



2022-2023
SEMI-FINALISTS





Thank you to Peggy Jacobs for sponsoring the Annual Youth Writing Competition. This contest owes its existence to Peggy, who created the concept and has graciously donated the prize money. Her generosity of spirit and pursuit of academic excellence inspires us to continue to serve the youth of the Coachella Valley.

Thank you to our judges, Jim Spalding, Eric Cunningham and Bruce Fessier, for supporting young writers in our community.



Category 1

Melody Ocampo

Informative Essay

Painted Hills Middle School

The origins of Mexico and its culture

Mexican culture is not a costume with sombreros and pretty dresses, it all started back in the 1325 C.E , when Mexico was located in North America and founded by the Aztecs. Mexico was originally called Anahuac, meaning the land surrounded by water. When the Aztecs first reached Anahuac , they were forced out of Chapultepec.

According to the Mexica(Aztec) myth, the Aztecs wandered for weeks in search of a place to settle. Huitzilopochtli (their god) appeared to the Mexica leaders and indicated a place where a great eagle was perched on a cactus killing a snake. In that place, the Aztecs founded and built the city Tenochtitlán and inhabited Mexico or Anahuac, from 1300-1521.

Their diets included maize , beans , squash , fruits and vegetables. They also fished and ate mollusks, turtles , salamanders, frogs, crustaceans , shrimp and many more marine animals. They drank water, maize gruels and pulque , the fermented juice of the century plant (maguey in Spanish).

During the day the Mexica would farm, fish, play various board and ball games. They would also dance, sing, play music, tell stories and read poems. However, in 1521 their nightmare began. In that year, Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortes invaded Aztec land and thus Mexico became a Spanish colony. The Spanish considered themselves superior to the Mexica, treating them inhumanly. Looting what they could, they murdered whole communities or enslaved them. The colonizers took their food, burned their homes, and destroyed their sacred temples. Because the Spanish believed they were superior, they did not respect Aztec culture and aimed to destroy it. Thus for 300 years, Spain ruled the land until the early 1800s, until the Mexica would fight for their independence.

Mexican independence dates back to the conquest of Mexico, when Martín Cortés, son of Hernán Cortes, led a revolt against the Spanish colonial government in order to eliminate the issues of oppression and privileges for the conquistadors. The Declaration of Independence led to the Spanish War for Independence that lasted for 11 years. On August 24, 1821, Spain accepted the independence of Mexico by agreeing to the terms of the Treaty of Córdoba .

During this period, the economy grew: new railways and telephone networks were built, new banks opened , industry, mining, agriculture and commerce expanded. Although the president, Porfirio Diaz brought many benefits , he also abused his power. He was president from 1877 until 1911, when The Mexican revolution started, to end the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz. The Mexican revolution ended February 5, 1917. Throughout time, Mexico has had multiple presidents , some that have made the country grow , and some that have not. However, Mexico stands strong as an independent country, rich in culture, principles, and traditions. Some of the important events in Mexican culture include September 16 (Day of independence) , May 1

(Labor day) , March 21 (Benito Juarez's birthday) , February 5 (Constitution Day) , Dia de los Muertos (November 2) and many more . Some of Mexico's most known foods include: tamales, buñuelos, elote preparado, romeritos, menudo , tacos , rosca de reyes , atole, and many more. There are also many fun games that come included in Mexican culture , some of those games are El Trompo , Loteria, Canicas, among many more.

In conclusion, Mexico has grown from being a Spanish colony, to their own country , through their hard work Mexican culture is shared throughout the whole world, and will continue to prosper throughout the years.

Category 1

Kyra Bufanda

Short Story

Painted Hills Middle School

It was a beautiful nightfall however the full moon's beaming lights could not be seen, the large thick clouds rained down on the people below and blocked the lovely moon. For many it was a day of celebration, but for Burt it was a day of mourning, every day was for him. Burt is my brother in law, I miss my sister very much but it had been five whole years since the accident and yet he was still drinking a bottle a week and taking drugs as if he were some highschool hippie in the early nineteen seventies. My family couldn't take it anymore, we all missed Julieta but he was taking it to another level. I was devastated when she died but it had been five years.

We told him multiple times that he wasn't allowed to show up on the Day of the Dead. Yet here he is, I don't even understand why he's come, he knows that it will only hurt him more to see her. He would cling onto us like a leech begging to come inside but mother insisted. Eventually, he passed out and we were free to celebrate alone. However, I could feel as if something was off.

"She's not here is she, mother?" I said disappointed.

"I know, I can feel it too. She went to see him, I don't blame her." Mother replied.

We could feel the emptiness, it wasn't like the last few years. She celebrated with us, she was happy with our offerings, but eventually she longed for her husband. I knew that her spirit was flowing through the city looking for him. Perhaps, Burt had seen her. I'd say the drugs definitely made it more likely that he had even talked to her.

Over the next few weeks, we had seen serious improvement in his behavior. After a month, he even quit drugs. Mother decided to invite him for a family dinner to show everyone how he had changed. Everyone was shocked! No beer belly! He finally shaved that god awful beard and even wore some nice, clean clothes. It was weird. I needed to know how he seemed to change over night. As everyone was setting the table up, I backed him into a corner.

"What happened Burt? You've changed so much in such a short amount of time. How?"

"It was Jules," He said calmly. "Jules helped me. I always thought that it was my fault. That I should have been the one in the accident but Jules never thought that."

I knew that it was all smoke and mirrors, but something inside me thought differently. I wanted to know if she said anything about me or mom. Just as I was about to ask more, mother called us to the dining room. I'll ask him later though, now's just not the time I thought to myself.

And it wasn't the right time, for an entire year had passed and it was once again day of the dead. I never found a good time to talk to Burt about it. He was always so focused on getting his life back on track and I was always so busy with my newborn, but I could never forget about our interaction. As soon as my wife mentioned that day of the dead was coming up, I immediately knew that Burt would be driving into the city soon. I wanted to see her - Julieta - just like how Burt did. And here we are sitting in my mothers home setting up the altar and all of

the *ofrendas*. Burt eventually burst through the door and greeted everyone. I pulled him aside almost immediately and asked him.

“How did you see Jules? I **need** to talk to her,” I begged.

Burt just stared at me, with a defeated look on his face. It felt like years before he finally said.

“Energy cannot be destroyed, it can only be transferred. It's the same with loss, although I never expected you to be the one who received it. Danny, I never **saw** Jules... I guess I just realized that this isn't the life she would have wanted me to live.”

I was so disappointed in myself. It made a lot of sense after Burt explained it to me. I turned into him, I was basically on my knees begging to see her that I didn't stop to think about the people around me. Once again Burt walked away from me, I stood back up and went into the bathroom. It looked like I haven't showered in a month and I reeked of alcohol.

I love Julieta but this is something that would kill her to see.

Category 1

Israel Angulo

Poetry

Toro Canyon Middle School

FALSE HOPE

The wind blows
Snow on the spruce
Icily diffuse
like cold prose

on the frozen
page. At an impasse
on the cold grass
It goes in

slowest motion —
the smell of gas,
broken glass, and
thought explosion

implodes the substratum
(every atom and isotope
like some strange hope)
Inside him, passing

through frozen eyes
and fast pooling blood,
an awareness floods
of his own demise.

—Israel Angulo
Toro Canyon Middle School



Category 1

Gianni Liverani

Poetry

Palm Desert Charter Middle School

The Loch in Endless Swirl
Sonnet by Gianni Liverani

Multitude of lilies, imminent to bloom
Life takes its course, eager to make anew
Nothing to put one in sorrow or gloom
A beautiful world, a breathtaking view
Although there is one flaw to mention
A murky loch, with an ominous sense
A portal to a revolting dimension
Full of brawl and vexation, makes one tense
A world of no color, just black and gray
Nor stars nor moon visible through the smog
How did this come to be, all this dismay?
For none can tell, all they know is of black fog
Back through the loch, back to the flawless world
Except for one flaw, a loch in endless swirl

Category 1

Ashley Torres Reyes

Poetry

Toro Canyon Middle School

IS THIS THE REAL ME?

Am I here
or there?
But here is
connected to
over there

Is this the real me?

I seem to exist
only in the head
of other people
who know of
my existence.

With whose eyes do I see?

Who made this cruel
world, sharp in my vision —
haunting my dreams, day
and night with images of
the terribly beautiful.

With whose ears do I hear?

Who do I hear
in my head who is
talking right here
right now, in here
just now?

With whose body do I feel?

Who would have known
how deeply I feel —
how much it can hurt?
Or the happiness that can
envelope me like a rose?

With whose mind do I think?

And feel —This sky wide brain
of thoughts and songs, jokes, love,
and tears —Will I know tomorrow?
Or, in the fulness of my entire life?

—Ashley Torres-Reyes
Toro Canyon Middle School



Category 2

Emily Feffer

Short Story

Xavier College Preparatory School

Fairy-Tale Fusion

Once upon a time, there were two girls. One, with blood-red hair, a fiery temper, and a bright red cloak. The other, with flowing golden hair that flooded with light, an inquisitive nature, and a pet chameleon.

Rapunzel sighed and crumpled her paper, throwing it like a basketball into the bin. It bounced off of several other pieces of parchment that had already made a mountain on the rim. Flying off of the top, three wads of paper, wet with ink, nearly hit a small, green chameleon. The tiny creature squeaked in alarm then turned a light rose color and scurried under Rapunzel's chair.

"Oh, Pascal, I'm *so* sorry," Hurriedly, Rapunzel scooped up her shaking friend. "Don't you ever wish that someone else was here?" Pascal turned his head to the right. Rapunzel sighed and took up her sewing that she had left on an overstuffed ottoman.

Red looked at her clock. 12:39. Nearly 2 hours had passed since her mother had left for the market. Before Mother had gone, she had finished the cloak. Walking towards the sewing table, Red picked up the creation, running a thumb over the stitching. A long black hair hung onto the delicate bright red cloak. Plucking it off, Red tossed it into the bin. She ran her hand through her dyed hair. When she removed her hand, a few black strands hung to her fingers. She also tossed these into the bin. Suddenly the bell rang.

"Hello," Red said, placing the beautifully crafted cloth down and rushing back to the counter. "How may I assist you?"

"Just two hot crosses please," the tall stranger growled, showing a full set of teeth and canines that were wolfish.

"Yeah, no prob," Red shrugged the weird teeth off, and ended any further conversation by spinning on her heel, and grabbing the treats.

"How much?"

"50¢ total." The man gave her the money. "Thank you. Are you eating in, or taking out?"

"I'll takeout."

"Alright." Red used tongs to place the toasted bread with melted sugar into a small bag. Handing it to the stranger, she thanked him for coming, and watched him leave. Looking out the large window, she noticed that there was nobody on the street. She turned back to admire the cloak.

Rapunzel woke suddenly to voices far below. Shaking out her limbs, she placed her sewing back onto the ottoman. As quietly as she could, she slipped to the open window that her mother had always come through, the exact one that gave her the night sky, but kept her away from the public eye.

Down below, three women stood, gawking at her tower. She overheard some of their conversation.

“Can you believe it?” one of the ladies was saying. She wore a long black dress, similar to one that would be worn in mourning.

“No! Tucked away like this! Could you imagine! If one was living there, how would they get food!” The second woman nearly yelled. She was wearing a mid-length yellow tea dress with black kitty heels.

“Well, I think-yes-I’m sure nobody lives up *there*.” The last woman was dressed in a dark blue dress. A shawl was draped over her skinny shoulders, protecting her from the light wind and the sunshine.

“How do you know?” the woman with the black dress asked.

“For starters, how would they get up and down Levie?”

“Good point.” Levie frowned and glanced at the flower bushes that encircled the bottom of Rapunzel’s tower.

“Levie, Millie, could we-”

“Harriett, stop yelling! Nobody likes it.” Levie stuck her nose into the air.

“Uh-come! Let’s get some hot crosses from The Rider.” Millie said, a bit nervously.

“Oh, yes! I love those!” Harriett swept out of the clearing, her feelings somehow unhurt by Levie’s strong words. Millie followed her, somewhat hesitantly. Levie gazed up at Rapunzel’s open window. Rapunzel quickly ducked under the sill, and looked through a small crack in the brick. The woman below seemed to narrow her eyes where Rapunzel had stood. Finally, after what seemed like ages, Harriett came back.

“Levie, come on! They might run out!” The portly woman whisked her away.

Red heard the bell jingle yet again. She glanced up at the clock, 1:22. Almost three hours. Slowly, she turned to greet the customers.

“He- Oh! Good afternoon Miss Levie! What can I get for all of you?” Red nervously picked at the hem of her apron.

“Hot cross buns. Six of them,” Miss Levie ordered automatically.

“Anything else?”

“Three warm apple ciders.”

“Alright,” Red said, whipping around to make the order up quickly. She knew that Miss Levie would *not* be happy if Red took her time. While spreading sugar on the buttered cinnamon toast, she listened to the conversation taking place behind her.

“I know!” Miss Harriett was saying. She was known for her loud voice. “I can’t believe we found that! I *knew* that the vines on that rock looked fishy!”

“Yes, yes,” Miss Millie said. Her signature blue dress had little spots of mud on the hem. “Again, I tell you, I don’t think anyone lives there. It would be quite impossible, I didn’t see a door.”

“Now, now ladies,” Miss Levie interrupted firmly. “Not now.” Red finished filling the final mug. Turning, she placed the hot crosses next to the mugs of steaming cider.

“\$2 and 25¢ please,” Red accepted the cash.

“Awfully cheap,” Miss Levie said.

“Er- yes?”

“Thank you dear!” Miss Harriett chomped into a hot cross.

“Could we get this in a bag?” Miss Millie asked. Red did as was said. Handing them the bags, she watched as Miss Levie, Miss Millie, and Miss Harriett swept out of the bakery, and into a small townhouse down the road.

Red wondered what they had been talking about. *Where could I find that place?* Red thought. *Rock...vines...The Wood!* With her revelation, she straightened. If it was cool enough to be worthy of gossip from the most notorious gossipers in town, it was cool enough for her. *Maybe I'll be able to get away from Mother for a bit.* Red smiled at the thought. Checking to make sure nobody was on the street, she grabbed a basket, placed bread, some cider, and her keys inside and pulled on the bright red cloak.

Rapunzel's breath came quickly. She remembered what Mother had always told her. *Stay out of sight, nobody should find you.* Well, now, someone *has* found her. Pascal tapped her leg with his little foot. She picked him up, and brought him towards her face. In the reflection of his eyes, she saw the long rivers the tears had made down her face. Pascal's little mouth curved into a small smile, and he patted her hand sympathetically.

“Rapunzel! RAPUNZEL!” The young woman looked over the window-sill and saw her mother waving up at her. “Let me in!”

“Alright! Alright!” Rapunzel wiped the tears from her cheeks and gathered most of her hair in one hand. Placing Pascal on the ground, she pointed to where her paintings were hidden. He got the hint and scampered away. Rapunzel watched him run, and after she was certain he was well out of sight, she wrapped her hair around the large hook adorning the top of the window. For one second, she wondered what it would be like to swing down to the ground.

The grass would smell like the flowers that her mother sometimes brought her. The dirt and mud would be soft beneath her feet, and would gently stain the hem of her long purple dress as she walked. The clear, bubbling brook would be cool and refreshing. When she left through the rock with the vines, someone would be waiting for her. They would show her the way to the village, away from this awful tower.

“RAPUNZEL!!”

Red kept a brisk pace down the street. She passed a mural of the royal family, and paused briefly. She had never seen anything like this. The artist had portrayed the royal family perfectly. The King and Queen stood, gazing gracefully down on whomever passed the wall. Each held a child in their arms.

The Queen held a little girl with long, blonde hair and striking green eyes. This child looked excitedly down on the viewer, as if she was happy to see someone walking past. In the King's arms, a little girl with blood-red hair that almost matched Red's natural color was

grinning. Her eyes were a deep, passionate black. She was staring down, almost as if she wanted to let the viewer know that she wasn't a coward.

Red knew that both had gone missing, one just a day before the other. The one with blonde hair was taken first, by a mysterious figure in a long black cloak, who had jumped off the balcony. The guards had searched endlessly, tirelessly, around the castle and the woods. There was no sign of the figure or the child. The next night, even though patrols had been doubled, the red-haired girl was also taken by a mysterious figure. This time, they had seen that it was a woman, but could not identify her.

The family names were inscribed on the bottom of the portrait. Red crouched down and looked at the small plaques. Under the Queen's label, there was a piece of metal, covered with dirt and wet with mud. Red gently pulled on it, and, due to the rust, it came off. Looking around to check that there was nobody watching her, she wiped the grime off with her sleeve. After a solid minute, she saw a full name. **Rapunzel.**

Red noticed another plaque (under the King's label) and took it off the wall as well. She used her sleeve again, and slowly another name revealed itself. When she saw the name, it took her a few seconds to fully comprehend what was written. She dropped the plaque, and scrambled backwards, nearly knocking her basket over. Slowly, she crawled back to where she had dropped the piece of metal, and read the name; **Red.**

“Oh, my love, I'm so sorry!” Mother wrapped Rapunzel in a bone-breaking hug. “I came *so* unexpectedly, it was hardly fair. I just thought that something had happened! I needed to run to town, so I felt I needed to stop here to check up on you!”

“Thank you, Mother,”

“Do you need anything? I'll come back from town with anything you need.”

“I-well-no.”

“I have to go, I wish this visit was longer, but alas! Will you let me down?” Rapunzel hung her head as she strung her hair through the hook. With her hair hanging down the side of her tall tower, she gazed at the rock as her mother slipped through the vines. Pascal climbed up her shoulder, looked at her, then jumped. Rapunzel screamed as she saw him clamber down the tower to the ground. She looked up towards the old hook, then stood on the window-sill. She looked towards the ground, and it seemed to get farther and farther away. Rapunzel took a deep breath and thought about Pascal. Once he hit the ground, he would be alone and vulnerable. Grabbing her hair in her hands, she jumped.

Red had run through the forest, and had come upon a large rock with long vines. Panting, she sat down, resting her back against the gray rock. She opened her palm, and looked once again at the rusted plaques. Red had read the names again and again, just so she would know that it was not a mistake. Pulling out the cider and bread she had carefully packed, she pulled the crimson hood over her black hair. Suddenly, a rustle came from behind her. A figure wearing a

black hood ran past her. Red looked around, but couldn't locate where the person had come from. She pushed it from her mind.

After she finished her small snack, and put the rest of the bread away, she attempted to lean back against the dozens of comfortable-looking vines to get a *bit* of rest. However, to Red's surprise, she fell backwards into a medium-sized clearing.

Rapunzel hit the surprisingly soft ground quickly. Scrambling to her feet, she took in the clearing. Several trees hung around the water of the babbling brook, and wildflowers grew everywhere. She stood there for several minutes, taking in the beautiful scenery. Then, she remembered her original task. She called out for Pascal, and ran in circles around herself. Her hair wound around and around her body, and she nearly tripped. That's when she noticed the young girl with black hair, and a bright red cloak.

Red and Rapunzel looked at each other for a few seconds before Rapunzel broke the silence. Screaming, she scrambled back, her long blonde hair unraveling itself and trailing behind her.

"Don't hurt me! Don't hurt ME!"

"Shhhhhh! Shhhhhhhhhh!" Red tried to calm the other girl down. Blubbering, Rapunzel stopped, and Pascal came out of nowhere, and treated himself to sitting on her shoulder.

"Look, my name is Red, and I—well—I came to find that," Red pointed to the tower, as Rapunzel eyed her warily. Red looked at her, then made a sudden connection.

"Are you—are you Rapunzel?"

"How do you know my name?"

"I-um-well, you see, you and I are sisters, I think?" Red ventured.

"How would you be my sister if I have lived in *that* tower my entire life?"

"Well, you and I are on the Royal Mural. You see, I think someone stole us away."

"I don't know about you, but I have a mother that loves me, and would *definitely* tell me if I was royal," Listening to Rapunzel's words, Red closed her eyes for a moment, remembering the tale of the two sisters.

"Rapunzel, does your mother own a black cloak?"

"Yes, but I don't see how that—"

"Does she have black hair and is her last name Gothel?"

"Yes... wait... why are you asking me this?"

"My mother is the exact same," Rapunzel's green eyes got huge. She realized that Red might actually be telling the truth. Red kept eye contact with Rapunzel, and cautiously reached into her basket, pulling out the two labels, and handed them to her.

"What are these?"

“They were on the Royal Mural under the King and Queen’s portraits,” Rapunzel flipped both over, examining both sides of the plaques. She read their names, and handed them back to Red.

“I like your cloak.”

Rapunzel and Red leaned against the tall tower and talked for hours. Together, they finished the rest of the bread from The Rider.

“Wait,” Rapunzel said. “If your stories are true, which I think they are, does that mean—does it mean that Mother Gothel stole us away?” Red paused eating for a second as she mulled this thought over in her head. She slowly put the bread back in the basket.

“I think...I think so,” Red looked at her sister. A loud voice came from behind the vine wall.

“Hello there officer! No, I’m just taking a walk in the woods,” The girls froze. “A tower you say? Tell me more!”

“Rapunzel, we have to hide! That’s Mother!” Red stood, and started to look around frantically.

“Red. Red!” Rapunzel whisper-yelled to the other girl. While Red had been searching for something on the ground, Rapunzel had thrown her hair to the top of the tower, and managed to slip it through the hook. She was nearly to the bottom of the open window. Red gaped up at her, and grabbed her basket. Hurriedly, Rapunzel swung into the top of the tower as Red grabbed the bottom of her golden hair and created a small foothold. When Red stepped onto the light brown tiled floor, she nearly screamed in surprise as Pascal jumped out of her basket and scurried behind a curtain.

Looking around, Red noticed a faded green wardrobe, a light brown mirror, and a fireplace dead center. A small sewing table had a trash bin full of wadded up paper. An ink pot and quill sat ready to be used. An overstuffed chair sat next to an ottoman, where a sewing project sat unfinished.

“Red, come on!” Rapunzel had opened the green wardrobe and was gesturing for Red to climb inside. Red nodded, made sure that she had both the basket and her cloak, and stepped inside. Rapunzel gently shut the door behind her, and picked up her sewing, settling down in her chair, with her feet propped up on the ottoman.

“Rapunzel! Rapunzel!” Mother Gothel called from the bottom of the tower. Rapunzel looked at where her hair still hung from the hook. Adjusting it, the young woman looked towards the ground. Remembering how it felt, she dejectedly allowed her mother to climb her hair.

“Rapunzel!” Mother gathered the girl in her arms. “I was so worried! I heard that someone found your tower, did you see anyone? Was your hair out of the window? You cannot do that anymore!” Rapunzel just stood there, not hugging her alleged “Mother” back. When Mother Gothel broke the hug, Rapunzel asked the reason for her sudden visit.

“It’s like I told you dear, I was worried that someone might have found you. Also; I needed to drop this stuff off,” Mother Gothel placed a basket on Rapunzel’s sewing table, and started to go through it, naming items inside off.

“We have the special roots you enjoy in your stew, *another* hair brush, you have really *got* to stop breaking them, and-”

“Mother?” Rapunzel asked, looking towards where Red was.

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

“Oh–your welcome dear I-”

“You are allowed to go,” Rapunzel said, already adjusting her hair in the hook. “I was planning to get to bed early today, so, therefore, I want you to leave.” Her mother stared, mouth agape at her “daughter’s” bravery. Blubbering about what Rapunzel was not to do, and reminding her to eat her food, and finish the sewing project, Mother Gothel left the tower and the clearing.

Rapunzel opened the door of the cabinet, successfully un-squishing Red. The redhead tumbled out, her basket sliding under the sewing table as her cloak twisted around her. Rapunzel walked to the small table and handed the basket back to her sister. Grimly, they looked at each other.

“Rapunzel–did ‘Mother’,” Red made air quotes as she said Mother. “Ever come here to spend a night with her ‘daughter’?” Rapunzel cringed at the word daughter.

“She would, occasionally,” The blondie looked at Pascal who had hesitantly revealed himself. “Right?” The chameleon nodded.

“Are there any *extra* bedrooms here?”

“Why?”

“Well, she was always gone every other week on Saturday. I always wondered where she went,” Rapunzel’s green eyes got huge, and Red nodded. “If we are going to do this, I need to borrow a bedroom.” Rapunzel led her downstairs to the little bedroom that had been made into a closet. Rapunzel collected pillows and a blanket from a small dresser. Then, they sat on the bed, and made a plan as they waited for the sun to set.

“Rapunzel! Rapunzel!” A voice called. Rapunzel and Red jumped up from the bed where they had been sitting. They looked at each other and nodded. Rapunzel headed upstairs as Red started to make preparations.

Red took the two baskets, and counted the snacks that were loaded in one of them. She made a mental list, and then looked at the other basket. She counted two dresses, one for her, one for Rapunzel. She then made sure Pascal was comfortably situated. He curled up in Rapunzel’s extra socks, and allowed Red to create a small nest around him. Red adjusted her cloak, admiring it in the small mirror that was leaning in the corner. Even though Mother Gothel might not be her

mother, Red had to acknowledge the woman's sewing and baking skills. She blew out the candles, and crouched down behind the bed, away from any light, to wait.

Rapunzel had let Mother Gothel in and was talking quickly, attempting to convince her care-giver to leave.

“Mother...you really don't need to—”

“Oh, dear it was totally on me! I had forgotten something, and I decided, since I have nowhere to be, to stay here tonight!”

“I-well-I—”

“Alright! It's settled then!” Mother Gothel headed upstairs to the secondary bedroom. Rapunzel looked down the stairs to where Red was hanging out in the closet. Then, she sighed and walked up the stairs after the tall, dark-haired woman.

The moon had risen, but the sun had not quite set. To the east, the moon glowed with a ghostly tinge, as the warm sun's long, loving fingers disappeared behind the mountains. At this time, the door to the storage room was opened, and baskets were exchanged. A river of gold went up to glance into a large bedroom, where a woman was settled on the bed. The pool of black checked all of the supplies. Looking at each other both nodded, and the golden one opened the window.

Red touched down first, with Rapunzel swinging down gently beside her. Rapunzel pulled her hair from the hook, and looked toward Red to lead her. Together, the two sisters walked through the vines and out into the darkened wood.

Mother Gothel woke. It was deathly quiet in the tower. Nothing stirred. She considered getting up, but she instead looked at the time. 9:00. Rapunzel would surely be asleep by now. One way Gothel had been able to get some peace and quiet between the two girls was to get them to bed early at night. Sighing, she turned over, now facing the window, and closed her eyes.

Red led the way through the forest. A loud growl sounded near them. They both almost shrieked in alarm. A wolf had somehow blocked the path in front of them without either girl noticing. Red should have known that this was going to happen. On the second of her two trips through this exact spot with her mother, Gothel had told her that wolves would attack people here. Man, she wished she had brought something to protect herself.

The wolf growled again. Red noticed that he was wearing a coat. That coat looked awfully familiar. She thought back to just the other day, and remembered the odd customer. She suddenly took note of the full moon. Of course! A werewolf! Screaming internally, Red stepped forward.

“Hello Mr... Wolf? I’m Red, the girl from the bakery the other day. If you let us pass, I could get you...um... free hot crosses for life?” The wolf paused its growling and eyed her up. Red gave a nervous smile and gulped.

Gothel woke again. Turning, she looked at the clock. 9:30. Still, everything was deathly quiet. Maybe a little too quiet. She got up, her feet touching the fluffy rug beneath her bed. She shuffled towards the door of the bathroom, and popped open the medicine cabinet. Gothel fumbled around for a few minutes, before finding the box of sleeping pills. She took the prescribed amount, and sat on the stool until she felt it kick in. Shuffling, she went back to her room, where she plopped on the bed, and almost immediately fell asleep.

The wolf jumped at Red. The girl screamed and turned, putting her arms to her face to protect herself. A loud, banging sound came from above her. A hand pulled her back up. She put down her hands and came face-to-face with a big frying pan. Rapunzel peered at her from behind it and tilted her head at the ground, where the wolf lay, unconscious. The two girls laughed, picked up their stuff, and continued on their way.

Rapunzel had never seen town. She marveled at how many people were out, and how many houses there were. As the big clock tower in the city square chimed 7:00 in the morning, people started opening their businesses. The delicate aromas of flowers filled the air and mingled with the smells of fresh pastries. Sounds of people wheeling wheelbarrows, calling numbers for orders, and boots clicking against paver stones were new and fresh to her ears. Red waved to a tall, bookish girl who was very pretty. She was wearing a blue dress with a white apron, and in her basket, she held several books. Smiling, the girl came over.

“Hello Red!” She gave the red-cloaked girl a hug. “And who is this? Tell me!” Rapunzel couldn’t quite place the girl’s accent. It sounded... French?

“Hello Belle. Well, this is my sister. I don’t have a lot of time, could you show me where the royal hearing stuff is that they do today? It’s urgent.”

“Ah! But, of course! Of course!” The young woman led the way through crowds of people and to the grand castle.

Mother Gothel woke. She glared at the clock. 7:30. Standing, she listened. Still, everything was quiet. Gothel walked to Rapunzel’s bedroom.

“Time to wake up, sleepyhead!” The woman lit the candle and pulled back the covers.

“Here we are!” Belle gestured to a large door, in front of which people were already lining up. “Good luck! *Au revoir!*” She swept away into the large crowd.

“Why are we here?” Rapunzel looked at the guards squeamishly.

“Well, we have to break the news to our parents somehow. Right?” Red replied. Nervously, Rapunzel and Red took their place. Rapunzel stuffed the frying pan back into a basket. The large doors opened with a creaking noise, and people started to file in. At the door,

the girls kept their heads down, and were instructed to stay in order. Together, they stood in line and waited.

Gothel banged open the shutters of the front window Rapunzel had let her in from for nearly 18 years. She was breathing hard. She glared at the tip of the castle that was visible and screamed like a wild animal. Turning, her black skirts rustled and she stomped down the stairs until she reached the lowest level. Pulling a key from her pocket, she unlocked a small door that was rusted from age and looked like a section of the wall. Throwing it open, Gothel stepped onto grass, and ran towards the clearing's exit.

Red and Rapunzel were now first in line. Nine others had gone in, and came out victorious. One was still in there. Sighing, Red wondered what they were going to say. Looking at her sibling's face she could tell the other was doing the same. The guard called out number 11, and number 10 came out beaming. Both girls took a deep breath, took each other's hand and entered.

Gothel ran through the woods and into the town square. Bolting to the door of The Rider, she noticed that there was nobody inside to man it. A long line of anxious people had already been formed. Growling, she turned and looked towards the castle. Of course! Today was Hearing Day! She ran past some of the outdoor tables, calling out her "daughters'" names.

Red and Rapunzel entered a large garden. Surrounded by medium-sized white walls, flowers and bushes bloomed. Birds sang on branches while bees pollinated. Guards were posted every two feet leading up to the thrones. On these thrones, The King and Queen sat, facing the door. When the two girls entered, the Queen gasped. She slipped off her chair and gathered both of her daughters, her *real* daughters, in a big hug. The King had followed her, and realized the same as his wife, once he came closer. He joined the hug as well. When they all disbanded, the Queen looked at the door.

A dark-haired boy had come in. He had a dashing smile, and held a book and pen in his hand. Rapunzel couldn't stop staring at him, and vice versa. Red burst out laughing, and soon, the King and Queen joined in. All of a sudden, the doors banged open, and the laughing stopped. Gothel entered the room, with guards trailing behind her.

"Girls! Let's go! Red, I can't *believe* you! Leaving The Rider! And Rapunzel! How *dare* you!" Gothel strode forward, but a quick motion by the Queen stopped her. Guards held her arms, pulling her back from the royal family.

"Gothel! Why? Nevermind! I *don't* want to know. Guards! Lock her in the dungeon," The King looked at his wife, surprised at her sudden temper. "She took them from me, William. I will

never forgive her.” She took her daughter’s hands, and pulled them in another hug. The King smiled and joined in.

Category 2

Lauren Cruz de Armas

Poetry

La Quinta High School

I see
By Lauren Cruz De Armas

I see
A war
Outside the window
People

Cry

People scream

Enemies
Spies

I'm scared- please hold me

Can I let it go?

Can't you hold-
See-

RUN DOWN -

HAIR IS FLYING-

DOWNSTAIRS-

NO TIME FOR REALIZING-

WHAT I AM DOING-

AND HOW IT WILL AFFECT MY FATE-

THEN AGAIN-

THIS SHOULD HAVE BEEN THIS DAY-

The pit of it all-
I hit a wall-

3 dead
Before I even reach
The last step

STAND-

Brush hair-

Smell

The blood-thirsty air

Smell-

The Oil

Dripping from

Putin's

Hands

FRESH WOUNDS-

I am scared

Mother hold me-

Mom-

Where are you?

Teeth gnaw at me

From the back

Of the street

See me-

FREEZE

Check-

ONE-

--

TWO-

--

THREE-

--

I close my eyes

Clench my breath
Thinking this will be my last life-
When I see
This light

COMING FOR ME

ARMY
TROOPS-

TANKS-

IT WAS MY BIRTHDAY TODAY

Where i was supposed to
Have a cake
I instead have rations

Where I was supposed to
Have a new dress
I have my old sloppy, sweaty sweater
mess

Where I was supposed to have a candle-
I have a raging fire before me

Where I was supposed to be wishing for a boyfriend
I AM NOW WISHING FOR
THIS WAR
TO END

In the hopes that my story
Will be told for
Me -

Category 2

Kaela Martin

Poetry

Palm Desert High School

August

It's August. The leaves are beginning to change their hues, and the weather starts to become cooler, with just bits of warmth peaking through the leafy trees. The fruits of summer start to become overripe, as the crickets begin their chirping chorus. It isn't the start of fall, but it isn't the end of summer either. August is an in between, it is both a hello and goodbye. The seasons slipped away faster than I could grasp, and my bed feels empty without you. I long for change as much as the leaves and the weather, but you leaving was the biggest change of all.

Weeks pass by, and October is nearing, but I still feel stuck in the inbetween of nothing and healing. I want to move on, but the fear of losing the memory of you is holding me back. You came into my life and changed the weather, you made the mornings feel light, and it made me feel as though we had all the time in the world. But now my bed is empty, and the mornings are heavy with the weight of dread.

The winter months pass by faster than I could comprehend, and before I know it, it's the start of spring. An unbelievable amount of things have changed, and I'm starting to accept that. The leaves have once again changed their hues to the usual green of spring, and the beginnings of life start to sprout around me. Grief takes time and healing is a process, but it's a process that we have to endure. I will keep going until I love myself the way you had loved me and I will bloom into a new person, even if you are no longer a witness to it. Things have changed and will never be the same, but it's okay. My mornings don't feel as heavy anymore, so maybe the birds sing for a reason.

The next thing I know, it's July.

Category 2
Kira Entzminger
Short Story
Shadow Hills High School

Hunter, Hunted

There the boy sat, charcoal scratching on paper. A newspaper wasn't the best surface to sketch on, he thought, but the charcoal had been burning for days. Day four was the perfect time to nab some. Perfect grain, perfect texture, perfect hold (one more day and it'd fall to a pile of ash below his touch). Day four was perfect.

So there he sat, sketching, and whistling. Whistling to himself a familiar, yet unrecognizable tune, and sketching the decaying...rabbit, maybe, which lay before him.

The poor creature was missing its head. Only a pair of...shoulders, perhaps, remained. Bits of flesh riddled the ground about its open grave, and a few maggots attended the funeral. Both of its back feet were missing. One had been crammed into the shallow pocket upon the boy's trousers (for good luck) and the other was nowhere to be seen.

A twig snapped behind the boy. His heart gave a jolt, and his hand flinched accordingly, smearing the charcoal where it wasn't meant to be smeared.

Anger traveled up his spine and settled on his face, his dark eyebrows lurching downward and the corners of his lips sinking. His head didn't turn as he hissed a menacing, "*What?*"

No answer.

"Can't you hear?" he inquired, his voice shifting from quietly malevolent to furiously raucous.

Still, no answer.

He gave a sigh, throwing the newspaper down and twisting himself to see what kind of moron dared interrupt him at this time.

There stood a man, accompanied by a long-barreled shotgun.

The boy studied him, taking in information. The man was tall, taller than average, and due to the man's above-average height, he thought, the man was below the average weight--much below.

Of course, everyone seemed to be below the average weight those days (so below that it, itself, was becoming the new average). Food was scarce. Meat was especially rare, with the overabundance of greedy hunters who didn't know when enough was quite enough. Greedy hunters like the man who stood behind the boy.

"That's my kill," the man muttered gruffly, his voice grating through the air like the call of a common ravenbird.

The boy only stared, unmoving, on high alert, a deer with his sights on a wolf. The man wasn't much of a man; he was practically a corpse already, carrying more muscle than meat on his bones, possessing more tobacco smoke than oxygen in his lungs, and--by the looks of the headless animal he'd claimed--holding less of a shotgun, and more of a useless, metal tube without gunpowder in those hands.

"This is your kill?" the boy asked finally. His tone remained hostile, his body remained unmoving.

“Yes.” The man’s course, gravel-like dialect cut through the assertive tone he’d meant to speak in, making his actual response seem reluctant.

“Ain’t much of one,” the boy pointed out grimly, “It’s weak. Got more skin than muscle, more muscle than fat. You’d be better off hunting sewer rats.”

A quick wave of degradation washed over the man. The muscles in his eyes twitched defensively, and he stepped forward. The man instinctively drew his gun, the barrel threatening the foliage that covered the forest floor. A stick snapped below him.

The boy sat unflinching, watching the thin man travel crookedly toward him. The man held the gun higher, bobbing every other step (a result of gout, most likely). He tried to remember if he’d reloaded his gun.

“Why don’t you run along,” the man grumbled, “before you get hurt out here.”

The boy paid him no mind.

“I must know...” the boy’s angry lilt turned to a new, curious vocalism. “...did you hunt this rabbit for sport? It isn’t rich with meat, though with all that muscle it must be fast.”

The man croaked a low, “I reckon he was, before I took his foot.” He coughed into the back of his hand then mumbled, “Even without it, he could run like hell.”

The boy blinked at the sound of a dry throat, knowing it well. “Ah,” his curiosity fell to feigned wonder, “you crippled the creature, first. Then you hunted it for sport, not for meat.”

The man continued his slow, irregular steps forward. He inhaled, then mumbled breathlessly, “Don’t matter, kid. There’s hundreds of bunnies all over this forest.”

This time, the boy turned his head cannily to gaze at the wasted carcass lying in front of him. The man jumped at the sudden movement. His shotgun did the same, springing up to point at the boy’s side, while his finger hovered over the useless trigger.

The boy’s head jerked over once again to leer at the man. He threw on a pleasant smile, murmuring eerily, “Collect your winnings, hunter.”

The man nodded, unsure about whether or not he really wanted the rabbit. Maybe he could use the pelt for something. The boy had been right, after all, the hunt was not for meat.

Watching the man kneel to retrieve the creature, the boy rose carefully to stand over him. He yanked at the small dagger he’d kept in his boot, and thrust it into the side of the man’s leg.

The man cried out, his voice breaking halfway through and ending in a shrill wheeze, his shotgun falling with a quiet thud. He winced, grabbed hold of the knife, and pulled it from his upper leg, yelping at the spurt of blood that came with it, and groaning at the river which flowed after.

The boy wrenched the blade from the man’s grasp, kicked him over, and searched him for a pocket watch. He found the little, round, telltale-pocket-watch case inside the man’s vest, and plucked it from the weak chain it grasped. He flipped open the case, eyeballing the man as he writhed. “Hunter,” the boy barked, glancing at the watch as the minute-hand rounded the two. “You have one minute to run.”

The man looked up, stammering weakly, "W-What?"

The boy shook the watch impatiently, "I cannot hunt you for meat, now can I?"

The man stared at him: meek, afraid, fragile, like a deer with a wolf in his sights.

The larger watch hand moved slightly, and the boy snapped, "Fifty seconds, hunter!!"

The man scrambled to stand, losing his footing momentarily, and slumping back to the ground.

The watch shook once again, the boy chanting menacingly, "Thirty seconds, little rabbit!"

Regaining most of his balance, the man started at a running limp, acting more like he was missing his foot rather than a small chunk of his leg. Leaves crunched under his now-heavy steps, and his breath caught in his throat while he half-sprinted around trees and tripped over rocks. He stumbled over tree roots and coughed ruggedly. He couldn't tell which was going to give out first; his lungs or his legs.

A grin crept to the boy's face as the minute-hand passed over the three. He began at an easy walk, relying on the faint racket of hacking coughs and grinding of dead leaves to lead him to the man. The boy picked up his pace when he could no longer hear where the hunter was. The crack of a branch just ahead let him know, and the boy stepped swiftly, quietly, contrasting the ponderous movement of the hunter.

He followed the man until they reached a mini-clearing outside the thick forest. Frail and staggering, the man hardly moved. He breathed roughly. The boy started at a dead run toward the hunter, driving the end of the dagger into his ribs again and again when they made contact.

The man let out a series of violent, almost-animal like screeches as the blade punctured flesh, muscle, marrow. He thrashed painfully, tugging at the handle of the dagger uselessly, gasping with panic and pleading for mercy. Red spilled from several deep slits in the man's side, dyeing the point of the knife an intense, sickly maroon.

The boy fought off the man's protests with mocked boo-hoos. He yanked the bulky knife from the hunter's compacted ribs and muttered a swear at the spray of blood that had stained his hands. The man attempted to sit up, then fell back in fear when the boy lunged threateningly at him. He settled into a stiff, nervous lying position, his head turning slightly, before losing track of the boy as he'd slunk behind the hunter's head, and out of his peripherals.

The man choked on a sob, feeling the blade fix itself just below his jawline. His eyes darted left to right, observing, watching, waiting for sudden movement; a mouse searching for a hawk he'd seen seconds ago. His heart pounded and his palms perspired. His breathing sped up and his gasps turned to horrified shudders.

He stuttered a shocked, "Wh-why?"

The boy shrugged, tightening his hold on the dagger and leaving a thin cut on the hunter's neck. He demanded through gritted teeth, "Because hunting the weak and injured is fun, ain't it, little rabbit?"

"Please," the hunter crowed, "I-I have a family, a-a big family, lots of buddies, please..."

The blade pushed down on the hunter's windpipe, the boy's knuckles going white from pressure. His voice went ominous once again, "So, you're saying there are...*hundreds of other hunters?*"

The man's eyes widened, his teeth clenched. Only half-words escaped his lips, "Wh-uh, no--"

“So it don’t matter. There’s lots of you so it don’t matter if I kill *you* for sport.”

“I-no, that’s not what I meant--“

“You are not rich with meat, hunter,” the blade shifted sharply to the left, ready to split the man’s throat in two. “So I must hunt you for sport.” The boy drove the tip of the blade into the hunter’s neck, listening to the wet, dense shriek he uttered, then his final muted gasp as the dagger tore through stretched skin, a rubbery trachea, thin vocal cords. Blood poured endlessly from the laceration, though the boy continued to saw through the windpipe, slice through the muscle, and sever the head completely.

Soaked from the end of his forehead to his midsection in blood, the boy sat back, panting at how much effort it took to detach a head from its body. He set the hunter’s head aside, after closing its freakishly wide, green eyes. He then looked back at the body and sat forward again, reaching for the man’s left boot. He struggled to pull it off. When he did, he brought out the dagger again and leaned over the man’s bare, dirt-blackened foot. The boy raised the knife over his head and swung it down, slicing through the thick first joint in the hunter’s big toe.

Then the boy pocketed his winning, mumbling to himself, “For good luck,” before standing again, turning away, and beginning to whistle. He began to saunter, a slight, grim smile on his face as he tried to remember his way back.

Category 2

Ifra Iyooob

Informative Essay Palm

Desert High School

Genocides Are Not Just of the Past

By: Ifra Iyooob

In the northwest area of China lies Xinjiang, a region home to over 8 million Uighurs, a predominantly Muslim Turkic ethnic group. Up to 1.8 million of these Uighurs have been imprisoned via concentration camps in a manner unseen since the Holocaust. Even though almost a fourth of the Chinese Muslim Uighur population have been imprisoned, scarce is the only suitable word to describe any media coverage dedicated to educating the public about this issue, a concerning and inconceivable current event that could undoubtedly be classified as genocide.

Multiple countries have accused China of committing genocide, including the US, the UK, Canada, and the Netherlands. The denotation of genocide is as follows, a violation of international law where acts are committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group. Reports write that China has been forcibly performing mass sterilization and abortions upon Uighur women in an attempt to cease population growth. Additionally, records accuse China of voluntarily separating children from their families. If that wasn't enough, China has implemented practices that are forbidden in Islam throughout the camps. For example, Uighurs imprisoned in the camps have been subjected to drinking wine and eating pork, considered sins or bad deeds in the Muslim holy book, the Quran. In addition, women have been forced to disown their scarves and men have been commanded to shave their beards. In one instance, a Uighur man who had grown out a beard of "abnormal length", something which he has complete bodily autonomy over, was sentenced to 6 years in prison. Additionally, this man's wife was sentenced to 2 years for wearing a hijab, a religious garment she should have sole jurisdiction over regarding if she wears it or not, and her decision should be free of any repercussions. In the camps, Muslims have been forced to renounce Islam and pledge their allegiance to the Chinese communist party. All of these actions have a sole purpose, to erase the Uighur religion and identity, ultimately wiping the existence of Uighurs off the Earth. What I have described to you is the prime example of a genocide.

The concentration camps of Xinjiang have been described as torture zones. Women who have escaped the camps have reported systematic rape, constant sexual abuse, and seemingly never-ending torture. Tursunay Ziawudun, a 42-year-old married Uighur woman, spent nine months inside the concentration camps before she was released. She later spoke to the BBC about her horrifying experience in the internment camps. Her descriptions are extremely graphic and distressing to hear, but they are the reality of the treatment the Chinese government subjects Uighurs to, all due to their religion, my religion, Islam.

Ziawudun described how women were taken from their cells nightly before being raped or gang-raped. Ziawudun herself narrated how she was tortured and gang-raped on three occasions by either two or three men. Furthermore, a detained Kazakh woman from Xinjiang revealed that she was forced to strip Uighur women completely and handcuff them to remove the women of all mobility before isolating them with Chinese men. She confirmed that the

concentration camps practice a system of organized rape. Ziawudun disclosed that some women who were taken away from their cells at night were never again seen. Those who made it back to their cells were forbidden from telling others of their experience, and threats forced those women from ever revealing their traumatic ordeals.

When Ziawudun was first detained a few months after arriving in Xinjiang from Kazakhstan after staying in the country with her Kazakh husband for five years, she thought of the detention stay as relatively okay. However, Ziawudun was later transported to a police station before being returned to the first internment camp she'd been brought to. During that time, her earrings were yanked out of her ears, causing them to bleed. Ziawudun described seeing elderly women stripped of almost all their clothes, women's hijabs yanked off, and guards clamoring at women for wearing long dresses. Whenever women resisted answering questions during interrogation with the Chinese police, they were mercilessly kicked in the abdomen. Ziawudun recounted how she almost passed out during those interrogation sessions. Later, Ziawudun was told by the camp doctor that she may have a blood clot due to those brutal interrogation periods. And when Ziawudun's cellmates pointed out her bleeding, the guards replied by saying it was "normal for women to bleed".

Ziawudun's cellmate, a 20-something woman, was taken out of the cell with her to a separate room. The two women were not alone, a Chinese man in a mask, who was beady-eyed for their beauty, stalked alongside them. Once Ziawudun's cellmate entered the room, she started screaming. Ziawudun immediately believed the woman was being tortured, she hadn't thought the man was sexually assaulting her cellmate. Later, Ziawudun's bleeding, which was caused by the police, was revealed to the masked man. As a punishment, the woman who had brought Ziawudun to the room was instructed to escort Ziawudun to a different chamber, the dark room, where Ziawudun was tortured with an electric shock to her genital tract. Once Ziawudun staggered back to her cell and saw her cellmate had also reappeared, Ziawudun noticed that her cellmate's behavior had transformed. She now stared quietly as if she were in a trance. The girl's entire demeanor had been altered, her original personality and character hid by the fright and distress of her experience in the internment camp.

Around 2017, the time of the alleged beginning of the detention centers, the existence of the camps was denied by China vehemently. It's important to mention that while the camps may not have been used to persecute Uighurs prior to 2017, other unjust and outlandish forms of mistreatment were employed as substitutes. But once the presence of the camps became apparent, via satellite images of the buildings, China labeled the internment camps as "voluntary vocational and de-radicalization programs for combatting terrorism in the region". However, if such claims were true and the camps were indeed "voluntary", China would not have banned the BBC, a news network that has reported on China's religious persecution of Uighurs, from airing in the country. In addition, there is nothing inherently wrong with the Uighurs, as China suggests, that they would need "deradicalization" to treat. The entire campaign is based on Islamophobia, the spark that lit the Chinese government's ever-expanding and brightly burning fire of heinous invasion on the human rights of Uighur Muslims.

Agnes Callamard, the secretary general of Amnesty International, a large human rights organization, anointed the Xinjiang camps as a “dystopian hellscape on a staggering scale”. After interviewing 55 former detainees, Amnesty published their scathing 160-page report on the crimes the Chinese government had committed and continues to commit against Uighurs, Kazakhs, and other Muslim groups. At a minimum, these accusations include “imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty in violation of fundamental rules of international law; torture; and persecution”. In addition, allegations exist of previously mentioned mass rape, forced sterilization, forced abortions, population transfer to reduce birth rates and population density, and targeting Islamic leaders to halt religious and cultural traditions. More recently, the United Nations’ human rights division released a 48-page report which accused the Chinese government of extreme violations of human rights which could equate to “crimes against humanity”. And as expected, via a 131-page document, China responded to the allegations by denying the horrors Muslims in Xinjiang have been involuntarily subjected to.

As a Muslim, hearing about the gross and inhumane treatment my people face daily is heartwrenching and sickening, to say the least. What boggles my mind is how underemphasized this issue is, specifically in the U.S. Rarely have I, an avid news-watcher, tuned into one of our national news channels to see coverage of the Xinjiang internment camps. Neither have I seen more than a couple of articles discussing the mistreatment of Uighurs outside of sources like the BBC and Al-Jazeera. This must change. More awareness must be brought to the despicable and horrifically unacceptable behavior of the Chinese government towards Muslims. A literal genocide is happening in China, and it seems that the U.S. government, which has declared China is in fact committing genocide against the Uighurs, is far from concerned. Sure, a law has been passed regarding banning goods made through forced labor in Xinjiang, but not much else has occurred. Nationally and globally, a strong effort must be made to pressure China into freeing all Uighurs and other Muslims that are being held in concentration camps. There are mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, fathers, husbands, sons, brothers, and children being tortured in China daily. These are lives worth saving and lives that deserve to be saved. These are ordinary people, like you and me, good people, like you and me, who 100% do not deserve the nightmarish and sickening treatment they are receiving.

The Uighur culture is beautiful indeed. In Turkey resides a school, dedicated to preserving Uighur identity and all the practices attached to it. The school is mostly made up of young Uighur children, whose parents are stuck in China, in the horrifying internment camps that still exist in today’s society. The Uighur Science and Enlightenment Foundation opened in 2015, to teach its Uighur students their mother tongue and all about their special and unique identity.

I hope that nationally and internationally, we can all pressure our governments to free the Uighurs, which will allow them to practice their traditions and religion, without ever having to worry about facing inhumane treatment as a result, an unalienable right that should be promised to all worldwide. I hope by reading my words, I instilled this same fire in you, to stand up for our Uighur friends who cannot stand up for themselves.

Category 3
Ivana Rodriguez
Poetry
Palm Desert High School

Growing Pains.

I need to stop these growing pains
The knowledge in two years nothing will ever be the same
Numbing myself to keep away the forceful rains of failure becomes routine
Desperate attempts to battle reality with false hope and happiness
Scaring with a smile only brought on more fears
Friends faded away
I began to have more bad days
All in an effort to dull these growing pains
Being loved helped the pain
But like the monster under your bed
Who you only believe in when you're alone and in the dark
They never really went away
People only said that they did
At times they're almost gone
I'm with family and friends
The blanket of warm laughter wraps around me
I missed it when it was ripped away so long ago
No tests, no fights
No failures.
And it's almost like
For the first time in forever
Almost like I'm hap-
A failed test
A call to the principal's office
A rumor believed to be true
I feel throbbing in the back of my mind.
Please
One by one, people leave
Disappointment and failure are the biggest culprits
Suicide by study to pass a test
Starving so for everyone, I'll look my best
Love is the only thing that dulls these pains
Barely out of reach, I destroy myself just for a chance of it
Please
I'll break myself in two if it means you'll approve
I can't take the disappointment out of you
So I'll just take the failure out of myself
Just give me the medicine to these pains

They infiltrate my senses, weeds intricately growing in my brain
Fueled by failure and fear
Woven in with my DNA, the pain is too much to bear
Even when I close my eyes
A bright red F waits behind my eyelids, ready to greet me
It seems as if I'll never escape
But now-
Poetry is the only place the pains don't exist
And even then
A stanza goes stale, a line left underwhelmed
I'm back to the disappointment I've always been
I can pick up a pen
And I can feign being an artist
But I can't unwrite my failures
And I can *never* unwrite these growing pains

Category 3

Cynthia Ruiz

Poetry

La Quinta High School

“Dinner Time”

“Time for dinner!” dread booms
I stroll past the dining room,
Where the silverware is gold as a medal,
I am in far reach of the participation trophy

To set it straight, I like food... liked food
Arranged so beautifully like rows of apples
Stacked sandwiches, such scrumptious servings
A bowl of fruit at my side on a sorrowful day,
Knowing it would ease all dismay,
That was my mistake.

Soon food turned into a test
Food became frozen packs of flavorless carb-free meals
Food became purple boxes of tea I wasn't allowed to question
And at most times, food was nothing.

The advice judgemental relatives, desperate tabloids, and loudly wrong “weight loss” blogs don't
give is
That the meals skipped and calories counted add up,
They don't burn into the “slim body” promised,
And instead weighed me down from my strength.
No insecurities go away just like that
Instead they turn into the body you're stuck in while crying in a bathroom,
Asking how this all happened.

However, the advantage to being hurt and ruined
is that you hold the power to forgive,
The choice to even, despite really not wanting to,
Forgive yourself.

Category 3
Joshua Alapizco
Song Lyrics
Shadow Hills High School

She said fuck you for this
Walking away disappear in the mist
She turning her hand to a fist
Hitting and hitting she wishing I didn't exist
But from the first look she couldn't resist

I've fallen into an abyss (yeah)
It's a dark whole with some dark souls
And the hell throne is where I'll go
Where there's a demon holding up a dead rose
And those who oppose get burnt up
Turned into stone and they ashes blow
Away
On some Kanye shit imma run away
Cause I miss her
I remember the first time that I kissed her
She was smelling good I could not resist her
She's a butterfly a sunflower
I'm a damn moth, man a whole coward
I know my love was sweet and sour and that's what made you say

Fuck you for this
Walking away disappear in the mist
She turning her hand to a fist
Hitting and hitting she wishing I didn't exist
But from the first look she couldn't resist

She couldn't resist
Put her on top of my list
She made me so nervous I talked with a lisp
She grabbed on my face she kissed on my lips
That's where I wondered does heaven exist
I was convinced she was my gift
Heavenly touch on my face it gave me a lift
How did it get from that to all this conflict
A bunch of screaming and cussin'
Ain't no more lovin'
Like fuck you this and fuck you that man that shits disgusting
Keepin it real keepin it real
I cannot feel I got like a hundred cuts on my body
Man, I cannot heal
I gotta pop me some pills just for the thrills just for the feels
Aye
She's lookin' so nice in them heels

I'll sell my soul for her that is my deal
It doesn't matter

She said fuck for this
Putting her hand in fist
Hitting and hitting she wishing I didn't exist
Walking away disappear in the mist
But from the first look she couldn't resist

I've fallen fallen into an abyss
Deeper and faster
I am a bastard
I need a pastor
Father forgive me for all of my sins before a disaster

Category 3
Maximus Rubalcava
Short Story
Shadow Hills High School

The Forest by Maximus Rubalcava

I have run into a conflicting situation. My car broke down. I was on the road, about to explore the new property that my dad bought for the family. I don't remember how much it was, but he bought it way up in the mountains of Oak Glen, California. Growing up as an only child in urban Los Angeles, I was never into the wild side of nature, especially forests. There's something about forests that really freaks me out. Maybe it's the way the trees are aligned. Or how it gets super dark and unsettling at night. Or maybe it's always those stories that people always make up about forests. About how evils of many kinds prowl the darkness and prey on the unfortunate souls that happen to be around during nightfall. Yep, that's the kind of stuff people make up. But frankly, I never really believed that garbage. Only crazy people that get into all sorts of pseudoscience will seem to do it. Anyways, that property my dad bought, it's for me and my mom to enjoy, as well as himself. Those words, Mom and Dad bring relief in my lonely heart. I never saw them much as a child. Both were business owners, and rarely had time for their only son. I mostly spent the 17 years of my entire life with my aunt Gisselle and uncle Jack. But even with them, I barely spoke a single sentence to them. I just felt empty all these years. No parents to be there for me. No siblings. No normal lifestyle. No happiness. Just the gray sensation in my life.

Alright, back to the story. So yeah, the car broke down, and I had to put it on the far right side of the road to park. Strangely enough, I don't know the model of my car. I just don't pay attention to that kind of stuff. Weird. I tried every method there is to get my car started up again. But no matter what, it wouldn't budge. I pulled out my phone to try to call for help, like a nearby tow service. But apparently, there's no cell phone reception up here in these mountains, not to mention that my phone is on low battery. Why is this happening to me? I can't just try to call multiple times to find someone while my phone is on 3% of battery. I decided to put my phone away and look for help instead. I couldn't go up to my dad's property. Sure, he's got neighbors up there. Kind-hearted folks who would do anything to help the son of a fellow resident. Only problem was, I didn't know how to get there. I needed the GPS to find its location, but getting up there will take longer on foot, not to mention how much time my phone has left. It seemed hopeless. But I had to do something. I wasn't just gonna sit around and wait for death to come get me, whether it be starvation, dehydration, or even a wild animal attack. Me being the scrawny, frail teenager that I was, I don't stand a chance against any animal. I began my quest to go looking for help. But where I was at made me rethink my choice. Now, remember how I said that I was deathly afraid of forests? Yep, I'm in a forest, in the mountains. I didn't want to go down the unpleasant horror we call a forest. Why Nathan? Why of all things did your father have to buy a property in the forest in the mountains? Mountains are bad enough, for their colossal heights bring terrible feelings everywhere in my body. But a forest, now that's where I cross the line. So now I must make a difficult decision: go into the forest with all the nightmares packed into it, or become a feast for a pack of wolves. I finally settled on Option 1, as that's the option I

have a better chance for survival. I'm crazy for doing this, but it's worth a try to get some help. I set out to face my fears and man up, just to get someone to tow my car and get me out of here.

Okay, now I regret trying to act tough and go through the forest. I have multiple chills going down my spine just walking on the trails. Just looking at the environment, it wasn't as scary as people made it out to be. None of the trees were shaped in unnatural ways, they all looked like normal pine trees. They all had their vegetation on them. No dead grass, leaves, or even twigs on the floor here. It was just green grass, weeds, and rocks. And luckily for me, no shadowy figures or nightmarish creatures remained in sight, or I least hope not. It's alright Nathan. See? This isn't so bad. I can do this. But I spoke too soon. The sky turned more gray than it already was. The clouds started getting more cloudier, and in a way that I had not seen ever in cloud behavior. And the fog. The misty, brumous fog that makes everything in sight impossible to see, kicked in. At this point, I started to panic. More to the fact that this phenomenon didn't seem like it was supposed to happen, or even exist at all. It all felt very unworldly. I wanted to head back, but at the same time, I had already made it very far into the forest. I wanted to retreat back to my car, back to my home. But it was no use. The fog made it very impossible to see anything. If I even tried to look, I could end up lost and find myself in an even worse situation. This all felt like a nightmare come to life, for something to happen in the woods. I was lost, alone, and I didn't know what to do. I was going to die. My mind, meanwhile, kept telling me to calm myself down, and I did, but it took a little while. I had always questioned the human mind in the past. It was so complex, so mysterious, to the point where it could do many things to you, like say things, do things, or even think things. But right now, I'm willing to do anything just to get out of here. Because now, it was a fight for my life.

It's been 45 minutes, and there's no sight of help, or even anything. I've been constantly walking just to get moving. As I took some more steps, I stumbled upon something very peculiar. It was a river rock. But what amazed me about it was that it was the only river rock here. All the other rocks here were very worn out in colors of orange, gray, and brown, very rough surfaced, and very misshapen. This river rock was pure black. It was smaller than the rest of the rocks on the floor, very smooth. The touch reminded me of a watermelon's skin. It was round on all the edges. The last thing I caught was that one of the edges was broken, like it lost a chunk. This was a really cool rock. I liked it. I decided to keep it home as a souvenir and a reminder of the awful experience I'm having right now. At least this rock lightened the mood up a bit. I put it in my pocket and headed off. 1 hour passes, and I haven't encountered anyone or anything scary. The fog, sky, and clouds were frightening, but it was hardly a scare. It wasn't really that bad. But then, I heard voices. Small whispers in my ears that spoke really quiet. I looked around to see where they were coming from. Nothing. They were just all over the place with no exact origin of where they came from, or what they even were. The voices then started moaning. My skin turned pale just hearing it. Their moans, I could recall, were not of pain, agony, and terror. They were more like despair, boredom, and sorrow, like they lost all meaning in life. I know how that feels, but I didn't wanna stick around to see what else would occur. I rushed myself out of there. The further away I went, the quieter the voices got to the point where

they weren't present anymore. I was glad to get out of that scenario. For the next few moments, I heard nothing but the soft wind blowing through my ears. It was pleasant. If only more forests were like this, or all of them. With brighter sceneries, more pleasing noises, and even animals. No, not like bears or wolves or mountain lions. I mean deer, bunnies, butterflies, and frogs. At least that's calm.

1 hour and 15 minutes now. I haven't seen anything unexplained yet since the voices in the fog. Through the fog, I spotted a figure. I couldn't make up my mind exactly what the figure looked like, but it had the shape of a human. I didn't say no to the possibility that it was a fellow person coming to help me so I rushed right towards the figure. I couldn't believe it. Being stuck in this forest for some time now, and finally, help was on its way. I wanted to thank the kind soul who's rescuing me. But as I got closer, I noticed something very wrong. The figure started to look a lot less human. It got darker and taller and thinner. Eventually, I ran into the figure to find out that this was not a human. This thing was tall, like 12 feet high. It was very thin, and possessed the blackest skin I've ever seen in anything. It had the same features of a human except eyes, a nose, nails, teeth, hair, ears, and a mouth. It practically had no face whatsoever. And the plain texture of its skin was very unsettling. We both stared into each other's eyes, saying nothing. I was too frightened to respond, so as usual, I ran. I was rushing at some very high speeds. I looked back to see if the creature was following me. To my surprise, it just stood there, not even attempting to catch up to me, and just kept staring at me in the distance. I was confident I lost it, but then I saw a glimpse through the trees, as if the creature had some teleporting abilities. Then I saw another one in front of me. Then another one. Then two others on my side. I paused as I was suddenly surrounded by at least ten of these things. They stood in a circle, just not saying anything and just staring. I let out a scream so loud that the entire forest must've heard it. I pushed myself out of the circle and ran away from the things' circle. Same thing, looked back and they did nothing but stare. I got further and further until they were no longer in sight. I stopped running, so I could save my energy. I looked around to see if anything else would pop up. No more black beings. I was relieved while at the same time scared. I just had to keep going.

I have had it with this place. This whole day in the forest is giving me and will continue to give me nightmares for the rest of my life. The gloomy weather, the misty fog, the cloudier than usual clouds, the voices, the thin, black beings. This was like something out of a horror movie. At this point, I don't even care if my car gets fixed anymore. I was too upset to even think about that. My survival was number one, but I had to get out of here. But if I did, what would I tell my dad? That I didn't go to the property because my car broke down and I had to go into the creepy woods where I experienced the unordinary horrors? No, he won't believe that. He'll think I'm delusional. I know. I'll tell him that a car hit my car and that it was totaled in the accident. I needed a ride back home, so I took a cab. That's something that I can sell to him. But the truth is, he probably won't even take the time to ask me what happened. Just like all these years, and with Mom too. It just makes me think: Why do I even have parents? Will I even get a chance to speak to them properly? Or more importantly, why do I even exist? 1 hour and 30 minutes in. I

stumbled across a large pillar. It appeared to have something carved on its rocky texture. I took a look and read the following: **“ALL WHO GO DOWN THIS PATH ANY FURTHER WILL SUFFER UNDER THE GAZE OF THE OUTLASTER. PRAY TO YOUR GOD, FOR YOU WILL NEED IT. WITH NO GOD, YOU ARE SURE TO MEET A LIFE OF INSANITY.”** I was both confused and horrified, as this made no sense but at the same time, this could be another horror that I could encounter. Who was this Outlaster? Should I keep my out for this thing? I was very unsure of the “praying to your god” part. Growing up, I was a nihilist. I didn’t disrespect any gods of any religion, but I saw them as meaningless in my life. And I believe that when you die, death won’t take me anywhere. I’d just stay in the ground, rotting away until only my bones were evidence of my existence. While walking away from the pillar, I noticed that the fog started to clear up. Everything was starting to be in sight, I couldn’t believe it. I spotted a sign that pointed to a nearby community that was only 1 mile away. I was so happy right now. Everything that I’ve been through for the past hour and a half, and finally, things were going my way. I was going to get help. I was going to leave. And I would never come back to this forsaken place ever again. Heck, I would forget that I even went here? But could I truly? That doesn’t matter, because I am getting out of here. I ran down the path that would lead me to the community in a joyful manner. I looked around as the fog started to disappear. The clouds started to get less cloudy, but they were still covering up parts of the sky. The sky got less gray, but nonetheless, it was still gray. I didn’t mind at all. My luck was beginning to turn around. But as usual, I spoke too soon. I spotted something in the sky that put me on a dead pause: two large red eyes looming over me. They looked down at me, and that made me stop running. I was frustrated that all of a sudden, something had to turn up in my way. The eyes started moving as they started to reveal a figure through the sky. Suddenly, the figure was in sight. I looked up as high as I could, as the being was as tall as the mountains here. It had a hard body texture, almost as if that was its protective armor. The claws on the fingers were long and sharp. The being, or the creature, stood in a human-like manner and was sorta built like a human, so more humanoid-like. The color, dark green with patches of black, was very ugly to look at. I noticed the wings on the back of the creature. They were large, had a dragon-like appearance, and looked like the wingspan stretched for many and many miles. And the face. It had the face of an octopus, or somewhat like an octopus. There were so many tentacles in the area of the creature’s mouth. But based on its design, it didn’t look like it possessed a mouth at all. This being was no alien, god, or demon. This was something else. All of this made it sound like I’m describing a monster from Lovecraftian horror, like Cthulhu. My mind couldn’t process what was happening. Was this the Outlaster, the being that the pillar warned me about? I only had one thing in mind to do: run. Luckily for me, I had enough energy to do that. I wasted no time and rushed myself out of the area. I looked back once in a while that the creature was following me. It was so slow, so that’s something. I couldn’t stop for 1 second. Anything I did, would lead me to a death trap. I know the pillar told me to pray to a god, but I didn’t have time to do that. I have been seen by its gaze, but I haven’t reached levels of insanity, as the pillar foretold. The ground started to shake beneath my feet. It was too unstable that it was hard for me to run through it all. Then, the ground broke, and I found myself falling down in a huge hole that would lead me to the undergrounds. The fall was long, and I was screaming for a long time, too. I looked back up to see that the being was looking down at me, watching me as I met my demise. I was coming to the bottom very quickly, and as soon as I knew it, everything turned white.

It was all white. I could hear the high pitched noise that you get in your ears sometimes. My vision started to come back to normal, as did my ears. I heard a voice. "Nathan. Nathan. Nathan." I could see a man in my sight sitting on a chair with a desk. My eyes looked around slowly as I started to see better. I believe I was in an office, sitting in a chair. I saw many things here. There was a fish tank full of common goldfish. I saw a globe, a statue of a cat, a bookshelf full of books, and a clock that read 11:20 am, and numerous photos of this man. I also saw paperwork and awards. One award I could recall seeing: "**Best Psychiatrist in Los Angeles**". I focused my attention on the man as my ears started to function again. This man had a rather gentle appearance. He was thin, very tall though. His brown eyes had the same brown color as a chocolate chip. His hair was black, and combed to the back. He must use a lot of gel today, as his hair was very shiny. He looked like a man in his mid-30s to early-40s. His skin was really white, like the white of milk. Along with that, he's got a mustache, which was a lampshade mustache. "Nathan, can you hear me?" he asked me. I responded, but my voice was very slow. "Yes." I was more focused on his name tag, which read Mr. Wells. Mr. Wells looked at me with a concerned look on his face. "The warden told me you had another one of your "nightmares" again," he said. "That's the 5th time this week. The same nightmare, same situation, for the 94th time. Have you been taking the Haldol medications I prescribed to you?" I just told him the truth. "No", I said, "I haven't been taking the Haldol medications." My voice was still a little slow, and it sounded very tiresome. Mr. Wells was a little displeased with my answer, but he took it positively. "I understand you don't want to take your medications. I really do," he said, "But you gotta understand. This stuff is supposed to help treat your condition. That's what medications do. They help you, right? Right?" I understood him, but I didn't want to listen to him. He told me I was free to go. I got up from the chair I was sitting in, and made my way to the door. I latched my hand on the doorknob, and was ready to open the door. But before I did, I turned back to Mr. Wells and asked him a question. "Can I see my parents?" Mr. Wells looked at me in a way that we had this conversation before. "Until you're well, Mr. Cole. That's why you're here," he said. Same as usual, I was displeased with this answer. I had put up with this excuse for all the 5 years I was put here. I just wanted to see Mom and Dad again. I miss them so much. I opened the door knob and left Mr. Wells' office. I heard say bye to me on my way out, but I was just too upset to respond. I decided to go back outside and get some fresh air. Another day at the psychiatric ward. I looked around the hallway that would lead me to the outdoors. I saw 3 pictures on my way out: a forest in the mountains, a broken down car, and a phone. I got outside and saw the gray sky and the cloudy weather. I saw that it started to fog up a tiny bit, but nothing too serious. Even though I was kept out of view from everything else, I could see the woods on the outside of the ward. I made my way to the others outside who were just sitting down, walking in circles, or just picking up stuff from the ground. A few of them started moaning, in tones of despair, boredom, and sorrow. I felt their pain. We were all the same here. Locked up because everyone thinks that this is what's best for us. It wasn't our fault that we had something that we couldn't control. I saw the guards in their black uniforms walking around, keeping an eye on us all. They all scared me, for they were tall, rarely spoke, and looked strong even though they all had a skinny frame. They were all scattered around the yard. A few of them looked at me as I passed them. They didn't follow me, they just stood there. I followed a sign that read: "**ARTWORK DISPLAY. COURTESY OF THE WARDEN.**" I like going to the artwork display. It

brightened the mood here a bit, and was the only entertaining thing here. I always went to this particular piece of art. It was a paper mache model of a creature that resembled Cthulhu, or at least was inspired by him. The artwork was named "The Outlaster", and it came along with a whiteboard that read this: **"ALL WHO GO DOWN THIS PATH ANY FURTHER WILL SUFFER UNDER THE GAZE OF THE OUTLASTER. PRAY TO YOUR GOD, FOR YOU WILL NEED IT. WITH NO GOD, YOU ARE SURE TO MEET A LIFE OF INSANITY."** I was more calm being out here today, or how I was a few moments ago.. I was tired of being outside, so I went back into my room.

In my room, I was ready to take a nap. I looked around my drawings, which I have taped on all four of my walls. I had drawings of The Outlaster and some unidentified creatures I made, which were tall and black. Before I went to bed, I pulled something out of my pocket. To my surprise, it wasn't like anything I picked up before. It was a river rock. And it was small, round, smooth, black, and had a chunk of the edge missing.

Category 3
Jackson Hendricks
Short Story
Shadow Hills High School

Escaping Tethoris

By: Jackson Hendricks

Prologue

It was a lie.

Some believed that by changing one thing, another would follow, but this was never the case. Why was it so hard to change in the end? The ideas that swarmed their head, the thoughts swallowing every word spoken, the scars one brings tangled with doubt, or did they just forget to care enough to try? Ideas can stay inside your head for days and never leave, they are a constant reminder of the unspoken. Thoughts and ideas crowd the mind, suffocating a person until no more. The fear each person carries can harm the brain, making the world seem dangerous, clinging to the closest thing they have; even if it's the worst thing to touch.

I ask myself these questions every day, hoping I can decipher the code inside a person's mind to shift into a greater development of character, and yet, I can't even decipher myself. It's not a surprise though, how could I understand everything in my brain, it's the equivalent of asking a wall to speak. Sometimes things are left unsaid, which begs the question, why am I always left with everyone's questions?

Grindwell Academy

The air turned black all around him. Sometimes, the world moves faster than those in it, and it can become the most conflicting sight. Both beauty and deceit in one area, much like being in a white room, peaceful but lonely. It was raining and Jason couldn't help but stare, as if it took all his attention and looked up. The stars were bright, and those looking back felt empty as his eyes fluttered, almost like Jason knew exactly how the stars felt. Eleven years old and being pulled from side to side, it is never easy. He was small for his age, his hair was a mess and his skin was a smooth reflection of the night sky. Although, one thing that everyone noticed was his piercing blue eyes that could drown anyone in his way. If anything, that is what made him stand out from the others, even when he hated it.

While the night was calm the tension around him was high, each of Jason's arms were being pulled from side to side. Taking every thought he had and at that moment, he was what some would call drained. It's not easy when someone tells another to pick a side, no matter what, a bias will be formed, and telling someone that they are worse is greater than death itself. It shows no matter what, or how long they tried, it was for nothing in the end. However, what if there was no bias? Jason sure did understand this concept well, for someone so young his mind was greater than both parents combined. This is what made him feel so lonely, nobody understood what he was thinking. Four days ago, he was in school solving quadratics and explaining

limitations. Bright he was, but it only made things worse, he was left to bear greater responsibility, logic. Years back, he could correctly assume his presents from the way his parents acted. If they were sitting, this was something small, and not from the list. Standing it was big, and most likely on the list, as they were excited to see my reaction. One thing he loved was reading, it was something he could escape and be devoured in. Each book he read was pure fantasy, Jason was absessed about the idea of a good ending. He thought if his life was this bad, then why not create a world where it was perfect. Things would fit, line correctly to his expectations. Although, eventually, his right arm got lighter and it seemed his mother was gone.

“Fine leave than see who cares, you’re a coward” Jason's father was a mess, and yelling made it worse. He was tall, round with a scruffy face and tan skin. You could tell that he was not the best father by his appearance, the ripped pants, and bruised knuckles from late nights out. Jason knew in his gut this would end poorly, and he was never wrong.

It took one year before his father was a deadbeat to society. He lived in a poor neighborhood, with countless gunshots blasting, and the car alarms exploding. Jason's room was made of one mattress and a dresser that, by the looks of it, was there since before they moved in. He had a low selection of clothes, and the apartment was smaller than the park outside. While that sounds normal, this park had one swing, a tree, and a slide falling to pieces. He would often help his father in paying rent through scheming, how to get a job, it seemed his father had more illegal ideals. So instead of doing multiplication or walking the dog, he would make plans for robberies and each one more dangerous than the other. One day, his father had made too many holes inside one of the planes. Mistakes were made and had decided to wing the operation. The school where Jason had been going for years had called him from his studies to the front office, which was annoying because he had just reached the best part of the book, when Atticus Finch was talking in his defense. Jason related to Atticus in many ways, intelligence, morals, but the one thing he knew was his courage. So when the principal calls him to the office, and leaves him with, what looked like, two businessmen. Jason understood his father was on trial here and courage is of utmost importance.

As he prepared the speech in his head, how his father was at home all night, they began to explain the situation. This time Jason heard something different than the other times, “arrest”, “robbery”, or the most confusing “our sincerest apologies”. Why would these men be apologizing, was it because he was alone, or was it that his father was in prison? This was different, no one has ever apologized, for the first time Jason was at a loss. Unless, he thought, something worse happened.

My father was never arrested.

It took seconds before Jason was in tears, he was stubborn but he couldn't hold it anymore. Fountains left his eyes and pushed the coins at the bottom up, as there was no more luck in this water. The two men had walked Jason outside towards their car, each step felt different. Would it be wrong to say he was released? Jason was confused why each step was minutes long, but each one made a difference. Maybe because the officers who were holding him weren't pulling side to side. One was holding his shoulder the other was in front guiding the way. He wondered if anything were going to be the same, would his mother magically appear and take him to this perfect life with a big house, a dog, and a family? It would be perfect, but perfection is a made-up word, and so are his thoughts. The car door opened and Jason sat inside thinking about what type of world he would make. Every now and again the men's conversation would zone in, “there's a place you can stay for a bit, just out town”. Still, he wondered about this place, was it beautiful and colorful, surrounded by trees and flowers. What about if it was run down and dirty, much like his apartment he would never return back to. The car kept driving and the sound of drops could be heard ever so slightly as they reached a small town that was neither nice nor bad. Some places looked horrific, and others it looked colorful. Now the longer we drove into the town, the closer we got to what looked like a castle. The building was built like a medieval mansion, and there were big windows on both sides of the door. Little ones defining each room and pillars all around. The windows looked muddy, and the plants on the building were overgrown.

It seemed there were three people waiting in front of this castle. A woman whose brown hair was tied up in a bun, with a suite just like the men

in the car, and thin glasses that had a thin gold line going around her neck. In the middle was a man, taller and thinner than those in the car. Although, his suit was a dark brown that looked too loose for his body. His hair was darker than the lady but shorter and combed over. Lastly, there was another lady, she was definitely younger than the rest, but looked old enough to be a parent. Her hair was flattened by the rain, and reached a length half-way down her back. Fizzy as it may be, her blue dress with little buttons and white ends to her sleeves took any look of being messy. As the car got closer their faces became more noticeable, glasses -first lady- looked wrinkled, her nose was pointed, she had bright blue eyes like Jason, and there was a small brown spot on her upper right lip. The man had a slim face, and a scruffy look that reminded him of his father. While his face looked younger than glasses, his hair wasn't as thick as it looked, and his eyes were a blueish-gray making him look older. Then there was a blue dress, she was definitely young, possibly in her twenty, and she seemed friendly. Her face was plain and had deep brown eyes which complimented her hair nicely.

The moment Jason stepped out of the car, all three had welcomed him kindly, except for glasses, he thought kindly of those names as it captured her essence.

“Welcome to Grindwell, my name is John”

He pointed to himself and held out his hand which I shook and then continued to introduce the rest.

“You see the one with glasses, her name is Flora, and the one with the blue dress is Erica”

While his voice was kind, he talked to him like a child. Sure he was a child, but he hated feeling like less than. Jason acknowledged the rest with a hand shake to show his maturity, and they responded by shaking the hand. Moving him inside the oversized doors, the two men from earlier seemed to disappear right after Jason took a step outside. He must have been distracted by the faces enough to ignore the car leaving behind him. Taking the first steps inside he could feel the air become thin, it felt clear and light. Taking a deep breath, the room was bigger than anything he could imagine. There were stairs circulating a great big red carpet with gold spirals in the center of the room, under a small brown table that had curled at the end of each leg. Holding a variety of flowers placed on top with a clear vase. Surrounding him

were chocolate walls, and two rooms from the right and left, that had open archways reaching the ceiling. Whether he knew or not this place was going to set some changes in Jason's life, possibly further than anything has.

“This is the grand hall, it's where we hold all of the celebrations' ". John stared at Jason hopefully to gain an excited expression.

“You know most children when they see this room start running all over the place”.

Jason nodded and didn't move, while this place was beautiful it seemed off. Almost too good to be true.

“Well off we go, to where you will be staying”

Following the rest through the right arch way and towards a new room. This time the room was filled with windows and huge curtains covering them from the sides. Each had a table in front of it, and there were two couches centered on another big rug with a coffee table in between. Moving on and another right turn, the rooms were more and more grand, the next one was filled with statues and chairs, turn left, that room was made of flowers and greenery. Each room being different, yet corresponding to the next, until something crossed Jason's. He pondered this thought room after room he was thinking, until he thought better of himself and asked.

“Where are all the others?”

All three stopped in place when Jason asked this question.

“Well they are right up stairs”

All of a sudden this staircase had appeared in front of Jason. Possibly, he was so distracted by the thought of being the only one there that he became the only one not paying attention. Ironic, he scooped the room just before

This one was smaller, it was a tan room with two doorways, and the walls were now blue. Although the chocolate wood stayed the same and pillared at the corners and middle of the windows. The windows were once again beautiful, huge and clear, he felt comfortable knowing that he could see the stars whenever he needed.

Jason took his first step, the air got thicker, second step, the walls got smaller. Then the third step, the window light dissipated and the ceiling lights were the only thing keeping it lit. At the end of the staircase it seems more daylight, meaning more windows. He could hear the children running around and the screams they held. Clapping, laughing, falling, all of these sounds

Jason could hear and tried his best to take in. Looking back he found himself being followed by a shadow, the others had disappeared and he was once again on his own. Walking up the stairs he found the sounds grew closer and the lights glow brighter, and eventually he was right at the top of the stairs.

Everything stopped, Jason unlike the rest that were squirreling around on the ground had looked directly towards the center of attention. In this case he was the attention and that made him uncomfortable. He walked through the group of children to find a spot where the attention wasn't on him. It goes to show that Jason hated attention, and most definitely hated children.

If he had started any longer, standing in front of everyone, he would have definitely walked back down the stairs, and all the way back to where he first put steps on this property. Whether it was smart or not, it could have happened, but Jason powered through. He understood that even if he did do that it would be even worse having to come back inside and face them again. Once he reached the back of the room, it seemed that the eyes had stopped focusing on him and went back to their brainless activities. Looking back he was able to take in the room. It was blue, much like the room before the stairs, except the pillars weren't there. The room was smaller, around the size of an average room, or so it seemed. Jason did at one point live a good life, when his parents were together they had that perfect suburban house with nice rooms and a huge backyard, he had a room that could be fit for a prince. Although, once they separated and he was left with his father, it all went downhill. Upon further inspection, there were small child-like tables, and the windows weren't as big just enough to be found comforting. Just before he started to walk towards a window a child pulled at his pant leg.

“Excuse me, but what's your name?”

Jason felt somewhat soft at this moment, he looked down and followed suit.

“Jason, my name is Jason”

The child smiled and walked away, holding her stuffed bunny.

Jason was caught back, not because of the child's reaction, but because for the first time he put his guard down. Something his father taught him to keep and pride in. He was right from the very beginning, this place is going to set some changes, and he wasn't sure how to feel.

Jason started making his way towards the window and leaning on the wall next to it. He watched the rain pour, each drop was more comforting than the last, clashing the subtle tones of the children talking about him, and submerging all focus outside. The birds were sitting underneath a ledge of the window just across on the side, and the trees looked troubled as their leaves pointed down. The longer he looked the more he wondered, will his mothers car ever reach this town, or even stop to see him?

Just as Jason began to wonder something grabbed his attention, right where he was at the front of Gindwell, there was a car. It was gray and shiny, it looked like something his father would ask him to scheme for. Then the door opened and out stepped a girl, one with a bright yellow clip.

A Well Rested Complication

Jason watched the girl from afar, she looked pressed, possibly about the fact she was sent here of all places. Or just like Jason, she too sensed the change and found it unwelcoming. She stood there like nothing was happening, waiting for others to guide her. Not even a flick to wipe the rain from her face, or the now drenched clothes she wore. Next to her was a car, gray and small, it had a wealthy name to it, and if anyone could tell beat-broke from wealth it would be Jason. The rain poured faster and the same faces who once greeted him came rushing out with an umbrella. Although it seemed before they went inside, a woman and man stepped out and began to talk. From the looks of the conversation, it was serious, and they handed them a folder that looked to be filled with papers. Some were pouring out of the open hinge at the top, red, orange, and white paper.

“Colored paper must be important”, Jason thought to himself. He rolled his eyes, sometimes he wondered why he cares so much. Was it the interest or curiosity, possibly it had to do with the little he had going on at the moment? Either way, he tried to look away, but in the corner of his eye, the girl became more and more prominent. Much like the stars when his life changed, and to no surprise there was a star sitting on her head, holding a portion of her hair back. Soon enough the conversation was over, the man and women left, letting the other three walk her inside.

He looked at the girl more intensely before she went inside, as he noticed something he hadn't before. A big brown spot on her forearm, he assumed it was a birthmark, which was rather unfortunate. Within seconds, brown eyes met blue, it was a swarm of anxiety-ridden anger-struck tones

that, only until after Jason realized, were none other than the girls. She had been looking straight his way, but for how long? Did she notice his stares or the hair on his head? It was rather messy, but why would it matter to her, she was a nobody to Jason. Still, he patted his shirt, fixed his hair, and sat more properly, for one sole reason.

No girl has ever locked eyes with him before.

Minutes later, no other than Ms. Clip was standing in the front doorway herself. Everyone, almost in unison staired and Jason joined for only seconds before looking away. The rest were quiet and some children went up to her. Others our age were among themselves and seemed like she wasn't the 'sort' to be around. It felt like a memory, she walked to the back of the room and stood there, obviously uncomfortable. Jason could see her more clearly, her hair was wavy and a nice shade of light brown, her skin was pale, and her face shape was small but structured. She looked angry like she just got done with a huge argument and she still had more to say.

Before he knew it, once again their eyes met. Jason thought to himself, "I need to stop getting carried away in nonsense"

Her eyebrows raised and she started walking towards him with increasing speed. As if he was the destination of buried treasure and she wanted the first look.

"Why were you staring at me," She asked without a second to even understand the situation. She sat down on the beanbag in front of him, and rather informally he may add.

"Hello, are you deaf or something?" Jason noticed he was spacing off again, he noticed her voice this time, sweet, but mature it was comforting among the rest. Remind him of someone, but he couldn't place exactly who.

"I wasn't," He said it with such conviction he almost believed himself. Crossing his arms, he looked away trying to ignore her, hoping she would leave him alone.

"Yes you were, I saw you" She seemed more irritated now, and Jason was scared it was going to end poorly. However, he started something and if he learned anything for his father it was how to end it, with pride.

"Maybe you need glasses then, because you're blind as a bat" Jason was blunt and straightforward, his father would be proud. Her face got red, and just then Jason knew he made a mistake. He should have apologized and moved on, but he was too prideful, hanging on to past lessons. Her fists glowed as they tightened, and then she stood.

"Why you little twat!" Her voice got higher, grabbing Jason's shirt she pulled him towards her and looked him dead in the eyes. It should be mentioned Jason has never really had experience with girls, so whether he liked to say it or not, at this moment he was dumbfounded. Although the more she stared at him the more Jason got to see her face, her eyes weren't brown, they were hazel, must have been her bangs obstructing his conclusion earlier, her nose was small, and her face had a natural blush to it.

"Say that again and you'll regret it, you hear" He knew she was serious, but once again a lesson swooped in, never back down from a fight no matter what.

"Please you'll only a girl what could you-"

Just then Jason without notice had landed on the floor, confused. A sharp pain went through his face and he immediately reached for it.

"You punched me!!" His voice was higher than usual and he was in utter disbelief. It would have been smart for Jason to have stood down and noticed, maybe his father wasn't so good with the ladies. After all, he would bring one in every night, which was probably the greatest red flag of them all.

"I told you, say that again and you'll regret it" Jason stood up and the girl looked at him with pure anger. The silence of them just standing and staring

at each other was louder than those gathering around. If they hadn't noticed already, most of the kids had grouped due to the commotion. What felt like minutes went by and before they knew it, footsteps grew near.

"What is happening here, I heard a -" One of the children ran to the voice near the front of the room.

"Flora help, they are fighting" She pushed her glasses up and looked at the two children as those who grouped around dissipated the moment Flora turned their direction. Her face was of annoyance, but also uncomfortable to look at, she was old and the wrinkles on her face became more prominent. Her eyebrows were slim, small enough to fit behind a desk pushed up against the wall, her eyes were sharp and while she was petite, her voice could take down houses. She was none other than the Big Bad Wolf from all those stories.

"Well then Mr. Bow and Mrs. Adams, looks like our stars of the days have met"
Our eyes never left each other and the same cold angry glances were shared.

"This won't do, follow me" Flora spoke clear and precise, moving her arm towards the stairs. Both followed suit and off down the stairs we went. Reaching the grand room again, and to the beginning, near the front door.

"Your behavior is unacceptable, barbaric at that" Jason's head stood tall, however, Ms. Clip seemed distraught over the situation. Who was she kidding? What did she think was going to happen?

"Your rooms have been prepared and are located in the respected dormitories, girls right, boys left" She pointed towards the stairs behind us, they were curved, touching anywhere but the center. Much like a circle in Jason's eyes. Moving towards them, both went up on opposite sides of the stairs as directed by Mrs. Flora. From the top, they ventured down their corresponding halls and looked back seeing, the woman who once stood at the front of the room was gone. Jason was terrified, taking a big gulp he continued to venture down

the hall. It was dark with dim lights, and the doors were on both sides of the room which made it more ominous. A red carpet with gold and brown accents was placed down the long hall and the other side as well. Now and again Jason would spot a painting of flowers or a grass setting which seemed to put him more on edge, as he was scared one would move. With each door, there was a nameplate, and he was desperately looking for his. The hall felt longer but the faster he walked the greater the chance of missing his stop and having to do it all again. Now right before Jason took his next step a whistle of wind was heard. *Gulp*. He was scared and moved towards it, however, while some would say he was an idiot, others would say it was smart. Mainly for the fact, the sound was coming from a room with the name, "Bow" plastered on it.

"Fantastic..." He found sarcasm to be his best escape in a world where he was always given the lesser hand. Moving slower as the whistle got louder, he put his hand on the door, *Creeeeek*, Jasons cringed at the sound, if he remembered from the movies left on when his father would sleep out by the TV, he will most definitely die first.

"I swear in everything that is-" Jason was frantic, eyes closed before he took his next step whispering a prayer for a man with knife fingers and ripped-up clothes to not be behind the door.

"Please God I was good this year, if you remember I took back the library book that one time..."

Finally, with the door completely open he could see the room plain as day, and while no scary man was in the room, there was a window left open by a hair. Slowly moving towards it he closed the window and looked out of it. He could picture it so fondly, the rain was pouring still, but the view was captured in art. There were trees from afar like a forest, tall and unhinged, buildings that allowed him to paint families inside during their happiest moments. If he looked more closely the gate surrounding the Academy was seen, it was built over a brick wall and had sharp points as if the children in here were animals. The grass was extraordinary green, this academy had a greenhouse which, though tiny, was kept in the back corner of the yard and

Jason loved the sight of it. Windows closed but drenched, leaves sprouting from the bottom and the different blurry colors that would present themselves to him. When Jason was younger, his mother would plant flowers in the back of their house, red, yellow, green, but her favorite were the blue ones. Crystal-like, they were so bright and alive that it was hard to think of them as flowers, and not miracles. One day, his mother was in the garden and he had just been scolded by his father about being a 'proper child', as he talked back when refusing to do dishes. She was bent over the blue flowers and cut one-off, I had been sitting next to her crying as she was my comfort. Handing me the flower she said, "Jason do not cry, in front of such beauty, instead take advice from it and indulge its understanding." I was confused but she didn't stop to grab my hand gently and say, "You are bright and just because a petal is got doesn't mean you have to leave, pick a petal and see you are still a miracle". He did as she said, and he cried more, but not because of his father, but because she picked the petal with him. Guiding him, and showing him that with imperfections comes to the miracle that he has seen in these flowers. If he could go back, he would relive that memory for the rest of his life, because it was the only memory he felt truly, utterly, perfectly, flawlessly, exquisitely, and incandescently happy.

From the corridor, he could hear the dry winds that carried his memory and watched them flow outside among the rain. Not a drop on them because he was too spaced to remember that simple laws of nature can condemn reality. Looking down at his hands, if he knew better he would say the drops from the window seal came from the rain when it was open. Although he thought, "Why aren't they dry, weren't they from the rain?" Jason was crying and he wasn't even aware of it. Patting his eyes, rubbing them against his sleeve, turning the door, closing it, and laying on the dull bed. It was small but big on him, and the sheets were a terrible gray, the pillow was too soft and his head could feel the mattress, the texture of the comforter was, in a word, shortly fuzzy. He closed his eyes, laying there for a while and just thinking to himself, "I am a blue flower".

"You're a what?" The voice was soft, and if he had noticed the door was open, and even though he shut it, during his manor of closing eyes he must

have missed the loud creak. Once again carried away with his thoughts and brought back to reality to find himself in another terrible situation. He would have also noticed he was saying his thoughts out loud, but he was so in-depth himself.

Opening his eyes, he sat up quickly and was surprised to see the girl, Mr. Adams, standing right at the front of the door. Almost like dejavu, his eyes widened as he realized what happened. She heard what he said,

"I could have sworn you said you were a -"

"Don't", Jason cut her off.

"Oh? You're so sensitive, plus I was just asking"

"Then JUST go away"

At this moment Mr. Adams was in a state of mind that was not herself, see while Jason was experiencing his phenomenon with the widow, Ms. Adams had her own. She, while unlikely to admit, was sensitive so those she thought could trust or care for wound up and left within seconds. It took a toll further than anything could, and it could go pretty far, so her next choice of words she came to regret.

"What? Afraid I'm gonna tell everyone you're a 'Blue Flower'?"

Jason stood there, she was being serious with him, which scared him to death.

"Next time you question my abilities, watch your back, or I'll make sure everyone hears about this little thing of yours."

"Understand"

Jason nodded.

Who was he kidding, in this place, there is no room to be a flower. The next day, Jason walked out of his room, the previous night he was too afraid to step out of his room. This meant he skipped lunch and dinner, but it was nothing he hasn't had to do before. When Jason awoke, it was to the sound of knocking on his door, short but loud. It was most definitely a call to leave and probably get breakfast. Standing he walked towards the clothes that were put away by the others who work here, thinking of what to wear.

I mean he didn't own much so the choices were dim, it seemed like another gray shirt, and black pants day to him. Slipping on his black-laced shoes which he enjoyed very much. They would make him just a tiny bit taller than the rest, as he was always self continuous to his height. Moving towards the door, none other than flora was there, seems like everyone just waits at his doorstep nowadays.

"Follow me for breakfast", he followed her down the hall and stairs, but this time to the right a new corridor that he had not been through. It was identical-looking from the open door hinge but it led to a huge dining area with a cafeteria and cooks, with what smelt like actual food. Bringing memories back from when his school would serve old milk and overly greasy pizza. Looking at all the kids he noticed the only chip that would always grab his attention, sitting by themselves, no food, no book, but silence around and in them. Jason felt pitiful for her, she must have been through a lot recently, but it doesn't excuse her actions and so he held high and stepped on by. Take a silver, cold tray and place food as it would come from the staff behind the counter. He would thank each person for food, each time it was given, and when he got to the end, he picked a juice out of the options they gave, apple, grape, and orange, he always preferred grape. Now turning to sit down, he noticed the clip again, looking away for another table, again the clip, maybe looks to the left, the clip, right, clip, half-lift, clip, half right, and the clip shinned on by. Too much like fate indeed, he made his way to her table and sat right in front of her. While he wasn't sure why he picked this seat he did, and the only thing he could think to say was extremely idiotic.

"Mornin" Who says morning anymore, Jason was cursing himself inside his head. She looked up at him from the dark brown wooden table, if he knew better, he would say she smiled for just a second once he sat down. Looking around again he wondered why no one else sat with her either, maybe it was because of the conflict from yesterday.

No matter the smile was done and a wall was built. She looked at him with disgust and adjusted herself, sitting more upright.

"Perky as ever, aye, trying to win me over so I don't spread you little flower joke"

Jason had completely forgotten about that, he was so stupid, and sitting was her was the worst idea of a lifetime. God if he would just wake up for two seconds maybe he would have remembered.

"Oh and nice hair" She pointed at the mess of what it was, short brown wavy hair now an even shorter brown wavy afro-like hair. He was embarrassed and defended himself.

"Yeah and nice face must have slept wrong"

"Please, is that what you call a defense? Be more practical, like this"

She looked Jason up and down before calculating a sentence.

"Nice clothes, is this the second week of you wearing them, or are you too poor to afford better ones" Jason was stunned on how just a second ago everything was fine and now we are battling like animals to show our place.

"Hey, no need to be mean, plus I wouldn't say anything because by the looks of those bags you must have been crying all night"

Jason saw the nerve in her strike, he continued.

“What? Did I hit a nerve? That is if you had any, you look soulless with the way you present yourself.”

“I mean come on, you could have at least tried, look at you-”

Jason knew he should have stopped; he was going too far.

“Greasy hair, and what could you be crying about, not like you got anyone waiting on your return”

That was it, Jason made a mistake, when he noticed how big of a mistake he made, he could see it in the tears she shed before standing up and screaming in a sentence.

“Jason calls himself a Blue Flower when he's alone”

Jason could the laughs build, and build, he was looking down at his hand, too embarrassed to look up. I mean everyone was laughing, the children, then adults with the tiny laughs, it was all a game, nothing shabby but it stung, it hurt so bad to hear my mother's words come from a mouth that was riddled with a problematic girl. Jason was tearing up, his face got redder and redder, the tears were held and he could only think of his father as the laugh grew. How he would laugh with them, laugh at them, around them, near, from afar. The room was spinning and Jason couldn't think and the doors were opening and closing, and his mother standing at his side if not patting his back, no, she was laughing? Laughing at me, I am not perfect, I am not the miracle, I am Jason, I am the non-perfect child because that is how I was born. I was born with flaws.

Hyperventilating he covered his ear and ran to his room, faster and faster he could care less of the screams from him from Flora or the others behind him. He needed the window, the stars, or the greenhouse. The escape he had when sarcasm wasn't there to help, he needed it, and he would find it.

The rest of the night he stayed in his room because down the hall he could see the children, saying names like “pedals”, “blue”, or the most creative, “blue petals”, which was not creative at all. Jason was never this embarrassed. So at the end of his bed was a desk against the wall, he searched for something to find an escape, and there it was a blank black sketchbook. This quality was of leather, and it had a tail wrapping around it to hold it closed. Opening it he looked for a pencil in the drawers and found one.

He began to draw, making the world a place he would live. Making the world his masterpiece where all different people lived and he wasn't the only one with flaws. Jason was not alone anymore.

Sitting for hours on end at a table, filled with anger, sadness, confusion, he made his first-ever character, he called him Damion.