

CYWR

CHICAGO YOUNG WRITERS REVIEW

SUMMER 2022
CONTEST



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Summer 2022

Contest Issue

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“The Story That Made Me Feel” **Contest Winners**

Grades K-5

1st Place:

“Puppy” by Lindsay Gale

2nd Place:

“Wind Over Water” by Nova Macknik-Conde

3rd Place:

“Snowy Night” by Mena Shaw

Honorable Mention:

“The Case of the Missing Vase” by Anya Leckerling

“I Fear” by Nala Delgado

“Saying Goodbye” by Soledad Mangles Fernandez

“Welcome Spring” by Emma Fitts

“My Dad” by Alexa Sims

“Dear T” by Amy Xia



“The Story That Made Me Feel” **Contest Winners (continued)**

Grades 6-8

1st Place:

“Zombie Story” by Scarlett Livingston

2nd Place:

“The Power of Fiction” by Maya Fedorowicz

3rd Place:

“The Shaking Stop Sign” by Jonah Christiansen-Barker

Honorable Mention:

“My House” by Isa Hasan

“A Part of Life” by Isla Rowney

“Naughty Knick Knack” by Nikko Delgado

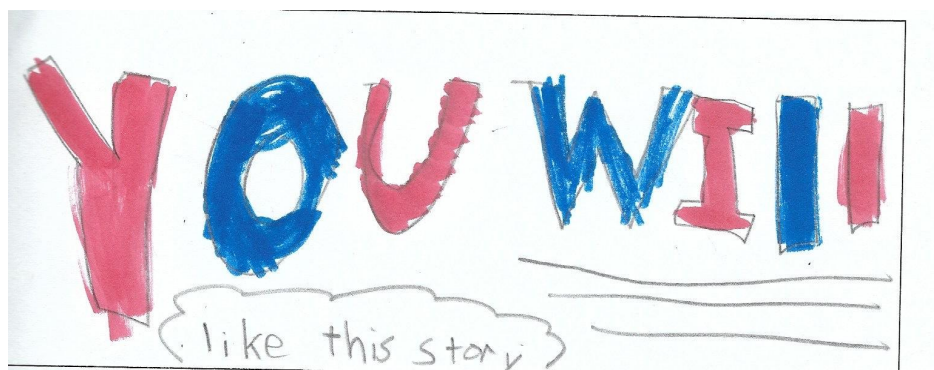
“In a world so big you feel so small” by Yaendi Herrera

“The Letters That Changed Me” by Veda Kalra

“Bittersweet Feelings” by Lizzie Sun

The Case of the Missing Vase

By Anya Leckerling
1st Grade



Dear Parents:

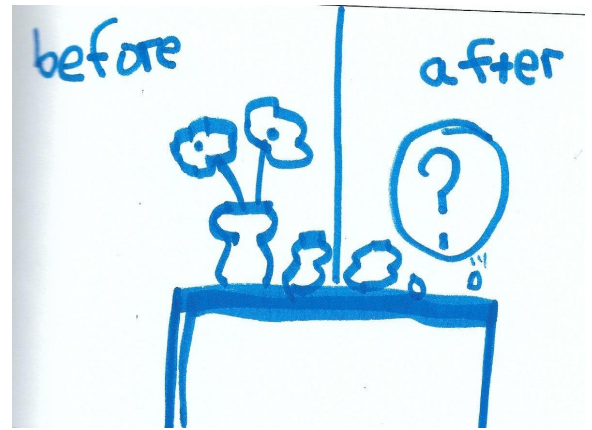
This story may have too much horror because there is murdering and stealing. Your children might be horrified by some parts. You should think about letting your children read this horror mystery.

Enjoy!



Leonardo Vendor was in her living room when she heard the phone ring. [[RRRIIINNGG]]. “Oh my!” she said. “It’s very late for a call.” She went to answer the call. It was amazing! It was her best friend, Mary. “Please, please,” Mary begged. “What is it?” Leonardo asked. “My precious China vase has been stolen!” said Mary. Leonardo ran to her bike. She knew something was really, really wrong. She got there in a flash! [[ZOOOM!!]]

When she got there, she saw Mary waiting on the porch steps. Leonardo said, "I'm here, Mary." "Come in, Leonardo," said Mary. "Do remember the blue and white vase on the Chinese table? Well, last night I went to get a snack and as I passed the Chinese table, the blue and white vase had disappeared into thin air!"



Leonardo asked, "Have you seen or heard about other mysterious things happening?" Mary said, "Yes, I heard that my neighbor's wife was murdered two days ago." "Anything else," asked Leonardo. "Yes, the night that my vase was stolen, I started looking around the house for it and I thought I saw people with the word "Demon" on their shirts," said Mary. Suddenly, Leonardo spotted something on the ground. "EVIDENCE!!" she cried. She saw a tiny, barely visible footprint leading outside. "Bye, Mary" she called. This left Mary very puzzled, because a second ago Leonardo had just arrived.

Leonardo was traveling a pretty fast pace for an eight-year-old on a bike. She kept looking at the road so she would stay on the right track. Finally, after two hours of bike riding, the tracks stopped. She looked up and gasped in horror! It was a shed, but it was



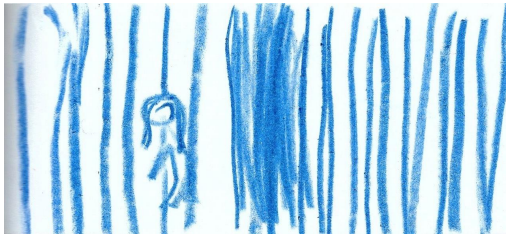
not just any shed...it had the word Demon painted on it! Leonardo carefully got off her bike and shuffled toward the shed door. The horror grew with

every step she took. She carefully opened the door and saw eleven men inside. They matched Mary's description, wearing shirts that said "Demon". One of the men asked harshly, "What are you doing in the Demon Shed?" Leonardo shouted, "GIVE ME BACK THE VASE!" Then, the men jumped up and started attacking Leonardo, not knowing that she was great at martial arts. But eleven men who also knew martial arts were too many for one girl. With all the men's power, Leonardo fainted.

When she woke up, she found herself back at her mansion. She was amazed by the men's power, but at the same time she was horrified. There were only a few questions left: how was she supposed to get back there, where was the vase, why was she back home and had she beaten the Demons? Suddenly, she saw the vase in her mansion. She walked toward it, looking inside and saw a small note neatly tucked inside. She carefully unfolded the note and read it. It read: Dear Leonardo, I got the vase for you. The police arrested the Demons. I think it will be safer to have the vase in your house.



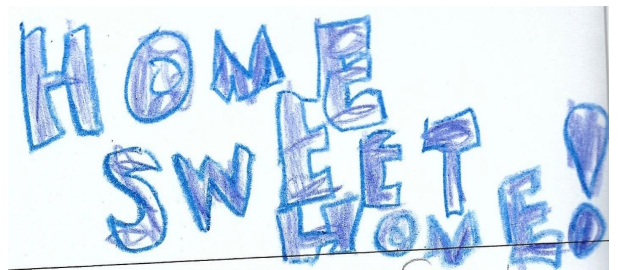
"Well, this case is almost solved," Leonardo said to herself. There was only one more thing she needed to do. Soon, she was walking into the police station. She approached the cell the Demons were in and, without even saying why she was there, asked: "Why did you steal the vase?" The Demons replied, "Our friends in China needed a precious China vase to support their family." "Oh, I see!" exclaimed Leonardo. "Oh



boy," she thought to herself. She had done all of that and made a family poor. Then she remembered something Mary had written: Mary had said that Leonardo could keep the vase. She told the Demons: "Now that I own the vase, I can give it to you. That way, you can give it to the Chinese family." "YES!!", the Demons cried. "But we are in jail," they continued. "How do we give it back to the Chinese family?" Leonardo said sternly, "I will tell the police the whole story. They will let you out to return the vase, but only under one condition. You must come back to jail after your delivery." "Fine," the Demons said.

Soon after, Leonardo was back at home. She loved sitting on the couch. She loved reading books. She loved being home, sweet home.

The End.



I Fear

By Nala Delgado
3rd Grade

Oh God. I signed up for a spelling bee. I regret that decision. Even worse, the spelling bee is tomorrow. T O M O R R O W! Well, I studied, and I think I know how to spell unpredictable. I hope so.

My mom hugged, kissed me, and tucked me into bed. But this spelling bee is making me so nervous that I could not even sleep! I tossed and turned. If this continues, I might be so tired in the spelling bee that I might sleep in front of gazillions of people!

I was thinking about spelling words, but then I find myself somewhere dark. There were disgusting intestines and blood all around me. Blech. And muscles too. It looked like I'm inside someone's stomach! Then I saw a little baby. A baby-in-a-stomach-that-is-gonna-be-born-very soon.

"Um, hello? Do you know where we are?" I poked the little baby in the leg.

She whined. "WAA! NO, I DON'T WANNA GO! DON'T TAKE ME OUTSIDE, YOU DUMB DOCTORS!" She cried some more. This is the most annoying baby in the whole planet.

"What?! No, it's just me, um, Nala?"

"Oh-what? Where are you, Nawa?" I was so tiny that the baby couldn't even see me! "Um, right here!" I yelled.

The baby smiled, and saw me.

She picked me up. "Wow! You are very tiny! Can you see if the doctors are coming?"

I couldn't even see her face because it was that dark. How did she even pick me up in this darkness? "Ummm, no. Ummm, where are we?" I wrinkled my nose.

"Oh, we are at my mommy's tummy! Amazing, right?" The baby giggled.

My jaw dropped, I guess my dignity dropped with it too. This is not right! This has to be a dream! I do not like this dream. I have to get out. Maybe, if I could get the baby to get out of the tummy, I could end this crazy dream!

"Ummm, do you mind getting your butt out of this stomach? I have a dream to leave." I begged.

The baby looked at me like she was offended, I think. (Note: I can't really see her face.) "Excuse me?" she said in a very stern voice. She's definitely offended. "No, my mommy's tummy is amazing. You have naptime all day! And who doesn't like naps?" She laughed.

"Uhhhh, I don't know? But why don't you want to get out of your mom's tummy?" I asked confused.

"Because it's dark in here! I fear the light! And I would hate being outside the tummy! I am scared of new things." The baby complained.

"But, I'm sure your mom is great! She will be so happy to see you!" I insisted. "NO! I am not leaving!" The baby screamed.

I covered my ears. "But, you have to face your fears! YOU HAVE TO!" I shouted back. "But I don't wanna-"

"You can make your mom so proud!"

"Fine, but I will hate this-wait what?!" The baby looked below. Part of her head was getting sucked out! "Wait. No. I regret my D-"

I caught her hand. "You will be fine. You are brave. And trust me - your mom will be amazing!"

The baby paused. Then smiled peacefully. "You are right. Thank you so much. I will remember this. I think I am ready"

Then she went. Crying because she was scared, but she still went.

I peered after her. “What do you want to name her?” The doctors asked the mom. “Nala Delgado.” The mom smiled.

I was shocked! Th-that baby was me?! And suddenly I am back in the dead silence of my room. Wow. Did I just help myself?!

As I was thinking about this, my room was suddenly gone, and I am in our old condo.

It was 2-year old me crawling (I know because I have seen photos of me). I went over to Mini me.

“I am scared! I hate falling down! I fear getting hurt!”

“Hey, what are you doing?” I asked, glad that it wasn’t dark this time.

“My parents want me to learn how to walk!”

She crawled to me. “Who are you?” She asked.

I made up a random name. “Umm, Datu VonFart.” I shrugged.

“Oh! Hahahahhahahahah! Funny name!” She laughed. Almost sounding like a hyena. “So. Walking. Are you doing well?” I asked.

Mini-me shrugged. “I quit. I am gonna crawl my whole life! I am scared! I hate falling down! I fear getting hurt!”

“But, you have to learn and you have to get hurt! That’s reality!” I insisted. Mini-me crossed her arms. “I don’t care, I am afraid.”

“When you are scared then that’s when you do it!” I urged.

“NO!” Mini-me shouted.

I frowned. I pushed her. She fell.

“Ouch. That’s not nice.”

Then Mini-me exclaimed. “Wait-that really doesn’t hurt!”

“Then keep walking!” I made her stand up.

She froze. “Ummm, ummm!” I could see her sweat.

“WALK! Leg one. Leg Two. Leg One. Leg Two. Leg One. Leg Two.” I said. She tried, but fell down.

“Get up! Walk!”

She got up. Walked one step. And then fell. Got up. Walked one step. And then fell. We did it for what seemed like a million times. And then she took 3 steps. No falling. 5 steps. No falling. And then 10 steps!

“See. Now you could do it!”

“Thank you!” Mini-me smiled.

As she smiled at me, the condo faded into a shiny wedding place. Everyone was dressed in white. I spotted a flower girl chewing her nails while waiting for the wedding to start. I saw her face. It’s 5-year-old me! I ran to her.

She looked up, and stuck her tongue out. “Why are you wearing PJs?”

I looked down. I was wearing a pair of fluffy PJs. Ugh. “Never mind that. Are you nervous?” I asked.

She nodded. “I care if people make fun of me if I slip! My name is Nala. You?” I smiled and came up with another name. “Ummmm, Maria Yasmin Caca Pants.” She laughed very loudly. Everyone looked at her.

I smiled at her. “It’s okay. See people are looking at you, but who cares!” “I care! And thanks for making me more nervous!” She retorted.

“Who cares what people think as long as you are having fun. Plus, I think everyone is looking at their phones anyway!”

She became quiet. “Well, fine! Who cares! I can do this!”

She walked down the aisle, ignored everyone around her, and scattered the petals. What a brave kid! Oh wait – that brave kid is me!

That woke me up. And it was morning and time for my spelling bee! I gathered everything, and rushed out to school. I was very nervous, very! But, I remembered my dreams. I have faced my fears. I have to face my fears.

Spelling bee time arrived, and I was behind a curtain. A bright light shone in front of the curtain. Just like my first dream. I went in front of the curtain, into the podium, and stared into the bright stage lights. I gulped.

“Can Nala Delgado please step up to the microphone.” The judge announced. I don’t want to walk! But I have to. I walked to the microphone.

“Spell, diagnosis.” The judge said.

Everyone was looking at me. Probably judging me. I gulped again. What did I tell my 5-year old self again? It is okay. Who cares what other people are thinking about me. I have to do it.

“D-I-A-G-N-O-S-I-S.” I replied.

The judges looked at each other. “Correct!” They shouted.

I breathed. I can do this. I may not win, but I went to the light. I walked. I had people look at me. And I did not fear.

Saying Goodbye

By Soledad Mangles Fernández
3rd Grade

When I lived in Puerto Rico, my mom and dad would work in the company called, “Iber Lumber,” and I would always come with them. My grandma and grandpa also worked there. Since I was too little to help, (obviously because I was one), I would stay with a nanny and play all day. But it wasn’t only the nanny who I would play with, it was also my grandpa, Jose. We would play together ALL the time and his usual wise, calm attitude would always make me feel better. He was also like an emotional support guy. And it was like this for the next two years.

“The news came.”

When I moved to Miami, Jose, and my grandma, (Mirta) stayed in Puerto Rico. I missed them a lot, but they visited all the time. Then, they were missing everyone too much, they decided to move. Years passed and then eventually, Jose got sick. I was having a father daughter party when I heard the news. “Everyone one is at the hospital, you have to come, quick, it’s Jose,” texted my mom, very quickly in Spanish. When my dad and I went to the hospital, I had no idea what was happening. The news came. Jose had died.

When we went home, I still didn’t know what had just happened. All the sad faces were making me feel worried and confused. Only one tear ran down my eye, and I asked, “Will he be, ok?” My dad answered, “Yes, we all miss him, too.”

When I grew older, (at about eight or just turned nine years old), I just started crying because I missed him. It was at night, and my mom helped me out. Later, I wrote a song about him. This is how it went:

Times passing by...oh! How much I miss you, because it's so sad, that you, ooo, just drifted away. And I have some words, that I have to say, so come on, let's go now, I'm gonna say (say, say, say...)

Say goodbye! Say goodbye! Though it makes me wanna cry! Say goodbye! Say goodbye! Though it brings tears in my eyes! Say goodbye! Say goodbye! I don't want to let you fly! Say goodbye! Say goodbye! Say goodbye! Say goodbye!

“Say goodbye! Though it makes me want to cry!

Say goodbye!”

My momma told me my wish would come true and I, hope it does. I just want to say, please come back home I don't want to live life alone! Because it's so, so, sad, to say... say goodbye!

Say goodbye! Though it makes me want to cry! Say goodbye! Say goodbye! Though it brings tears in my eyes! Say goodbye! Say goodbye! I don't want to let you fly!!! Say goodbye! Say goodbye! Say goodbye! Say goodbye!!!

When I wrote the song, I felt better and I got more used to him being away, but at the same time, right here, in my heart. It's hard to say goodbye, but at least I don't have to do it alone, and all I really know for sure, is, he'll never leave me alone.

Welcome Spring

By Emma Fitts
4th Grade

Spring welcomes me to a beautiful world.
A world where flowers bloom and children laugh. A world where you smell
flowers everywhere.
A world of beauty and kindness.
Somewhere everyone can enjoy themselves and be happy.
Where happiness just fills the air.
A place with tulips, daisies, and daffodils.
Dragonflies zoom past me.
The park is filled with butterflies and chirping birds.
A world where leaves are green.

“A world where problems can be forgotten.”

Where lives are worth living.
Somewhere truly magical and alive.
A place where you can roll around
In the lush, green grass and feel
The most joy.
A world where problems can be forgotten.
A magical place called SPRING.

Snowy Night

By Mena Shaw
4th Grade

I see the lantern,
Outside of the window
On a dark night
In the middle of winter.

It's bitter cold,
But inside this cozy comfy house,
I'm warm.
The warmth gives me hope,
And happiness,
As I watch the snow,
Drifting down to the ground.

“It has a speckles and speckles and rivers and rivulet
of stars.”

The ground is hard,
It's very gray and depressing.
But I happily watch it now,
As it becomes a carpet picture of the white fluffy snow from the sky.

The sky is deep, deep blue,
Blue just like the darkest navy blue you could find.
It has a speckles and speckles and rivers and rivulet of stars
Stars are so bright,
They are like little mini suns.
How lucky must I be... I thought,
To have seen this wonderful image at night.

Puppy

By Lindsay Gale
5th Grade

I sat on the cool, hard stone of my backyard as I twiddled a piece of dark green grass between my fingers, thinking. A rapid knocking on the window made me jump. I heard the muffled voice of my dad.

“Lindsay, come in.”

I quickly went back inside, feeling like curiosity was eating me alive. Dad pulled me over to his computer. Displayed was a white furred pup with light hazel ears looking up at the screen. Dad clicked the mouse, and another picture showed. But I couldn’t focus on it. The picture of the pup was all I needed.

“Dad?” I asked breathlessly.

“I’m going to check out a breeder’s home, and we might just get this puppy. But I’m not promising anything.” Then he was gone.

I ate my dinner as I stared outside. The sky was beginning to darken. The trees swayed back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. A few clouds still lingered in the sky, colored orange and pink from the setting sun. The rest of the sky was a warm navy blue, rimed with dark red, orange, and pink outlines. A squirrel scampered across the picnic table. The breeze ruffled its fur. A bush scratched against the house, sounding like ragged but soothing breath. A few stray leaves bumped against the window, and the faint shadows of two fleeting birds showed in the distance. Everything was so peaceful and serene, but inside me, worry and anxiety coursed freely.

I was just digging my nails into my palms to stop the nerve-racking thoughts my brain was channeling, when I saw the door opened. All the feelings that had been

coursing through me the past hour and a half vanished. Only one was still there: “He’s opening the door slowly. That means he got the dog.”

I jumped up, and there she was: the dog. Her soft white fur looked like cotton, and her bright black eyes looked like onyxes. I couldn’t be more excited. Dad held the puppy gingerly like he was afraid of breaking any bone in her body as he set her down on the laundry room floor. I stared at her, as reality finally dawned on me. I had a dog. OH. MY. GOD!

“I felt a laugh of joy escaping me. I finally had a dog.”

I had been wanting a dog for so long, and now I have one. I remembered all the times I had paced up and down, pleading to my parents to get a dog; all the times I had closed my eyes, and imagined I was holding a furry pup close; all the times I had felt a tongue on my cheek only to realize it was a dream; all the times I had read everything about dogs I could, trying to soak it all in. I felt the joy radiating off my body. As dad handed the pup to me, I felt an electric spark. This was true. I felt like laughing. I felt like screaming with joy. I felt like jumping up and down like a cheerleader. But I just stroked her soft, silky fur. I had never felt something so good. I felt like, well, like I had just gotten a dog. The pup looked up at me with her glimmering obsidian eyes. I felt a laugh of joy escaping me. I finally had a dog.

God, she was so small. Only the length of my lower arms. Her two legs fitted into my hand, and likewise, her head was the size of my palm. She was probably SO young. And she was our pet now.

Then, dad jerked me out of my excited thoughts. “C’mon, let’s give her a bath.” He said.

As we took the pup upstairs, I peppered dad with endless questions. “She’s so adorable, isn’t she adorable? How old is she? What does their home look like? Does she have brothers or sisters? What toys should we give her? I have a stuffed bear her size with fuzzy brown fur. And also what will she eat? Is she thirsty? Can we give her some water or milk? Won’t that make her go to the bathroom? Where will she sleep? Can she sleep in

my bed? Will she sleep on the couch or in a box or where? I wonder what I'll play with her. I can play with her, right? How will we give her a bath? Will we use our shampoo? What towel will we use? Do you think she'll like the bath? Does she like going outside? I heard that Lily got ticks when she went out to the dog park. Where are the dog parks? Dad?"

Dad tilted his head. "Huh?"

I groaned.

Just then we reached the bathtub. It was time to give the pup a bath. Dad filled a bucket with warm water, and put the pup in. Her white fur stuck to her body. Her soft brown ears moved back and forth. As water poured over her, though, the pup tried to get out of the bucket. Her paws scratched over the wet and smooth surface. She whimpered, a soft, heartbreaking sound, and looked around with her big, scared owl eyes. She shivered uncontrollably as her curly tail twisted at her back. I watched the pup as water poured over her back, as the shampoo was rubbed on her shaking body, as the foam drifted in patches on the water, as we wrapped the shivering dog in a dry, soft towel. As we carried her, her little legs tried to move like crazy and her head twitched around with anxiety.

The honey scent of the Burt's Bee shampoo wafted from the pup as Dad turned on the hairdryer. The dog flailed and whimpered again. I put my hand in the pup's still wet fur. It seemed to calm her down. I felt a protectiveness come over me. She turned her head, stopping her struggle, and showering my hand with warm rhythmic licks. I giggled. The dog's pink tongue felt like Jell-O.

"Yes, hello to you too." I whispered.

The pup tilted her ears, angling her head to look at me. I scratched her wet chin as she started to lick me again. At that moment, I came to a conclusion: regardless of what happened, my life would never be the same.

Wind Over Water

By Nova Macknik-Conde
5th Grade

Wind over water
Sky over sea
Riding the ocean
Come, wait for me

Alone on the sand
Waiting to see
Riding the ocean
Come, wait for me

The birds are a-chirping
The skies are like new
The wind is a-howling
An endless dome of blue

“Walking on air/I’ve grown my wings”

Shimmering so brightly
Too bright for my eyes
Hoping for a dream
That will never come true

Walking on air
I’ve grown my wings
Falling through clouds,
Flying with glee

Singing to sleep
Drifting alone
Flowing to you
Not on my own

Waiting for sunshine
Waiting for rain
Waiting for lightning
Waiting for wind

Waiting for hope
Waiting for dreams
Not on my own
Not on my own

Drifting to heaven
Holding on tight
Drifting to sleep
Waiting for night

My Dad

By Alexa Sims
5th Grade

For being only eleven years old I have experienced a lot of loss. At only the age of six, I had already lost my beloved father to cancer. He had a rare type that was not able to be treated in or near Ohio (where my family and I live). He was treated at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas.

I remember when I learned that my dad had cancer. He had come home from work early and had a terrible headache. He had called my mom and said he had to go to the hospital, and that something just wasn't right. My grandparents came over and watched us until they came back from the hospital. I recall my mom walking into the house sobbing. As a three-year-old at the time, I didn't know what was going on. The next day I was helping my mom pack for Texas (they had to leave immediately), while she was trying to explain what was going on. In my three-year-old brain, I still didn't understand that they were going to be gone for weeks and weeks at a time, and I said, "Mama, you should take your pajamas in case you have to spend the night." That made my mom just break down in tears.

“... little videos of us dancing to songs or just saying
'Goodnight' or 'I love you'.”

My mother split her time in Texas with my dad and in Ohio with my younger sister (Jenna) and I. Jenna and I lived with our grandparents, in their big, two-story, brick house. They took care of us while my mom and dad were in Houston. Although we had fun at our grandparents' house and they took very good care of us, it just wasn't home. It truly became our “second home” though. All of our clothes and toys were there, for we stayed there for up to five weeks at a time. We would video chat with them (or just my

mom if dad wasn't feeling up to it) almost every night and would send them little videos of us dancing to songs or just saying "Goodnight" or "I love you".

For my fourth birthday (December 20, 2014) I got to go down to visit my dad and my mom. Mom flew down, stayed for a few days then flew back to Texas with me. We left the day after Christmas and flew in around eleven-thirty at night. Dad had driven to the nearest store and bought a Christmas tree for the apartment, and already had gifts for me and mom under it! I still remember a couple of the things he got me, but my favorite at the time was a Frozen puzzle that came with little gems and stickers you could put on it.

The day he died started as pretty much any other day. It was July 2, 2017. He had been released to come home in the past week and doctors were in and out checking on him. We knew he didn't have much time left, but we all hoped we would have at least another week or so with his condition worsening. He had lost his senses of smell and taste a long time ago, and one of the last things he asked for was pickles! The week before he died he was not doing well. The weekend before he passed away my mom took him to the hospital and he got fluids, and the doctors said it would give him enough fluid for one more week. He seemed to have some good days, but the more the week went on he got weaker and weaker. By the time Sunday morning came, he was so weak that he couldn't breathe. Mom had called the doctor early in the morning, and she had been there the entire morning. One of the biggest regrets of my life is not saying a final goodbye.

In conclusion, I had some of the best memories with him, and he will always be in my heart. Those are special memories to me and I hope you enjoyed learning about him/his story.

Dear T

By Amy Xia
5th Grade

I cannot agree more.
Nothing will calm you down better than
Simply standing outside.
No matter where,
In your backyard,
At a park, or at school,
The result is the same.
Birds singing their songs high up in the trees,
Creating a lullaby just like the ones we heard as babies.

“I’d like to spend days out there.”

The tiny squirrels squirming around in the bushes,
The leaves rustling as they fall from above,
The soft wind caressing your face,
The fresh scent of the flowers and trees,
The faint sound of cars passing by
Little children screaming as they run around and around.
I’d like to spend days out there,
Doing nothing but stand and enjoy the peace and quiet,
But the night slowly darkens,
As day becomes night,
As blue becomes black.
The sun steps back,
Letting the moon take its place in the vast sky.

My House

By Isa Hasan
6th Grade

On the outside, my house glitters in the California sun. The painted white walls remind me of my clean white pillows. It is my palace. It is my Taj Mahal. The house has many windows and many doors. Looking at the windows is like looking at a row of shiny mirrors. I moved in when I was nine years old and I loved it right away. The view is beautiful. I can see mountains from a distance.

“Indian and American and Muslim. All the parts of who we are.”

The driveway is grey in color and filled with cars. The driveway pavement smells of rubber. It feels rough on my hand when I fall. Last year, when coronavirus started, I once fell “splat!” onto the driveway when I was walking home from a walk. My face hit the pavement and I started to cry. There are many cars because there are many people that live here. My friends don’t understand why we have so many people living in our house. I try to explain to them that we’re Indian. I live with my grandparents, parents, brother, and cousin. My grandparents are always rushing in and out of the house. I see my grandma getting in the car dressed in a sari. She always wears bright red lipstick and bangles.

Many trees hang over the roof of the house. There are giant oak trees and scraggly pine trees. Purple flowers surround the driveway. There are pink flowers too and they remind me of the smell of an orchard. My driveway makes me think of the first time my brother came home from the hospital as a baby. I was so excited. We had carried him into the house in a car seat. I pulled his hat off and he cried. I felt confused because I didn’t understand why he was crying. I was four years old. I remember we had a

ceremony for him called an aqiqa. We shaved his head and gave money to charity. My mom wore shalwar khomeez as she held him in her lap.

Inside the house, there is a kitchen. Minerva, our nanny, is preparing my chocolate medicine. It is a medicine that I have to take every day so that I get stronger. My doctor said that I have to gain more weight because I'm too skinny. I don't think I'm that skinny. Minerva cooks my food every day. She makes me pasta, rice, and daal, Indian lentils. I can smell my age, eleven, in the air as I walk through the kitchen. Eleven smells like chapli kababs and chocolate chip cookies and halal pepperoni pizza. All the things we eat. Indian and American and Muslim. All the parts of who we are.

Every day, Minerva tells me to eat food and I refuse to. I usually don't feel hungry. Sometimes, I'm not in the mood to eat. Sometimes I'm busy. My grandma also tells me to eat. So do my mom and dad. Everyone is telling me to eat all the time. I feel annoyed when everyone does that. I can hear my mom and dad's muffled voices from behind their bedroom door: "He's not even in the first percentile for weight. What will happen to him?" But I think I'm fine.

The kitchen also smells like Indian food. It reminds me of when I buy food for my grandparents when they come for dinner. I make them lentils and rice myself. My mom taught me how to use the rice cooker. We eat dinner together and talk about how my grandma is doing. She tells me lots of stories, especially from when she was little. She tells me stories of palaces and jinn. My grandpa tells me stories too. He remembers what it was like before India became free from England. He tells us stories about how they didn't have a car, a TV, or even a toilet. He tells us about how they were scared during the riots. Muslims and Hindus were killing each other. People's houses were being set on fire. My grandpa lived in a house behind a very high wall. They were safe but they couldn't leave the house for weeks when the riots were happening.

In the living room, I have a piano. It's black and the keys are white. It's as big as a car. The piano reminds me of how my aunt used to play "Chopsticks" with me when I was a baby. I would sit in her lap and play it with her. She would put her hands on my hands and help me play. I loved it. My aunt doesn't do "Chopsticks" with me anymore. She doesn't live with us anymore. Now she has a baby so she's busy all the time. I can

play over a hundred songs on the piano but they are all Disney or Bollywood songs. My grandparents listen to me play the piano. They think I'm really good at playing the piano and clap when I play it.

Upstairs, there is the room that I sleep in. My room has two beds that my brother and I sleep on. My brother sleeps on the top bed and I sleep on the bottom one. My brother's Spider-Man pictures are on the wall of my bedroom. There is also a picture of my brother in Aruba on the wall. And there's a picture of me in Carmel. We have pictures of us in Dubai and in India. We have Arabic calligraphy on the wall that we painted ourselves, and paintings we made of our mosque. During Ramadan, we do art projects with my mom. My brother builds Lego sets in my room too. Sometimes I like to push them down just to annoy him.

Also upstairs is my cousin's room, my parents' room, and my grandparents' room. I call my cousin "Api." She is my elder sister. I like to send videos to her on my iPad. I send her videos every day of me saying different silly things. She lives with us because she goes to university here. But she grew up in Dubai and India. The rest of her family is back home. Every night, I hear her speaking in Urdu loudly, laughing for hours on the phone with her friends or her mom. But when I see her, she's quiet. She doesn't go with us to Mexican, Italian, or American restaurants. She only eats chicken tikka pieces and watches Bollywood movies in her room. Sometimes she seems sad, like she misses them. I wonder whether she likes living in America.

In my parents' room, there is a TV and a computer. We pray in my parents' room. We pray five times a day, like Muslims do. My prayer rug is blue because that's my favorite color. My brother's is red because that's his favorite color. Papa's prayer rug is yellow. When we pray, we first do the iqama. The iqama is the prayer call. My brother and I take turns doing it. We also wear our hats when we pray. We throw our hats on the floor and run out when we are done because we want to go back to watching TV or playing. But my mom makes us come back and pick up our hats.

Outside, there is a swimming pool. I like to swim in it and my brother does too. The pool looks as blue as the ocean. It sparkles in the summer in the sunlight. The pool looks like a blue lagoon. When I jump into the pool, it is always warm in the summer. I

sing my favorite Bollywood song, “Pappu Can’t Dance,” as I splash around. But in the winter, it can get cold. It can be as cold as ice. I shiver like a dog when I get out.

My house smells of oranges and sandalwood. It smells of ittar, the Indian perfume that my dad has hundreds of bottles of, all stuffed under his bathroom sink. I don’t think he’s ever used them. My mom tells him, “Just throw them away! They’re twenty years old.” But he doesn’t want to. He says it reminds him of Lucknow, the city he grew up in. His family ran a famous ittar factory from their house. The scents of musk, amber, rose, and khus wafting through the air remind him of his grandpa, who used to read Quran every day as he pressed his feet. And he remembers his grandma, who was a great poet of Persian and Urdu. He remembers flying kites on the roof.

“My house feels bright and warm like sunlight.”

I can always hear birds or crickets chirping outside our house. I hear the crackling sounds of frying samosas and pakoras that my grandma makes and the loud sound of the pressure cooker as Minerva cooks lentils for dinner. It always sounds like a freight train and it is always a surprise when it whistles. I quickly cover my ears and run out of the room. My house always sounds like the Indian news channel that my grandpa plays loudly from his room. The news anchors yell at each other but my grandpa laughs. I hear my mom and dad speaking loudly on work phone calls as they pace on our long balcony. I hear my brother playing Nintendo. Minerva calls me again. “Isa! Come eat your food right now!”

My house feels bright and warm like sunlight. My house feels like clouds, and like warm sand on a beach, and like eating ripe alphonso mangoes that taste sweet. My house reminds me of love.

A Part of Life

By Isla Rowney
6th Grade

Vivid rays of light surround me as soothing waves crash down, colorful palm trees ruffle in the wind, and blankets of warmth encase me. An airy laugh of joy escapes my lips, scanning the beautiful resort, until the remembrance of my eighteenth birthday sprouts in my mind like a weed, interrupting my moment of pure bliss. Pushing away the thought, attempting to return to paradise, a black circle on the pool surface draws my attention. Bubbles rise to the exterior, circling the spot, until a realization of the horrific situation weaves its way into my head; there's someone drowning. A shriek of terror vibrates in the deepest darkest depths of my throat, crawling and scratching its way out into the atmosphere.

“My childhood slowly fades into my rearview...”

The patch bobbing its way up and down, familiar dark brown curls swirling in the water; until snapping back to reality, I sprint to the pool's edge. Cold, harsh waters tug me under as I pull the delicate child in my arms, tucking her luscious locks of hair behind her ears, scanning her face for signs of life. Long eyelashes, a button nose, and plump lips decorate her lifeless and juvenile face, each facial feature organically creating a recognizable profile; my own. My childhood slowly fades into my rearview, and as I unwillingly approach adulthood, the beautiful, free experience of a child evolves, leaving vanishing steps.

Naughty Knick Knack

By Nikko Delgado
7th Grade

The boss walks outside and the door slams—
I popped up my head from my cozy bed
whiskers perked up.

“It’s time to redecorate!”

I run over to the bathroom, my paws *click-clacking*
against the wood floor.

I jumped up on the seat.

It’s time to redecorate!

I scratch up the toilet paper, unrolling it
from the tube.

Once it’s down, I grab it with my teeth and
start unrolling it
until there’s no more left!
I drag it all over the house.

After a few minutes,
I hear a door open and slam again *BOOM!*
“I’m home!”

The boss shrieked and dropped her bags
when she sees me biting the toilet paper

Her apartment has been TP’ed from top to bottom, I used it all for payback.
Next time she’ll give me enough treats.



In A World So Big You Feel So Small

By Yaendi Herrera
7th Grade

In a world of 8 billion people you feel so small and peripheral to your
surroundings so lost in life
Thinking you know the meaning of importance since you searched it up on
Google for your essay that's still due

“How could you have missed this all along?”

Up until that monotonous night you sit and think realizing the definition of
Importance all along has been you
It's been the same girl you've looked at in the mirror everyday the same girl
that's always felt so small and irrelevant
How could you have missed this all along?
It's only until you're in a dark pit of self-hatred and despondency you realize
how important you truly are

The Shaking Stop Sign

By Jonah Christiansen-Baker
8th Grade

There is an intersection in San Jose, Costa Rica. If someone found themselves at this particular intersection some time ago, and if that someone looked very closely around themselves, they would have noticed something quite peculiar. And although many people saw this peculiar thing because they were so bored in their car that they had nothing else to do except look out the window they did not believe what they saw. The first person to truly see the peculiar thing was a young Canadian foreigner who rode by in the back of a red Costa Rican taxi. The boy was looking closely at the stop sign on the corner of the street because he noticed that no one stopped at it, nobody seemed to need it. He stared so closely at the stop sign that he swore he saw the stop sign shake. It wobbled from side to side. The stop sign was shaking like a shivering little girl or a bawling little boy.

The boy in the taxi hated how oblivious everyone was to the stop sign that shook, despite there being no breeze whatsoever.

“Why’s the sign shaking, mom?” the boy asked.

“What do you mean, honey?” His mom looked at him from the passenger seat.

“Well don’t you see it mom? Look real close.” The taxi was slowly going past the stop sign.

“Oh, now I see it... It’s just the breeze, sweetheart,” she said distractedly.

But the boy kept his eyes on the mysterious shaking stop sign. “I think it’s sad.”

Late that night, when his mom was fast asleep, the boy who had such a big heart walked about half an hour down the dusty street from their hotel in San Jose to the place where the shaking stop sign was. He walked past buildings big and small, all appearing a very dark color because of the shadowy night. At this time of night, the streets were very

quiet, and no cars passed the shaking stop sign or the big-hearted boy as he set to work under the watchful eye of the thousands of stars above him.

“The boy ran outside, ignoring the calls of his mom...”

Every now and then, the big-hearted boy would take a break from his work and go sit by the stop sign. He even thought at times that he could hear the poor sign sniffing. Every time he heard the stop sign snuffle, the boy would get right back up and start his work again. It was nearly daylight when he finished. He left as the first car pulled up to witness his handiwork. The person inside got out of their car, gaping at the big-hearted boy's clever creation. The boy smiled to himself, and with his head held high, he continued on home. He got a few hours of sleep in before his mom woke him up.

“The traffic is horrible,” his mom said, “I sure hope it doesn't take too long to get a taxi.” The big-hearted boy stared out the window at the line of cars that stretched down the road, honking obnoxiously as they all tried to back up, or turn off onto the closest side road. The boy ran outside, ignoring the calls of his mom and he kept running until he reached the spot where he had spent the previous night.

When he arrived at the end of the line of cars, he saw that the stop sign was no longer shaking. It stood firm and demanding upon its new stand. All the cars bowed down to the stop sign's power. Every car that ever set eyes on the previously shaking sign and driven by, stopped now, for this sign was hung strong, bolted to a large brick wall.

As he approached, the stop sign seemed to smile at the big-hearted boy from his brick throne. The big-hearted boy smiled back.

The Power of Fiction

By Maya Fedorowicz
8th Grade

I step onto the cold steel surface, the sound echoing around the cavernous pit creating a chorus of noise only to descend into deafening silence. Tip. Tap. I try to walk carefully not daring even to breath as the mouth of the cave looms ever closer. Gravel and rock shifts underneath my feet as I try to stop myself from tripping. The scent of charcoal and burning wood permeates the atmosphere, causing me to choke - my sputters and gags boom and echo in the isolation. Shadows seem to dart between misshapen rock, twist and leer in the silence. But nevertheless I move forward, trying to find my way in the darkness holding out my free hand to make sure that I don't collide with the jagged towers of rock which spiral seemingly into oblivion.

Slowly, water drips from the tips of the stalactites and gathers in small crystalline pools. I clutch at the decaying fabric at the grip of my sword, willing it not to deteriorate as a small flickering ember comes into sight, I follow it as it dances through the darkness softly illuminating the skeletal fingers of rock and barren earth before me. Following the crimson glow, I glimpse more flecks of flame dancing wildly, magnetically against the contrast of the midnight black, illuminating a dark but faintly visible mass.

I step closer.

Now I can see the curling writhing mass, a lump of scales and talons, a swiftly swaying tail curled underneath a gargantuan torso. The whole room suddenly feels hot and oppressive. I hold my sword at arms length ready if danger should come my way. Slow wafts of smoke billow from the creatures nostrils and create patterns in the firelight, I try to sneak through the cloak of smoke - tiptoeing once again. I need to get the golden cup from behind the dragon, just a couple more steps I tell myself but my knees have already started to wobble and I can't help but feel the sword loosen in my grip as my arm starts to shake with nerves.

Smoke clouds my eyes and all I can hear is the cave rumble with each breath in and out that the sleeping creature makes. Stumbling and disoriented, I reach for the cup with the golden rim glinting painstakingly bright, fingertips outstretched I stretch for it until I lose my balance and come crumbling down...

“An eerie silence descends. But nothing happens...”

My body falls hard onto the muscly back of the creature, I stay still hoping within all hope that the creature will stay asleep. An eerie silence descends. But nothing happens, I slowly, excruciatingly slowly get up and pick up the golden cup and start to tiptoe back out of the cave, wiping my brow as I exit. The rush of nerves have just caught up to me and my fear has not yet left my body as I start to walk out of the cavern but not before the cup slips out of my fingers in a golden streak and bangs to the ground, clattering and emitting a loud shriek.

Stirring, the beings breathing starts to rise as my eyes go wide, I start to sweat, violently sweat and a blinding sense of panic shoots up my body, everything seems to quiet as the beast's yellow snake-like eyes slowly open...

I shut the book with a resounding clap, as the tea mug nestled in my shoulder slightly shakes with the impact, the liquid sloshing against the sides. I breathe a heavy sigh of relief that the snake-like eyes are not actually staring at me, take another sip of my tea and set the book down.

The Letters That Changed Me

By Veda Kalra
6th Grade

When I was studying the story of an Indian hero, Ashoka in my history lesson, I was moved. His story inspired me and it sparked a mélange of emotions, feelings inside me so I decided to write a story about a young boy writing letters to his imaginary best friend, 'Ashoka'.

Beside me, lay a stack of old letters. I sighed, picked them up and was about to trash them. Suddenly, I saw the word 'Ashoka' in the letters. A flashback took over my mind. It was a sunny day, Tears were falling down my face after being scolded by my parents for hitting my brother and I sat on my bed with a pen and a diary, writing to be best friend. Kids always laughed at me when I told them the great 'Ashoka' was my friend. They didn't believe in magic, imagination and listening diaries. I did. I believed that Ashoka listened and understood.

And just like the flashback came in a millisecond, it disappeared in no time too. I was dumb, diaries never listened. The kids were right. And yet, I did not want to throw those diaries in the bin. Those diaries held my emotions and feelings. They contained stories and experiences. They held a part of me inside them and I was not ready to let go of myself or my past. I opened an envelope and started reading the first letter.

Dear Ashoka,

This is my first letter to you. We share the same name, so I'm guessing we have some common genes too, right? If not, please blame my Science teacher for not teaching me. I think you'll understand.

I did something today. Something bad. Something I would have never ever done but I promise you I have learnt my lesson. My parents don't believe me but I know you do. Best friends have to, right? I

cheated in the test today. It was a Math test and I used a calculator. It was stupid, I know. But I couldn't afford to fail, I couldn't afford to not get an A. Because if I had not gotten an A, my report card would have been bad, and if my report card would have been bad, well we don't want to go there. Anyways, I came to talk to you because I had a question. I was wondering about change.. Is it possible to change right now? When is the right time to change?

I want to be honest, kind, selfless and brave. But I don't know when to change. When is the right time? Is it today? Is it tomorrow? Is it never? Does God visit me and tell me it's time to change? Ashoka, please help me. I cannot listen to the monotonous, boring, incomprehensible words that are forced out of others' mouths. I only understand you.

Love,

Ashok

I couldn't resist so I picked up another one.

Dear Ashoka,

I guess you don't know the answer either. Who does? But never mind, I forgive you. I forgive you because you are true to me, a true friend. We were learning about 'Rahim and his dohe' in class today. The poem spoke about how water betrays a fish when the fish is caught. But fishes love the water truly so they always forgive the water and still stay in it. I will do the same for you, Ashoka. Even when I don't get answers to my questions.

In school today, two people got into a fight and I stood there, as a bystander. I didn't do anything. I didn't ask them to stop. I enjoyed it. I don't know why. That adrenaline rush of who would win took over and I chanted names along with the other children. I'm making too many mistakes. Am I even learning? I have to change, but how and when?

Love,

Ashok

I did not know what to say. I looked at the words I had written when I was a 11 year old child, finding my way in life, a purpose, an identity. I felt deja vu, the same feeling I felt when I had cheated. Except this time I had cheated on my health. It was an addiction I was trying so hard to give up but I did not know how, or when. I crossed my fingers and secretly hoped my 11 year old self had navigated and figured out the answer. I opened another letter.

Dear Ashoka,

I think I'm getting it now. Maybe. Sort of? Change is not easy. It takes courage, it needs bravery. When I learnt about you today in my History lesson. I was awed. Awed that you changed from a ruthless ruler to a Buddhist Monk. Our teacher told us it was because you were a humble hero. A person who was not afraid to make mistakes as long as he learnt from them. One who cared about people.

I salute you Ashoka, you are a true hero. However, I wonder, what made you change? Who told you that the day you won the Kalinga War - you were no longer going to fight again?

Love,

Ashok

My hand moved towards the last envelope, I opened another letter. The last one. The one that would have the answer, hopefully.

Dear Ashoka,

I kept thinking today. What if there is no 'right' moment? What if every moment is right? We can't keep waiting for the 'right' moment, can we? I don't think an angel visited you that night you won the Kalinga War. I think it was you, you who decided to change. Your humble, brave soul. And so do I,

today, I do not care if today is not an auspicious day for my mother because the coconut she got from the Mandir fell on the floor.

**“But because you changed – the entire world
salutes you.”**

It's never late, it's never early. What counts is that you decide to change, that you have the courage, that you have the humility and that you have the determination. You changed when you saw the bleeding soldiers, you had conquered a kingdom, with dead people. People who had died fighting to protect their kingdom from your greed, your gluttony.

If you had not changed that night, Ashoka. We would not be praising you in school. Buddhism would not be so popular. We would not see you as a hero. But because you changed - the entire world salutes you. And also, bonus for me - I'm 11, and you were 41 when you changed so.... Hahaha, seriously though, I think I've finally got it and it's all thanks to you.

Love,

Ashok

And so, I have decided to quit now. At this moment, since according to my junior self - there is no better moment than now. Fortunately, the blessed coconut has also not fallen so I am guessing it is auspicious (not that that matters but, oh well...) Today, I swear to not destroy my lungs, protect myself. This change will change what people think of me. I will be seen as a hero for my grandchildren instead of a grandfather who destroyed his own body and life and that means the world to me.

Zombie Story

By Scarlett Livingston
8th Grade

How do you survive an apocalypse? It's simple. Arrange a group of strong fighters. Stock up on food and weapons. Find a safe place to hide out. And most of all, survive the humans.

From early recruitment, us zombies are taught the essentials of evading the humans. The maniacs run around attacking us with their strange weapons and technology. They haunt us in our dreams every night with their nauseatingly clear skin, the revolting whites of their eyes, and their disgusting clean teeth.

The worst of all is what they eat. There is no discrimination in the diet of a human. Their pearly white molars will chomp down on anything you give them. Everyone knows you're supposed to eat others of your species, not plants or other animals. It's down right unnatural.

Us zombies' life goal is to destroy the humans, before they destroy us. Upon recruitment, we are sent to prepare for war with the humans. When I was first recruited, I awoke in an empty house, glass scattered across the floor from a shattered window. A black cap lay among the shards, labeled White Sox. I'd placed the hat atop my head and crawled out of the house, where I eventually stumbled upon a herd of some other zombies who had led me to the underground zombie survival training camp, where we strive for zombie survival.

The camp was flooded with zombies, scurrying and slinking through the bunker to different training classes. We were taught the essentials of survival, as well as our history: how the humans had risen up from the ground, born to destroy us.

As we bustled about in our everyday matters, the beautiful sounds of muffled screams from above us seeped through the dirt. I couldn't wait to be up there with my fellow zombies, fighting the terrible humans.

And now I am. After years and years of training since that first day, I am finally placed into battle. Today is my first journey outside the bunker, and I'm placed on the front lines. We are arranged in intricate clumps, each wandering, aimless soldier vital to our impeccable battle formation. I wear my White Sox cap atop my head as I always do.

“...the last horrifying sight I am left with is the face
of a human, lugging me away from the battle.”

I feel whatever insides I have left turn to mush as I anticipate the fight. I fumble mercilessly with my White Sox hat as I hear the shouts of the human language, steadily getting louder as they approach. Suddenly a herd of humans turns the corner, racing towards us at full speed like an avalanche. They're even more horrifying than the stories told. Their skin tightly fits their face. Full piles of hair top their heads, their faces revoltingly ruddy. They are a terrible sight. As the human army charges toward us and we invigoratingly limp towards them, I unleash a battle-cry mixed in with the gurgles and grunts of the zombies around me. I stagger toward the closest human with my arms clumsily outstretched, victory certain.

Then, suddenly, I am on the ground. Zombies and humans alike trample over me, and the last horrifying sight I am left with is the face of a human, lugging me away from the battle.

My head throbs with pain, and I awake with my body squished against a glass barrier. My gaze extends to the rest of the confined space I find myself in. The perimeter is lined with glass, a lab with all sorts of mysterious equipment beyond this room. I stir at the sound of a human conversation behind me, which I am somehow able to understand. Through the glass barrier I had so gracefully awoken on are two vicious, monstrous looking humans.

“...you have to run the experiment,” a young blond man says, probably in his early twenties. This was the human that had dragged me away from the battle. Anger swells in me as I see my White Sox cap sitting atop his head. How dare a human kidnap me, and proceed to steal my hat.

“I’ve told you, it’s risky. The chances of it working are too low, and if it fails, we may be introducing an even more dangerous variant,” a woman in a lab coat replies.

“At this rate, a new variant is inevitable,” argues the man. “If this works, we could end the entire apocalypse, before anyone else turns into a zombie.”

My head was reeling from the words of these humans. Experiment? Variant? Turns? I was utterly confused. So confused, I let out a snort of puzzlement that nearly sent my eyes rolling back in my head.

The heads of the two humans shoot towards me, and the woman rushes over to a computer, clicking away at the keyboard. The man hurries over to her. “Run it now. He’s awake, it’s the perfect opportunity.”

“I’ve told you, I can’t—”

“We’ve risked bringing a zombie into quarantine for this experiment, it would be pointless to back out now,” the man retorts desperately. “Please.”

The blond man fiddles with the White Sox cap and looks toward me forlornly. I panic as it dawns on me that the experiment they were debating—it was on me. I scuttle to the corner of my glass cell, searching for a way out of this human-infested prison. As I anxiously scan the room for anything that could save me from this horrible fate, my eyes locked with the woman in the lab coat. She stared at me in deep contemplation, then at the hat-stealing human. Suddenly, she spoke. “Fine. I’ll do it.”

“Really? You’ll run the experiment?” the young blond man inquires, relief notably lighting his face.

“Yes,” she replies. “Despite your bias on the matter regarding this particular zombie, if we can find a way to bring the zombies to what they were before they turned, we could save everyone. After all, they were once human.”

And then I dropped dead. Or it sure felt like it at least, because if my heart had been beating to begin with, it would have stopped then and there. The sound of the human's words reverberated in my head, bouncing madly around in my skull, but not settling in. It couldn't be. There was no way. Zombies...used to be humans? We were never recruited. We were humans, until we were turned into zombies. My head swarmed with all the lectures, all the lies I had been taught about the history of humans and zombies.

Red lights began to blare around me, and before I could have my much deserved panic attack, a set of arms pinned me down and a group of humans wearing yellow hazmat suits barged into my glass prison.

A female voice boomed from overhead. "Warning. The experiment will begin in 60 seconds..."

The humans strapped a set of wires on my head. I thrashed around in an attempt to escape, but it was useless. The hazmats had long evacuated the glass cell by the time the intercom voice reached the end of the countdown. As the words, "the experiment will begin now" were spoken, I braced myself for the end. Suddenly, my head seemed to do a 360 as I was transported out of the lab and into a hospital room. Humans in lab coats raced around as infantile crying pierced the room. The crying—it was coming from me. I was carried to a human woman in a hospital gown—her face streaming with sweat, but smiling bright as the sun.

A series of memories flashed before my eyes. Crawling to my beaming father. Flying kites with my brother. Sprinting along the beach the summer before first grade. My high school graduation. My entire life, compacted into a moment.

My first day at work. Holding my newborn son. Taking him to his first White Sox game.

Watching the news with my family. Finding out about the virus. The government ordering a worldwide lockdown.

The first zombie attacks. Watching the world collapse.

The mental slideshow slowed, as I relived the last moments of my life as a human. A zombie had broken in through a window. My four-year old son was screaming as the horrid thing approached him, foaming at the mouth, in all its disgusting horror. Its nauseatingly green skin. The revolting gray of its glassy eyes. Its disgustingly yellowed teeth, chattering as they rushed towards my son. I charged at the thing, slamming it into the ground a mere seconds before it would have reached my son.

The way my arm numbed after its teeth sank into me. The way my vision blurred as the virus spread through my veins. The way my son screamed as his mother pulled him away from me, as the virus transformed me. His black White Sox hat flying off of his head, his blond hair tumbling out of it.

“Experiment failed,” the voice on the intercom announced. I was once again collapsed in the glass cell. I craned my head towards my hands, their complexion riddled of all green and gray they had held for so long. I was human.

Suddenly, an aching pain stabbed at my side, followed by a similar reaction in my chest. I experienced my brain and body shutting down completely, the room around me blurring into nothingness. Everything was so jumbled together, I barely registered the man rushing into the room, kneeling by my side. I barely noticed the tears streaming down his face and the White Sox hat clasped in his hands. And as I inhaled my final human breath, I barely heard him utter the words, “I’m sorry dad.”

Bittersweet Feelings

By Lizzie Sun
8th Grade

We are driving to our old neighborhood to check out how things were. I saw the row of yet-to-be-bloomed cherry blossoms end. An unknown feeling hit me as we changed lanes and turned right into our old neighborhood.

Ah. The worn-out brick wall was standing strong as ivy vines snaked their way up. The petunias gazed up at the sky, dazed and blushing.

We parked along the grass field where the dandelions grew, waiting for an Aladdin to make a wish on its white feathers; where blades of grass greedily reached for the sky, and bees kissed the faces of flowers gently. I stepped out, hand steady, yet heart shaking. It felt weird—like a sticky lingering feeling. You wanted to stay but you didn't. I stared at our row of houses. If we just turned left and went down, our old house stood.

But my squeaky little brother bolted out of the car and ran towards the bus stop. I laughed with my parents, breathing in the clear-cut air, and chased after my brother. I froze looking at the two ice-cream-scooped-shaped bushes; I used to stuff violet flowers in there to trick my friend it grew flowers. My heart ached, as I remember all the years I spent here. I was happy but sad—what was this feeling?

I walked to the bus stop, where the stone slabs remained untouched and the trees stood forever still. The wooden bench had ebony handles curved inward and wood that was chipped and mossy on its edges. The delicate spiderwebs swung dandily on the bottom as a friendly summer breeze greeted us. My gaze shifted to the tall trees. We always played a balance game; who could stand on the tree roots the longest? My heart throbbed more.

I crossed the street and smiled at the rose bushes. I plucked a thorn off and placed it on my nose; it was a game I played so I looked like a rhino. Six steps left, up two. A plum tree. Bearing the tiniest of plums, the plums resembled grapes more than plums. Up thirteen steps, left five. A nook is hidden by the branches of trees where I wished on a dandelion many years ago.

Our family did a turn and decided to visit our old house. A thoughtful silence was broken by my brother yelling in excitement. I looked at the two dogwood trees that grew “fuzz balls”; aka premature flowers across the street from the house. They leaned toward each other like my brother and me during the night.

Then I stared at our house—the same dull, yet meaningful, blue-painted door. The beige bricks and blocky bushes were still there. For some reason, I was the most disinterested in our house. I scanned the cars for people who would’ve moved out.

A stranger’s gray car was parked in front. The ugly blue sedan on the end of our row still was parked next to the sidewalk. Our neighbor’s burgundy SUV was parked to the left. I picked up a twig that had a flower that seemed to be blooming—but was still a bud; on the brink of both. I stared blankly at it.

I skipped to the park, where there were sets of swings. “Pick the middle one—it’s the best and it’s far from the spiders,” I remember my friend teaching me.

I sat on the middle one and swung. I swung higher and higher until I felt like I could touch the soft clouds above my head. I heard the fairies whisper in the trees after I jumped down, and joined my brother, on the baby set of swings. We laughed as I pushed him and left him in an awkward position that threatens glassy tears from his beetle-black eyes.

As we walked back, I thought about how empty the neighborhood felt; it was odd; nobody was out and walking around. It seemed like we got our alone time to enjoy the neighborhood. The next thing I know, we’re in the car. I look out the window earnestly. I take out the twig with a flower. I look at the flower and know what I’m feeling. I look out the window one last time as I tuck my bittersweet feelings into my glass jar.



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