leaving behind the silence that would outlast the shoes themselves.

2ND PLACE

“THE LAST WISHSMITH”

By **Sukaina Hussain**, Centennial High
Howard County Literacy Association

The fire crackled and hissed, its golden glow reflecting off the worn surfaces of the workshop. The clang of hammer on an anvil was steady, rhythmic, as if time itself were bending to the will of the man behind the forge. But the man was no ordinary blacksmith. His hands were not simply skilled at shaping iron and steel; they could shape destiny. He was a Wishsmith, one of those rare few that could forge wishes into metals.

The world had once been full of Wishsmiths. For centuries, their craft had been revered; their creations sought by kings and emperors, and adventurers, too. A sword that granted invulnerability, a ring able to heal any wound, a necklace that let the wearer speak any language—these were the wonders that flowed from the hands of the Wishsmiths.

But the Wishsmiths were gone now, their kind hunted to near extinction, as the empire that ruled the continent recognized the danger of their powers and sought to control them to harness their capabilities for its own ends. Only one remained now.

Before his forge stood Eldrin, the last of the Wishsmiths, hammer in hand. His hair was shot with silver; his features sharp and weathered. Yet his eyes remained a deep, haunted blue, eyes that had seen too much: too

much death, too much blood, too many wishes granted. And with every wish, a piece of him was lost.

The blade lying before him was unlike anything he had ever forged: the fabled Sword of Aeons, said to confer dominion over Time itself. Whosoever gripped it in his hands was said to be allowed to erase faults or to rewrite history as it suited his fancy. It had existed only in myths and legends; now, however, this was reality-a tangible something- and Eldrin was the craftsman ordained to make it.

He had no other option.

The empire's soldiers were closing in. They would stop at nothing until he was in their custody and made to forge the sword, willing or unwilling, and if they succeeded in getting him to, the power of it would cement their rule forever.

Eldrin set the blade on the anvil, his eyes tracing the intricate designs etched into the steel. This was meant to be more than just a weapon. It was meant to be a key- an instrument of unimaginable power, a wish forged into steel.

But as he reached for the first ingot of metal, a memory stirred within him. A memory of times before fire, before the forge, when he was a simple blacksmith content with shaping ordinary men's tools and arms. But the wishes came- and with his first wish, a little thing, just to keep his friend safe, came a whole life change from which he could never go back.

He had beaten wishes into swords and shields and crowns. He had granted wishes of love, of vengeance, of immortality. And with every wish, he'd felt something slither free, like sand between his fingers. The more he gave, the less he became.

Now, with the forge heating up, he could feel it once more- the pull, the hunger, the longing to be something more than human, to transcend the limits of time and space, to forge his own destiny. It was the temptation of the Sword of Aeons, a temptation he had tried to resist.

"Eldrin."

The voice was soft, like the wind. Eldrin's heart skipped a beat. He hadn't heard her approach.

Talia stood in the doorway, her figure framed by the dim light outside. Her long, red hair was braided over her shoulder, and her emerald eyes- so bright, so full of life- stared at him with concern.

"What are you doing?" she asked, stepping forward into the dim glow of the forge. "It's too dangerous. They'll find you."

Eldrin did not say a word. His hands were shaking, but it was not from the forge's heat. It was deeper, an inner tremble of a voice whispering to him to take that final step- to complete the sword, to change everything.

"I have to finish it," he said softly, the weight in his voice from a burden he could no longer explain. "If I don't, they'll use it against us. Against everyone."

Talia frowned. She knew the cost. She knew what happened to those who forged too many wishes. Eldrin had changed over the years- he'd grown distant, grown cold. His very humanity was slipping away with every wish he created. She had seen it in his eyes, which no longer warmed up when looking at her; in the dwindling smiles on his lips. The man she knew- the man she had loved- seemed to slip through her fingers like the molten metal he worked with.

She stepped forward, gently laying her hand on his arm. "You don't have to do this. We can run. We can find a

way to hide. The sword doesn't need to be forged. Not by you."

He pulled away from her touch, his expression hardening. "It's already been made," he said bitterly. "The wish is already cast. I only have to finish it.

He turned back to the anvil, and the room fell into an uneasy silence. Talia stood there for a moment, watching him. She wanted to help him, wanted to pull him back from the edge, but she knew the truth. The more he forged, the more he would lose. And soon, there would be nothing left of the man she loved.

Eldrin's hammer fell with a loud clang, and a wave of heat erupted from the forge. Eldrin stepped back, his brow dripping with sweat. He had done it. The blade was taking shape, its edge gleaming with an unnatural light. Time itself seemed to bend around it, warping and twisting.

Talia could see it too. The sword was beginning to take on a life of its own, a will of its own. She could feel the pull, the overwhelming power that threatened to consume everything in its wake.

"Eldrin," she whispered, her voice trembling.

But Eldrin didn't answer. He was lost now, his eyes empty of all but the endless void that stretched before him. The forge, the heat, the metal—none of it mattered. Only the wish mattered. Only the power.

The door to the workshop suddenly flew open, and a group of soldiers stormed in with their leader, General Halgar who stepped forward with a cruel smile on his face.

"Eldrin," the general said, his voice cold. "We've come for the sword."

Eldrin didn't look up. He didn't need to. He could feel their presence, could feel their need for the power he was about to unleash. And yet, he didn't care.

With a final strike of his hammer, the Sword of Aeons was complete.

Eldrin reached out, lifting the blade with trembling hands. The sword was his now. It was his creation, his legacy.

But as his fingers closed around the hilt, something inside him snapped. A scream of anguish, a cry of loss echoed through his mind. He felt it-the last vestiges of his humanity slipping away. The man he had been was gone, consumed by the wishes, consumed by the power.

Horrified, Talia watched a gruesome scene slowly unfold in front of her, as the General and his men slowly fell to the ground, each brutally speared by the Sword of Aeons. Eldrin stood in the midst of the bodies, his clothes covered in blood. A strange smile bloomed across his face as he looked at Talia, and he began to close the distance between them.

Soon, they were nose to nose, and Eldrin's hand reached up to caress Talia's cheek. Talia was utterly stunned, yet she leaned into the heat of Eldrin's palm.

But she did not notice the shiny, blood-stained sword gripped by Eldrin's other hand.

She did not notice how he carefully raised it up to level with her stomach.

Talia only noticed the sword once its sharp point had pierced through her flesh.

And before long, she was dead.

It was for the best, he thought. No one can hold me back now.

Eldrin dropped her body, and it let out a resounding thump on the cold stone floor of the forge, whilst he walked out, never looking back.

And time, as it always had, marched on.

1ST PLACE

“THE GIRL IN THE BACKSEAT”

By **Seryna Weaver**, Snow Hill High
Eastern Shore Literacy Association

He was driving. It was evening, the shadows from the trees throwing stripes across the road. The car in front of him was going slightly slower, so he also slowed and prepared to pass. But the girl in the backseat in front of him stopped him. The back windshield and his sunglasses slightly distorted his vision, but he could tell that she had red hair—like his daughter’s. Her head was turned so he could just see her face. The shape of the eyes, the small nose, the smiling mouth, all reminded him of *her*. His daughter. How could he forget her? No. He must forget. She was gone, leaving only a space. The girl in front of him turned, and he could see that her eyes, a striking blue, were getting closer. Wait, something was wrong—the brake lights on, he fumbled to hit the brake—*where was it?*

CRASH

Screams, his own. Crunching, smashing, the cars screeched to a stop.

Silence.

Then, sirens. Moving closer, and lights. He could feel blood running down his face, bruises on his arms and head, but he couldn’t move his legs. Where was the pain? Nothing but numbness and an overpowering sense of horror. Wait, he could move his arms, but his legs, he could

see now through the stars, were trapped where the console had been smashed inward.

An EMT came, checked his pulse, called for help. Then he turned back to him. "Ok, we're going to get you out. You'll be fine. Stay calm."

"The girl."

"Who?"

"In front of me. Is she alive? The girl."

"I can't say. The crash was pretty bad."

Shock, horror. Had he killed her? The EMT saw his face changing and spoke calmly.

"Hey, its ok. Stay with me. Here comes help."

"The girl..." Strange. No pain at all...wait, there it was...striking him up his legs, tearing him apart...

"It's ok! We're going to help you! Stay with me!"

But the blackness had won...she had died...his daughter, the girl in front of him, all his fault.

...

He was in the hospital, lights and moving objects around him.

"He's coming to."

"We'll need to remove his legs."

And then nothing, just painless sleep again. He liked sleep; it helped him forget.

...

It was ten years later, and he had forgotten. Well, most of it. Sometimes the pain and shock arrived, but he mostly kept it at bay. He had moved to a small house in a lonely neighborhood of strangers. The people around him grew tall bushes to seclude themselves from outside, and slowly he became trapped within those walls, physically and mentally. Nothing changed, day after day, year after

year. Five more years passed. And then the family moved next door.

There were five of them: a father, three sons, and the mother in a wheelchair. She had lost the use of her legs. The father started cutting down the hedge between the houses. The children went to school during the mornings, and all afternoon and evening they spent running around and getting into trouble. The mother seemed sweet and kind.

...

The sun is bright, and the sky is blue, the trees aglow in the late summer weather, he goes out for a ride around the block. It just so happens that the mother next door is out to get the mail at the end of the driveway. They greet each other, and she asks him about his legs. Trying to forget has not erased the pain. He turns down the question.

"I don't want to remember. It was...not a good day." Is he too gruff? But no, she is nodding sympathetically.

"Oh. I understand." she answers. Her face, the shape of her eyes, the small nose, the smile...the red hair. The memory of that day begins to play in his head, and he barely hears when she asks if he would like to hear her story.

"It was about fifteen years ago"–

It had been a hot August evening–

"We were driving on the interstate"–

He was on his way back from lunch with an old friend–

"I was sitting in the back seat, my brother driving. I was watching the car behind us"–

It was his old red Nissan. He got rid of it after the crash, not that there was much left. –

“And suddenly my brother slams on the breaks because of a deer running in front of us”–

The break lights had flashed, blinding him for a moment, and in his shock, he had accidentally hit the gas pedal. –

“And I saw the driver’s face in the split second before the crash, he was frantically trying to stop, his sunglasses flying off his face”–

He never got the sunglasses back; they had probably been ruined. –

“And there’s this crunch, and screaming,”–

He had screamed, his legs getting crushed and the shock overwhelming him–

“And that’s all I remember. When I woke up in the hospital, the doctors told me my legs would never work again. And now, here I am.”

He feels himself trembling, his face turning white. She asks him if he is ok; he says that he just remembers something and turns to leave. He knows now. Or does he? He needs to ask one more question.

“Did...was your car small and black, with a sticker of a frog with a cowboy hat?” The words come out in a rush. Half terrified of the answer, yet half yearning to know the truth.

“Oh, yes! I remember that sticker. How did you”– but he is gone, into his house so the guilt won’t show. He stops by the window, looking back at her. She sits in her wheelchair on the sidewalk, her husband and three children coming around the house to show her something. As she picks up the smallest, she looks at his house, worry giving way to confusion, confusion giving way to an understanding. Her husband is behind her, a child on her lap and the others hanging off her chair. And he knows that she knows—it was his fault, she would never walk again.

But, in the light of the afternoon sun, she smiles at him—an understanding, knowing smile. A forgiving smile.

2ND PLACE

“THE FOOL IN HER WEDDING GOWN”

By **Keira Conley**, Tuscarora High
Frederick County Literacy Chapter

I walked through the wheat fields, brushing my hand over the grains. At that moment, I seemed to forget everything plaguing my mind. About a hundred feet beyond me stood an old house, tattered with years of use. Margaret Wallace stood on the porch, holding a watering can in her ink-stained fingers. Her oak hair moved in the breeze like silk.

She set down the can and turned her focus to me. A smile crept upon her face. “Hey Lily, I thought you had wedding stuff to attend to.”

“No, we finished an hour ago,” I came on the porch and bumped her shoulder. “I hope I’m not a bother, Coyote.”

She chortled, “You could never be a bother.”

I don’t recall where the nicknames “Lily” and “Coyote” came from. We have used them since our youth and the time we spent together lying in the tall grass fields. We have been in each other’s company for ten years. Two years ago, our relationship took a romantic turn, although it is hard to tell if it was for better or worse. She was vulnerable then, after the death of her parents, leaving me as her sole companion. Emotions got the better of us while logic left. It was more troublesome now as I was betrothed

to a man I did not love so my family could get money for my mother's medicine.

"How are your Coyote Stories coming along?" I asked, noticing fresh ink on her fingertips. Margaret was a writer, though she never told me what she wrote about, so I referred to them as Coyote Stories.

"Not the best; I don't have any motivation," she replied, admiring the flowers she grew on her porch. "I have a stuck feeling, being in this town. I don't know, it's hard to explain."

I leaned against her sturdy shoulder. "Then don't."

The sun was setting over the mountains protecting the valley we called home. It was always beautiful, the shades of orange and pink like a painting.

"I need to leave," muttered Margaret, plucking a weed from a pot.

I looked at her while she stared deeper into the setting sun. "But you can't go. This is our home, Coyote." She chuckled, "What is a home? A place where you feel safe? A place where you can be free from the ideals of others? This town has not done that for us; if it did, it wouldn't call me a spinster under its breath, and we would stand at the altar tomorrow, *together*."

"I must disagree; this is home." I set her hand over my beating heart, "This love we share makes a home, not those around us."

"Is that why you're marrying Thomas, the heir to the coal company that practically runs this town?"

I shook my head, "My reason for marrying Thomas is for the life of my mother, that cancels out our own need for love. You understand that, right?"

"Family is important, but tell me Lily, does this feel important?"

Margaret held my face as she pressed her lips against mine. The world seemed to dissipate, leaving us in a void. I set my hands on her waist. My heart seemed to beat again, a feeling I had not felt in Thomas' arms.

Margaret separated her lips from mine, "Now, can you live the rest of your life without that feeling?"

"No."

She held my hands, "Then join me! We can leave the confines of this town and relish that feeling for as long as we live!"

My breath stuttered as I let go of my grip on her hands. "I have duties here; I can't abandon them."

Margaret sighed and returned to her flowers, "I am leaving tomorrow, with or without you. I'll be at the church before you wed; I need your final decision then."

I stirred the soup in my bowl, watching the vegetables swirl around the spoon.

"Esther," my mother, frail and white as ever, started, "how are you feeling about tomorrow?"

My parents and I sat around a now-empty table. Four of the seven chairs carved by my father now sat collecting dust. They once belonged to my older siblings, but they had all left home.

"I'm nervous," I replied to my mother.

My parents were a reflection of the life waiting for me. A life without love. A life that was decided for them, just as mine was soon to be. It terrifies me.

Mother had another coughing fit. Specs of blood appeared on her white handkerchief.

"You'll be fine," my father hissed as he comforted his sick wife.

He was right of course, I had duties to attend to here. But as I cleaned my bowl and got ready for bed, I was overtaken by the thought that if I did give up love for my family, would it be worth it? This medicine is merely experimental and if the status quo stays, then I am doomed to live the rest of my life thinking I should have left with Margaret.

On the east side of the church, I waited for the ceremony to begin. After a sleepless night full of thoughts about my future, it seemed unreal to be standing here in the reflection of the stained glass. I wore simple makeup with my hair down. My dress is made of lace and wool, and the bodice an accent of coral fabric with a flower pattern.

Sounds of galloping echoed against the walls. Margaret sat like a queen on a sturdy mustang. She dismounted the beast and stood face-to-face with me.

"I know," I muttered, "I look rid-"

"Beautiful," she finished, "You are beautiful, my Lily." She took a white lily from her bag and placed it in my veil. "Are you coming with me?"

Deep down, I knew the right answer, although it pained me to say, "No."

Margaret's eyes became stiff. "Why not?"

I turned away from her. "I can't go on living knowing I could have helped my mother but didn't."

"What? Our love won't stop; you can't ignore it!"

"If I must help my family, I will without a second thought," tears formed in my eyes, "Besides, you have nothing to lose by giving everything to love, Coyote."

"That may be true, but I would sacrifice for us. I love you more than every flower, all the stars in the sky, each bottle of ink. What we have goes beyond these simple

desires!" She put her hand out to me as a way of asking me to join her in this adventure, "If you don't come with me now, we may never meet again. So I beg, join me, Lily." I stepped back and let tears fall from my eyes. "I can't."

Margaret let her hand fall, rage filling her face. "Then you are nothing more than a fool in her wedding gown. Marrying a man you don't love, destined to wake up each day to an empty bed. What is to come is your fault, so don't blame me,"

She mounted the steed again and looked down upon me, tears now like rain on her cheek, "I thought you loved me," she said, her voice raw.

"I do," I whimpered.

She straightened her back. "Then why are you making that promise to Thomas instead of me?"

Margaret galloped away towards the mountains, taking my heart with her. The charcoal on my eyelashes fell with my tears, and my body ached. I fell on my knees into the dirt. *Can't I allow myself to be happy?*

My eldest sister, Emilee, found me on my knees. Deep down, she must have known I didn't want this wedding. This must have been how she felt all those years ago. Emilee took me by the shoulders, her green eyes staring into mine.

She engulfed me in a hug and whispered, "You can do this, Essie."

I stayed a moment in her arms before she set her sights on cleaning me up. She spoke no words as she fixed my makeup and brushed the dirt from my gown, which was for the best.

More composed, I entered the church with my father and walked down the aisle to Thomas and a priest. The

stained glass made my dress orange in its familiar light I had grown to dread.

"I, Esther Katherine Pilsbary, take thee, Thomas Benjamin Rickbus, to be my wedded Husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death do we part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth." Each word a dagger to my chest, these empty promises without love.

As the announcement rang that we were now husband and wife, I realized Margaret was right. I am a fool in her wedding gown.

I stood at the sink in a home I had shared for seventeen years, washing dishes from tonight's meal. Thomas was on a chair to my left in a waistcoat covered with a sprinkling of coal dust from running the mines. He was reading a news article that brought out many scoffs. My three surviving children, Beatrice, Caleb, and Ben, sat across from him, doing assorted schoolwork and whatnot. Pictures of my two daughters who had died during the Spanish Influenza sat on the window sill in front of me. I missed them terribly, but I kept strong for the family I had made.

Life was simple and comfortable, it was nice, although it took me a while to see that. A month past the wedding, Mother died. After that, I wondered if it would have been better to leave with Margaret, yet as I matured I realized my choices were right. The memories we shared are enough, anyways I haven't seen her since she rode off into the mountains. I haven't a clue if she has found peace or if she even remembers me. But no matter if she does or not, Margaret Wallace will always be a part of me.

"It's time for you three to get to bed," I instructed my children, noting the time on the clock.

The children grumbled but still did as they were told, abandoning what they were working on.

Thomas folded his newspaper and kissed me, "Will you be coming to bed soon?"

Those first few months were hard on Thomas. Like me, he wasn't thrilled to enter into a loveless marriage, a marriage of convenience, a marriage for money. But as the years passed, we became close and content in each other's arms.

"Yes, I just have to finish some things first," I replied, drying my hands.

"Okay, dear."

I leaned against the sink and looked over my home, the familiarity being one of my greatest comforts. From the corner of my eyes, the orange cover of the book my eldest daughter was reading caught my attention. I had never seen it before, meaning she bought or borrowed it today.

Coyote Stories

M. Wallace

My breath halted as the title brought back memories of years past. I took the book from the sofa and walked onto the porch, sitting next to the wildflowers I grew. Under the stars, I opened it to the first page,

To my Lily,

A day has not passed when I have not thought of you. I miss those years more than you can ever know, and I hope you have found peace in your life. We both deserve it. If you are reading this, know I forgive and still love you.

-Your Coyote

I smiled and looked into the star-dotted sky. A strange sensation began in my body as my heart beat again, knowing the love I possessed also burned within her. I held the book to my chest as if it was Margaret.

"My Coyote," I whispered into the night, my eyes filling with tears, "I love you too."

1ST PLACE

“BARBIE”

By **Ava Nelson**, Oakdale High
Frederick County Literacy Chapter

Her body woke her at three that morning, two hours before her alarm was set to go off. After a moment, she rolled on her side and reached for her table lamp, lifting a switch that caused a warm lightbulb to flicker to life. She sat up in the dim lighting, plagued by a light daze as she waited for her mind to catch up to her. Despite the amount of sleep she got—which she knew was more than usual—a bone-deep fatigue wracked her form. All she wanted to do was lay back down and allow sleep to whisk her away, but that was not a viable option. It was Wednesday, she realized, and she had homework left over from the night before.

She never used to be the type of student to delay doing her work. In prior years, her homework was always completed before the sunlight dissipated for the night. In that world, so distant it seemed like an alternate reality, there was no such thing as falling asleep on top of her papers or late assignments.

A lot had changed since then—*she* had changed a lot since then, and she had not the slightest clue how to bring back those parts of herself.

She retrieved her phone from underneath her pillow and tapped it awake, squinting as the overly bright screen illuminated her features. She quickly decreased the

brightness and scanned her recent notifications. Other than mindless taunts from apps she needed to offload, nothing of genuine value awaited her. The edges of her lips teetered on a frown as she unlocked her phone, and read through messages, still delivered, that she had sent to one of her only 'friends' weeks prior. She ignored the way it caused a slight ache in her chest and slid out of the app to instead deactivate the alarm that she would not need that day.

Then, in hopes of restoring some of her energy, she laid down on her side and surfed between miscellaneous social media apps until it was five. Weariness was still present, but she forced herself to start her work. Groggily, she sat up for the second time that morning and dove her hand into her backpack conveniently placed by her bed to fish out mathematics homework. Robotically, she muscled through the problems until there were no more left to do. All too soon, it was time for her to get ready for school.

She pulled the covers off and uncrossed her legs, swinging them over the edge of the bed. Tingles traveled through her leg muscles as they awoke from their sleep, causing her to purse her lips. She planted her feet on the carpet once she could feel them again, then pushed herself up to walk over to her bathroom.

The light switch was flicked up and an industrial overhead light lit up the cramped space. She looked in the mirror and a deep dread immediately settled over her as she remembered the existence of that... *thing*. It was foggy like a memory from early childhood, and, unceasingly, it floated right by her head. The *thing* itself was not scary, but rather its implications. She avoided it for as long as she could while brushing her teeth, but everything must come to an end. Eventually, she had to face it. It was going to torment her, and she had no choice but to soothe it.

Cleansing was first in her skincare ritual, as that *thing* always made sure to remind her. If she did not wash her face, the *thing* informed her, more painful pimples would arise, more patches of discoloration would tarnish her skin, and her pores would be so clogged that it would suffocate her. Her heart rate picked up. Hastily, she uncapped her cleanser and squeezed a giant glob on three of her fingers before scrubbing it all over her skin. Moisturizer was next. If she did not moisturize, the *thing* told her, her skin might flake so bad that it would fall from her flesh. So she quickly layered five pumps of moisturizer all over her face.

Then, it came time for the most crucial part of getting ready, her favorite thing to hate, even though she loved it. She loved what it hid but hated that there was anything to hide.

She picked up a brush, opened her foundation, and slathered it on until it coated her facial disharmonies.

Then she concealed anything that dared to poke through the mask.

Next, pink blush, because it made her look more alive. Pink was her favorite color, she was not sure if anyone knew that.

"You need more pigment. You look drained, like you need to sit down," the *thing* whispered in its... unspeaking way. Its voice, much like its physical formation, was hard to pinpoint. It was as if it only existed in her mind but transcended it at the same time. She agreed, anyway, and added more blush.

She could not forget contour to define the cheekbones she did not have. Pretty girls had them.

She needed a bit of bronzer too.

Of course, powder, so that she could defy laws of human-like oil production.

Her favorite: A lip liner that drew a bit outside the divots of her natural lip shape, to make them seem bigger. A corresponding lipstick too. And gloss.

A little bit more powder, just to be safe.

Finally, setting spray, so none of it moved.

She looked fine, the *thing* told her, but she should look better. Surely the *thing* did not intend to feed into her great fishbowl of insecurities, it was just critical in the way any good friend would be. Still, it hurt that her efforts were being minimized, and it hurt even more that she knew the *thing* was right.

The world was brutal, as she had come to learn. Living in that reality—one that was so, forebodingly real—she had to accept that she would never be the girl she embodied in her dreams. She was condemned to forever be a forgettable face, nothing more than a grain of sand in the ocean, and she had to be okay with that... But she was not. And that is why she had no choice but to hide herself under cosmetics each morning. It was an addictive high that she knew deteriorated her insides, but she could not care because it kept her steady as she braved the dark and lonely world. It did not feel like she had anything else—*anyone* else.

Remembering that her phone had not rung in months, she knew that one was not just a feeling. Could she be blamed for wanting to feel good? She wanted to feel good, just for a little bit.

She quickly learned that the *thing* had no intention of leaving her in peace that day. She knew it when she got on the bus, and exchanged greetings with the bus driver, and she nearly cracked open from the look he gave her. The *thing* convinced her that it was a glare filled with repulsion and judgment. He had lifted her sweet frosting and seen the bitter tragedy lurking beneath.

"He sees your truth," the *thing* tortured her and it consumed her alive. Suddenly, it felt like she had not put anything on that morning, a bad omen for the rest of the day.

She slipped the hood on her sweatshirt up after she found a seat.

When the time came, the bus dropped her off in front of her house, like it always did. The bus driver wished her a good afternoon, and she said, "Thank you, you too," as she normally did. She dragged her heavy legs around to the side of her house to let herself in. There was no real reason for using it instead of the front door—it was just a habit she had dug herself too deep into to stop. She already had her keys on standby in her hoodie pocket and simply took them out and stabbed them into the lock. The door opened, she went in, and shut it behind her.

Silence.

Her breath settled, yet stress bunched up in her stomach. She hung up the keys and grabbed her phone out of her pocket, thumbing it so the screen would light up. Nothing new confronted her.

Absently, she wondered when her parents would return from work as she kicked off her warm boots. She walked towards the main staircase to meet an empty kitchen, then she scaled the stairs to go to her room. The *thing* was silent as she willed herself to enter the bathroom.

There was nothing good about this part of that day. Without the invasive eyes of peers, her composure was finally able to crumble as she met her gaze in the mirror. The *thing* was floating by her head, like always. It was going to watch as the real her resurfaced.

She eyed the makeup wipes sitting menacingly on her counter and felt more weight pile onto her heart. There was nothing she wanted to do less than this, but-

"Your pores," the *thing* reminded her.

"I know," she whispered, water pooling in her eyes.

She looked in the mirror again and wondered if there was a place for her in this world. It seemed like life meant a never-ending cycle of contorting herself to fit into a puzzle she did not belong in. The chains of humanity were hurting her wrists, and it all felt like so much work. The constant worrying and artificial obsessions were draining. The lack of a real hand to hold onto was gut-wrenching. The inability to feel nice was shattering.

Her liveliness disappeared as the makeup wipe glided down her cheek.

"A bit gross, no?" the *thing* made itself audible once again.

Was this what beauty meant? Was it intended to hurt like this?

She looked so tired when the wipe robbed her of mascara.

That was who she was, though, and that was how she felt.

The *thing* reminded her that it was not proper to showcase it to others.

The disguise fell apart piece by piece until all that was left was the girl beneath.

That night, she settled into bed early so that she did not have to think anymore—she was tired of doing that. Out of habit, she checked her phone once again. She should not have done that, as it only made her feel worse.

Pitifully, she longed for a better tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow, her natural skin would be enough in her eyes.

Perhaps the worries that endlessly fogged her mind would fade into insignificance. She allowed herself to hope, even though her soul knew that tomorrow would not be better. Tomorrow would just be a repeat of that day she had just lived, and every day before that: A perpetual cycle of hopes being crushed, endless loneliness, and the upkeep of a scalding facade.

But maybe, just maybe, tomorrow would be better...

2ND PLACE

“THE WAY”

By **Savannah Wertz**, Snow Hill High
Eastern Shore Literacy Association

The golden hour sunlight dripped through the café's humongous, hazy windows, leaving glowing pools like melted honey spilt across the floor, the faces of the customers, the counters, and catching the on the crystal bowl of scones and spraying little stripes of rainbow on the face of the waitress. A man, seemingly in his early twenties, ambles in with tousled, thick, loose, ebony-colored curls that reach for his gray-blue eyes that carry an exhausted, distraught look. He flops into a linoleum booth-seat, his shoulder pressed against the window. He patiently waits for a waiter to take notice of him. He is in no rush, having spent this precious, warm summer day cooped up in an office, working so hard in attempts of pleasing the new, disgruntled boss... so much so that almost every drop of mental capacity has been wrung out from his mind, like the dirty dish rags after scrubbing restaurant counters squeezed tight. He relished in the sticky, humid July evening air in the short walk from his car to the quaint café and he plans to return to the tantalizing freedom of fresh air as soon as he gets his normal straight black coffee to revive some life into him. The waitress notices the new customer, her cheeks flushed with an essence of a raspberry hue from rushing back and forth from customer to kitchen all day. She strides up to him, her brown-barley

waves freeing themselves from the elastic that has attempted to hold them back from her face all afternoon.

“Hello, sir, what may I get you?” She asks, her voice tired, but still painted with that too-sweet buttercream frosting customer-service voice. He looks up at her, his stormy sea eyes, her earthy hazel meet like waves crashing ashore. The sunlight sets their features ablaze in brassy golds and bright amber. He smiles a lopsided, wonky front toothed smile, the first real smile in what seems like since his care-free high school days. She smiles, all her teeth showing, the first real smile since her single mother died, and left her to her grandparents at age thirteen. It is one of those love at first sight moments, where your soul recognizes this other soul, and they instantly go from embers to a blazing wildfire, the same type of euphoric feeling as the golden-hour sun that coats everything in a new light. They both take a deep breath. A deep breath that provides them oxygen to the breath they have been holding for what is certainly too long. Right then and there, a glimpse of a future, one of hope and light dancing like the flames simmering beneath their skin flashes in the electrically charged air between them.

“A black coffee, please.” He chokes out into the silence, clearing his throat, and unable to wipe the goofy smile aching his cheeks.

“I will bring that to you in just a moment.” She practically sings, desperately trying to contain her smile bursting at the seams and hide her senses that buzz as if they just came alive for the first time.

She lies awake, her bones aching, specifically her wrist that was stiffened with arthritis. She looks around, she is in a room, cast in darkness, in a bed shared with a man radiating warmth. She is that young waitress, now aged

ninety-seven. He is that young, distraught customer, now aged ninety-eight. She reaches a hand covered in paper-thin, wrinkled skin stretched tight over veins and bone to rest on his hand, calloused, rough, painted with liver spots. He quit his job as an office assistant and created his own landscaping business, the reason for his calloused hands. She stopped being a waitress and started to design the landscapes, help with the planting, and with the business side of things. His eyes flicker open now, a blurry version of the crystal clear wild sea that captivated her that one day forever ago to meet hers. The bedside alarm clock glares rudely in red light that it is 2 am, almost as if it is annoyed they are awake, urging them to go back to bed.

“Let’s go, honey, back to the place.... the place we first met.” She whispers, her voice floating gingerly through the air, as fragile as the crystalline wings of a dragonfly. Her eyes are glistening with tears, matching his, both mouths shaking with a smile. Her mind is lost to dementia, which they both know will steal her memories away in a little while, but at the moment, her whole self is here to experience the now, to remember it all. His mind and body are gripped with the aftereffects of a stroke, limiting his memories, his body and his mind. They both know death is waiting patiently at their door, raising his hand to knock, waiting for them to open the door. They aren’t scared, not really. They know that God is waiting for them on the other side, and they will be together. They might have been scared when they were children, but after seeing the Lord deliver them through so many trials and tragedies that aimed to tear away the flesh from their bone, all the while keeping them together, they have no doubt in their mind. They also both know, not in the front of their minds, but in the cobweb covered corners, that if they go on this trip, it will be their last. They probably won’t even make it there.

He sits up, grunting with the effort, with the strain to his aching lower back, a muscle pulled at the end of his landscaping career that stopped him from the constant heavy work. She sits up, her thin bones creaking in protest, her long, silvery hair sparkling in a cascade down her back like an ancient waterfall. They flutter around like butterflies sipping on marigolds, gathering items for only one suitcase. They know they are not packing for a long trip; they know they want to bring only what they need in their final moments. They grab their cherished bottle of organic wine from the exquisite vineyards of Italy, they grab their simple wedding rings, a gold band for him, a gold band with a small diamond for her, and slip them onto their fingers, and finally, they change into their clothes. The last outfit they will ever slip into.

They shuffle, barefoot through the house they worked so hard to get the money to buy, the house where they built a business together, built a family with four children, and most importantly built their love. The moonlight, a sweet melancholy tinge, like coconut cream frosting is slathered over every surface sparkling their wedding rings. Such simple, humble, modest jewelry, more cheap and un-impressive than almost all of the wedding rings of their friends they accumulated over the years, and yet they are the most precious. They stood the tests of time, of agony, of frustration, of the devil's tricks, and still, they stand by each other's sides.

They slide into the front seats of their car that they are *technically* not supposed to drive because of his stroke, and her dementia. They look at each other in the darkness, their hearts pumping with the blood that has sustained them through each moment. They know... in a while, this rhythmic thumping of their heart will be silent, and so will they, just left will be their bodies, their souls soaring through the dimensions until they arrive in the heaven they

came from. They lean forward, grasping each other's hands in a trembling goodbye, but more of a see you in a while embrace, instead of a finality. They plant their last earthly kiss on each other's lips, shriveled and softened with time. He starts the engine with a twist of a key, and they drive off, in the direction of the place where their life *truly* started. On the way, her mind fades like a photograph bleached by the sun, and everything becomes a fuzzy blur, forgetting her past, her present. Tears spill down the old man's face. He knows her mind is up in heaven now, and it will not come back to her body, and he knows that his is about to do the same. He doesn't really know where he is driving anymore. Somehow, they have ended up on a winding desert road, dusty and swirling with the dance of heat waves. His hands jerk involuntarily, and he pulls to the side of the road and parks the car. Her once dazzlingly iridescent hazel eyes that seemed to shift with every mood have dulled, and they close, for the last time. Silent sobs rip through his body as he stares out the front window. The sunlight has slid just low enough in the sky to melt and pour that precious golden glow over everything, over everyone, an ethereal moment, just like their first. He takes a deep breath, his lungs shivering, and lays his head on her shoulder. His breath warm and filled with life slips out from between his lips, parted in awe at the divine hand that brought him through his life to this moment. For the last time, his eye lashes close, closing the curtain on the light, and life.

Everything is drenched and dripping with that gold, like their golden hour times on earth, like their first and their last minutes together. Both of their souls revel in pure, healed, restored bliss. "We are home again." He says, but not with words, but in the way that souls communicate in heaven, the meaning sent through the air on a feeling.

They smile at each other, they are both the naïve children having tasted their life together for the first time in that café, and the witheringly old married pair that weathered the horrid storms of sorrow and stood in the sunshine of joy.

That's the way they were going all along. They knew they were going to a place of gold, to a place of each other, to a place where they were both young and forever old. Where the Lord greeted them with an embrace of light. Now they left their shadows to wander off somewhere, back on earth, while they gleefully, blissfully exist together, waiting for their children to join them in heaven, waiting for them to find their way.

1ST PLACE

“TORMENTED”

By **Callista Bernhardt**, Centennial High
Howard County Literacy Association

The Cherubim smiled—not with mischievous intent behind his expression, but with the air of self-satisfaction. The silly engineer was finally his, and Gepetto could stuff it. He crawled along the musty attic’s beams and listened to the muffled ravings beneath. He had been particularly lucky to finally snag someone of such obvious talent and interest to his superiors, and he wasn’t going to give up his chance now. The ravings rose to a shriek, and the Cherubim heard the satisfying thwack of the pen set hit the wall and another thump as he heard the engineer slump to the ground exhausted. “Aiutatemi...” muttered the engineer. Now the Cherubim could begin his work in earnest—starting with the boy’s visions of grandeur and architectural designs. He couldn’t introduce the future to the boy too quickly, and one must always have creative blocks to break through, but the more of a dreamer the boy was now, the better his inventions would be later. Into his tired brain, the Cherubim placed dreams of a few church domes here, a new type of crenellation there, and, last but not least, dreams of light piercing the bridge that fell last week into the river. The rays showed him the places where the everyday stresses cracked and chipped at it, finally causing it to sink—quite literally—into depression.

The Cherubim finished adding the final touches to the boy’s nightly visions and decided that that would have

to be enough for tonight. He crawled back along the attic beams and then wriggled out of the large crack in the roof. It was too small for humans but just the right size for pigeons and the smaller of the heavenly host.

The Engineer woke up groaning to angry squawks and piercing light. He pulled himself up off his knees and crossed the closet-sized room, nearly tripping over the pen set in his haste to open the shutters and release the light trapped behind them. He flung them open and felt a rushing stream of warmth, heard music and people passing on the street. Far below, the cobbles twisted this way and that, and a small rooster strutted his few feathers around the pigeons and chickens. Blearily, the Engineer looked around and realized his mistake; he forgot to replace his trousers you see... or rather you don't, as he quickly pulled the shutters back and sighed with exhaustion. Having become presentable to his "modern" society, our Engineer then realized his back ached with the pain of an un-fitful rest. With a groan he recognized that his dreams were suspiciously grand last night. You must excuse me reader, but dreams in this world he lives in are often just the stirrings of one's own subconscious. However, if one has made a contract with a cherubim or seraphim, one's dreams are no longer one's own.

"LEONARDOOOOOO!" shrieks a voice from far below. "IT'S TIME FOR YOUR NEXT INTERVIEW!" Then a slight pause, "WHERE ARE YOU?!"

Sighing dramatically, our young engineer stumbled down the stairs to face his one true fear. Other people.

"And what were you dreaming about last night—*giovane*—that would make you scream the way you did for all the neighbors to hear?" asked Carota, his keeper and general source of annoyance. Leonardo poked his head up over the banister and surveyed the battleground that he must conquer to get to his interview this morning. First,

there sat Carota, in a chair at a rough table near the foot of the stairs. She gazed in amusement at the scarfuffly shaped head of hair peeking over the banister while she chopped radishes (the bright purple of the radishes contrasted with the orange dress she's wearing). A few feet further a glance and Leonardo only just avoids the baleful stare of the terrifying Basilico, whom one will never find without a sable tunic to match their pitch black hair—slightly green in sunlight. He carried the last vestiges of the breakfast that Zucca neglected to finish, again, and trudged slowly to the beautiful blue tiled sink on the opposite end of the room.

"Ah, right," Leonardo said, as remembered himself and slowly pulled his face up to the height of the banister. "Come, I've made the usual," Carota instructs as she tilts her chopped radishes into a side bowl. Leonardo's nostrils flared as a wonderfully fragrant aroma washed over him, something... cheesy?

"Oh! Finally woken up have you? -It's ciabatta with eggs and cheese." She motions to him to sit in front of a plate of said ciabatta whilst the other occupants of the kitchen and dining room clatter around until everyone is in some semblance of a circle around the table in an assortment of chairs and postures. Zucca, a youngling girl of about 6, bounced like one of Leonardo's windup toy designs.

"Leo, Leo, Leo, Leo, Leo!", she chattered, "did you hear about the new pink bubbles out in the city square? They're twice as effective as the clear ones! Oh! And did you know that there's an earlier curfew now? Too many people are missing..." which made her shudder involuntarily.

"You mean escaped to other city-states?" Leo asked.

"No, they've heard screams in the sewe—" "That's enough now," interrupted Carota, "Let Leo finish his ciabatta in peace, and then tell us how well his interview is going to go today." Obediently, Leonardo gulped down the stringy cheese bread and cleared his throat to explain his newest attempt to gain a patron.

"Well, as you may have heard, Agliolo is looking for new talent to improve the defenses of his palazzi, and I just so happened to have thought up some particularly interesting designs last night—here have a look," he said as he rolled out the scrap of parchment covered in designs that he had hidden in his doublet that morning. Leonardo was a red-haired boy of about 19 and constantly in motion, despite all dubious claims of perpetual motion not existing. He reminded his siblings of a flickering flame that roved everywhere and sought everything, never satisfied in his achievements and always off dreaming of better inventions. Leonardo unfurled the thick paper and, with a flourish, displayed it on the cleanest part of the messy table that he could find. Silence, and then, an uproar of congratulations and excited murmurings followed by several pats on the back ensued while Leonardo looked on with some earned smugness. "It's magnificent!" "Stupendous!" "Meraviglioso!" "What is it?" —cue record scratch.

"What do you mean 'what is it?'" Leonardo demanded, "Isn't it obvious?" Judging by the blank stares of his relatives... clearly not.

"Well, it looks ingenious? Certainly whimsical enough that Agliolo will be impressed?," supplied Basilico as Leonardo began to inwardly turn into goo.

"What they're trying to say," interrupted Carota again, "is that you have done marvelously and that you should be proud of yourself, Giovane. Now go and get that contract!"

Mustering himself, Leonardo smiled and looked up at a slightly haphazard contraption, a clock that he made when he was much younger and less of a perfectionist. Years ago, he tried to get Carota, and then his younger siblings, to pull it down, but he could never persuade them to. After all, it was his first major invention and they were too proud of him to pull it down. That, and he needed to work on other contraptions to make money rather than fiddling with something that already worked perfectly well. All these thoughts flitted through the back of his mind as it took his brain a millisecond to process the time and what it signified for his entire future. "AIUTATEMI! IT'S ALREADY 10 TILL MEZZOGIORNO!" And with that, he grabbed the paper, stuffed it in his doublet, and dashed outside and down the stairs without another word to his family or glance at their concerned faces. He raced through the streets, careful to avoid refuse from the previous day and street-sellers hawking their wares from wagons and crates. The city-state was a labyrinth of red-tiled roofs, imposing fortifications, and palazzos. Leonardo knew the streets well-enough, but he always felt extremely lucky to have the Duomo and its spires poking up amongst the living spaces as a reference as good as a compass needle. He moved quickly, knowing that Agliolo's palazzi was in the northern district of the city and that it was much farther away than he liked. So focused was he on his task, that he slammed head first into a flaxen-haired youth with an unfortunate mauve tunic, who was clearly attempting to be seen as royalty. Oh no. It was Asiago.

"Why hello cousin," he sneered, "good to see you again, I was just talking about you to a fine friend of mine," and with this he gestured to his bulky and none too-friendly looking comrade, a tall boy whom Leonardo recognized as Finocchio.

"Hello to you too," Leonardo replied with the coldest civility. "Now, if you don't mind, I have somewhere to be and I could do without your idling making me late." Uh oh, wrong thing to say.

"Ohhh, looking to get a patron are we?" Asiago asked with a mean glint. This could get ugly.

"Nothing of the sort, I simply need to run an errand for my work and this is the best time to do it." It was useless, Asiago saw that his cousin was clearly upset by the look on his face and that he had the edge this time. "Not so fast. I think my friend and I could help you with this errand of yours if you're so busy. We'll escort you to your destination."

Leonardo knew that this "escort" would end up taking him to a dark alley and leaving him battered, so he did the only thing he could. He ran.

"HEY! COME BACK HERE!" Clearly that wasn't an option, but Leonardo spotted some of those pink bubbles floating around that Zucca told him about. A street vendor was carefully putting a few out at a time, but a cloud still persisted in the middle of the street. 'Perfect,' thought Leonardo. He dashed through the bubbles, careful to hold his breath and not pop too many. Luckily, it seemed Asiago wasn't thinking very straight today, or he hadn't heard of the effectiveness of the new pink bubbles. Either way, he ran straight through them breathing heavily and after he and Leonardo made it through them, Asiago started to sway a bit. Leonardo couldn't afford to watch the effects of them on him for long, but the bubbles clearly were as good as Zucca said. He glanced over his shoulder. Asiago had seemed to glaze over, like he'd had too much wine, and staggered around pointing and muttering something about butterflies. 'That'll teach him to tarry me,' said Leonardo to himself, and continued to run the whole way to the fortification of Agliolo. Panting, he finally beheld the

imposing grey structure and stopped for breath. It was much more terrifying than he had imagined. There seemed to be a gloom that seeped from the cracks of the aged walls, but that was probably just the dust in his eyes and the lack of sleep. Leonardo could see no guards, which was odd, but he figured that they were probably inside. The towering solid metal doors covered in a filigree of skulls and gryphons also did not inspire confidence, but Leonardo was going to be late if he tarried any more. He took a breath, stepped up to the doors, and knocked.

2ND PLACE

“A STARVING ARTIST”

By **Daniel LeCates**, The Salisbury School
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My knees tremble in anxiety, causing the wooden stool I stand on to skittishly shake. I've already tied the end of the rope to the ceiling. I pull the loop over my chin and tighten it until the itchy bristles dig into my neck. Tears stain my eyes and cheeks, but it's all over now. Here, in my cramped studio apartment, surrounded by my failures, the painted rocks, the sketchy watercolors, the distasteful portraits. I breathe hard, harder, psyching myself up. I feel my life flash before my eyes as I kick the stool from beneath my feet.

“Are you still painting?” I hear my dad yell from across the room as he starts my way. “You a damn girl or something?” He kicks the can of brushes laid next to me. “I’m almost done.” I reply as I pick back up my can of brushes, ignoring his second question. I’ve been painting since I was 10, a short interest of mine that picked up into a blazing passion by the time I was in middle school. My father hates it, always trying to get me to play football with him, like he did in high school. He treats me like this frequently, and I have no siblings to back me up. On breaks from school I usually go and stay with my mom, who wouldn’t care if I was in the other room painting or doing cocaine, she’s always out with another guy.

"Eh, you look a'ight." My dad says with a small grin. One of the only times I've seen him genuinely smile. It's my first high school prom, and of course, I have no date. That didn't stop my dad from buying me a tux and sending me off anyway. "Listen Ricky," he leans in close to me with that familiar alcohol breath, "I know I can be a bit harsh sometimes, but I want you to know I care about you kid, a lot."

"I know dad."

"And I want you to know that I really love you, don't ever stop thinking that, alright?"

"I love you too dad." Even if he was drunk, those words meant something to me.

"Get the hell out of my house!" My dad roars from across the kitchen counter. He chucks a beer bottle at me and it shatters on the wall behind me. "No son of mine is going to shack up with a boy!"

"Dad, please, you don't understand. It was nothing, I promise." I pull the letter out of my pocket and shove it in his face. "Look! I won the competition at school, I can finally go to college." It was a letter from the liberal arts college in the next town over. They staged an art competition at my high school, and since it was my senior year, I could easily use it for benefit. He rips the paper from my hands and tears it down the middle. He gets close up to my face and yells, "I don't care if you got into Harvard, or some pansy liberal school, I want you out of my house, and out of my life!" Tears fill my eyes as fury fills his. I run out of the house as quickly as I could, leaving all of my belongings, all of my art supplies. I'll get them back later.

I wake up in my dusty dorm room. My cramped, claustrophobic single dorm, not sure if it was a blessing or a curse. After that day, I went and lived at my mom's, which was tough because she lives far across town. I eventually went back for my stuff, and I haven't seen my dad since I graduated high school. After he kicked me out, my dad called my boyfriend's dad, who beat the ever-loving shit out of him. I couldn't see him again either. My condensed dorm room was further enclosed by my piling paintings. I stay up way too late and skip meals to keep my projects going. I check the time, 8:31 AM, of course I chose the early classes. I sluggishly pull myself out of bed, carefully avoiding the acrylic paint splattered on my floor. It was like my life was being consumed by my art. Paintings were always an escape, but now they only reminded me of the past.

"Here are the keys by the way. You all set from here?" The landlord beams at me.

"Uh...yeah I'm good." I stutter back to her. I finally graduated college and barely scraped some money together, either borrowed from friends or my countless side jobs, to start renting out a place.

"Alright nice, just give me a call if you need anything." She says before turning around and closing the door behind her. I turn back towards my new home. A blank canvas of a studio apartment, ready for me to paint my life into.

I stand in the middle of my studio apartment, littered with trash and discarded paintings. My nicely furnished home now turned into a desecrated graveyard for my piling failures. My obsession with my paintings was

growing worse and worse. Dusty lighting pours in from behind the thick drapes covering my windows and that distinct paint smell lingers in the air. I eventually lost contact with most of my college friends, and I went back to the way I had always been, alone. I get a random call from my mom. I pick up.

"Hello? Mom?"

"Hey, I'm sorry to call you so out of the blue. I was told I should be the one to tell you this."

"Tell me what?"

"Your father passed away last night. I'm so sorry Ricky, I know this is so sudden, but I think you should drive back—" *kchnk*. I slam the phone back down on the table. I stared blankly at the phone, hoping I would wake up from a dream. I step away from the phone and pace around my room, my hands in my hair. I'm barely able to wrap my head around this. I stop and look in my hands, how could this be possible? My stunned demeanor changes to anger. I turn to my latest work, a painting of a father and a son. I grab it, the wet paint staining my hands, and throw it against the wall, tearing the canvas. He won't ever get to see my work now. He won't get to see who I have become, why couldn't I have just visited him one last time?

I ignore the thousands of calls echoing from my phone. I almost didn't notice the tears falling from my eyes. My eyes blur and I begin to trip over trash littered across the floor. I grab some rope I was planning to use for my next project and begin tying it into knots. I pulled out a loop big enough for my head, and tied it to the metal pipes lining my ceiling. The noose swings from side to side, and I place my wooden stool directly beneath it. I choke on my breath and shakily step onto the stool.