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CHICAGO YOUNG WRITERS REVIEW

WINTER -
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Winter - Spring

2023

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The Hightailing Horse

By Kylie Mackey
3rd Grade

It all started on Halloween. My dad and I went horseback riding. I got a big, tall, beautiful hazel and brown horse. His name was Pumba and I fell in love the second I saw him. We went into the arena. It was really far away from the barn. The arena was huge and I loved it because it gave us so much room to do so many tricks! Pumba and I were trotting, jumping and just having fun together! I was so proud of myself! Sadly the lesson was over and it was time for Pumba to go back to the barn.

I went out of the arena and then the sky turned gray! There were booms of thunder. BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! Lightning was flashing! It lit up the sky. My heart started pounding and I could tell Pumba was getting nervous too. Then, out of nowhere, Pumba took off with me on him! It was so scary! My dad was chasing after us as fast as he could but he couldn't catch up. Pumba was running faster and faster and FASTER! I heard five big booms of thunder! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! **BOOM!** The horse ran even faster and faster with me still on it! I couldn't get him to stop! He wouldn't even slow down! I didn't know what to do! Finally I grabbed hold of the reins as hard as I could and I started turning Pumba into a corner so he had to stop running. Finally he stopped. My heart was still pounding and Pumba was still upset but I knew the scariest part was over.

We got back to the barn and I got off the horse. My hands were shaking! I was so scared. I got in the car, got a drink of water and went back home. I ran up to my room and took some time to calm myself down. After a little while, I came out of my room to find my dad. There was something important I needed to say to him. My dad saw me and gave me a big hug and I turned to him and said "Dad, can we please do that again?"

Shades of Purple

By Catherine Park
4th Grad

Purple

Looks like the ocean on a stormy day

Silky lavender paint

A petal of a flower

Sounds like a soothing deep melancholy rumble
A dragon's bumpy scale

A glossy book cover

Tastes like a glorious, lush grape

A succulent ripe plum

A flavor bursting jellybean

Feels like pride

A time when everything is going your way

But sometimes a day where it is silent and sad

Purple can give you many thoughts in different ways

Ash Rising

By Annika Thakarar
4th Grade

Chapter One

Ash had never been considered a proper fire dragon. For one thing, she always wandered far from the nest. Also, she was the wrong color, dark gray and black instead of red.

The only dragon who didn't think she was strange was her sister, Flicker. But Flicker was the head of the foraging group, so she wasn't around a lot.

To sum things up, Ash was ignored her whole life. Until the humans came.

It was storming, so everyone had moved inside. Ash, however, was not in the nest. She was out in the forest. All her life, she had wanted to see a tree dragon. They could camouflage themselves in the forest. Flicker had told her that at night, when they couldn't sleep.

Ash didn't care that it was raining. She had been searching for a tree dragon for who knows how long, and she wasn't going to stop now. And anyway, Flicker had also told her about mist dragons, and she would be fine with seeing one of those too. (Fine meaning she really, really, wanted to see one and went outside every foggy day to try and find one.)

So she was out, examining an oddly shaped pine, when she heard the noise. It was a sort of chattering, like talking except she couldn't understand the words. Then a pair of stick-like figures tumbled out of the bush. They saw Ash and stumbled to their feet. The taller one chirped.

Ash was about to run to tell her sister when a crashing sound came from the trees. Vivid, the queen's youngest dragonet, came tumbling out of the undergrowth. "M-mommy said to get you 'cause it's rainin'."

Ash was wondering why they sent a tiny dragonet who didn't know how to fly to get her when she remembered the stick creatures.

"Wow what are those!" Vivid said quickly. Ash sighed. "Vivid, go back to the nest and tell your mom I found something."

The dragonet looked distressed. "But Mommy said to-" Ash cut her off. "I'll be back soon. Now go!"

As Vivid ran off, Ash turned back to the creatures. They were still there, staring at her. Humph, she thought. They were supposed to be scared.

Ash reached forward and curled her claws around them. They were pretty big, but could still fit neatly in between her talons. Ignoring their shrieks, she turned towards the nest and took off into the sky.

Chapter Two

As soon as she reached the nest, Ash headed for the throne room. The queen, Inferno, was waiting for her, "Soooo," she said in her long, slow drawl. "The little black dragon has brought her queen a gift. How charming."

"Humans. Always the same."

Ash clenched her teeth. It wasn't her fault her color was unusual. Inferno peered down at the chittering twigs. She scowled. "Humans," the queen spat. "Always the same. Now, where is the treasure?"

Ash was confused. Then she realized that the queen was talking to the humans. "They don't speak our language."

Inferno huffed. "Maybe not, but they have the map to their treasure. I want it. I've made up my mind. Dragons of the Fire Nest," she called. "One dragon must go and bring the treasure back. Who will do it?"

The dragons were appalled by the queen's sudden decision. They all stopped what they were doing and stared. There was a long silence. Then Flicker said, "How about

Ash? She's darker and can blend in. And it would be nice for her to prove she's a loyal dragon." She added the last part wryly.

Ash had no idea why Flicker was doing this. Couldn't she see that Ash didn't want to do it? Then she felt all the eyes pressing in on her. It would be nice to prove herself.

So that's how Ash found herself out in the forest, holding one of the humans, some paper, and ink, with absolutely no idea where to go.

"So do you think you could help me?" Ash asked for the tenth time. The human only stared. Ash sighed, and tried again. "Do-you-know-map? Map."

"The drawing wasn't a mindless scribble."

The human made a squeaking sound, and Ash had the feeling it was laughing at her. Frustrated, she threw down her paper and lay down on the ground. She was tired and hungry; it had been almost two days since she'd left and she hadn't gotten any leads. The human glanced at her, then started drawing on the paper with some ink. Annoyed, Ash turned toward the human. She gasped. The drawing wasn't a mindless scribble. It was... "a map," Ash breathed.

Chapter Three

The rain had stopped, and the sun poked through a hole in the clouds. Ash stopped in front of a tall, imposing manor that looked like it was once a busy mansion. Yes! she thought. After many days of traveling, she had reached the destination on the map. The human led Ash into the structure. It was a bit of a squeeze, but she made it into the tall, empty room. The human turned around. "Hel-lo," she managed to squeak. Ash stared at her. She explained. "I'm Desjira. I'm not allowed to speak Dragon a lot, but..." she trailed off. "Anyway, the treasure is over here."

Ash interjected. "You're a human. Why are you giving me your treasure?"

"Because we stole it from the dragons," Desjira replied matter-of-factly. "It was yours before we came."

The girl uncovered a sack from the ground and handed it to Ash, who took it. Then Ash helped Desjira onto her back and exited the manor. "I'm Ash, by the way."

Ash crouched down and sprang up into the air. Desjira shrieked with joy as they soared over the forest. The setting sun blazed a trail over the trees, making them feel like the only ones in the world.

When night fell, Ash flew down to a clearing. She shared some nuts with Desjira and then lay down. “Ash?”

“Yeah?”

“I think you should rule your nest instead of your queen.”

“Well, I’m not sure. Anyway, who was that human you were traveling with?”

Desjira sighed. “That was my father, Marklo. He’s... a bit gruff.” She turned over onto her side. “I left to go out on my own, and he followed me. He was angry. That’s when you found us.”

Ash frowned. “But you were just exploring. What’s wrong with that?” But Desjira was already asleep.

When Ash woke up, something was drifting through the forest. She sat up, rubbing her eyes, and saw a piece of paper. It read:

By order of the queen Inferno, any creature that is not a fire dragon found within a forest length of the fire nest will be charged with trespassing. The queen sees all. Traitors will be punished.

Chapter Four

Ash carried Desjira all the way to the nest. Once there, she brought the human to the throne room. The sack was slung over Ash’s shoulder.

“Ah, Ash.” The queen said when she saw her. “You brought the treasure.”

“Yes,” Ash replied, “But it’s not for you. How could you do this?” She brandished the piece of paper. Dragons clustered to read it.

One of the fire dragons, Firestorm, growled, “But this isn’t right! The territory belongs to all dragons.”

Firestorm's brother Scorch scoffed. "It helps fire dragons, fool. We don't care about the others."

At once, all the dragons started fighting. "STOP!" Ash roared. The clamoring stopped. "I can't let you remain queen, Inferno. I must be queen instead. We will take a vote."

"of course the dragonet would vote for her mother"

Some dragons were incredulous, but others stated their vote right away. Ash watched as many dragons voted for her; Flicker, of course, Firestorm, Blaze, Wildfire, Flash - there were so many dragons who cared about others. Scorch voted for Inferno, as did many others. Finally, there was a tie, and the only dragon left was Vivid. Ash felt hopeless; of course the dragonet would vote for her mother. But Vivid hesitated, then cast her vote for Ash.

"WHAT?!" Inferno screamed. But the vote was over. She had lost.

Ash was stunned as the dragons around her erupted in cheers. "Who'll be your general, Ash?"

Ash looked at Flicker, but her older sister shook her head. Ash said, "Firestorm will be general." Everybody cheered; he was a popular choice.

Desjira and her father walked over to Ash. "You will be a great queen," her friend said. "Just remember me when you're famous."

Ash laughed, but her heart ached. "Do you have to go?"

"Yes," Marklo answered. "Desjira's mother will be looking for us. Oh, and thank you, Ash, for being Desjira's friend."

Ash watched as they walked away together. She wanted to go with them. But she had a nest to take care of. And she wanted to be a great queen.

The Space City

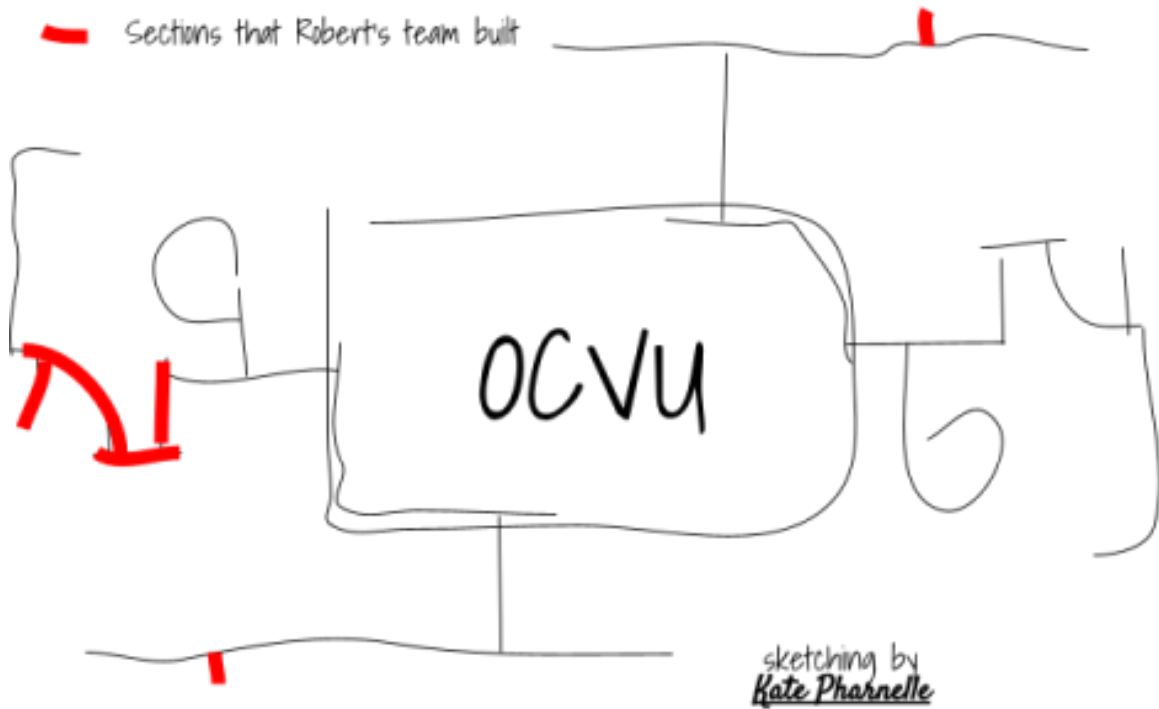
By Nathan Xu
4th Grade

Chapter One

Saturday, August 27, 3849

Something was amiss onboard Space Station Cosmo. The usual chatter of astronomers and aerospace engineers sharing their plans seemed to have gotten louder. As you glided through the modules on the Zero-G Invisible Transportation System (ZGITS), you could hear more talking at every connector. Everyone seemed to be excited about the same thing. There were plans to build a space city!

The space city would be built to replace the old Crater IX. Named Volcano I, the city was supposed to be the best of its kind. If the plan worked, It could act as an outpost to receive deliveries and messages from remote colonies past the asteroid belt, including the new cloud cities over Uranus and Neptune, the budding, unrecognized shiptowns of the outer moons, and the numerous refuel and rest stops wandering in the enormous gaps between Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune. The city would be provided with the newest technology, and there would also be two megalaunchpads with six identical Meteorite VIII 8-person vertical takeoff spaceplanes. Before its flight to Mars, the city would be put together on a high, moony plateau on Earth's moon, but all the bits and pieces would be built on the station's enormous Orbital Vehicle Construction Unit (OVCU) (map shown below), a 4.8 square mile area of flat special ultra-compacted concrete with a spinning Artificial Gravity Generator (AGG) nestled inside of it.



Sketch of Orbital Vehicle Construction Unit (OVCU) by Kate Pharnelle, head of the International Space Exploration and Engineering Association (ISEEA)

Robert Connerlan floated out of his sleeping pod and stepped into the teleportation chamber across the module. Once inside, he said sleepily, “3022548.” The chamber automatically punched in the code for him and he teleported to the mess, where some cyberfood (food that is programmed to taste, smell and feel in a certain way) was waiting for him. He popped what looked like small cubes of jello into his mouth. They were supposed to taste like bacon, potatoes, and fried eggs. It was delicious and perfect for zero-g since the jello didn’t explode when squeezed (instead it split into two smaller cubes) and didn’t stick to anything. Beverages were served in bubbles that sat in metal holders with lights on a floating robotic tray. Whenever the drink robot stopped by a table, the lights would flash around the beverage or beverages the person at that particular table had ordered. The bubbles didn't pop; you had to swallow them. That day Robert had ordered a cybercoffee with a special creamer stored in a dissolvable chunk made for outer space. One of his colleagues, Dr. Sam Kordle, pulled up next to him.

“Combo B, eh?” Robert asked. “Yep. Today they're serving buttermilk pancakes and yogurt parfait. I decided to get some fruit juice to go with it.” He swallowed a bubble of green fruit blend and continued to talk. “Do you have any plans for the space city? As the head of atmospheric chemistry, I’ve already started thinking about the atmospheric dome material. Mars’s atmosphere has 2,400 times more CO₂ than Earth and the average temperature is 76°C lower, so the need for the right stuff is crucial. Our current selection is vinyl-coated polyester fabric.”

“Great! Your team can design the material, and my team and I can design the dome! I’ve already designed the tungsten beams (lightened with a special beryllium alloy, of course) and I’ll show you the blueprints for the beam pattern.” A projector floated by and shined a picture of an automatic bubble gum wrapper on the table. “Arg! No! Not 6@rt2&%s! 6@rt2*%s!” The projector paused for a second, then projected the plans for a self-fitting shoe. “No! That’s 7@rt2*%s! Wait, that was invented back in 2026! How old is this thing?”

“My database is 58232191221 seconds old.”

“My database is 58232191221 seconds old.” the projector said robotically. Robert did the math in his head.

“2003! 2003! 8:40 and 19 seconds on May 10, 2003!” The projector’s night lights turned from an inactive gray to a deep shade of red.

“Projectors do that?” Sam asked Robert. Robert was head of the engineering department of ISEEA, and people expected him to know this kind of stuff.

“All models of the Algae projector produced after 3771 are equipped with basic emotions such as pride and embarrassment. They can be distinguished by the color of the nightlights.” Robert said, remembering his training. The projector’s nightlights glowed orange with pride. Finally, it showed the right blueprints.

“Hmm... I think we’ll have enough polyester fabric to fill in the gaps. But first, it all has to be vinyl-coated.” After more discussion of the dome, Robert started thinking about the location of the city.

“I’m thinking of landing in Amazonis Planitia. It’s one of the smoothest places on Mars, and it’s got a pretty interesting volcanic background.” It went on like this for a pretty long time until breakfast was almost over and workers were already starting to shuffle out of the hall. Unlike during the construction of Space Station Cosmo, there was no big speech. Everyone knew what to do. In the control room, the AGG was switched on. Construction had started on Dome Panel 1! Everyone rushed about, first carrying tungsten then grabbing anti-weights, and then turning on the high power saw-bot to cut the indent that would hold the polyester. The project was on.

Saturday, September 3, 3849

Robert stepped outside the airlock and floated up to the top of the completed parts of the dome (The spacesuits were specially equipped with antigravity devices to counter the tug of the AGG). It was his first time seeing the dome, as he’d spent the rest of his time preparing parts and sketching blueprints inside his cabin. He’d never had the chance to see the enormous dome panels that would constitute the city’s armor. Robert slowly floated to the upper edge of Dome Panel 2 (#1 had been completed and shipped to the moon on August 31) and carefully examined the curvature of the enormous sheet. Then he reported his findings to the robot leading the construction. “The curvature is too far outwards by 0.4%, though it’s possible to adapt the design to change the shape of the top panels and add in a 34th panel at the top.” The robot sent a message to the other bots on the grounds, and the humans received an alert on their computers. Robert continued across OVCU for about 0.27 miles until he reached a Set Location Teleportation Device (SLTD) that took him to the other side of OVCU in an instant. He floated into the East Control Center (ECC) and reached a hologram with a keyboard. He typed in “dghbekxotms”. Instantly, a ZGITS appeared and Robert stepped on. He glided down a long, straight storage hallway made of titanium plates nailed together and filled with alcoves stacked with metal crates labeled “KEEP AWAY,” “DANGER,” and “DO NOT OPEN.” As he floated down the dark hallway, he passed the occasional window, stack of mess hall chairs, and roll of duct tape. Around halfway down, the hallway intersected with an even longer hallway. This one was bright and clean and there were tables and chairs filled with astronauts chatting and playing multiplayer computer games like Zopt (Robert always lost to the blight waves.) They were in the entertainment wing. Robert

had been here many times, but never to go to the hangar. (by the way, he was going to the hangar.) That day the West Hangar had been closed so he'd had to use the east one. Robert was quite happy because he'd never gotten the chance to visit it. When he arrived there was only one shuttle left. He climbed in and lifted out of the hangar. Then he did a large U-turn and flew over OVCU (from his perspective.). The ever-twirling station had already spun over, so Robert waited until the massive spinning complex turned to face him before viewing the dome panel from above. After a brief reconnaissance, Robert started heading back when an alert popped up on his monitor and a hologram of Kate Pharnelle, head of ISEEA, appeared in front of him.

"Robert, there's a problem down at the generator. It's struggling to produce the needed electricity that powers the station! The backup generator isn't working, so I'm using an electric pencil. The power's only going to last for a few sec-" The hologram disappeared and Robert's shuttle lurched. The generator had stopped working! Suddenly, the lights went out, and the AGG stooped. The dome panel! Robert put on his suit and leaped into space. Immediately, his suit boosters propelled him toward the OVCU and he spotted Dr. Kordle pulling the dome panel with a concentrated gravity gun (CGG). How they manage to do that kind of thing nobody in our century knows. Robert pulled out his CGG and latched onto the Boson VI that had been slowly floating into space ever since he'd ejected. He pushed himself toward the generator bay and rummaged through his equipment. Electrical tape! That's what he needed. Dr. Kordle had given him a sample, but the tape was still in prototype form so he and Sam were the only people who owned some. In case you're used to the 21st-century definition of electrical tape, electrical tape in 3849 is tape that when stuck to something can make that object generate electricity. Robert had a black 100-watt roll and two green 200-watt rolls, but 500 watts is nothing compared to the ~6,000 watts needed to power the station. Sam seemed to know Robert's lack of supplies, so he tossed him a red roll and two blue rolls.

"How much power do these generate?" asked Robert, staring at the strange new types. "The red one is 5,000 watts and the blue ones are 500."

"Hold the AMCD (Automatic Magnetic Communication Device). 5,000 watts. Did I hear that right? *5,000 watts?*"

Alone in a Strange House

By Natalie Jones
5th Grade

“I’m going to spend the night at my friend’s house,” Smith explained, “Your job is to watch the house.” I nodded. It sounded like an easy job.

Smith was an explorer who explored and brought back what he found like: fossils or an Egyptian mummy. The house that Smith lived in was full of treasures he found on his adventures. Apparently, he was going to his friend’s house, and I will be watching his house for him.

Smith handed me the house keys just as a bus pulled up to the house. “Call me if you need anything,” he said. “Oh, and one more thing...”

He was suddenly interrupted by a loud honk from the bus’s horn. “Got to go!” he yelled as he shut the door and hurried out to the bus. The driver turned on the engine as Smith got in then drove away.

I was sure there would be no intruders that were going to intrude, so first, I decided to explore the t-rex room, then get a snack, instead of checking for intruders. As I entered the room however, I heard footsteps below me. I stopped and listened. It was heading for the garden! I ran out of the room, into the Mummy Room, through the Grand Hallway, and out into the garden. The footsteps had stopped. Who were they from, Smith?

No, they couldn’t have. Smith had left a few minutes ago, so it couldn’t be him!

I decided to avoid going into the T-Rex Room for a while. As I got my chips from the pantry, I heard some voices. Again, I stopped and listened.

“Good,” someone was saying. “Give me a report in a few hours.” The talking stopped. The whole house was silent.

Puzzled, I decided to explore the mummy room and see Smith's famous collection.

I walked into the mummy room to look at the mummies. Instantly, I rushed over to a sarcophagus with Egyptian writing all over it. As I inspected it, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a weird shaped box in the middle of the room. I walked over to the box, and without thinking, I lifted the lid and looked inside expecting to see a mummy but all there was, was a human shaped hole! I gasped, stepping backwards, tripping over a rock, and smashing into a wall! Suddenly, there was no wall! I fell backwards landing on my back! As I lay there, my back hurting, I realized something. I was in a tunnel! A few minutes later, I got to my feet and started walking down the tunnel. It seemed to go on for miles! For a while, I heard a faint sound of footsteps, but as I walked farther through the tunnel, the footsteps grew louder until it sounded like they were right in front of me! I started running.

“I watch the house and make sure there are no
intruders”

Then all of a sudden, I was face to face with Smith! “W-what are you doing here?” I stammered.

“I am Robot Smith. I watch the house and make sure there are no intruders,” replied Smith in a robotic voice.

“Oh, you are a robot who guards the house, and you are the thing I've been hearing this whole time?” I asked.

“Yes,” confessed Robot Smith.

Once I got out of that creepy tunnel, I decided to clean the house up. I felt better since I had found out that the person or robot I had heard was only a guard for the house. I spent the rest of the day reading or cleaning.

When the sun started to go down, I watched a movie, took a shower, brushed my teeth, and started walking to the guest room, where I was going to sleep. I walked past the Rube Goldberg machines and into the guest room. A fireplace was in the corner of the

room where there, a fire was burning. I got into the guest bed, but before I could close my eyes, a robotic hand came out from the wall and turned off the fire. I smiled.

“Thanks, Robot Smith,” I whispered as I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

The next day, Smith returned from his friend’s house. As he entered the kitchen, he asked, “How was everything?” “Good,” I replied. “How was staying at your friend’s house?”

“Good,” Smith said.

“Robot Smith helped a lot,” I added.

Smith raised an eyebrow, “That’s what he’s calling himself now?”

Smith laughed. “Let’s sit down and you can tell me all about what happened while I was gone.”

Sounds of Art

By Diana Sinko
5th Grade

At recess, Addison was drawing a cat sitting on a couch in her sketchbook. She was sketching the cat with the couch on a field. The picture was in different shapes, colors, and sizes. That was her way of sketching things. The cat was turquoise with a hat on top of its head. While the couch was a sphere-looking in shape. "Addison, no cat looks like that, it is weird just like you," said a girl giggling and laughing. Addison asked her friends what was wrong with her. They said that she was just herself. Even though she agreed with them she still wondered why. She kept sketching and saw that she was doing it still the same way she was illustrating it back then. A couple of months later she saw a banner demonstrating a picture of a pencil saying, "Drawing Contest starting next week, the winner who wins will get \$500!" Everyone was so excited to see that there was a drawing contest. A girl was smirking and saying, "There is no way Addison could enter or win because she is awful at it." When she arrived at a park she slumped down next to a tree and thought of thoughts. She tried to do her illustrations a little differently but it didn't work out. A voice in her voice said, "Why are you trying to act like someone else if your art is different? Yes, it does have some things that not everybody does but you are not everybody." Then she started to think more about what her voice said. Addison started painting what she did. On the day she turned in her artwork. After several days they announced the winners. Addison did get on the podium but not in the first place and she was okay with it. Even though she got second, which was not bad, she thought her artwork was a masterpiece.

A Final Doggy Treat

By Jooun Park
6th grade

The first clue that today would be special was on the ride home from school when my dad took an unexpected turn. Up to that point, I had been mentally reviewing that day's math quiz, checking if I had gotten all the questions correct. I looked up. "Where are we going?" I asked.

"You'll see." My father's eyes smiled in the rear view mirror, but he did not say anything else. That was the second clue. For the next ten minutes I sat in curiosity. My parents were always very scheduled and rarely did anything without letting me know in advance.

The third, and final, clue was when we pulled into the parking lot in front of the pet store. By then, my curiosity had grown to anticipation. Every kid knows that there's only one reason a father takes a daughter to a pet store.

Inside pastel toys decorated the wall. Dog clothes hung on a rack. In a large pen, gray dogs, black dogs, brown dogs, and white dogs ran in circles.

One tiny white dog sat on the corner, but when it saw me it jumped up and down and wagged its tail. My sad shut mouth became a big happy smile. When I picked her up her cute little body was as soft and light as a sheep. Her nose was as black as chocolate. Her paws were as soft and squishy as a jelly. I noticed that her ears were a little yellowish just like a star. "I'll call you Star," I said.

"Bark," Star replied.

I can't describe my joy at that moment. I had been asking my parents for a dog since I could talk, imagining all the fun we'd have together, and now I finally had one.

But imagining having a dog and actually having a dog are very different. Soon I would learn that it was not so easy.

A few days later, Star and I sat on the wooden floor in the kitchen. I raised a doggy snack and looked at her. “Ok this time we will get it right? Got it?”

“Yip,” Star replied.

“That's close enough to yes.” I raised the treat even higher. Star’s eyes followed it. Then in my most commanding voice, “Sit,” I said.

Star tilted her head. She scratched the back of her ear, but she did not sit.

“Sit,” I repeated.

“Yip,” Star replied.

In frustration, I threw the snack on the ground. Star immediately snapped it up. “Enjoy,” I grumbled as I went to find my mom. I found her on the sofa reading a book. “Mom, Star won't listen.”

My mom closed her book and looked at me. She frowned and I could tell she was thinking. After a minute, she said, “You have to be patient. You need to build relationships with Star, and keep on going.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, turning back to the kitchen. I had hoped for more practical advice than to be patient, but it was the best advice that I had.

“I needed to try something different.”

Back in the kitchen the scene replayed. I would lift the doggy snack. Star would “Yip,” which I guess meant, “I’ll promise to do it this time.” Then she would break her promise. By the time it was time to go to bed I wasn’t sure if Star was refusing to learn or if it was me. I needed to try something different.

That night, I lay in bed trying to think of a solution. Star snored by my feet. I thought back to all the times I had to learn something. I learned to ride a bike from my dad. My mother had taught me to read. My teacher taught me how to write with neat handwriting. Then I figured it out. All of them had taught me something by showing me

how to do it first. Maybe Star didn't know how to sit because she needed an example. I knew what had to be done.

Satisfied, I knew I'd have to get lots of sleep. Tomorrow would be a big day of learning. Instead, I tossed and turned all night in anticipation.

The next morning, I leaped from my bed and rushed to the kitchen. I skipped past the breakfast table and snatched a bag of doggy treats. "Star, come here," I cried, but she didn't come. Just one more thing to show her, I thought. I found her just waking up on my bed. At the sight of doggy treats she wagged her tail.

Just like the day before, I held up the treat and said, "Sit."

Just like the day before, Star didn't sit.

Unlike the day before, I sat on the ground and pretended to eat her snack. I pretended to enjoy it, too. Star stood on her back legs, looking around for the treat that I had hidden in my pocket. I stood up and held another dog treat in the air.

"Sit," I tried again. Again, Star didn't sit. This time, when I pretended to eat the treat I rubbed my tummy and smacked my lips. "Mmmm," I said.

Star jumped up and down. "Yip, Yip."

This was not as easy as I had imagined last night. Patience, I reminded myself. Again I showed what I wanted and again she failed. Again and again until my pockets nearly burst with dog treats that I had pretended to eat. Until there was only one left in the bag.

Wearily, I lifted the snack one more time. "Sit," I begged. I sat on the ground and pretended to eat the snack. Star did not move and for a moment, I gave up. I wasn't sure what to do next. But then, Star looked at me and then looked at the treat. She slowly bent her back legs and lowered her rear-end onto the floor. My disappointment vanished as I leaped into the air. Star copied me.

I fell to the floor and hugged her. As I did, the dog treats I had pretended to eat fell from my pocket onto the floor. Star began devouring them.

"I guess you deserve a treat," I said, laughing.

Final Remembrance

By Phoebe Cummings
7th Grade

The things I remember about her are random. How her dyed dark red hair hides her eyes, how her shoes are covered with scribbles from her boredom. Her black denim jacket was covered with pins, covered completely in black paint. I asked her once where the pins were from, and she refused to answer, starting up a new conversation. Her jeans are ripped, but not in a styled way. She sliced them up with a knife, just to annoy the teachers at school, but she never got dress-coded, no matter what she wore. I think they pitied her.

I remember how she held me when I cried, how she combed her fingers through my long black hair, telling me it would be okay. Why did I never tell her that she was okay? Why did I never comfort her? It was always about me.

I remember her pale starlit face staring up at pinpricks of light. Her amazement and wonder. She was too young to have seen the things she saw. Maybe that's why she did it. Maybe that's why she betrayed me.

I never saw it coming. I thought we lived for an interminable amount of time. But I was young and naive. I didn't comprehend the significance of life. How short of a time we really stay living. We breathe an iota of time.

She left me. She told me we would be together as long as the sun continued to rise, and then she left me as soon as night came. She left me alone in the darkness. She deserted me. Did she not know the sun would still rise in the morning?

I didn't cry when I found her. I didn't do anything. I turned, and I ran. I ran farther than I have ever run before. My lungs, my chest, and my feet burned and ached. But I kept running. Past the busy streets and the cafes and libraries where we would sit together and watch other people read or eat or just talk. We never talked at these places.

We would just sit in silence, and that would be enough for us. Tears finally came. Tears of anger, of silence, and of wishes that would never be fulfilled.

When we were ten, we sat and talked about the things we wanted to do when we grew into adults. She said she wanted to be an artist. She wanted to paint the scenes from her mind that she could never figure out how to explain. Those dreams and scenes shattered along with her heart, and her good conscience.

“Goodbye.”

Goodbye is what her parents whispered when she was lowered into the ground.

“How could you?”

This is what I whispered when I placed my hand on the chestnut case of her coffin. It was a closed coffin funeral, but I wished to see her face once more. I wanted to hold her in my arms but also hit her in the face. I know she wasn't really in that coffin though. I knew that in the coffin, there was a corpse that was just an “it” and not a “her.”

You couldn't find a way to stay in the world in which I reside. Or maybe you never really did live in this world. Maybe you never really lived. Goodbye isn't good enough for this. Farewell, adieu, bon voyage, so long. What do we mean when we say these things? When we say goodbye are we really saying goodbye? You never expect goodbye to be forever. You normally are looking forward to the next time you see each other again. But what happens when a causal goodbye becomes a forever goodbye? What do you do then?

Amelie, this is my final goodbye. I don't know why you thought you needed to leave, and I wish you hadn't left me alone, but you have left. You are gone. And now there is nothing left to do except to wish that you find yourself somewhere better than the place you left me. Goodbye.

The Delicacies of Adventure

By Andrew Li
7th Grade

Carmen, a world-traveling food critic, was living a great life. She had media coverage, a lovely high-end house, and all the bells and whistles that came with fame.

Louis was having an average day. As the head chef at the Full House Inn, he woke up early to make some scrambled eggs, blueberry muffins, and slightly charred pancakes. Bins of cereal were spread across the freshly cleaned counters. All in all, there was nothing too fancy, but nothing too bad either. The inn also provided dinner, but they did not cook lunch; several reviews of the inn mentioned this peculiarity.

Gunther, the inn's owner, strolled watchfully through the dining room, where laughter and chatter echoed across the inn. He went into the back, where the chefs were just finishing up the day's work. "It wasn't the greatest food ever," Gunther said harshly. "Honestly, it was kind of bad." All the chefs wilted under his words. However, they were used to it. After making breakfast, they would clean rooms and check in new guests. Surprise! Not only were they the chefs, but they were also responsible for everything else.

Carmen, back in her hometown of Cratea, entered the inn; she wanted to critique some local food. Everyone was on their best behavior. The menu featured oysters, truffles, and even things coated in gold leaf—if she liked it, the business could increase tenfold. She took a place at a table and all the talk and laughter in the room became hushed whispers, until they went out altogether. The chefs took out the shiniest silverware and most beautiful china they had. When the food was presented, every eye in the room turned toward her, especially Louis, who eagerly awaited her reaction. The entire room waited with bated breath.

After she finished her food, she declared, "Excellent!" The room applauded and went to compliment the chefs. Louis lit up on the inside.

At the end of the night, the chefs had worked harder than they ever had before, holding onto a great feeling of accomplishment. When Gunther came in, they hoped that maybe—just maybe—he would give them a little praise. “It is... acceptable,” he muttered.

The next morning, Carmen returned with the media and press. She asked for a tour around the back, to see how it was. Louis, as a proud head chef, led the tour around the kitchen. He gestured toward an ordinary cabinet, saying that it was just the pantry and where they stored all the dry food. However, when he opened it, he found that it was nearly empty. Disbelieving, he shifted a bag of flour to the side, just to make sure there was nothing left. To his surprise, in the middle of the boards that made up the bottom of the pantry, a few planks shifted up, unbalanced by the flour. When Gunther, Carmen, and Louis peered into the hole, they each felt a faint tugging sensation. Their vision swam through a haze of yellow and green, and the next thing they knew, they weren’t in the kitchen anymore.

“Silhouettes of mystique creatures flitted through
the shadows.”

For some odd reason, they were now somehow outside the town gates. A dense forest towered over them, and they shared apprehensive glances with each other. They decided to enter. The moment the trio stepped foot into the forest, they heard life all around them. The leaves crunched under their feet as they went deeper into the unknown. Chirping and the calls of animals filled the air, creating a natural symphony. The trees blotted out the sun, darkening the forest. Silhouettes of mystique creatures flitted through the shadows. “Hey, is that you?” Gunther asked. No reply.

He spun around to find that neither Louis nor Carmen was there. “Um, are you pulling a prank on me? This isn’t the best time!” Suddenly, something grabbed him by the ankle and pulled him. He struggled and his head hit a tree root, causing him to black out. The next thing he knew, he was tied up by vines inside a cave... with Louis and Carmen! Carmen had a pocket knife and cut through the vines that were holding her hostage. Once freed, she helped Louis. Released from the choking tight vines, they

pondered ways to escape. The walls were made of stone, and it was definitely not a very large cave. They looked out of the mouth of the cave, noticing that they were above the tree canopies; but whenever they approached the mouth of the cave, the vines would cover up the entrance. When they tried to cut them, more vines took their place.

Hours of cutting resulted in a dull blade. Luckily, Gunther had a lighter--- he occasionally smoked after working long shifts at the inn. He held it against the vines, and they started burning. Acrid smoke wafted from the vines, quickly filling up the cave. The entrance cleared, and they scurried out of the cave with relief and climbed down the cliff face.

With the incredibly dense forest canopy, it was impossible to tell what time it was; but they knew it was time for food. First, they peered into the murky brown river, but could only see silhouettes that appeared spiny and unpalatable. Something caught Louis's eye: a tree with shiny red apples. However, they had worms inside. Carmen, a true food connoisseur, knew that dandelions were edible. Picking up several, the trio washed the dandelions in a small waterfall nearby, and though it was sustenance, they did not enjoy it. Conveniently, Carmen collected some water.

“This is a sign!”

After some wandering, they saw a lovely rose in the middle of a clearing, in stark contrast to the surrounding dark area. The sun shone down— it was noon.

“Something's wrong,” said Louis.

“What do you mean?” replied Gunther. “This is a sign!”

“I don't think we should go over there.” Unfortunately, Gunther quickly dashed to the rose and tried to pick it. They chased after him, but they all started to feel nauseous.

“Oh, not again” muttered Carmen, as they blacked out. When they woke, bones lay scattered on the ground around them. It was a vast wasteland that stretched as far as the eye could see. Withered plants and dead trees dotted the area. In the center stood the rose, shriveled.

“That rose is probably what we need to go somewhere else,” remarked Louis.

In the distance, a thin purple fog surrounded a living tree. As they watched, the tree withered; its life cycle finished in a matter of moments. With curiosity, they followed the fog, which drifted across the ground lazily. After an hour of walking under the sweltering sun, they panted while covered in sweat. On the horizon, the fog crept towards a forest: it was filled with trees, with cover dense enough to blot out the sky.

“Wait a minute,” said Carmen. “Haven’t we been there before?” As they looked over, they realized that they had, indeed, been there. The same trees, vines, and dark lighting. They continued chasing the mist, and it suddenly entered a cave glowing with a faint purple light. Gone. A glowing amethyst was set in stone in the center of the cave. As they watched, small tendrils of mist extended through the cave walls and into the air. Uh oh, they thought, and attacked the amethyst; cracks spread throughout it. After the destruction, the mist pulled back into the cavern, obscuring everything from sight. As it cleared, a colossus stood between them and the exit. The shattered amethyst pieces shot up beams of light at the humanoid monster, which roared and swung a giant fist. A large shot of mist solidified in mid-air and hit the ground next to them, leaving a large crater.

“Those stones are probably powering that...thing!” cried Louis.

“We’ve got to destroy them!” said Carmen confidently.

“Wait...how?” she faltered.

“At the touch of water, a crystal smoked and went dim.”

They had no time to think, however, as the goo-like tendrils tried to wrap around them. They ran, but Carmen tripped, causing her water bottle to fly out of her bag. At the touch of water, a crystal smoked and went dim. The tendrils shuddered momentarily, and the giant stumbled.

“Its weakness is water!” yelled Carmen. They threw water on the stones, and each one fizzled and died in turn. With the tentacles trying to bring them down, and the giant stomping around and lobbing projectiles, it was tough. The tendrils got more sluggish and

the giant smaller and weaker each time a crystal vanished. When every fragment was destroyed, there was a rush of green light.

“Thank you for purifying the forest,” sang a chorus of voices. Dozens of small green lights flitted through the air. “We are the spirits of the forest. In return, we will take you back to your home world.”

“Wait, wha-” There was a blinding flash of light, and they woke up on the Full House inn’s kitchen floor. There was no one nearby. They stood up and exchanged glances.

“Was that a dream?” asked Carmen.

“I don’t know, but let’s not talk about it,” said Louis.

“I think we can all agree on that,” said Gunther. They strolled out of the kitchen quietly. Immediately, someone ran up to them and asked what took them so long. They checked the clock, and they saw that it had been hours since they left.

“You vanished! Where were you?!”

“It’s... a long story.” They rushed out a cover story, and everyone seemed satisfied. They returned home, each thinking it was a dream.

What If

By Rylee Little
7th Grade

What if there
Was no pollution
The animals would be happy

What if people
Weren't bullied
The victims would be happy

What if every test
Was an automatic A+
The students would be happy

What if kids opened their lockers
On the first try every time
They would be happy

What if YOU
Changed the world
Everyone would be happy

What if YOU
Were you
Everyone would be happy

The Perfect Hit

By Saagar Rai
7th Grade

I looked at home plate and shuddered by the fact of what could happen. Maybe I can be shot out or get hit and earn myself an injury and a spot on the losers club. Each second felt like years and it felt like time had stopped. Out of nowhere, a voice calls me up to home base.

“Hurry up Saagar. Don’t be late!” Said the coach. That moment, I felt like I had forgotten about myself and who I am. Everything about me being 12, having a brother, being in sixth grade, and it being my first baseball match. With all my might, I walked myself up with my bat being dragged behind me like a weight slowing me down as I endeavored to home plate. As soon as I got there, I saw what I feared the worst. The fastest pitcher with lightning fast movements; the first baseman who can and will try to strike me out at every single moment; the outfielders who are so good at catching, every player before was struck out at least once; and the catcher with his quick reflexes and his creepy, evil stare. I got into my batting stance while looking at the pitcher and the ball he was holding tightly in his hand, ready to strike at any moment. *What should I do? What should I do? What should I DO RIGHT NOW!* I screamed in my brain as my body felt too stiff to move. The whole field felt tense as I kept staring at the pitcher’s eye and making eye contact. Without any hints, he sneered a big, dark smile and threw a ball as fast as light, straight at me. *I wish I hit it, I wish I hit this ball, or we will be out and lose the game.* I, without a second to spare, swung my bat and hoped for the best as I heard a bang and saw the ball fly away into the air.

“Oh, my God. I don’t think we will be able to catch that.” Said the pitcher with his mouth falling open and his body barely able to support himself. I ran as fast as my legs could carry me. The people in the bleachers were stunned as if a hush fell over them of what would happen. As it happens to be, the second baseman was definitely stumped

by his expression on his face. I looked at my hit as it was heading into the territory of the center fielder. I slowed down despite my team's dismay. The ball was zooming by the fielder as he ran and ran then lunged at the ball with all his might, only to miss by a few inches and humiliating his whole team. And himself. Poor guy he was. So depressing. Anyways, I picked up the pace and crossed second base. I looked at the outfielders without a clue, they were scratching their heads as to where the ball was. Inside the bases, the basemen were looking at a guy who is leisurely having a good time skipping from base to base with a smile of Homer Simpson. Perhaps the most hilarious of all was the pitcher who was again, staring at me with his way of showing acceptance and surprise by showing the stink eye from his piggy face and having a staring contest with my head. I got to home base with the catcher for once, showing sympathy to me as he looked at me and smiled. I smiled back and thought to myself. *We got a home run and won the game. Ha, take that, losers.* I trundled to the dugout where my team was cheering for me. The second I got there, I was met with a wall of high fives and nice works.

The coach came up to me and said, "Nice job out there Saagar. That hit was good." I smiled at him and heard some people out in the bleachers cheering for me. Then, my dad came from his car and called me. I ran to him and hugged him and told him what had happened. He looked with a big grin and told me there was still a game to play. I looked at him, looked at the game and went back in to play the legendary game.

The Stage

By Ella Zeng
7th Grade

I frantically shook my head, but they continued to urge me on, so I surrendered. I went up the plain, rotten, oak stairs that creaks with every step, and onto the center of the small stage. Strangely, it seemed just like me. I stood to face the audience, but froze, feeling their expectant gazes. I opened my mouth, but what was I here for? Nobody told me what I was supposed to do, where to go, when to stop. I stared into the darkness, frightened. I don't know how many seconds had passed. Finally, I silently left the stage. I left without doing anything nor saying anything, and their discouraging stares followed me. My face burned hot with red. As I sat down, I closed my eyes, wishing their eyes didn't say anything. Wishing they didn't tell me my worth.

Suddenly, claps and cheers erupted. I glanced up from my hands to spot "her" on the stage. There were red velvet curtains that embraced her, and a stage as grand as her smile. We were never really close, only a couple of words were exchanged between us at school, but I knew what she was like. They always talked about her. Intelligent. A beauty. Successful. Unlike me, who was forgotten. Like usual, her smile shone radiantly, unlike her eyes, blank without meaning. I often wondered what made her that way. She looked like a lifeless doll, moving along with the strings that held her. She brilliantly displayed her abilities. She sang like the whispers of the wind, danced like the soft waves of the ocean, and her beauty that seemed to be from the heavens. I glanced at the audience, and they nodded with a satisfied smile, but I knew they thought she could've done better. Nothing was adequate enough for them. I sighed. Suddenly, someone came and handed her a certificate and a gift.

Suddenly, a wave of anger and jealousy crashed inside me. I pretend not to know why I stormed on the stage at that particular moment, but I did. The rewards shouldn't have been given to her, but to someone more helpless, like me. I should've sat quietly like

I always did, hidden in the shadows, obedient. Instead, I stormed up the stairs, onto the stage too grand for me and snatched her prize. By then, the red velvet curtains had closed, obscuring their view from us.

“a shadow covered the entire back wall like a beast”

I glanced around, dropping her awards, aghast. There were cracks filled with cobwebs everywhere, yet so small they wouldn't be noticeable down there. At the back of the stage, a shadow covered the entire back wall like a beast, ready to pounce. I glanced back at her, and looked into her eyes. A stab of guilt pierced through me. I knew she earned her awards fair and square, yet I still coveted what was hers. Her eyes were like the stage, full of cracks, yet the stage was so grand like her smile, that people often miss the cracks. Ashamed, I picked up the certificate and gift, and carefully placed them into the palms of her hands. I knew that there was a possibility that she was broken from expectations, yet I ignored it. I clasped my arms around her, and gave a gentle squeeze, scared to crush her fragile frame. I pushed her back, to gaze into her eyes again. A spark. Barely noticeable, but it was there. I took her hand, and quickly pulled her off the stage. Never again, would I desire things that aren't for me. Not until I know what's behind those curtains, and on the stage.

Popping Bubbles

By Lucy Oprinski
8th Grade

I sit still in class hiding behind a book so no one can see me. I have a sneaking suspicion that if people look into my eyes they will shrivel up and turn into a stone harder than any steel. Like Medusa. If that happened, I could never live with myself, so I protect them and myself by looking down. By staying in my corner. By staying invisible to the rest of the world so no one looks too closely. So they suspect absolutely nothing of me.

While I'm in my corner, I like to Pretend. Pretend that I am a ghost separated from the earth, and my body is something different entirely. As a ghost, I study myself. I notice the way my eyelids close for a second too long, and how my back swings upwards in an odd line that isn't straight. I look at my arm and imagine the cells working and dying to keep me alive. I imagine the vibrant city that must be inside me, little families of cells living in cramped apartments with dirty rugs and washed-out paintings to make the apartments less depressing. What I like to imagine most of all though is a paradise. Maybe a farm or a garden, or just a tiny room with white walls. A Secret little place where a lone cell resides. They dance and sing and yell and cry whenever and wherever they want to, because there's no one in the way to stop them.

Today that little cell lives in a flower field. It lays down right on top of the flowers with its hands behind its head and looks up to the sky. It squints, for the sun is too bright. Dew drops from the flowers wet its clothes when it finally sits up. It laughs and hits its little head with its hand.

I want to be that little cell inside me sometimes. Just doing and not worrying. Not smart enough to regret the past and fear the future, just relying on instincts and happiness to get it through the day. I don't have the luxury of doing that, if I don't think ahead, I fall behind. That's what I'm told at least.

A hand taps me on the shoulder. I jump a little, dropping my book. “Sorry,” said a voice, presumably whoever owned the hand. A slow bubbling starts in my torso. One by one my organs expand, growing bigger and bigger until big painful bumps emerge from my skin.

They can see.

I look down and over, now looking at the mystery person's feet. “Uhm” they hesitated. “Could I borrow a pencil?”

“Yeah!” I say, making sure to add an exclamation mark on the end. The bubbles are spreading. I reach into my bag. The red welts are spreading up towards my arm, making my hands shake as it grows. I grab a pencil and reach over to hand it to the mystery person. A bubble erupts from the skin of my hand, and I drop the pencil. It drops in slow motion. The ground screams as it reaches the floor bouncing slightly before coming to a standstill. I freeze in horror, the bubbles growing bigger and bigger by the second.

The mystery person reaches down and picks it up, “Thanks.” they say.

The bubbles pop and deflate as I face forward again in my seat. I put my hand to my neck to feel my pulse, it's beating steadily. I could have sworn that it was faster. I take a deep breath before burying my head in my book. I'm not able to read, so instead I study the groups of words. Measuring the letters and the spaces, and let my head drift off till I'm back as a ghost, observing.

I “read” for a couple more minutes before I can refocus on my work. I'm supposed to be working on a history presentation. I slowly open my laptop (as to not make any noise) and scroll through it, skimming over every slide looking for flaws. I'm surprised to find none. My mouse hovers over the little white share button. I'm hesitant to click it as a tiny bubble form on my neck. Sometimes I find flaws in my work while I present it. Little misspelled words, or pictures just a little too much to the left. I push through my anxiety and push on the bubble slowly until it pops and there's nothing stopping me from submitting it. So, I click the button dramatically, making sure to savor the feeling of success. I breathe out a sigh of relief once it's sent and go back to reading my book.

I finish my book and look up, accidentally making eye contact with the teacher. I quickly look back down. I can feel him looking at me, staring at the top of my head. I can feel the headache coming back. “Andrews.” He says. That’s my last name. He calls all his students by their last name, I’m not entirely sure he even knows our first names. I look up carefully, my eyes rest on his shoes.

“shoes are the best thing to look at”

I’ve found when trying to avoid eye contact shoes are the best thing to look at. Pants are creepy, as well as shirts. If you look at the neck it seems like you’re a vampire, and you can’t look at the mouth, too close to the eyes. Shoes really are perfect. Today the teacher is wearing the shoes he always wears, which is none. He’s wearing sandals, which I don’t think count as shoes. “I see you’ve turned in your work early.” He pauses while I berate myself for turning in the assignment early.

“Yes” I say, trying to be loud so he doesn’t ask me to repeat myself.

“Good job.” He says and goes back to sorting through papers. I feel pops as I take a deep breath, reaching two fingers up to my neck to feel for my pulse.

“Oh, and Andrews,” he said. I hurriedly refocused, slamming my computer closed in the process, “Since you finished early, do you want to present now? Get it out of the way I mean.”

My heart seized in my chest. The students started shutting their books and computers, already expecting a yes. I turned bright red as their faces turned towards me, boredom written into their eyes.

I panic as a bubble in my stomach. It grows and spreads like a virus, creating bubbles running along the creases in my skin. I feel the bubbles reaching my heart, they grow and squeeze until my heart can only beat in panicked and unnatural ways. I start breathing quickly as bubbles cover my face, puffing out my eyes and cheeks. The bubbles grow and spread till I’m no longer recognized as human. I look like an astronaut tossed out into the vacuum of space without a spacesuit. Half my body boiling from the heat of the sun, half freezing without it.

The longer I pause the more the students' stares hurt. They change and heat the air around me until it's hot oil. It feels like I've been thrown into a deep fryer. The oil bubbles up my skin even more until I am surrounded in a tomb of deep-fried dead skin. I want to peel off the skin, but I know if I do there will be only muscles underneath it. I close my eyes and breath, I'm told that helps with stress, and look at the teacher.

"Ok." I say, trying to stop my voice from shaking. "But I need to go to the bathroom first." I squeeze my hands as the teacher thinks.

"Ok Andrews but be quick." I stand up, trying to keep my eyes on the students. I feel like if I look away, they'll pounce. Like weeping angels. "We'll be waiting for you." The teacher said as I reached the door. I look back at him and smile, trying to ignore how menacing that sounds.

I walk down the quiet hallway. Every step bounces off the walls making a loud THUMP. I want to go back to my little imaginary world, to my flower field with dew drops on my face and grass stains on my pants. I can't though. Every second passes slowly. Too slowly. My brain isn't working anymore, it's empty. Like a tidal wave came and swept everything away. I beg myself to fall back into my imagination, but my brain won't let me. Not a single bubble is on my skin, and the air is just air, burning oil is better. I sit down on the toilet in an empty stall. I'm the only one in the bathroom. I put my hands behind my neck and my head to my knees as I try to pop bubbles I don't even feel.

I'm reminded that it's real. Myself. My body. My brain. They're all real. I squeeze my eyes shut. Every time I remember it's hard to keep myself from crying. There's a certain emptiness that fills me when I lose my little imaginary pains. Guilt.

I stop myself from thinking any longer. It won't lead to anything good. Instead, I focus on the bubbles I don't feel. I imagine them inflating my skin and organs, till I look like a handful of flesh-colored balloons. Slowly I feel them coming back. The first one is in my left lung, it blows up, so my breathing is fast and erratic. The bubbles spread deep inside of me, through my blood, my breath, and my thoughts. They spread till I am bloated and fat. I close my eyes for a couple seconds before standing up. I need to get back to the class. The teacher is expecting me.

Can't Beat the Waves

By Kaitlyn Phan
8th Grade

Fresh wave, same ache
saltwater ice circled abysmally,
transient, navigating through the
monsoon season through to plain lulls.
Same high pressure current, a
black-blue autocrat stippled with sand
and seaweed, malign terror
surging to the slick surface.
Laughing, roaring, unholy deafening
chants as she gains momentum,
gaining ground and the sea churns
crueler and crueler. Me, I am a molecule.

"I try and camouflage myself"

I try and camouflage myself among
the shoreline; but God doesn't hand out
exit tickets to the dead gone
non-believers,
not even the vicar in his old tower I say,
not even your childhood dog
who you buried under the lemon tree
and bit your tongue until you were gone for.
We are just victims of the rapture as another
deafening blow makes landfall,

waves cresting, shimmering in apostasy.

We're all gonna have to get wet this time.

Unfortunately, Sunday's best turned into a flotsam.

I tell myself, "you're gonna have to feel this one, kid." And the next one. And the one
after that until

forever.

The Doorway

By Nikki Primiani
8th Grade

Merie climbed out of the truck with a sigh, stomach rumbling. She hadn't eaten or drank all day, being at the art show. She looked down at the painting in her hands. *My best one yet*, she thought sadly. *I really thought this would help pay off the mortgage.* She wiped her sweaty palms against her paint-splattered jeans. She hated driving her car, but it was the only way to get around when you lived in a farmhouse on the outskirts of Fahille, Nevada (a.k.a. the middle of nowhere). Her therapist, back when she could afford one, told her it was because of the car crash that killed her parents and made her aunt her guardian.

Aunt Leighanne, or Aunt Lei for short, was the sweetest woman Merie had ever known. Aunt Lei was the type of person to scold you for eating ice cream without her, and then ask you for help baking one of her famous apple pies. Just thinking of her brought a smile to Merie's face, until she remembered the debt Aunt Lei had passed to her when she died. There had been a fund left to cover the mortgage, but it had run out last month, and she had to pay quickly. *If I don't sell anything, how am I going to make any money?*

Merie walked up to the oakwood double doors of the big red farmhouse and sighed, letting her palms rest on the shiny brass handles. She turned around to look at the weeds and yellow grass. *Thank goodness I live too far away from town to have neighbors, or I would be mortified of the state of the house.* The paint on the house was flaking away under the hot Nevada sun, making everything dry and brittle. The unkempt state of the house was fully revealed when she unlocked the door, the squeak of the rusty hinges surely being heard by anyone a half-mile away. Placing her painting against the wall, and hands on her hips, Merie sighed again. There were cobwebs in every corner, as there was only so much cleaning one person could do in this big farmhouse. Her fingers lightly traced the scar

that ran from her brow bone all the way down to where her neck and jaw melded together, a nervous habit ever since the crash.

As Merie walked down the hall, covered in an icky green wallpaper she had never liked and where she would hang up yet another painting that had never been sold, she took a moment to reflect on her lonely life. She wasn't overly pretty, by any means, but she did have what Aunt Lei used to call a 'certain charm' about her. Tousled long brownish-black hair, light brown eyes, and a complexion no one could quite pinpoint weren't very special, in her opinion. *Maybe I could have gotten a girlfriend if it weren't for that scar.*

Deciding to ignore her romantic inadequacies, she was about to hang up her painting when she stopped abruptly. She blinked her eyes. *What on earth-?* There was a door there, right in front of her at the end of the hallway, on the previously empty wall where she had planned to place her painting. Placing a hand to her head, she started to feel a bit woozy, but brushed it off as she approached the strange door. She slowly reached out to touch the handle, then yelped and clutched her hand close to her chest. Sparing a glance at her hand, she could see blood marring her skin.

“A tap on her shoulder jostled her back to reality”

Merie's curiosity piqued, she quickly grabbed the door again and flung it open. She instantly placed her arm to shield her face, the light emitting from the doorway almost too much for her eyes to handle. A tap on her shoulder jostled her back to reality, and she blinked her eyes a few times to get used to her surroundings. She was still in something that at least looked like the farmhouse, with the familiar oriental hall rug and slope of the roof, but it had seemed to be transformed into... a museum?

“Umm... Hello? Who are-” The strange lady suddenly caught sight of Merie's face, and blushed tomato red. “Oh, Miss Merie! I am so sorry, I didn't see your face there for a second!” Merie looked in confusion at the woman. She was about her age, with curly red hair, yellow cat-like eyes, and freckles. “Here, here. Let me show you to your studio,” she said, grabbing her arm. The woman started walking at a brisk pace as she dragged Merie along behind her.

“Umm...’ Merie was shocked by the woman’s abrupt actions. “What’s your name? Where are we?” The woman stopped and turned to smile brightly at her.

“I’m Flame, and I’m your art consultant! I’ve collected your works for ages, and displayed them all in this museum!” She said brightly. Merie felt a certain sense of disbelief until she started looking around her. People were staring and pointing at her, and her artworks were hung on the walls with throngs of visitors crowding around them in admiration and wonder. Flame continued dragging her along, and a sense of hope started to form in Merie’s belly, fluttering around like she imagined it must have in Pandora’s Box.

They walked into a room, and Merie stopped, mouth hanging open in pure and utter shock. Art supplies of every shape and sort were scattered about the room. Her hand traced her scar nervously, unsure of what to do with all of these materials.

“Hey,” Flame said, guiding her to a chair in front of a blank canvas. She grabbed the painting from Merie’s hands and set it aside, replacing it with a paintbrush. “You should paint something!” Merie frowned.

“I have no mortgage...”

“But... what if I don’t know what to draw?” she questioned, looking up at Flame, only to start when she realized that she was no longer there. It was just her alone in the room. *I wonder... would it be really that bad if I just stayed here forever? Everyone likes my art, everyone appreciates me, I have no mortgage...* Shrugging to herself, Merie started to hum as she painted, her gentle brushstrokes masterfully applying color to the colorless surface. As her painting continued, a beautiful golden butterfly started to emerge, fluttering around a woman opening a box. As she finished, she titled the piece with a swirl of white paint. *Pandora.*

A nurse walked into the asylum room, the walls chalky and white. She looked almost identical to Flame, except for the green eyes. She gently rested her hand on the humming Merie’s shoulder, taking the painting *Pandora* from the easel and replacing it with another blank one. She slowly slipped out of the room, walking quickly down the

long, winding corridors similar to the floor plan of the farmhouse, and looking around to make sure that no employees saw her. Rows of rooms lined the halls, some occupants dead silent as she walked by, and others screaming curses at her. An inmate slammed against their door, laughing maniacally as their one - and only - eye peered through the bars over the window.

“Once you’re here, you can never escape! Never! Never! Never!” They chanted madly, cackling as the nurse walked by. Despite the clamor coming from the room, she didn’t flinch. Slipping out of the door, she approached a man in a suit. He looked over at her and smirked.

“Ah! Miss Blaze, always a pleasure,” he said. She rolled her eyes and held out her hand.

“How many times have I told you not to call me ‘Miss’? We’ve been friends for years, Leon.” He shook his head in amusement at teasing her and handed her the money, and she handed over the painting in exchange. Leon examined it.

“Same time next week?”

“As always,” She said. They parted ways, Blaze starting back down the corridor, slipping her cut of the profit into her apron. The same inmate from before crashed into the door of their cell, and she roughly slammed a hand against the steel with a jarring rattle. “Quiet, Charlie! You don’t want a repeat of last time, do you!” Charlie slunk back in terror, curling into a ball in the corner whilst peeking out through their hands. As always, Blaze stole from the inmates, and Merie was just the latest addition to her money-making collection.

The Dark Secret to Dreams

By Ansa Qureshi
8th Grade

The price of having little siblings is that they are in need of constant entertainment. It's torturous. Especially, when my mother comes in and tells them they can't get on any of their screens. What's more, their toys aren't enjoyable anymore.

"They're too boring now," my sister squeals. Both of them sit, jaded from the whole world, whining about their problems and, as the oldest, my job is to deal with cries.

Now tell me, was it cruel of me to tell them this story? Possibly. Did I feel guilty for giving them nightmares? Maybe. Was it worth it, once I got an afternoon of silence? Yes, one hundred percent worth it.

"Alright, Alright," I said, when the idea of this tale came to my mind. "Will you please be quiet? I'll tell you a story, okay, but after that you've got to distract yourselves."

"Fine," they muttered. "Your stories suck anyways," my brother added.

I'm doing you a favor, thank you very much.

If he hadn't said that, maybe my story would have been kinder, but now the damage was done.

...

Arguing and bickering. The old, tired looking house on the corner of Devereux Court stayed in a constant time-loop. The mornings were spent in silent breakfasts and the nights in low, strained whispers. The family of three never spent much time in the house. When they did however, they never sat in the same room. Mainly, the little girl would stay up in her room. She would try to have the least amount of contact with her parents. They would fight a lot. So much that it was hard for them to remember where their daughter was half the time. Mum tries at least, the little girl thinks, holding onto the

silver lining. When the little girl was born, her mum had given her a very creative name. The name was the remedy to the mother-daughter relationship. It meant a star of divine strength. Her name was Estrella.

Estrella Charlton-Donelly.

...

“What kind of name is that?” my sister scowls. Her sarcasm streak could take her to the moon.

“Do you have a better name?” I ask, bitterly.

“I’m just saying,” she states. “It’s a weird name.”

I roll my eyes and continue.

...

Now, Estrella wasn’t a normal child. If you asked her parents they’d say she was a vivid dreamer. Someone who had an overactive imagination, always stuck in her head. When you looked at Estrella you’d think of a girl who had survived some sort of trauma. She was very quiet, the total opposite of outspoken. Every time you looked at the girl, you’d see the lack of sleep in her pale eyes. The immense hunger shone through in her thin cheekbones and colorless skin. Her hair was always pinned tightly to her scalp, stress glimmered in the few white strands.

“No one had ever asked Estrella anything about herself”

No one had ever asked Estrella anything about herself, though. She would stay quiet but that didn’t mean she didn’t want anyone to ask. If someone ever did, Estrella had a response prepared. She had revised it over and over in her head.

“It’s something like lucid dreaming that makes me the way I am,” Estrella would say to them. “I have a friend in my dreams. He’s really nice, actually. We talk very fondly. I just wish I could bring him here.”

Then, they’d ask, “Where’s here, Estrella?”

And, she would say, “Into this world. He’s wanted to come for ages but he’s trapped. I’m going to free him, though, don’t worry.”

...

I paused. I wanted to see a reaction from the two kids, who were now undoubtedly interested in the story. I suppose that thought made me smile just like Estrella.

“Why’d you stop? Keep going,” they chided.

“Right.”

So I went on...

...

Estrella met with none other than a devil- or should I say phantom- every night. His name was Alchor, and Estrella went to sleep eager to meet him in her dreams. He would treat her like she was remembered, when everyone else didn’t care who she was. There was this one day that the manipulating phantom let it slip that he was trapped.

“From?” Estrella would say.

“If only someone could free me”

“Esta,” he would say. “I’m trapped from your world. I would come to you if I could, but I’m locked in this cage. If only someone could free me...”

“Well...I could,” Estrella suggested. “...If you told me how.”

“It’s complicated, you have to find some sort of key.”

“A key?”

“Yes, it’s in your house somewhere, so is my cage.”

“A-Alright,” Esta stuttered, “I can find both, I’ll free you.”

According to Alchor, the key wasn’t physical, it was a soul.

So, Estrella killed. It was better not to mention who, but it definitely wasn’t someone important to her. For a while, Estrella wondered how this dead body would

become a key. Then, as if on command, the soul came out of the dead corpse. She caught it. Estrella felt triumphant. She had done it. She had gotten the key. The sudden realization of what she had done had hit Estrella too fast. She was a murderer and she couldn't do anything about that now.

When Esta met Alchor again, she was in tears.

"I don't know what I just did. Alchor, I-I-I'm a murderer." Estrella's tears covered her face.

"Face it, Estrella. You never had to do it, you chose to. It must have felt delightful. The world wronged you and you paid it back," Alchor stated, flatly.

"I-" But Estrella felt silent. She wondered if he was right.

"Now for the instructions to find my cage," Alchor continued. He started listing items to find his spirit cage.

"It's all ready for you to perform the ceremony. All you have to do, my dear, is find the most central area of your house."

Estrella nodded, still fazed from everything that was happening.

She'd woken up that morning and decided to do all she was asked of. Her parents were invited for a workplace dinner which gave her the perfect opportunity. She made the plan in her room.

If I gave all the details of this so-called "plan", we would be here all day. All you need to know is that everything went as intended. Estrella followed Alchor's instructions blindly. In a few minutes, the phantom would be free and Estrella would be gone forever.

...

"I'm gonna go get a snack," I said, hastily. The only problem with this story is I knew I wasn't gonna give it any sort of happily-ever-after. I definitely could, I just didn't know how.

"NO," my brother yelled, "you can't leave us on a cliffhanger."

"Yeah, you can't do that," my sister copied.

At this point, I don't really care if they get nightmares.

So, I kept on with the story.

...

It's all true when I say that a phantom lives in every home. They're all trapped in cages. Just like Alchor said, phantoms are urging to be freed. Their cages can be found in the most central place of your home. Only few know how to move them from the spirit realm and into our world, then insert the key and let them roam amongst us. Phantoms are the screams you hear at the end of your nightmares. They desperately try to communicate with us because only we can free them.

Estrella didn't know they were a destructive species and she didn't see it coming. She just wanted a friend and she naively believed in his promise. So she set Alchor free. Estrella never knew the spirit realm was full of such dark colors. As soon as he came out of his imprisonment, Alchor showed his true intentions. He told Estrella that he had been awaiting freedom for a long time.

Estrella found herself in a dark place. She could see the misty swirls of purple that indicated that she was now in the spirit realm. She saw her own body smiling and waving up at her from our universe. Alchor roamed free in her body and Estrella was now the phantom.

“Estrella tortures those who enter the house”

Estrella sees the cracks of what could have been the last exit from the spirit realm to her universe and makes a choice. With a fast hand, Phantom-Estrella wipes out her own body. She lets the corpse lay there, and watches it in her new form. Alchor had died with Estrella's body, but the bitterness from the betrayal left a mark on the young girl, even if she was a phantom. Now, Estrella tortures those who enter the house with nightmares and then, like an agile ninja, slits their throats.

People say that to this day, they can hear the screams on Devereux Court once Estrella does her job. No one in their right mind dares to enter the house, but there are

always those selective few that don't have a right mind. Those are the ones that are never seen again.

...

My siblings sat there, hollow-eyed and fearful.

"It isn't true," my brother said, trying to comfort my sister, "is it?"

He looked at me to support his claim. I just shrugged. His eyes bulged and his bottom lip started to quiver. My sister burst into tears without any hesitation.

Of course it wasn't true. I made the whole story up. The thought of a blood-thirsty phantom living in every home communicating to its residents through dreams was crazy. Too crazy to be true.

...

Or was it?

Sparkly Green Heels

By Ginger Weathers
8th Grade

Sparkly tall heels and the first day of third grade do not mix well together, I would know that firsthand. But if I was given an option to go back and do it over I would not change a thing. Except maybe my outfit.

It was close to winter of 2017 and I had just moved to Denver, Colorado, at the age of eight. We went to visit my cousin and aunt before we decided to officially move to Denver. While we were visiting, my cousin took me around town to visit a few different stores and areas. We stopped at ROSS and were just looking around at the different clothes and shoes when my eyes landed on these beautiful, amazing pair of black velvet high heels with greenish-bluish sequins covering the heel. I begged my cousin to get them for me even though I was only eight at the time. She gave in and bought them for me since it was close enough to my birthday.

I don't know for sure but I think by the time we drove back to Kansas to get our stuff and then came back to Denver it was somewhere in the middle of Christmas break. I had to help unpack all of our stuff from the moving van so, of course, I put on my tall, sparkly heels and strutted outside. I proceeded to carry our stuff up and down the stairs to our apartment in my sequined heels, tripping and stumbling more times than I would like to admit. The other kids who also lived in the apartment building were playing outside at the time. One of the boys walked over and offered me a hand in carrying our stuff. I declined his offer and turned to show him I could carry the bags on my own when I tripped and my heels did the inward thing. I managed to catch myself and walk it off, but man was that embarrassing.

A few days later winter break was over and it was time to go back to school. Everyone else had already finished half the school year but I was the new kid. The night

heels. My mom noticed I had planned to wear the heels and told me absolutely not. A little background, I was a really stubborn kid and I only heard what I wanted to. So the next day I got dressed super quickly, put on my heels, and ran out of the house before she had the chance to see what I had on my feet. My mom didn't even notice I was wearing my heels until we were already at the school and she was talking with my new teacher.

“Everyone was looking at me”

The school I started going to was so different from any other school I had been to before. The school had two floors and every grade had two-three classes all filled with students from kindergarten to 5th grade. The cafeteria had its own section of the school. There was also a whole theater room, art room, gym, and, I think, music room. The playground was huge and they even had enough room for a whole garden. When I got to my class on the second floor I felt completely out of place. Everyone was looking at me and one girl that was in the same class as me turned around to one of her friends and was like, “Look, she’s wearing heels.” We had P.E. that day and I had to sit out on a red rollie chair while the rest of my classmates were playing.

So yeah, I wasn't the smartest kid ever but I can proudly say that I was the best dressed in my class that day. Later on I unfortunately lost my heels, but I will forever remember the sparkly green heels clacking up and down the tile floors that day.





Upcoming Issue

Submissions are now accepted for CYWR's upcoming issue.

We're very excited to see all of your short stories of any genre, personal narratives, poems, song lyrics, as well as screenplays, scripts, and book excerpts. To read the submission guidelines and submit your writing for publication, go to:

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