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First Place Poetry Winner

Storm Warning
Lynda Long

The weather in this office never varies
Always a sense of urgency
The air taunt with trepidation
The calm a misnomer
As those are the moments most frantic
Trying to escape from the mire of the last flood
Before the next hurricane blows in
Red tape hanging from the branches
Of innovative ideas
Weighing them down,
Draining the life from them
No matter how fast you bail
The water always rises faster
And you must ask for help,
Form alliances, bargain
Just to keep your head above water
But be cautious whom you trust
That same rope that pulls you out
Can also be used to trip you up
Hang you out to dry
One wrong step and you are sunk
Stuck in the muck of bureaucracy
Do everything correctly
Make it look easy
And you are expendable
Set loose like so much flotsam
The sun always shines on management
But here in my cubicle
Once again it is raining paper clips
Water Over Hands

Holly Strickland
Robbie reaches over the back seat to make sure all the doors are locked. A mixture of Texas heat and big city fumes hangs a dull haze on the late August afternoon. Stoplights at each corner invite our eyes to wander over the increasingly ominous landscape of deteriorating abandoned buildings and dingy humanity. Old men and women garbed in a strange array of battered winter coats, foreign to a Houston summer, hunch over rusty shopping carts guarding the sum of their worldly treasures while maneuvering curbs and old dull Cadillacs. Meanwhile, clandestine groups of two, three, maybe four seedy neighborhood dwellers huddle in boarded-up storefronts with their backs to us. Suddenly, blocks before the old apartment, from out of nowhere, a loud knock shakes the driver's side window. Shit!

"Mom! Do something!"

Time stands still as my heart sinks back to its rightful place. Body stiff, head never turning, my eyes dart over to a mismatched pair of entrepreneurs leaning against the Subaru door. The tall, dark, thin one in dirty jeans and a torn, faded tee-shirt reading "Ja Rules," begins spraying something sticky on the windshield. His partner, a short heavy Latino of about 14 years, in a Houston Oilers jersey, bangs again.

"Five bucks lady."

I'm stunned. I look at Robbie, his teeth clenched, forehead pinched in shock. Small tears in the corners of his wide blue eyes mirror the beads of sweat dripping from the matted blond hair on the sides of his head. The light turns green; I hit the gas and watch in the rear view mirror as the assailants flash me the finger. Robbie slumps in the passenger seat, his color coming back.
“I can’t believe you just did that! I think you mighta’ hit one of ‘em.”

“Sometimes ya gotta do what ya gotta do.”

Robbie hadn’t seen the knife handle poking out of Mr. Football Jersey’s pocket. I’d do anything to protect that boy: run over a foot, work three jobs to get him outa here, even endure bringing him back here to protect his future, his character, with today’s endeavor. Right now, I need to protect his sanity, his sense of well-being. I try to change the subject.

“Look, there’s our old apartment with the green carpet.”

Robbie barely remembers the old apartment, now with broken windows boarded up, a haven for vermin in all shapes and sizes. Nor does he remember our old life there, having left shortly after he started walking. Green, the only thing he remembers, carpet remnants from his crawling days. Lately, my pride and joy had been slacking off, taking too much for granted. Today was meant to be a lesson, a drive down Memory Lane. You know the routine — remember where you came from, appreciate what you have. Lofty maternal visions.

“There’s no way it can be mine,” he’d lied. “The doctors in the army said I couldn’t have any kids.”

“Well, I guess that makes this the Second Coming of Christ,” I thought. Imagine me, the second Blessed Virgin Mary. He was gone the next day. Cleared out the checking account, left me with the house payment, the bills. Left me with Colonel Sanders, our pet chicken rescued from a bouncing truck on the way back from our romantic trip to Mexico. He’d bought me a thin silver ring in Laredo and promised our life together would be forever happy. I believed him. That was the fall of 1975; I was three months pregnant, broke, twenty-five hundred miles from my fine Catholic family who couldn’t be told anyway, and moving into the apartment with green carpet.
Minutes later we finally arrive at our destination, the old church where Robbie had been
baptized as an infant twelve years earlier. The mobile health unit is just setting up shop out
behind the crumbling fixture in a portable metal shed with dingy, torn, pink curtains. A line is
already forming, so we venture out of the car, take our place. Robbie’s eyes don’t blink.

“Are you sure we lived here?” he pleads, hoping I’ll realize some colossal mistake and
jettison us back to the comfort of our three-bedroom house on the cul-de-sac.

Oh yeah, we lived there, just blocks away in the apartment with green carpet. No
furniture save the baby bed and playpen. Baby formula and two-liter Diet Cokes the lonely
inhabitants of the icebox. Teary mornings forcing myself out for yet another fifteen-hour shift
on numb feet—hey, at least I could get something to eat at the restaurant I worked in. People
always gave me that pitiful “I don’t know how you do it” look. Hell, you just do what you gotta
do. Dreams are just dreams, they stay in your head. Better off making plans. Truth be told,
Robbie saved my life. Gave me a reason to get up and grow up, never give up.

“Things were a lot different back then; don’t you remember the swimming pool? You
used to love it.”

“Sure, if you say so.” It’s obvious he feels like a stranger in a foreign land, wearing his
fear and anticipation like a sign on his forehead.

We wait silently, occasionally wiping the sweat from our faces, while barefoot women
with barefoot, runny-nosed children scratch and cackle like hens in a barnyard. Reminds me
of poor ol’ Colonel Sanders; I gave him to the neighbor kids two doors down when I had to
leave the old house. Last I heard their dog had had his way with my old feathered friend. Sad,
feels familiar. Rumor has it you could find feathers scattered three blocks down. I hope that
wretched beast got a good case of salmonella.
Finally, it's our turn to venture inside the temporary dwelling for the free booster shot. Robbie needs before going back to school. Mounting the two makeshift cinderblock steps and maneuvering the threshold, I hesitate, take a deep breath to ward off the trepidation threatening as my eyes pan the room. A filthy flowered sofa with more stuffing bulging out of the upholstery than in it slumps along the wall under the pink curtains we had seen from outside. Matronly nurses in white, with haimets and nylon knee-high stockings pinching their calves into rolls under their knees, sit at painted wooden tables. Years of layers of paint, in a rainbow of colors, carved clear through with graffiti, broken legs stabilized by dusty old books. I notice The Old Man and the Sea. What stories these tables could tell, I think; do I really want my son to be one of them? Do I really want him to be injected here, in this place? Is the lesson worth it?

We're led to a table; I look down and see "God Saves" carved right next to "life sucks." Robbie looks into my eyes, brows furrowed, silently begging. I keep my thoughts to myself, nod slowly, and watch the shimmering needle pierce his smooth, uncallused skin.

Finally outside the old neighborhood, I muster the courage to break the deafening silence.

"Well, how was your shot?"

"My shot? Who cares about the shot? I just don't ever want to go there again!"

I have to fight the smile threatening to give me away. It worked. It was worth it.

"Good, remember that. You know it's up to you."

"Yeah, I know . . . and, Mom?"

"Hmm?"

"I promise, I'm gonna be willing to do what I gotta do."
To Pen I Grip
Cynthia Thornton Herrera

With words I weave
These thoughts express
From dreams they drip
  Like from a sieve
They cascade down
  From silent lip
Through veins of hand
  To pen I grip

With words I grieve
As thoughts regress
Could dreams run dry
  Like riverbed
Of sands that sink
  From dying lip
Through shriveled hand
  To pen I grip
Duality of Man

Kevin D. Bowen
Second Place Prose Winner (Tie)

Blind Date
Lisa Garza

Elaine watched the lobsters jostle for position in the clear acrylic tank at The Mariner. Their claws were bound with brightly colored rubber bands. They reminded her of a video she had once seen of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s funeral where all of the mourners wore black arm bands. Maybe the lobsters mourned their own impending plunge into scalding water.

Elaine looked at her watch for the third time in two minutes. She realized that she no longer had a clear idea of what time it was, only that she had spent 22 minutes in the foyer of The Mariner waiting for Larry.

She paced over to the window and regarded the cars in the parking lot. Under her arm she carried a straw clutch. Why had she bought such a ridiculous purse? It was too flat to hold anything thicker than a checkbook. And the fact that it had no strap meant that for the duration of the evening, she was committed to clamping one arm to her side to keep the silly thing from falling to the floor. She had become a fashion paraplegic. Not unlike the lobsters. Instead of being bound with a large rubber band, she was crippled with a poorly designed purse.

She looked at the lobsters again. The bigger ones had blue bands. There were three of them. There were seven smaller ones with red bands. One particularly small lobster didn’t have a band at all. Maybe that’s why a stray red rubber band floated aimlessly through the stream of bubbles in the tank, slowly turning around and around, like an inner tube caught in a rip tide.

The door to The Mariner swung open and admitted an older couple. The man looked like Peter Jennings and the woman looked like Mrs. Bell, her science teacher from the 7th grade. Elaine imagined that they had been married for 33 years, had two daughters named Felicia and Ellie, and lived in a house with large pine trees in the front yard. Peter Jennings spent every Saturday morning raking the needles, while Mrs. Bell phoned Ellie long distance and baked cookies to take to Bible study on Sundays.
Maybe Larry would be her Peter Jennings. Thirty-three years from now, he would rake the needles from her flower beds, and she would phone their son who would be stationed in San Diego with the Marines.

The door swung open again, and a tall man filled the frame. He seemed to hesitate, as if he were sizing up a saloon full of outlaws before he swaggered in. This must be Larry.

“Sorry I’m late. Some asshole cut me off on the freeway, and I missed the damn exit. You must be Elaine,” said Larry.

“And you must be Larry,” said Elaine politely.

“I’ll get us a table. You smoke?”

“No, but we can sit in smoking if you prefer.”

“Naw, I quit a year ago.”

They were seated at a booth. Elaine ordered iced tea and Larry a Corona. The waitress returned a moment later with a tall lemon-topped glass full of weak tea the color of Southern Comfort. Larry drained the Corona in three swallows, four at the most, and then started on a second. Elaine spilled some Sweet and Low on the table. She thought the white grains looked like a miniature Milky Way on the smooth dark wood. It made her think of that Dr. Seuss book where an elephant discovers an entire world in a grain of dust.

The waitress returned to take their orders. Elaine decided on the shrimp Caesar salad with no croutons because she hated the crunching noise they made. Larry ordered the catfish basket.

While they waited for their food, Elaine learned that Larry had attended classes at Burdoyne Jr. College, had once been a starter on his high school football team, and now worked for Minor’s Office Supply as an inside sales rep. On Saturdays, he washed his Ford Ranger.

The waitress brought Elaine’s shrimp salad and placed the small ceramic bowl containing the dressing to the right of her plate. In front of Larry, she placed a red plastic basket piled high with shapeless pieces of fried catfish, skinny French fries, and two absurdly round hush puppies. Almost as an afterthought, she left two crimped paper cups filled with lumpy tartar sauce.
Larry immediately picked up a piece of fish that, to Elaine, looked exactly like a sperm whale. Which made her look at the tartar sauce and think of other things that were thick and white. She repressed a grin as Larry dipped his whale into the sauce.

Larry launched into a joke about a drunk who wanders into a confessional booth. By the time he got to the punch line—“There’s no toilet paper in here either!”—he was laughing so hard that a tiny flake of catfish flew out of his mouth and landed on Elaine’s forearm. She resisted the urge to hurl it off and instead surreptitiously wiped it away with her napkin. She was relieved to see that it looked like an intact piece of catfish rather than a chewed up one.

In between bites of French fries, which Larry ate in pairs and triplets, they discussed after dinner movie possibilities.

“I heard that A Beautiful Mind got really good reviews,” said Elaine.

“Is that the one about the psycho woman that has that secret code locked in her head? She keeps saying ‘I’ll never tell’?”

“No, that was Don’t say A Word. A Beautiful Mind is about a genius mathematician—“

“I always hated math,” Larry interrupted. “I had this gimp teacher in high school who walked around on crutches and, I swear, he hated my ass. Always marked my answers wrong.”

“What about Dragonfly?” suggested Elaine.

Larry looked as if he’s just found WD-40 on sale at Wal-Mart. “Is that the one about those choppers?”

“No, you’re thinking of Blackhawk Down. This one has Kevin Costner.”

“Aw, he sucks. Why don’t we go see the chopper one?” asked Larry.

“It’s supposed to be pretty gory. I hear that parts of it are too Saving Private Ryan.” As soon as the words left her mouth, Elaine realized her mistake. Larry’s face lit up like a Vegas slot machine spraying out buckets of quarters. As if to complete the illusion, another piece of food launched from Larry’s mouth, but this one missed its mark and landed like a comet in the middle of Elaine’s Sweet and Low universe.
Barely able to contain his excitement about seeing large military aircraft and their occupants being blown to bits, Larry finished the last bite of his fries. Elaine fully expected him to upend the basket to get the last of the crumbs into his mouth. Thankfully, he did not.

Larry asked for the check, and Elaine excused herself to go and powder her nose.

The ladies room featured impressionistic aqua wallpaper, meant to make you think you were underwater. She supposed it was some novice designer’s way of carrying out the nautical theme. She scrubbed her forearm where Larry’s fish had landed with the overly sweet, cherry scented pink liquid from the dispenser.

Elaine looked at her reflection in the mirror. The paper seemed to highlight the pink embroidery of her peasant blouse. She noted with satisfaction that her new blonde highlights accentuated her green eyes. A week of salads and Slim Fast seemed to have eliminated that extra two pounds. And the crippling straw clutch looked Barbie doll cute.

Elaine applied a generous coat of cherry lipstick and checked her teeth for bits of lettuce. Satisfied with her appearance, Elaine headed out of the ladies’ room and exited to the back of the restaurant. As she slid behind the seat of her Camry, she felt the wind lift the fried fish odor from her hair and clothes. On the way to the multiplex, she phoned her old friend, Marjorie Onstadt to see what institution “cousin Larry” had come out of. Maybe she would go see Blackhawk Down. It had gotten good reviews, and tonight Elaine felt as if she could handle anything.
Driving 85 down the slick, black highway
strung out on our powdery wife.
Reading Poppy Z. Brite by the light on the rear view mirror . . .
yellow hue on the molding page.

Hitting Numbers on a Friday night . . .
the club packed with white-faced babies.
Our limbs covered with black leather . . . white out contacts . . . fangs displayed
Laughing at the little girls trying to take us home.
Do you find us beautiful? our pale skin . . . our fierce eyes . . .
they ran home scared of the chuckling vampire brothers
we ruled that place.

Drinking Ecco Domani by the bayou, warm and green.
    New Orleans screaming at our backs, giving birth to sin and joy.
Merlot in hand as we contemplate the universe and all that lay beyond . . .
    how will our souls be re-incarnated? (you hated yourself even then)
This is what I Remember.

Ringing phone in twilight hours
    pulling my languid psyche from the daze of dream.
She was afraid for her son . . . her voice cracked and creaked like the wooden floor
    Muffled yells escaped from your parched lips . . .
    I was there with you, though you did not know.
Could feel the cold cylindrical tube pressed under you chin.

Standing in the scorching Houston sunrise
    white faces clad in black velvet raiments.
    Corrupted children . . . outcasts of an unsympathetic society. (you were their father)
Praying for a soul in the early morning light . . .
    even the make-up could not hide the purple bloated face

I left you a gift . . . the only one allowed, no one knew.
Cuddled up in your stiff hand . . . sterling silver eye of Ra.
    Now you can always wear yours too . . . it matches the tattoo on my left arm.
I can feel you around me . . . a soul such as yours is not allowed to pass.
    the harpies . . . do they tear off your leaves? Dante* said they would . . .
Hot tears rolling down my cheeks . . .
This is what I choose to Forget.

*See Canto XIII in Dante's *Inferno.*
Twisted Beauty

Michelle R. Buck
Damn it, Pookie
Chris Canter

I'm Pookie. I mostly live across the hall from Chris. Since I am a cat, my life primarily consists of two things: eating and sleeping. Of course, the fact that I have no responsibilities leaves me free to harass Chris at every turn. Oh, holy cow! There's the stopper to Chris' sink! I think this would look lovely in my pile o' stolen stuff, right next to the drain guard from his shower and the several pens I have stolen from him. He may come and yell, "Damn it, Pookie!!" whenever he finds my pile o' stolen stuff, but that only makes it more entertaining. Sometimes I'll climb behind his dresser so that I can unplug his network connection. He'll have to re-strip and re-crimp the RJ-45 connector, and he'll probably yell, "Damn it, Pookie!!" but that only makes it more entertaining.

Sometimes Chris' girlfriend will walk by. She likes me. She seems to think that I'm not evil, that Chris is only exaggerating. I'll let you in on a secret: I'm evil incarnate. Kelli (that's Chris' girlfriend) will come over and pet me, and I'll purr and look happy. If Chris ever tries to pet me, I'll go for a vein.

Sometimes I'll sit outside Chris' room at night and harass him. I'll scratch at the door and meow loudly. Sometimes I'll try to talk to Chris. I wait until he's almost asleep until I do any of these things; it's no fun if he's awake enough to come outside and yell at me.

I like to knock things down in the middle of the night. Once, Chris was foolish enough to set a big decorative wooden thing atop the bookshelf. He probably thought that since that bookshelf is about eight feet high that there would be no way I could possibly get up there. "Ha!" I thought to myself, "I can just use my Matrix jump and get atop that damned bookshelf." Of course, I wasted no time in knocking down that stupid wooden thing. Chris probably figured it was Armageddon or, at the very least, nuclear war. "Damn it, Pookie!" That's four "Damn it,
Pookies” already today. Wait, wait, it’s two in the morning, so that would be the first “Damn it, Pookie” of the day. I’ll try again at four A.M.

Sometimes I’ll go pick a fight with one of the other cats. You can’t always tell it’s me starting the fight. If the other cats spoke English, they’d probably say, “Damn it, Pookie.” I like the fact that my name is Pookie. It lets me get away with so much more. Since I am a completely black cat with yellow eyes, a name like “Demon Cat” or “Hell Spawn” might give my secret away. But who would ever suspect Pookie of plotting to destroy all that is good in this world? Chris, that’s who. And I’ll take care of him soon enough.

Sure, I might be going bald over my eyes, and the black on my tail might be turning a slight shade of umber, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to die anytime soon. I’m not even two years old, which means that I’ll be around for probably another 10 years. Since I live inside the house, Chris can’t “accidentally” run over me three times with his car. I also can’t “accidentally” fall into the pool or not get out of the way of the lawnmower. So unless I happen to choke on one of the seventeen hairballs I leave around the house everyday for Chris to deal with, I ought to be around for a while. Once Chris left for the weekend, and he saw that every few hours there was activity on his computer at home. He probably thought it was one of his sisters, but it was really I, Pookie, purveyor of all that is wretched and evil in this world. I will be his undoing one day.
Second Place Poetry Winner

When You Are Gone
Lynda Long

When you are gone,
I shall eat cereal for supper
And lasagna for breakfast;
I will religiously dog-ear the pages
Of every book in my library,
Particularly those I do not intend to read;
I shall throw away the TV,
Disconnect the telephone,
And post gargoyles at the gate.
When you are no longer here,
I will gleefully shatter
All the ordinary, practical, everyday dishes
Then use their multicolored shards
To make mosaic stepping stones
For my solitary garden.
The Sacrifice
Jennifer Hagan

The rain was splattering against my bedroom window. The clock told me I had five more minutes until it would blare in my ear. The thought of another day was reassuring. I could start this day fresh and get everything accomplished that was set forth in my routine schedule of meetings and appointments.

I snuggled my head back into the down pillow. My body heat warmed the blankets that lay on top of me. Yes, this was going to be a great day. Then the alarm tore into my romantic dreams of a wonderful day. It was time to get started. I was dressed and ready to go before it was time to leave. I took this opportunity to read the newspaper and catch myself up on yesterday's events.

The drive into work went well, too. Hardly any traffic stood in my way of productivity. As I walked into the large marble foyer of the office, my secretary stood waiting for me with a cup of black coffee. She knew just how to say good morning. She followed me into my office and closed the door after her. I just looked wonderingly into her innocent face and questioned what was to come next.

"Maggie, your mother just called a few minutes ago. Your grandmother passed away this morning."

I was dumbfounded. Thoughts of the sweet elderly woman rushed my mind. How could this happen? She was so healthy. Last week at the doctor's office, she was informed that her health was great and she would live another ten years. I quickly called my mother to find out what happened.

"Mom, it's Maggie, what happened?"
“She killed herself. The note said . . . she did not want to live any longer. She had lived and experienced everything. She killed herself.”

I could hardly make out what my mother was saying through sobs of tears running down her face. I understood that Grandma had killed herself, but it still did not make sense to me that she did not want to live. My grandmother was the strongest woman I knew. She retired at the young age of 82 to travel around the world. After five years of seeing Europe and China, she decided to live with my mother and father. She wanted to see her family and keep close to the ones that she loved.

I immediately told my secretary to reschedule all of my appointments and meetings for next week. I had to leave and figure out what was going to happen. As I walked to my vehicle, I took extra notice of the stains in the concrete. Some of them looked like Mickey Mouse; others took the shape of flowers. Grandma loved roses. She would often talk about how my grandfather used to send them to her. He would simply put a note on them saying that he loved her and it was just because. I had never known my grandfather, but through her stories, I knew him enough to understand his love for my grandmother.

I stumbled into my car and tried my best not to cry. I would mourn later tonight when I only had myself to console my new wound. As I turned the ignition on, I wondered what I would be faced with at my parents. My mother was very close to Grandma, but I was the pick of the pack. Whenever there was a family gathering, Grandma would sit next to me. She would often call me at work just to see how things were going. We were usually together on the weekends and when I had time.
The traffic decided to wake up and keep me from moving any quicker than a snail. As I turned up the radio to find out which roads were the worst, thoughts of my grandmother crawled into my head.

I was thinking about the past Thanksgivings. As tradition, I helped Grandma make the turkey and dressing. She was kidding me about the fact that everyone in the family had no idea that I made the turkey and dressing. For years we had played this trick on everyone. No one realized that Grandma had arthritis so bad in her hands except me. I was the one who clued into the fact that one day a family member would be responsible for making the famous turkey and dressing. I quickly asked if I could help Grandma. She said yes, but we would keep it our secret. If anyone else knew that I helped make the mouth-watering dish, it would be ruined. I knew this too from past experience. Everybody in the family swore that Grandma spit into the dressing, because if someone else even attempted to make the recipe, it would fail. One year, my aunt tried to make the exact replica, and the dog would not even sniff it. The next time someone else tried it, it was used as a plate to put the other hot dishes on. I was the only one in the family who knew the secret. Keep adding turkey broth. If the dressing were too dry, all the ingredients would lose their flavor or turn out like a brick. For fifteen years, I had kept the tradition going without anyone knowing. I chuckled to myself remembering how Grandma loved the secret we kept from everyone.

Her eyes used to light up with delight every time I walked into a room. She would reach high above her petite figure just to put her arms around my neck and give me a hug. Every week, she would pester my mother to drive her to my place so we could go out to dinner, just my grandmother and I. I would always offer to go over to
their house and pick her up or eat with my folks. Grandma would just shake her head and say that we needed to talk about the week’s events together, and it was not a problem for my mother to drop her off. She would never tell me about her week. She always asked me about the cases that I was working on or whom I had gone on a date with. She loved to hear about my life. In so many ways, I think she lived through me. Since her arthritis had gotten progressively worse over the years, she would stay home and watch TV. Every once in a while, she would stitch a handkerchief, but only if she had taken an extra pill.

I was finally at my mother’s house. A police car was in the driveway, and my father was on the porch smoking a cigarette. I slowly walked over to him and gave him a reassuring smile. My father just looked at me and asked if I was okay. I wanted to scream that of course I was not okay. My beautiful frail grandmother had just taken her life. Instead, I got tears in my eyes and let him hold me close. He smelled just like the cigarette. His warmth could not comfort me, but instead it chilled my bones. The wind swirled a leaf by his foot, and then the rain started to patter on the concrete sidewalk. My grandmother was dead.

Dad pushed me back from his embrace for just a moment. He looked deep into my watery eyes and, without even opening his mouth, said that everything would be okay. He knew I would be the one to suffer the most, but he also knew that I would never show this much emotion again until after the funeral.

“Maggie, your grandmother left a note just for you. We have not opened it.”

I looked at him in disbelief. What did she have to say? I instantly walked into the house and went straight to my grandmother’s room. I stood outside her door for what
seemed like an eternity. I wondered what would greet me inside. Finally, my hand reached the doorknob, and I slowly twisted the handle. I peeked inside, as a child would hoping not to get caught. I stood at the entrance into her perfectly white doily room. I still felt her presence. She was there with me. I could feel her spirit taking me to every corner, examining every picture, every knickknack, and everything that my grandmother kept as her possessions looking for a letter. Her sweet perfume filled my nostrils. The crisp white down comforter was aching for a warm body to make wrinkles. Then the letter appeared. It was in a baby blue envelope with a matching baby blue ribbon. My name was written in her distinctive cursive handwriting. I picked up the letter and carefully ran my manicured nail under the flap.

To my Dearest Maggie,

I love you. You were always willing to go the extra mile to make me comfortable and happy. I could not go until you know the reasons. About a month ago, I had a dream that you would meet the man who would one day take my place in your heart. In the dream, he was the police officer who questioned your mother about my death. I did kill myself, and everyone should know this. I was tired of living through you. You have your own life, and I feel as though I have kept you from living it. Things happen for a reason. I made this happen. Go now to the man in the room with your mother. Comfort her and bring him a glass of water. Everything else will work out.

Maggie, I will always be with you. Keep the tradition of Thanksgiving alive. If need be, tell the rest of the family you had me spit into a jar, and that is the reason you can make my turkey and dressing.

Love always, and I’m looking forward to being your guardian angel,

Grandma XOXO
My heart stopped. I stood in disbelief. Grandma never believed the dreams that she had. She was not a superstitious woman. As I was thinking about all the reasons that this could not be true, her spirit filled the room. Once again, I could breathe in her perfume. She led me to the kitchen, where I poured a glass of water. As I walked into the living room where my mother was, I stood in a trance. The police officer and I looked into each other’s eyes.

“That is how I met your father. It was because of your great grandmother that my life is now complete,” Maggie stated.

“Mom, don’t you miss her?” my daughter innocently asked.

“Sometimes I do. But I named you Anastasia after her. Every time I look at you, I see her. You help me get through the rough times, just like she did.”
Mary
Amanda Zirgulis

I have forgotten how to be nice. I occasionally display examples of evil, and this, for some strange reason, cannot be stopped. It is actually a grave predicament, one that I am not accustomed to. I stare blankly at people and say insensitive things. For some bizarre reason, I can't stop myself.

This girl, Mary, at work set her lunch down on the table I was sitting at the other day. It was her break, and she was buzzing about her shift. The white trash that left her three dollars on eighty, how Mindy messed up her food, and how ninety-three didn't get their crab cakes till dessert. I sat there, looking at her face. She looked like she had Down's syndrome. Her blond hair was dry like summer grass plagued with no rain. Her stubby fingers picked at her tangerine, its bright orange skin taut; there was no way her nubs were going to get through. I started to get angry. The hardwood back to the bench I was sitting on was disrupting my vertebrae, and my feet ached. Her washed-out blue eyes seemed cross-eyed as she focused all her energy on the smooth waxy skin of the tangerine. Her silver band on her middle finger seemed like it would never come off, her skin almost growing over it, burrowing the metal strip in layers of her annoying, wrinkled forefinger. She clenched her jaw at the tangerine, as she looked around for a sharp object. She noticed Coffey, and her face lightened.

Coffey approached us. Coffey's last name was Coffey but people at work called him Decaf. He was tall and lanky and rested his gangly wrists on the formica counter. He smiled at Mary, and her face broke into a goofy grin showing her crooked teeth and yellowing tongue.
She sighed flirtatiously. Her directionally-lost eyes rested on him, and the most horrifically nasal drone filled airspace.

"Can you help me with this?" She held up the firm tangerine. She seemed unaware of my anger. I could see saliva at the corner of her mouth, glistening in the light. He reached out to take the tangerine from her animal-paw grasp, but I was quicker. I grabbed it, felt its beauty, and threw it as hard as I could. It sailed through the air, past the bar, knocking over a bottle of Tanqueray that was on the counter. It hit the glass pane window with a thud and then fell, landing perfectly in the corner of the wall next to the jukebox. The one with the meager five cd’s. Dust was temporarily disturbed, and the tangerine sat, no longer mauled by Mary.

Coffey, Mary, and I looked at the tangerine, then at each other. "I didn’t want you to destroy it," I stammered. She glared at me, looked sort of confused and angry. Her already abnormal facial features seemed twisted and humorous, so I laughed. She looked shocked, ran up past Coffey and into the ladies’ room.

"You are really something." Coffey looked at me, stone faced, composure kept. He sauntered away, and I sat, transfixed on the tangerine. I felt bitter like old citrus acid. Later, when we were both working, Mary and I didn’t make eye contact, and when night came, and it got late, I went home. As I was leaving the restaurant, I looked in the corner for the tangerine, but it was gone. It did leave a mark on the windowpane though, a round smudge on the Windexed glass.
A Turn In Thoughts
James Womac

As a kid, I was exposed to many illegal activities. My father was a “big time” crack-cocaine dealer and had several ties to the local Crips gang in the Fifth Ward of Houston. I can remember riding around with him in his blood red Cadillac through the barely lit streets for hours at a time. The people that he would meet used to scare me just to glance at them. They wore clothes that helped them blend into the night. When the car would stop, one of these men would seem to pop out of nowhere and be at the window exchanging money with my father. Sometimes he would give them small packages, and other times they would give him little brown paper sacks stuffed with money. These are the very vague memories of the beginning of my life of crime.

When I was three, the F.B.I., the D.E.A., and the H.P.D. Narcotics Division raided our house. I heard a loud pounding on the front door. This was unusual because I did not hear the creaking of the front glass door before the pounding started. My father disappeared into the back room, but I could still hear him shouting obscenities from the front room. He reappeared moving quickly towards the front while he was inserting his ammunition clip into his AK-47. The sound of the clip going into his gun was the last noise I heard that night. Everything became silent for what seemed like an eternity but was probably a split second. I saw the door fly open, and there was a blinding flash of white light. I could barely see, but I did manage to peek around the couch to see many men in black tactical gear rushing in. Gunfire broke out when they entered my house, and I watched my father blast off round after round. The shots stopped as my father surrendered his weapon and his freedom. My mother was caught in the crossfire and was shot and killed at some point during the outrage. My father ended up on Death Row because one of
the agents was also shot. To this day I vividly have the whole scene in my head like a Hollywood movie.

Myself, I got sent to a home for orphan children. The house was not a horrible place to be. During my stay there I became the outcast to all the other kids. They never accepted me, or maybe it could have been me that never accepted anyone else. I became a cold-hearted kid that would never allow anyone into my life. I became very lonely and made new enemies in the house every day. I can remember many times getting swats due to my fighting with the other kids. All this hostility produced a constant growing anger inside of me. I blamed the whole situation on the law enforcement and our legal system. I truly believed that my father’s incarceration and my mother’s death were these people’s fault.

At the age of 13, I fled from the home and managed to make it down to Galveston, Texas. I started staying underneath piers and bridges. The dark nights of loneliness made me second guess my decision on leaving the orphanage. There were not anymore hot meals or adults for guidance. I learned to eat off others’ scrap food and dig through trash from all the tourists. Everyday on the streets my survival became more difficult. Until one summer night I meet a guy named “Shooter.” He took me in and let me hang out with him and his friends. He called his friends his brothers, and I was instantly impressed with these guys. My lifelong feelings of loneliness seemed to go away. I began to hang out all the time with my newfound friends. I would run them errands, and they would pay me so I started to get an income also. At the age of 15, I was recruited for good into the gang. I started out as a collector/gunman. I would go and collect debts owed. Many times the money would not be there, so I would have to kill. I saw many violent, bloody deaths. Sometimes even innocent bystanders on the street were brutally shot down by my own gunfire. As time passed by, I moved up in the ranks. On my 18th birthday, I was promoted
off of the streets and given my own neighborhood to run. At this point in time, I felt like my father. I could feel his power. The things I saw as a young kid allowed me to live this lifestyle with no remorse or hard feelings. I truly believed that this was the way for me in life.

Now it has been a good ten years since I first became a habitual criminal, and I sit in an 8 by 10 cell, which will be my home for the rest of my life. The Galveston Police found bullet shells with my prints on them at the scene of a shootout that killed a woman and her three-year-old boy. Here I think all day and all night about my past life outside. My thoughts and outlook on life have made a big change. I am finally angry with my father because I am no longer a naïve 3 year old that was unaware at the time that what he was doing was wrong. It wasn’t the federal agents or the system that was at fault. It was my father who was responsible for my mother’s death, my life as an orphan, and my street lifestyle that led me to this place in my life. To me it is odd how these life experiences changed the outcome of my future. I ask myself one simple but complicated question every day. What would my life be like if my father had chosen the normal lifestyle?
Third Place Poetry Winner

Photographs In My Mind
Jim Skinner

I look at the old photographs,
black and gray,
on shadows of white.
I see the blurred lines,
the black eyes, grey faces, white hair,
a young man, white shirt, black pants,
standing in back of an old gray Chevy,
under the summer trees
with grey leaves
arm around parents in this one,
next to a young woman in that one,
captured in shades of light.

My parents,
I touch the faces I see,
but I feel only the glossy paper.
No rough stubble of a beard,
no warm skin,
no hot breath.
No love,
not real.

I see the past,
my past,
in these old photographs.
I quickly turn the page,
of the album.
I cannot look anymore.
These people are gone now,
only colorless photographs,
on a black background,
on the pages,
in my mind.

I see the future,
of when another son,
will look at the old photographs,
of me and her,
touch the paper,
remembering the feel,
the rough stubble of beard,
warm skin,
hot breath,
unconditional love.
Were we real?
Were we in color?
Second Place Winner (Tie)

Tokens
Lisa Garza

When I was in the third grade, I was absolutely smitten with Michael Vancura. St. Paul’s Lutheran was full of square-headed Norwegians that had lived in isolation for so long that, like those big turtles in the Galapagos, we all started looking vaguely alike. Michael arrived in October with angular Mediterranean features and a smooth olive skin. That, coupled with the fact that he could make farting noises with his armpit and he once hit Margerie Onstadt in the head while playing dodge ball, made him irresistible. I used to look at his back during class and wonder if his silky black hair was as soft as it looked. I would imagine running my fingers through it but would stop with embarrassment, sure that he would know that I was thinking about him.

I used to want to sit by him at lunch. But of course the boys sat at one table and the girls at another. Not that I actually wanted to talk to him. Just to be near him and his coal black hair would be enough. Just imagine if we would lie close enough together so that our hair would touch—his black, my blonde. . . . Thinking like that always gave me a funny feeling in the pit of my stomach.

During art one day, we were coloring pre-drawn pictures of dinosaurs. “Stay in the lines, boys and girls,” droned Mrs. Greer. She was way too tall and had no husband. She still used the honorific “Mrs.” but we had never seen her sit with a man at church. He must have left her, the circumstances of which occupied the girls’ conversations for several recesses at the beginning of the school year.

I glanced up at Michael, who sat in the front row. He was just turning to talk with Benny Starr, probably to ask him if he knew how tall I was or if I like Red Hots as he planned to bring me some tomorrow. He had warm brown eyes the color of Hershey bars. I could see, even from three chairs back, the longest set of lashes in the entire school, maybe even our whole city. Maybe even on planet Earth.

He had a box of 64 crayons. The rest of us lived with frugal parents who had been through a major depression and were, in fact, still depressed. The box of 36 was perfectly sufficient for the third grade. Margerie Onstadt had to deal with a box of 12. But Michael had 64.
I examined the crayons in my own box. They had belonged to my sister Robin the year before. Although she had tended her charges carefully and lost not a single sheep to the Crayola wolf, they nonetheless showed their age. Their paper wrappers were spotted with small bits of wax from the other colors. All had had to be sharpened at least once, and thus they were different heights when standing in their box. The box itself was held together at the bottom with a strip of masking tape to keep them from falling out.

We finished our pictures, and Mrs. Greer said that she would hang the nicest ones on the bulletin board. Margerie Onstadt’s black triceratops was put aside. She hadn’t stayed in the lines. She sifted through Benny’s sky blue allosaurus, Chucky’s red violet stegosaurus and Teena’s tan duck bill. Then she stapled my forest green brontosaurus right next to Michael’s magenta T rex! I felt my face heat up, probably the same color as the crayon I clutched in my hand—carnation pink.

Our two pictures, side by side. It had to be a sign.

The bell rang and we lined up for recess. I managed to get in line just behind Michael and when the cumulative impatience reached critical mass and kids started pushing, I felt myself propelled into Michael’s back and a whole universe of dark black hair.

We filed outside into an oppressive heat that could sap the energy out of a room full of monkeys. The girls gathered under the large oak tree and designed houses in the dry dirt, complete with oak leaf tables and acorn children. The boys began a game of kickball, sure to leave them breathless, sweaty and in danger of heat stroke. Marjorie Onstadt watched the entire proceedings from the shade of the janitor’s shed.

I wasn’t interested in pretending to mother an inanimate seed from a tree. I couldn’t play kickball—what would everyone think? Marjorie was out of the question. So I went to the restroom.

“Can’t you hold it?” asked Mrs. Greer. I feigned a look of pain that said an accident could be imminent if the delay was too long, and she let me return to the cool dark of the school. I dawdled in the hall, examining the kindergarten artwork projects: angels on blue construction paper made by using their own handprints as the wings. Our classroom door stood open.

The lights in the room were off. Through the windows, I could see that the playground outside looked like Carolyn Lindstrom’s Easy Bake oven with a fresh bulb. Thus, I could see out, but no one else would be able to see in. The girls argued under the oak tree. Marjorie Onstadt fiddled with the heavy Masterlock on the stainless steel hasp of the shed. I couldn’t see the boys, but I could hear the thwack of the red rubber ball being kicked and someone
shouting, “Run for it, Mikey!” Mrs. Greer stood on the sidewalk and smiled at Mr. Toppel, the math teacher. She absently fingered the silver whistle around her neck which she will put to her lips in a moment to call us in.

I find myself standing at the front of the room from Mrs. Greer’s viewpoint. I envy that she can see Michael from the front whenever she wants. I walk over to his desk and run my finger along its laminated surface. There is a pencil smudge that he probably made himself during math this morning, one that the janitor will wipe away forever tonight. I rub the lead into the grooves of my fingertip.

I kneel down and peer into the cramped cubby beneath the desktop. There is the box of 64 that he had put away just moments ago when we walked out for recess. With trembling hands, I remove the box, carefully noting its position. The back of the box has a built in sharpener. I open the lid, and my nostrils are filled with the heavy, waxy scent of Crayolas: burnt umber, periwinkle, goldenrod, silver for Christ’s sake! All standing in neat orderly rows like a choir in a stadium. When Michael opens this box, each crayon will have a perfect unobstructed view.

I withdraw one, not the silver. That’s too much. But the magenta, the one he just used. I imagine his fingerprints on the crayon’s smooth paper wrapper. Would they line up with the same lead smudged ridges on my own hands? The magenta crayon has a smooth, factory sharpened point. It is a deep rich color, too red to be purple, too purple to be red. I have lived nine years on this earth, but nothing in my life is colored magenta.

I put the crayon in the pocket of my blue gingham jumper and walk back out to the playground. I feel like I’ve been turned inside out and my eyes are now watching the inside of me. Will anyone see the bulge? Will they wonder why I won’t take my hand out of my pocket? If I keep fingering the crayon, will I smudge the liquid smoothness of the wax or rub off Michael’s fingerprints?

Magenta. That night I wrapped the crayon carefully in a Kleenex, like a baby, and put it in my jewelry box where it would be safe. I think I still have it in a box somewhere, along with other things that I have collected over the years—one of Carolyn Harris’s rhinestone barrettes, a maroon pen that says “Lutheran Aid Society” from Pastor Ingersoll’s desk, a bottle with three pale blue Valium tablets from Mark Baxter, whom I dated briefly in college.

Michael had to know that one of his crayons was missing the next time that he opened the box. Their orderly rows would now lean like Saturday night drunks, upset over the loss of their brother. As far as I know, Michael never suspected me of stealing his color. But to this day, the scent of crayons makes me think of the third grade, Michael Vancura, and magenta.
Window on the World
Alan M. Toback

A wooden window frame . . .
In a run-down two-story house
An upstairs bedroom with many wonderful memories

A wooden window frame . . .
Six panels of old glass, frosted over with scenes of yesteryear
Looking through at the world outside
A world filled with love, hate, joy and sadness
A world that searches for forgiveness of its sins

How can I see this world?
Where is this place of salvation?
I am alone here, sitting in a chair by the window, in total darkness.
The muted sun fills the east side of the room,
Bringing a warm glow to my face,
As the earth turns its magical circle.
I sit here alone waiting, listening to an expressive world.
The robin redbreast sings outside the window.
A soft breeze rustles the tree branches,
Shaking them against the lower pane.
I can hear the sounds of cars passing in the street below.
People talking, a radio playing loud music, all reaching up to encircle my ears
This life I live is limiting, but fulfilling in many ways.

A wooden window frame . . .
A looking glass on the world
Seeing with eyes that do not see
Eyes that still sense beauty
Eyes that never tasted the sight of a lovely smile, an admiring glance
But I do not want or need pity.
I have survived these 30 years,
Seeing with my heart, my thoughts, my other senses,
to show me what eyes have never seen.
Folded Space

Allison Tipton
Are You Male, Female, or EMale?:
A Conspirator’s Insight On Embarrassment
Natalie Badillo

Cautiously I peered into the empty dining room; seeing the coast was clear, I put “it” on the center of the cedar table and quickly left the room. “Whew... I did it!” My heart was pounding as loud as a bass drum, but finally, my deception was complete. I began to relax; for a brief moment I was a confident five year old, basking in the knowledge that I was about to pull a slick one on my mom. But then my mother entered the room, and she saw “it.” I knew my moment of truth had arrived. Soon my clever deception turned into humiliation, and I experienced the most embarrassing moment of my young life.

But first let me give you a little background. It all began when mother enrolled me in a very studious private kindergarten, Saint Edward’s Catholic School. Having had just recently celebrated my fifth birthday, I was the youngest in my K5-6 class; my youth caused me to feel that I had to be somewhat different in order to fit in with the other children. By different, I mean I became the class clown. Needless to say, I had numerous “little chats” with my teacher and principal—often on a daily basis. In fact, in my first year of elementary education, I set a grand record for the number of meetings I had with school officials; it could have been the most documented year in the history of world records of young schemers. Every day, our teacher, Mrs. Estes, would use a stamp as an incentive for good behavior. If you were good that day, you received a happy face on the top of your hand, and if you were bad, you received a sad face. As you might guess, my stature as class clown kept my collection of smiley faces to a bare minimum. Unwilling to recognize my “leadership” skills, Mrs. Estes marked me almost daily with sad faces, causing me to retreat routinely to the little girls’ room at 3 o’clock where I would scrub off the sad face until my hand was red. Only then could I go home and face my beloved mother who had such high expectations of me. No way would I let her see my daily dose of sad faces! Because of my diligent scrubbing, I felt confident my mother was unaware of my true behavioral status.

However, when report card time came around, I started to get worried—not about my academic grades, but about my behavior grade. Heightening my worry was that St. Edward’s had a rule: when we received our report cards, we were not allowed to look at them without our parents’ supervision. Well, let’s just say I decided to ignore that rule. So before school had ended that day, I had “innocently” managed to peek at my report card in order to be prepared for a one-on-one confrontation with my mom later in the day. AAAAAAGGGHHH!!!! My mom
was going to have my hide! Our class had progressed far enough through the alphabet that I recognized I had an “F” on my report card! Just the mere thought of that letter on my report card was unbearable and made me cringe. That letter, reeking of pure evil, was in bold black ink, brightly displaying itself on my report card! I had to do something about this grade! I could not let my mom see what had become of me; I would be a true disappointment.

I knew I must do something with this grade and quickly. When I got home, I ran straight to my room, trying to think of a way to make that horrible “F” disappear. Suddenly, a thought clicked. I could “white-out” that “F” and then write in an “E” with a bold black pen. “Oh yeah. I’m a genius!” After I was finished replacing the wicked “F” with the good “E,” I set the report card on the kitchen table, ready for my mom’s review. I was so relieved that I had thought of such a clever way to trick my mom.

Unfortunately, when my mom finished surveying my report card, she called me into the kitchen to discuss my grades. First, she asked me if I had looked at my report card before I gave it to her; I said what any young kid in my situation would do. I lied with the utmost sincerity that I could muster. But then she looked at me with “mommy” eyes... you know, the kind of eyes that burn into your soul so deeply that the intensity just makes you want to confess at all costs, the kind of eyes that tell you that she already knows you are up to something, so you had better spill out the truth. Next, she showed me the letter grade that she was suspicious about. It was the brutal “F” that I had changed into an innocent “E.” She steadfastly asked me what this particular “E” stood for, and I proudly told her that it stood for “excellent.” She then explained that an “E” in this part of the report card was not possible. In fact, she continued, there were only two letters in the entire alphabet that could go in this spot. Needless to say, those two letters were “M” and “F”—and were preceded by the word “Sex.” Alas. My clever plot wasn’t so clever.

Thus, at the wise old age of five, I learned my lesson. The simple truth I learned was this: if I am going to try to “pull a slick one” on my mom, I had better learn how to read first. Once I understood what my mom had explained to me, I felt incredibly silly and realized that things are best when they are left alone. Now, every time I receive a grade I regret, my conscience takes me back to when I attempted the easy way out. I will never forget how red my face turned when I realized that I had unknowingly changed myself from a “female” to an “emale.”
Miss Pancake
Cynthia Thornton Herrera

She's the miniature of a woman,
Young, graceful and pure.
I so much want to embrace her
And keep her in this mold,
This form of innocence
That arises each morning refreshed,
Happy, fruitful and ambitious.
Bright-eyed and juvenile,
Not knowing of the metamorphosis
That grows elegant inside her
And shapes with angelic hands, the curves
Of her nose, her cheeks, her lips, the hips
And parts between faint fingertips
Stretching her childish remains vulnerable
From bone, to muscle, to forehead dome.
But she still likes to stay at home
And sleep with me late on Sunday morn
And beg for pancakes and eggs at noon.
So I feed this child who grows inside
And take the blame for her sparkly eyes
That someday won't look on me the same
When her heart swells from some other affection
And shatters her childish form.
I will miss her youthful face,
Her pumpkin smiles
And syrupy chin.
I'll know how powerful is time
And pancakes.
South Padre Bay

Sarah Coronado
Melissa’s Sestina
Mary M. Mancl

To us she arrived, a gift in a storm,
A light so bright in her father’s vision.
What wonders ahead for this child soft.
And to us all she gave her permission
To be safe, unencumbered by demons.
Beautiful child whose life promised truth.

She grew wild, filled with innocent truth.
Energy, curiosity a storm,
Her mother teased was dancing with demons.
On tiptoes she twirled around a vision,
Inner song singing happy permission
Frenzied, spinning dizzy, she landed soft.

Girlfriends conspired, their teenage breasts soft.
With plans to seek freedom, stretching the truth,
They sneak out of school lacking permission.
Top down, tops off, daring the pending storm.
Wild abandon blurring her vision,
She never flinched as on watched the demons.

Muscle and teeth and charm disguised demons
Teased and tore and fractured her young heart soft.
Until at last a sealed fatal vision,
A trance too strong to predict the whole truth.
Her love exploded emotions of storm
And blind passion surrendered permission.

At the altar the judge gave permission
To love and own and protect from demons,
But he was the thunder, she in a storm,
As new life bloomed in her belly so soft.
Was for this new love, her ultimate truth,
Bleeding eyes opened wide to the vision.

To her she arrived, a saving vision,
New strength in new life grants her permission.
Freedom to break out and write out the truth,
Now safe, secure, though still plagued by demons.
Her kindness preserved, restored her touch soft,
Teaching and reaching, defying the storm.

Melissa knows truth stamps out the demons,
Her vision of life needs no permission
To love the soft girl, her will to conquer the storm.
Visitor
Christina Frisbie

The clock's ticking seemed to magnify in volume with every passing second. *How much longer could this possibly take?* Lisa thought. Her husband Rick was simply supposed to go pick up a few items at the store and come right back. This Halloween they had decided to forego the parties in favor of handing out candy to the trick-or-treaters and enjoy a relaxing evening together. Maybe there was a mob of last-minute shoppers this evening, and the lines were long. She glanced out the window for maybe the hundredth time. The setting sun was casting its golden glow across the cooling landscape, silhouetting the jagged branches of the trees. A lone bicyclist pedaled by in shorts and slip-on sandals; he seemed oblivious to the dropping temperatures and encroaching darkness.

Lisa's thoughts were suddenly disrupted by the offensive blaring bass of a would-be rapper across the street. *I'm all for music appreciation,* she thought, *but I like to be able to choose what music I hear in my own home,* dammit! Lisa started to march towards the door to notify the Inconsiderate twerp that not everyone shared his musical taste but soon realized how tense she was becoming as she waited for Rick to return. *Dismiss these negative thoughts; this night is supposed to be fun,* she told herself.

Finally, she heard the sound of shuffling on the front porch, the doorknob turning, and some fumbling. Heading for the door. Lisa noticed through the small window above the door that there was no light on the front porch, although she could have sworn she had turned it on earlier. It couldn't have burned out already—she had just replaced a few days ago. *Very odd,* she thought.

"Rick?" Lisa called out as she approached the door, but there was no answer. The noises abruptly stopped. Lisa stopped in her tracks. A quick, sharp chill ran up her spine, and her instincts were suddenly on high alert. Her mind raced, torn between what she wanted to believe—that it was Halloween, and Rick or someone was playing a trick—and something more ominous.

She backed up quietly and went for the phone, deciding to call Rick's cell phone to see what the hell was going on. That's when she noticed his phone on the kitchen
counter where he had once again forgotten it in his hurry. Damn! Lisa turned off the hall light, suddenly aware that she might be easily seen by someone from the dark outside. She had always believed in trusting her gut instinct, and it was telling her to be on guard and take some immediate precautions.

Lisa quickly and quietly checked the locks on the doors and windows around the house, all the while feeling like she was being watched. She knew where Rick kept a rifle hidden, but she had never fired it, and was not going to consider that as an option now—not after what she had witnessed as a child.

Her family had never had guns in the house when Lisa and her sister were growing up, and had never had a need for one. Then, at the age of 12, she had witnessed Donna—her 15 year-old drugged-out neighbor (and former friend)—shoot herself in the chest with her father’s .44 magnum. Donna miraculously survived but certainly not unscathed. The bullet missed her heart by an inch and had collapsed a lung, and she had lost a great deal of blood. She had eventually healed physically, but psychologically, she seemed irreparably wounded for life. Ever since then, Lisa had especially loathed the sight and existence of guns. Rick and his family had always had handguns around, and he claimed he never had a bad experience because of them. He seemed to conveniently forget about the time that his alcoholic father accidentally shot himself when he stuck a loaded gun in the back of his waistband.

Now alone, Lisa figured out her options. She kept the portable phone in her hand, went to her nightstand drawer, and fished out the stun gun she kept there. That was the only kind of gun that she felt comfortable enough to handle. She had never used it on anyone but checked it periodically to make sure the battery was still in good working condition. Turning off the safety switch, she pressed the trigger, and the blue lightning of voltage zapped loudly between the metal prongs. She locked herself in the bedroom and decided to wait quietly, hoping that Rick would come through the door at any moment. She would be relieved, find out what was going on, and THEN kick his ass for leaving his phone here when she really needed to reach him. A few more minutes passed, and Lisa felt the sweat beading on her brow, every nerve on end.
Suddenly, there was a loud banging at the back of the house, as if someone were trying to break a window in. Lisa was terribly scared, but kept her wits about her, dialing 911, and keeping her stun gun ready.

"911, what's your emergency?" the operator drawled, and Lisa explained as calmly as she could that someone was trying to break into her house at this very moment.

"I'll have to refer you to your local sheriff's office because you are located outside the Houston city limits," replied the operator. Lisa wanted to come through the phone, and smack this drone in the head.

"Listen, I need someone out here RIGHT NOW!!" Lisa snarled, trying with all her might to not panic. The banging resumed, and Lisa prayed that this conversation would not wind up on one of those unsolved mysteries police shows with her picture listed under "Victim."

"I'm sorry, but you need to speak with someone at the sheriff's office. Let me give you their number," replied the calloused nitwit. Unbelievable! Lisa was exasperated. She must have the IQ of a houseplant!

"Can you at least transfer me there?!

"No, ma'am. You'll have to call them directly. Here's the number: 713-221-6000."

Click. Lisa had no more rational words for that idiot, hung up on her, and frantically dialed the sheriff's number, as she repeated it to herself.

"Sheriff's office. How can I help you?" answered an astute female voice on the phone, giving Lisa a quick flash of relief.

"Someone's trying to break into my house! Please send someone over here right now!" cried Lisa.

"What are you hearing? Are they there right now?" asked the deputy after verifying the address.

Lisa paused and listened. The banging had stopped. She didn't know if she should be relieved or even more scared.
"No, there was someone banging on the back of my house a minute ago, but it seems to have stopped. I don't know if they are still there, though."

"We'll send someone right over to check it out."

"Please hurry. Thank you!"

Lisa hung up the phone and played the waiting game again. She knew there was a police substation maybe five minutes away, so a cop would be there shortly. Yeah, right. The silence was becoming deafening, and Lisa's anger was increasing with every passing minute.

Then she heard the front door open and close. Lisa was ready to stun gun, kick, fight and scream whatever or whomever confronted her.

"Lisa?" she heard Rick call out, sounding a bit alarmed.

A wave of emotion crashed over her, and she bolted out of the bedroom to meet him in the hall, stun gun still in hand.

"What the hell..." Rick started to say.

"Someone was trying to break in here! I heard noises at the door, then banging at the back of the house, and I called the cops! I can't believe they're still not here!!" she yelled, adrenaline still pumping.

Rick guided her back into the bedroom and told her to wait with her stun gun there. He took the rifle down from its hidden spot, loaded a few bullets into the gun, and stepped quietly into the dark hallway. He checked out all the doors and windows, finding nothing amiss. Lisa waited breathlessly, listening intently to every sound, and heard Rick cock the gun as he stepped outside. I hate this, I hate this, I hate this, I hate this!! Lisa's thoughts raced.

Rick came back inside, locked everything securely again, but kept the rifle loaded and within reach.

"There's no one out there now. Tell me again exactly what you heard," he asked Lisa.
Lisa went to the bedroom door and banged on it several times with her fist, noticing Rick's alarmed expression. As if on some strange cue, the doorbell rang, and they both jumped.

Rick peered out the window to see a cop looking around the front porch and yard. Lisa checked the time.

"Geez, it's only been a half hour since I called them. I'm glad they could finally drop by. Does the situation have to become violent to get their attention?" Lisa couldn't hide her sarcasm or disgust.

Rick stepped outside to speak with the officer, and Lisa followed.

"You called about someone trying to break into your house, ma'am?" inquired the deputy.

"Yes, I called half an hour ago. Someone was trying to open the front door first, and then banging on a window or something at the back of the house." Lisa replied.

"Well, I've checked around the sides and the back, and there's nobody there now," the deputy informed her.

"Why is the front porch light off?" asked Rick, noticing the darkness on the front porch for the first time.

"I thought I had turned it on." Lisa said and reached up to check the bulb. The light bulb had been removed.

"Okay, now the bulb is gone." Lisa showed them.

"Are you sure you had one in there?" asked the deputy.

"Yes, I'm sure. I just put a new one in there a few days ago!" Lisa insisted.

The deputy surveyed the area once more and, satisfied that all was in order, headed towards his car, informing them to call back if they heard anything else. Lisa and Rick went back inside, and Rick put a new bulb in the light socket on the front porch. Locking everything securely, he set the alarm on the house, turned to her, and hugged her, holding her for a long time.

"I'm glad you're okay. Look, let's get some sleep, and I'll check everything out
again in the morning when there's daylight," Rick offered.

"Yeah, right. Sleep. Sure, no problem." Lisa's nerves were frayed. "By the way, what took you so long to get back from the store, anyway?" she asked.

Rick looked a bit sheepish. "Oh, I ran into a guy I used to work with, and we hung out and talked for a while. I didn't think I was gone that long."

"You forgot your damn phone, so I was here fending for myself!"

"I'm really sorry. Let me give you a backrub to relax you, and I'll check everything again in the morning, okay?"

"Okay," replied Lisa, exhausted by now.

The next morning Rick checked around the outside of the house and with the daylight made a couple of new discoveries: a light bulb discarded in the bush next to the front porch and a shoe stuck in the mud by a window in the backyard. It was a man's slip-on sandal, which hadn't been there before. Lisa stepped into the front yard, still a bit jittery from the previous night's misadventures but taking pleasure and a feeling of renewing strength in the beautiful clear weather. She spotted her neighbor Charles next door in his yard and strolled over to tell him about what had happened. Lisa and Rick enjoyed having Charles and his wife Pat as neighbors. They were friendly people who kept an eye on things around the area but were never nosy.

"Good morning, Charles!" said Lisa.

"Good morning, yourself. How was your Halloween?" Charles responded.

"Well, a bit scarier than I cared for, to tell you the truth," Lisa replied and proceeded to brief him on the night's events. Charles' facial expression changed from amusement to curiosity to alarm.

"Did the deputy take a report?" he finally asked, when Lisa had finished.

"No! He took a half hour to get here, then supposedly checked out the perimeter of the house, and left. I guess he needs a body or some kind of violent incentive to pique his interest," Lisa sarcastically replied. As she spoke, Rick came around the corner and joined them, greeting Charles.
“Lisa, did you tell Charles what happened?” Rick asked. “Yeah, I just told him everything, and he noticed that the deputy didn’t take any kind of a report. What do you have in your hand?” Lisa said, noticing Rick’s strange cargo of a light bulb and a man’s sandal.

“Well, I found the bulb in the bush by the porch and this sandal in the mud by a window at the back of the house. Someone was definitely up to something out there,” Rick stated, frowning.

Charles spoke up. “You know, I heard some commotion very late last night, and spoke with Gustavo early this morning.” He pointed a few houses down the block.

“It seems that there was a young guy on a bicycle wearing one sandal out here last night. He apparently was trying to break into Gustavo’s house but got caught by the dog in the backyard. It bit him right on the butt and wouldn’t let go!” Charles elaborated. Lisa and Rick were enthralled, and Charles continued.

“Can you imagine how embarrassed he was when the cops showed up? Not only did he have this angry canine’s teeth sunk into his rear end, but it turns out that the deputy patrolling this area last night is his dad!”
Third Place Prose Winner

Unsaid
Stephen Deiro

Madison Westmore sat in the emergency waiting room for what seemed like eternity. It was nearing one a.m. and he was running on about three hours of restless sleep from the night before. He looked around the room and tried his best to contain himself in the chair he was sitting in, as if it somehow separated him from the rest of the room. He wanted to stay untouched, away from the disgusting sickness. So much poverty, so much helplessness, all in one room. I don't belong here, he thought. He began to glance around the room, the three-month-old Hispanic baby boy to his left catching his eye. The boy looked up at Madison curiously with his runny nose and then went into a frantic coughing spat. Madison smiled at him pityingly. He felt indescribable pains for this little baby, where he was coming from, where he was going. He was clutching a tattered old bear made of terry cloth that looked like it had just been found in a dumpster. That's probably my old teddy bear, Madison thought cynically.

Madison then turned his attention to the frail girl sitting across from him who had just had a miscarriage. She's probably not much older than I am, he bet. She sat there shaking violently, every so often letting out a miserable sob. She noticed him staring at her, so he looked at her wide-eyed and empathetically and quickly turned away. He wished he could comfort her, this girl whom he had never met before, but her boyfriend appeared minutes later with a flannel shirt that he gently wrapped around her. More than anything, though, Madison felt his attention drifting to the beige linoleum floor. It was so dull and dreary, the pattern of spots almost hypnotic in a sense. Then again, of course, the waiting room was the same as the rest of the hospital, old, dilapidated, and utterly depressing.
His mother had called him up earlier that night when he had been at his girlfriend Kelli’s party, an event he had been looking forward to for weeks.

"I need you to come home, Madison. I think you need to take me to the hospital."

Once again, her heart had been skipping beats, and she had begun to feel dizzy. Madison groaned, irritated.

"Have you been taking anything, Mom? Have you been taking those diet pills again? Well?" Ms. Westmore paused before answering, hearing his tone and the unmistakable condescension.

"No," she answered quickly as if he was being ridiculous for even asking, "I quit taking those awhile ago . . ."

"What do you mean? When was awhile ago?" She didn't say anything, and Madison already knew the answer.

"Yesterday," she finally murmured. Madison didn't even bother replying and instead hung up the phone. He was tired of dealing with her, this woman who was supposed to be his mother, his parent. What a joke, he thought. Kelli put her arms around his neck and tenderly kissed him on the lips. She put her forehead against his and smiled sympathetically, but still she was insistent. She could get him to do anything.

"You have to go . . . she's your mother."

So now here they were, waiting to see if she was on her way to having a stroke or heart attack. He looked over at his mother, who seemed to be overly concerned about all this, looking into her compact applying her makeup. He remembered her looking into the mirror more than anything else at his father’s funeral. Sometimes her all-consuming vanity made him literally ill to his stomach. Madison picked up the People magazine lying on the
chair beside him and began to rhythmically flip through the pages, doing his best to pretend he was thoroughly entertained. He cautiously glimpsed his mother through the corner of his eye. Her breathing was noticeably heavier than usual, and she was tapping her foot on the floor anxiously. He continued to ignore her, not even giving her a glance of acknowledgment.

"Elizabeth Westmore? Elizabeth Westmore?" The heavyset nurse waddled over to their vicinity of the room, and his mother stood up shakily. "Come this way ma'am," the nurse ordered. She looked at Madison desperately, as if to plead with him to come back with her. He had planned on going back with her anyway but threw the magazine down on the chair as if he were grudgingly being forced to go back. Even though he had promised himself he wouldn't, he couldn't help but feel sorry for her sometimes. They followed the nurse at a snail-like pace back into the examination rooms. It was pretty much identical to the rest of the hospital, perhaps the only difference being it was sloppily painted in a putrid pea green. They finally arrived at their room, examination room eight. The fluorescent light eerily flickered outside the doorway as if to warn them to stay out. There was something creepy and ominous about this whole situation, and Madison just wanted to turn away and run. He wanted to ask his mother if she felt it too or if his intuition was just out of whack. He sat timidly on the edge of his seat as he watched the nurse take his mother's vital signs. She was so fragile, so much more so than just a few years before. Madison surveyed the room, maneuvering around in his chair to observe the cheap wallpaper behind him more closely. He estimated from the pattern and the way it was peeling off the walls it was probably circa 1977. Even the wallpaper looked as if it wanted out of this goddamn room. The nurse finished taking his mother's blood pressure and then left them alone, promising that the doctor would be in shortly.
“She was nice—can you believe she has five children?” He didn't even respond. Personally, he felt sorry for her five kids and thought she would be more well suited to work in a prison. "Madison, do you think you could get me the TV clicker?” His mother asked a little too helplessly. He looked up at her in disbelief. She's supposedly having a heart attack and she's worried about what's on TV? Suddenly the thought that she might be doing this all for attention struck him like lightning.

"Get it yourself, you haven't had a heart attack yet!” He snapped. He got up and handed it to her anyway. Things weren't always like this between him and his mother, just since he acquired the capacity to think and comprehend. It seemed like the older he got, the less respect he had for her as a person. He hated that he felt that way, but it was the truth. He often wondered how things ever got this way in the first place. How somebody whom he was supposed to have such an incredibly strong bond with could be so detached from him.

“So how's school?” she asked.

"Fine."

"Well . . . are you doing well in all your classes?"

"Four 'A's', two 'B's,'” he answered curtly, his eyes fixed on the television screen.

"What about—"

"God, Mom—you know, just because we're stuck in the same room together at three in the morning on a Sunday night—doesn't mean we have to talk." Ms. Westmore laid back on the examination table, defeated. She knew how he despised her, how the only emotion she ever saw when she looked into his eyes was an all encompassing hatred. She wanted to tell him that she was sorry for not being the mother he felt she should have been, the mother he had needed all those years. But she said nothing.
The on-call doctor finally arrived. He was a short little Asian man who talked extremely fast and had obviously left his bedside manner at home. Madison couldn't even pronounce his name so he didn't even bother trying to learn it. He told them both he was alarmed at his mother's abnormally high blood pressure and irregular heart rate and wanted to at least keep her overnight if not longer. Madison looked at his mother's panic-stricken face, beads of sweat slowly beginning to appear on her brow. He was now nervous too. He pretended as if he was unaffected by this new information and talked to the doctor as if he was an employee of the insurance company, instead of a loyal and devoted son. The doctor mentioned coronary heart disease, and Madison could barely control his distress. His grandmother had just passed away from that a few years ago. He suddenly began to feel very claustrophobic and ill at ease. All of this was too much. He wanted no-thing more than to be out of that hospital and in his bed at home sleeping, where he was safe and invulnerable.

"Your son can stay with you if he likes," the doctor continued. Madison looked at his mother, unsure of how he should act. Should he act normal like everything was going to be okay or let her see that he was concerned? He wanted to tell her that he loved her, that she was going to be fine, but he just couldn't let himself. Instead he looked at her blankly and fished his car keys out of his pocket. He knew she was scared and wanted him to stay with her, but for some reason he felt the need to refuse her this one thing, even though he felt like he should stay too. Their relationship had gotten so bad that showing the slightest bit of kindness to her felt not only awkward but as if he was condoning all her past actions over the last eighteen years.
“I'm sorry Mom . . . I can't. I've got a test in Pre-Cal tomorrow, and I have to get some sleep.” He stood at the end of her bed nervously, teeter-tottering back and forth on his heels.

"It's all right," she smiled at him proudly." You're so smart Madison, just like your father." He smiled softly, fighting back the tears that had begun to well up in his eyes.

“Night, Mom," he whispered, his voice almost cracking. Madison looked at his mother one last time. He felt the urge to say something more, to hug her, even just touch her foot that was no more than a few inches away from his hands, but he turned away and walked out of the room. She'll be fine, he reassured himself, she'll be fine. But even then as he walked down that God-awful hallway, he knew that he was making a mistake. He knew that he should have listened to his intuition, and for once his heart, and stayed with his mother. But he continued to walk down that hallway. He continued to walk out of that rundown hospital. He continued to get into his car and drive all the way home. And when Madison got a call from the hospital at eight thirty in the morning telling him that his mother had passed away, all he could do was lie curled up in a ball in that safe bed of his and cry. He cried, not because of all the harsh words that were spoken over the years but for the words that weren't. He cried about all of the things, all of the things left unsaid.
Passionately Craving
Katherine Einem

Kiss me with your name and capture these lips of mine.
Make them yours for a second or for an ever.
You lend them to whispers; to speak of careless words.
They even escape in moments of song.
Why not use them to kiss my own?
God how I wish to be a cluttered comment that leaves your mouth,
or a simple song slow dancing on your lips.
Fly away and kiss me.
Our friendship will be beautiful as Regret walks away.
His footsteps will fade with doubt by his side,
and we will overcome each other.
Borrow sweet passion just for a while and meet me in heaven.
We will taste a kiss called Overwhelming, as she makes even Magic envious.
Your lips will be quenched while my heart overflows.
“Stay with me here in this world of us,” I’ll tell you when we breathe.
“For you have finally met Paradise and I have finally found Love.”
In a moment . . . a kiss, my heart will float into your hands.
So please lend me your lips with a trust,
or I fear I will forever be less than a whisper.
Toxin
Morgan Graham

It's been three days—three long painful and empty days.

Each morning as I awake in pure silence, I feel the struggle of a new dawn thrown upon me like a tremendous pile of jagged rocks almost constricting my now shallow breathing.

As the sun slowly rises, I scream into the darkness, like a lost child searching for unknown answers. Slowly seeping through the insipid and withering curtains, the golden sun casts reflections of broken shadows across the ever-tiresome wall. Unknowingly these dancing shadows resemble my shattered ambitions and fire my constant struggle for life.

Life... is that what they call this? This hell? This exile that I have thrown myself into? This bitter place that teaches me that bulimia is something that only I have the power to cure? How the hell would they know? How could they possibly understand? They say that with each day that passes everything will become a little easier, and then someday this will all be but a mere memory of a distant but unforgotten past, a past until recently I have been able to conceal for five long and painful years.

I remember how everyone used to say, "God, you look so skinny, have you been eating?" I would always say yes, of course, and throw my head back laughing in careless disbelief, pretending nothing was wrong but secretly loving the attention I was getting. I remember the way they used to watch me, like vultures searching for prey, carefully inspecting my every move as I painfully shoveled down mouthfuls of food, pretending I was enjoying the constant torture and forcing myself to hold back
spontaneous vomiting. When I finished, I would always excuse myself with a smile and take comfort in my porcelain dungeon. Day after day I stepped on the scale with the cold metal touching my bare skin, my toes clenched together, and I would watch nervously with sweaty palms as the numbers whizzed by in a thick black blur and then came to a sudden unforgivable stop. Repulsive, disgusting, I thought... absolutely unacceptable. I would be angry with myself for not trying hard enough and in turn punish myself by not eating for days at a time and promising myself that I would binge at least twice as much.

Every day has been a constant and endless struggle. Alone and scared I feel myself begin to wonder... why? Why did I subject myself to this hell for so long? Why have I hidden this secret deep within myself, for years hiding the truth of what I really am, forgoing any chance of saving what was left of my withering existence. Now I have come to the harsh reality of who I truly am... I have a secret, I have a disease, I have an eating disorder, and time has showed no mercy to my mind nor my body. Time, yes, time, it certainly has taken its toll on me, and at 18 years old I appear to be nothing more than a pale, lifeless stranger. A living corpse slowly rotting away, with hollow dark eyes and skin stretched so tightly around my face, you would think that if you were to peel back that first layer of skin, my weak and decomposing bones would crumble. I've spent so much time with this disease, hiding it, and living it to perfection, that I fear even though it has already been three days in this institution, in another three I will be back to my old and precarious ways. Eating and binging, that burning sensation lingering in the back of my throat while my eyes water and my stomach convulses almost begging me to rid it of the toxins I forced in to its shallow walls.
Come Stop by Grant's Hotel

Martha Leatherman
INKLING CONTRIBUTORS

Prose and Poetry

Natalie Badillo is a freshman majoring in interior design, marketing, and communication. Her hobbies include dancing and drawing.

Chris Canter is a sophomore English major and computer whiz whose clever wit is apparent to anyone who meets him.

Stephen Deiro is a sophomore who enjoys writing, music, and golfing.

Katherine Einem likes soccer, painting, and being with her family. She is a sophomore majoring in elementary education.

Christina Frisbie is a sophomore creative writing and journalism major.

Lisa Garza is majoring in life! When she’s not directing at Playhouse 1960 or writing, she spends time with her family and numerous pets.

Morgan Graham is a freshman business major with minors in English and education. She enjoys writing poetry.

Jennifer Hagan is a sophomore accounting major. When she’s not writing, she just likes to have fun.

Cynthia Thornton Herrera is a proud mother and grandmother. Even with a full-time job, she still finds time for travel, photography, hiking, and writing poetry and memoirs.

Jennifer Kleiber is majoring in British literature and history. She is also a member of Phi Theta Kappa who enjoys reading, music, and movies.

Lynda Long is a sophomore major in history. When she’s not studying, she enjoys reading and gardening.

Mary M. Manci is an ex-chicken exec whose interests include writing, music, travel, scuba diving, volunteering, and spending time with her family. She is also a member of Phi Theta Kappa.

Jim Skinner is a sophomore majoring in information technology.

Alan M. Toback almost loves writing even more than he loves his wife! In his spare time, he likes to go fishing. He is currently working on a romance novel.
James Womac loves surfin.' In his spare time, he is an education major.

Amanda Zirgulis is an undecided major, waitressing her way through school. She also enjoys traveling.

Art

Kevin D. Bowen is a freshman math major who loves skydiving.

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Candy King is a sophomore at Tomball College and an officer in Phi Theta Kappa. She’s an accounting major who enjoys music, cartoons, and video games.

Allison Lau likes reading and drawing. She is a sophomore education major.

Martha Leatherman is sophomore photography major. She enjoys swimming, reading, and watching movies.

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Allison Tipton is an art student who likes long walks in the rain and hiking in the woods. Her goal in life is to do anything she can to make the world a better place.

Denise Wolfe is a freshman majoring in studio art. She likes to spend her free time drawing and painting.
CREATIVE WRITING CONTEST INFORMATION

All Inkling submissions are considered as entries in the Tomball College Creative Writing Contest. Each anonymous work is then submitted to a panel of seven judges: Doug Boyd, Professor of English; Dr. Allen Gee, Assistant Professor of English; Dr. Greg Oaks, Associate Professor of English; Dr. Van Piercy, Assistant Professor of English; Katherine Reynolds, Professor of English; Melissa Studdard, Associate Professor of English; Dr. Rebecca Tate, Professor of English. Each judge picks his or her top five in both poetry and prose. Next, each work is assigned a point value ranging from five to twenty-five. The total for each work is added, and the top three highest numbers become the first through third place winners.

HOW SUBMISSIONS ARE SELECTED

Works for publication, including artwork, are submitted to Katherine Reynolds or Rebecca Tate, Inkling faculty advisors. They substitute, in place of the author’s name, a number; thus, only they know the identity of the individual contributors. Each staff member is then given a duplicated copy of each submission to be considered for the current issue. After final selections are made, the staff’s copies are returned to the faculty advisors and destroyed, thereby prohibiting the circulation of unauthorized copies of anyone’s work. The final step in the selection of materials is a staff selection meeting when the Inkling editors, staff, and advisors meet to discuss and vote upon the final selections of publication. Only after final selections have been made do the advisors reveal the identity of those individuals whose works have been chosen.

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