

# Pikes Peak Library District 2015 Fiction Writing Contest Anthology

PPLD Teen Fiction Writing Contest 2015

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# Journey to the Top



# "Journey to the Top" by Maggie Frohnhoefer

## Honorable Mention--Middle School Division

Sunlight and shadow flashed across the mountain. The mighty Hawk Mountain. I have heard stories about the people who climbed it. How they discovered new plants and animals. Now it was my turn to climb Hawk Mountain and find new things along the way. My main goal is to get to the top. As I stood at the base of the mountain I heard a small voice in my head chanting, "You're going to fail." And for a brief second I believed the little voice. Half of me thought it was true. I will fail. The other half of me knew it was definitely not true. "there's no turning back." Those very words echoed in my head. I lived by those words and now there was definitely no turning back.

*Let's do this*, I thought and so I started on the trail to the top. I climbed for about two hours when I came upon an Indian village. I continued walking until I came upon an Indian girl around my age.

"Excuse me, do you speak English?" I asked. The girl started at me like I was crazy.

"I do speak English," she replied. She continued starting at me but I went with it any way.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I am Little Firefly. Who are you?" she asked.

"I am Jane Lancet. Pleasure to meet you." I replied.

"Nice to meet you too." she said quietly.

*Is it possible that she is scared of me*, I thought to myself. If she was I thought I must have made a terrible first impression.

"Have you been to the top of the mountain?" I wondered.

"Sadly, I have not." she replied.

"I'm going to the top. Would you like to come with me?" I asked.

"I would love that. May I come along?" said Little Firefly.

“Of course! I would like it very much if you came along,” I said.

And so we were on our way. After walking a mile or so we saw something amazing. A mother bear and her two bear cubs. They were so beautiful and majestic. The little bear cubs jumped and played through the grass. I thought they were amazing. Little Firefly told me not to get too close because mother bears are really protective of their cubs. So we stayed a good distance away from the cubs.

Then a big herd of deer passed by with tons of little fawns. All the animals we saw were just breathtaking. As we made it to the halfway point, I saw the most amazing flowers.

“I think it’s going to rain,” said Little Firefly.

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

“The clouds are getting dark and they’re coming this way,” Little Firefly said.

“If it’s going to rain we better find shelter.”

“What about that cave over there?” she said as she pointed to the cave about fifty feet away.

There’s no turning back. Suddenly those words echoed in my head. It was true there’s no turning back even if it rains or snows I will never turn back.

“Hello, are you okay?” asked Little Firefly.

That brought me back to reality in a flash. “Oh sorry, I was lost in my thoughts,” I replied.

We were about to approach the cave, then suddenly the mother bear and her two cubs that we saw earlier were walking into the cave. I guess they had the same idea as we did.

“I guess we’ll be walking in the rain,” I said.

So as we continued we saw the most elegant flower ever.

“Do you know what type of flower that is?” I asked Little Firefly.

“I’ve never seen that flower before,” replied Little Firefly.

Then it hit me, I think I just discovered a new plant. It was amazing. It had so many different vibrant colors like the rainbow. I took out my pocket knife and cut the stem off the flower. As I cut the stem the stem turned purple.

“That’s weird,” I said out loud.

“Weird indeed,” replied Little Firefly.

What an amazing discovery.



“Let’s continue before it turns into a complete downpour,” I said.

We continued walking what seemed like days but it was only three hours. Finally the rain stopped and the clouds cleared.

“Look at the sunset. Isn’t it beautiful?” said Little Firefly.

“It is amazing,” I agreed.

After another hour of sitting on a boulder and watching the sunset, the sun was gone. Gone to another place in the world. As Little Firefly and I laid in the grass looking at the stars, Little Firefly told me stories about her native culture. The stories were amazing.

After an hour or so I was fast asleep, dreaming about the stories Little Firefly told me. As I slowly woke up, Little Firefly was starting at something in the distance. As my vision cleared I realized she was starting at a majestic elk in the distance.

After waiting a few minutes to say anything, I said “Hello, are you okay?”

But she continued starting in awe. “Hmm. What? Oh, sorry, it’s just it’s so amazing and majestic,” she replied.

“You’re right it is very majestic,” I said.

“Are you ready to continue? We’re almost to the top,” She nodded her head but still started in awe like she’d never seen an elk before. That’s it, she’s never seen an elk before.

“Hey, Little Firefly.”

“Yeah?” she answered.

“Have you ever seen an elk before?” I asked.

“No, I have not,” she said sadly. “I have always wanted to see one.”

“It’s your lucky day you get to see one. Isn’t it cool?” I asked.

“Yeah, super cool,” she answered. “Are you ready to start walking?”

“Yeah, let’s go,” I replied.

As we started walking we passed the timber line where there were no more trees. And this meant that we were so close to the top. I was almost to my goal. My journey was almost over. Now there’s no turning back I’m almost to the top.

Suddenly the hill got really steep. We tried climbing but we slid down. “How are we going to get up there now?” asked Little Firefly.

“I have rope in my backpack. We can try to loop it around a rock up there and climb up to that ledge and go from there,” I said.

And so my plan kind of worked. Once we got to the ledge the rope fell off the rock it was tied to and fell back down to the ground.

“What are we going to do?” said Little Firefly.

“We can try to climb up,” I suggested.

“It’s worth a shot,” replied Little Firefly.

So we got a hold of a rock and tried to pull ourselves up. Luckily it worked. Finally I reached my goal. I was at the top. Then suddenly the tiny voice in my head said, “You did it, you did it.” And it was true I did do it. I didn’t fail. I did it. This journey was amazing. Making a friend, finding something new, and seeing so many amazing animals.

And now to complete my second goal Getting back down the mountain. I didn’t think about that.

“We’ll spend the night up here and start back down in the morning,” I told Little Firefly.

And so we spent the night on top of Hawk Mountain. I listened to Little Firefly’s stories as I slowly fell asleep. As I woke up the next morning, feeling groggy, I was still over the moon and happy that I got to the top. There was another journey ahead of me. The journey of getting down the mountain. “*Can I do this?*” said the little voice in my head. Then the word “I can do this.” Echoed in my head. And it was true. I could do this. I could get down the mountain. I got up the mountain and I can get down. So we started down. We came to the area where the rope had fallen.

“How are we going to get down?” asked Little Firefly.

“We can slide down or jump,” I suggested.

So we slid down.

“Ouch ouch!” yelled Little Firefly.

When we got down that little hill we stopped at a small boulder. I examined Little Firefly. She skinned her left knee and right elbow. Luckily I had some bandages and Neosporin in my backpack, and luckily I took a class on first aid.

After Little Firefly was bandaged up and on her feet, we went on our way.

“I wonder if we will make some new friends,” Little Firefly said.

Suddenly a man came running up the hill yelling, “It’s coming and it’s hungry! Large fangs, killer claws! Ahhhhhhhh!” The man ran and hid behind Little Firefly.

“Excuse me, sir but what’s coming?” I said.

“That,” he said as he pointed at a little squirrel. “That killer beast. It’s crazy for blood and very vicious.”

“But sir, it’s a small, innocent squirrel. All it can do is steal your lunch,” I said.

“That’s what they want you to believe. But they’re really blood thirsty vicious creatures!” The man yelled.

“My tribe always believed that squirrels were a good luck charm,” said Little Firefly. I could tell she was trying not show fear of the mad man hiding behind her.

“Sire, are you okay?” I wondered.

I man crossed his eyes and said “Of course I’m okay. I’m one hundred percent perfectly fine.” Then suddenly the man passed out.

“What are we going to do with him?” Little Firefly wondered.

“Shouldn’t we call an ambulance?” I said as I rummaged through my backpack looking for my phone.

“Hurry! Call the ambulance. They can drive up the trail on the other side of the mountain,” said Little Firefly, her face full of panic.

“Little Firefly, stop freaking out. It’s going to be okay. You need to take some deep breaths.”

“Okay. Deep breaths.”

Finally I found my phone and dialed 911. “Hello. A man passed out on Hawk Mountain. He needs medical assistance right away. Yes, he is breathing. Yes, we are on Hawk Mountain close to the timber line. And he was acting strangely. He was yelling that a squirrel was a crazy creature and was acting like a mad man. Hm. Yes. Okay.”

“What did they say?”

“They said that they would be here as soon as possible,” I responded. “I hope he’s okay.”

“Yeah me too,” said Little Firefly as she paced back and forth, biting her finger nails.

“It’s going to be okay,” I reassured her but I didn’t seem to help.

Poor Little Firefly was freaking out. I wish I could calm her down, I thought. Suddenly the words “You can do it,” echoed in my head. It was true. I could do it. I could help this man and make it down the mountain. “I can do it,” I blurted out loud.

“What?” asked Little Firefly.

“Then finally the paramedics showed up and took the man to the hospital.

“Thank you,” said one of the paramedics right before he left.

Little Firefly was still pacing back and forth biting her nails.

“It’s okay,” I tried to reassure but it still didn’t seem to help.

“You ready to go?” I asked Little Firefly.

She did not reply but only nodded her head and began to walk. We walked for an hour. Not a word came from Little Firefly’s mouth.

“Are you okay?” I wondered. She nodded her head and continued walking. “*She doesn’t want to talk*” I told myself silently. “Are you sure? You haven’t talked in hours.”

She gave me a smile, but she continued being silent. Finally she said, “Sorry I haven’t talked to you. It’s just that experience scared me and I’ve been thinking about it. Very sorry I haven’t talked to you.”

“It’s okay, I get scared too. Everybody does,” I replied. Then we stopped and took a rest at the half way mark. Little Firefly told me her tribe’s camp was not too far from here.

“I can’t believe our journey is almost over,” I said.

“Me either,” replied Little Firefly.

We continued for two hours or so and came upon Little Firefly’s tribe. Suddenly an Indian woman came up to us and said, “Where have you been little one? We have been looking for you,” By the looks of it that Indian woman must have been Little Firefly’s mother.

“I’ve been on an adventure!” she yelled, her voice full of joy. With my good friend Jane Lancet.”

“I see,” said Little Firefly’s mother.

“Hello. You must be Little Firefly’s mother. How nice to meet you,” I said.

“Nice to meet you, Jane,” replied Little Firefly’s mother.

Then she turned her attention back to Little Firefly. “You need to tell me where you are going next time. I was worried sick,” she said.

“Okay, Mother. I’m sorry,” she said then she turned attention to me and said, “Goodbye Jane Lancet. It was nice to meet you, and maybe someday I can see you again.”

“Goodbye, Little Firefly,” I said, my eyes full of tears. And I waved goodbye and was on my way. As I got to the bottom, I started up at the mountain the same way I had when I had been about it climb it.

“I did it,” I said out loud to myself.

Then I heard a car horn. I turned around to see my mom in the white car she always drives. I walked to the car and climbed in and looked at the mountain one more time before I drove to the lab downtown to show the flower I discovered.

And it was true. I found a new flower and named it the Little Firefly, flower after my good friend Little Firefly. And I hope my story of climbing the mountain lives on for generations to come.

The end.



**Up to You**





# "Up to You" by Ally Hall

## Honorable Mention--Middle School Division

Sunlight and shadow flashed across the mountain. It's like the day and the night were fighting over who had reign over the air and the sky and the mountains. Life often seemed like that to me. Happiness and sadness were constantly at war in my head, both trying to take me over and control every aspect of my life.

I stood in front of my hairspray residue covered mirror looking at my pale complexion. Freckles spotted my shoulders and chest like constellations in a dark night's sky. I was a galaxy waiting to be explored, but no one ever ventured further than the first few stars. My dark brown hair fell on my shoulders and I held the buzzing razor in my hand. With my fingers wrapped around my small mane, I closed my eyes.

"Life is all about taking chances." I repeated over and over again as the sharp blades gnawed.

Hair fell around me in a tornado until there was not an inch of it left. I was awaiting a moon like head with craters but instead I was left with a pretty good looking one. Kurt Cobain on my hand-me-down t shirt was covered with little hairs so I brushed him off and walked out of the bathroom. I was greeted with my short, stout mother who wore a confused and angry look. Apparently she had been calling me for the last few minutes. I probably tuned her out... it wouldn't be the first time.

"What in the world have you been doing in there?" my mother reprimanded me before she even looked at my head. When she finally did, I heard a squeal escape from her thin lips.

"SHANE WHAT THE -"

I grinned at her and ran for the door, slinging my backpack over my shoulder. Hearing her footsteps made mine move faster and I burst out of the door, leaving the glass frame to slam shut. My mother hated slamming doors more than anything in the world... maybe just as much as I hated running. But I ran and ran

until I came to a park a few miles away from my house. Mustard yellow and forest green paint coated intertwined pieces of metal and left people to cringe at its unfortunate existence.

The only good thing about running for me, I suppose, is the fact that it makes me feel something. Feeling things, good or bad, made my entire existence worthwhile. As long as I could feel the beating of my heart and the dryness of my throat from the quick breathes I let in, I was alive. And that's all that really matters to me on certain days. My Converse really did not do much to cushion the weight of my body during every step. So my feet were sore, my forehead and now bald head were covered with a layer of sweat, and I was gasping for air. Must of been quite a scene to see me: a 5'1" thirteen year old, gender unclear, bald head, wearing fitting-in-some-places-but-not-others cropped jean shorts and an old Nirvana shirt, flailing about and gulping air.

It took me a few seconds to get a steady oxygen flow to my brain before I noticed someone. She were swinging on the two unstable swings looking at me. Jet black hair fell on her shoulders and complemented her pale canvas of skin and her icy blue eyes. I heard the creaking of the swings threatening to drop her at each and every tucking and extending of her legs. Nameless person continued to stare and so did I. I examined her like I do every person I see.

"Why'd you steal my shirt?" she half-yelled.

Looking around me, I saw no one so she must have been talking to me. Confused, I glanced down at her torso and laughed. We had the same band shirt.

"I guess we both shop at the loudest store in the mall." I mirrored her smirk.

"You mean the one that people are scared of and won't let their kids in?" she replied.

"Or the one that people pay way too much money for things that are cheap quality." I said, "What's your name, dark hair?"

"Hmmm... my name is... Avery. What about you baldie?"

Acknowledging her lying, I mockingly replied. "Hmmm... my name is... Ruby."

I walked over to the swing beside her and fished out my earbuds and phone from my backpack. It took me a while again to

realize that they were staring at me, but when I did I shot them a glare. Nobody could examine me. Only I could examine others. It made me uncomfortable otherwise.

My head turned, Bikini Kill blasting in my ears, she tugged my left ear bud.

"Really, hmmm... my name is... Avery?"

"Really, hmmm... my name is... Ruby."

Avery was too much like me. This was odd. You never find people like me which is great and horrible. I'm unique which is cool I guess, but it also means I'm alone.

"Let's go." Avery got up and motioned to me to follow them. Standing up, she was also maybe 5'1" and was as flat as a board front and back. I added that mentally to the list of things we had in common.

"My parents told me to never go with strangers, sorry potentially dangerous girl!" I grinned.

"I'm not a girl. Or a boy for that matter. I'm neither and both and I guess I fluctuate between all genders. It's odd. I don't expect you to understand gender fluidity. I prefer gender neutral pronouns please and thank you. So leaving with a potentially dangerous girl is not a problem." They shot me a look, and it was unlike anything I've ever seen. I understood that look. I gave that look to so many people. The I'm-not-going-to-hold-it-against-you-but-I-feel-unworthy-when-you-misgender-me-so-these-are-my-pronouns-thanks type look.

"Being genderfluid means you change genders and you are not set in one way or another. Your genitals don't define you." I replied with a grin and changed the pronouns mentally.

Through a silence and a long stare, I shared with them my whole life story with my eyes. How girl never felt right and boy never felt right. How only human felt right.

Finally, I jumped off of the swing. They grabbed my sweaty, chipped nail polish nails, cracked skin hand and dragged me down the street.

We walked for about an hour, talking about Kurt Cobain and other bands, being non-binary, and school. Turned out that Avery was going to be going to my school this next year which made my life a whole lot easier. I guess you could say I had

friends. I did. But none really understood me. My quirks and my identity were not shared and I couldn't relate to them in the slightest. But now I had someone. That was all I could ask for.

It was now undeniably night. My sunscreen and chlorine smelling skin itched from all of the bug bites to which I had been coated with. Those little monsters had no mercy and successfully viewed my body as a blood buffet.

I turned to the coolest human being on the planet next to me and said "It's getting late. I should probably get home. "

They nodded in understanding and stated that they had to get home to their worry struck parents as well.

We half jogged back to the park and sat on the swings one more time.

"I know what it feels like." they said out of nowhere to the dark, crisp air.

"To be scared." I understood. The creaking of the metal above me holding the plastic seat underneath me was always annoying to me, until tonight. Here, with Avery, was comforting.

That was all that was needed to be said. Avery began swinging high. Back and forth and back and forth until they were so high I was afraid for them. Avery yelled mid air, "DOWN WITH CIS!" and then jumped and tumbled onto the woodchips. I laughed, understanding the reference.

I repeated their steps and flung my one hundred pound body off of the two chains and landed next to them.

It was a full moon out and I could see their white teeth underneath their purple lipstick. Our laughter shook the summer's night and wrapped around me. I felt warm in this cold, cold world.

Suddenly, Avery turned on their side and looked me dead in the eye. They leaned forward and kissed me on my chapped lips once then sprung up and ran off into the streets yelling, "DOWN WITH CIS! DOWN WITH CIS!" and crying with laughter. I could feel the slimy consistency on my own lips as I watched them run off.

"Now students I am Ms. Pickett. Welcome to eighth grade English. Now since our school values your speech, writing, grammar, and ability to sound like an intelligent human being, you will have two periods of English with me in this room every day. Now to warm up and break the ice a little bit, we are going to go around the classroom and state our names and something interesting about ourselves. Okay, you start." She pointed towards a student in the front.

I was at the other end of the classroom, keeping my head down. No one else cared at all about the people in this room. So why should I?

Ms. Pickett was a mid-twenties, newly married tall and strong woman. She had short, cropped light brown hair with dark brown eyes and a crooked smile. Band-aids were worn on her back and foot because of what I assume to be tattoos. There was a strict policy on that at our school. Who cares about a cross tattoo or a cat's face? Is it sending the wrong message? That "hey you can do whatever you want with your body"!

Zoned out I was for a solid fifteen minutes until it came to a voice I had heard before and could never forget.

"My name is Avery Walters and Kurt Cobain is my idol."

The classroom went still. It actually was normal. But to me everything went still.

I turned to look at them and we locked eyes immediately. Avery had shaved their head. Mine now had about a half an inch of hair on it now but it was still pretty short. We mirrored each other's smirks like we had done weeks before.

"It's your turn." the kid behind me whispered in my ear.

"Umm... hey my name is Shane Samsels and I am in love with the night of July 13 and purple lipstick."

"That's very interesting. Okay class let's now begin our lessons."

That was just the beginning of a story that will last forever.



# Shaded Sprouts





# "Shaded Sprouts" by Selena Mendez

## Third Place--Middle School Division

Sunlight and shadow flashed across the mountain. It was the perfect place for Rose and Dark to meet. Rose, an outgoing woman, was the princess of the Plant Vector, hence her name. She was the master of creating plant life, and was jolly if the sun was out, or sad when it was raining. Most of the time, she was welcoming of all people and creatures.

Dark, however, was almost the exact opposite of Rose. He was shy and had an extremely shady past. Since he was the king of the Shadow Vector, he had control of all shadows and dark magic. He was in a tragic accident that caused him to lose his arm, however, an evil set of dark magic promised him his arm back. He agreed without hesitation and without asking the cost because he was bleeding profusely and desperately needed to get better. A few weeks after his "deal with the devil", he went on a rampage, taking over his vector and torturing his people.

When he first met Rose, he was alone and grieving, He defeated the dark magic and stopped the suffering of his people. Through guilt, he would disappear from his vector for days on end. Rose and her friends, Aqua and Rage took him in when they found him injured. Everyone except for Rose felt something strange about Dark. Rose felt it too, however, she believed that everyone deserved a fair judgement.

This kind act changed Dark. He felt a strong love towards Rose that he couldn't show. Although he felt this way, he still met Rose at this mountain every evening. They would spend time with each other for hours, giving themselves knowledge of shadow control, or the making of life pods that would grow into rose bushes. Spending so much time together made the pair inseparable. Although this was true, Dark feared that when Rose found the secret of his shady past, she would disgrace him.

Every day, Dark felt Aqua, the princess of the Water Vector, catch up to him. She knew every detail. After all, they were soul-

linked. The same evil, dark magic over-took Aqua as well, but she handled it better.

"Please don't tell Rose. If she found out, she would hate me!" Dark pleaded to Aqua when he found out she knew.

"Why should I, of all people, listen to you? Why do you care so much about what Rose thinks of you? All you are, is a heartless, monster!" responded Aqua. She never spoke to people in such a harsh manner. In fact, she was the bubbliest of the group, but when it came to Dark, she had absolutely no tolerance.

Dark knew why he had cared so much of what Rose thought of him. To him, it was quite obvious. Rose had given him a chance to redeem himself, to make himself a better person. He hesitated to tell Aqua his feelings in fear that she wouldn't care. However, he had no choice. He explained to Aqua his reasoning and she listened intensely. After his explanation, Aqua nodded to indicate that she understood. Although she understood Dark's predicament, Aqua had a different opinion.

"Don't you think it would be better to have a relationship with no lies?" Aqua asked. Dark was about to speak, but was quickly interrupted by Aqua. "Rose is a very understanding person, and she deserves the courtesy to know. If you aren't willing to tell her, I will."

Dark's only response was a perplexed face and vigorous shaking of his head. He couldn't believe that he poured his heart out, only to be back-stabbed by Aqua. He ran for miles until he reached the mountain. His only safe-haven. The only place where he had been happy. And in one instant, it was going to be lost forever. His negative thinking soon ended when he caught a glimpse of Rose. He thought of how beautiful she was with her long, silky, brown hair and her gorgeous, rare, hazel eyes. Rose was irresistible when she smiled so freely. These thoughts made Dark feel warm inside, but it also made him feel guilty.

"Hey, Dark! Are you ready to learn how to make an oak tree? Based on your learning statistics, I think you can master it in about three hours!" Rose exclaimed to him, cheerfully. She always enjoyed Dark's company. After a numerous amount of minutes without a response, Rose asked, "Dark, are you okay? You look sad. Did something happen?"

Dark didn't want to answer truthfully. "Yeah, everything's fine. You don't have to worry, but I was wondering if I could have a raincheck. I'm feeling kind of sleepy."

"Oh, okay. You go and rest!" Rose responded in disappointment.

She was looking forward to teaching Dark the wonders of tree-making, but she knew what it felt like to be tired. Dark nodded goodbye, and left the mountain. Rose slowly walked back and noticed that she walking in the rain, to the home that she shared with Aqua and Rage.

While she walked, Rose wondered what was wrong with Dark. She sensed that something had happened. After all, she wasn't born yesterday. As she neared her home, she noticed that Aqua was slouching on a chair that was set at the porch, gazing at the ground. When Rose approached Aqua, she realized that there were tear drops on the hardwood floor. Startled, Rose quickly asked Aqua why she was crying. Aqua slowly looked up, and rested her eyes upon. In that instant, she knew that something had happened between Dark and Aqua. They both had the same, empty look in their eyes, and their energy was at the same level of lowness.

It took a lot of guts, but Aqua began her tale of Dark's shady past. She went over the arm-taking accident, the evil magic, the gruesome torturing of his people, and his depression after the long war he had fought over his body. After the excruciatingly long tale, Rose was terrified. Her look of horror and confusion told Aqua everything. She knew that it would be up to her to change Rose's look on this to a more positive perspective.

"Rose, Dark may have done those morbid things, but it was because he was being controlled by that awful magic. You can't turn your back on him now! You've changed him so much. If you leave him, he would be devastated," Aqua pleaded. She knew Rose was the most forgiving person she knew.

"Aqua, he's a terrible person! He did all of those retched things to his people! I can't believe that I let my kindness be a weakness! How could I?" Rose began to cry and sob at this thought. This was the first time in years that she let evil be so close to her.

Aqua tried to calm her down, but she was quickly pushed away. Rose began to run to her room, but bumped into Rage on

the way. Even though they weren't close, Rage immediately felt concerned. Being the princess of the Fire Vector, she wasn't used to such strong emotions.

"Are you okay there, Rosy?"

Rose didn't respond. She just pushed through, and continued down the hall to her bedroom. Aqua ran after her, and also bumped into Rage.

"Somebody PLEASE tell me what's going on!" Rage exclaimed.

Aqua quickly responded, "I'll explain later!"

She gestured for Rage to help her. Both of them quickly ran to Rose's locked, bedroom door. They could hear Rose inside, sobbing, asking why she couldn't see it earlier. Aqua continuously knocked on her door, pleading Rose to open it. Of course, she got no answer. Rage even went as far as trying to burn Rose's door down, however, it was protected by fire-proof plants that Rose had originally formulated to decorate Rage's room.

After literally hours of attempting to talk to Rose, Aqua and Rage gave up. As Rose noticed this, she escaped her confinement by jumping out her window, having her plants break her fall. She desperately needed closure. After a moment of thought, she decided to go to the mountain, where she would meet Dark every evening. Her thoughts travelled to the time when Dark taught Rose how to make a shadow horse. Being the quick learner that she is, Rose mastered this action in an outstanding thirty minutes! She could tell that Dark was astonished, and laughed at the thought of it. She loved Dark.

Rose couldn't understand why she had fallen in love with a bitter monster. That was mostly why she was so upset. She was exhausted, and desired to rest badly. Without knowing it, she fell into a deep slumber on the softest patch of grass she found.

As the sun peeked over the colorful mountains, Dark awoke. Immediately, his heart shattered. He remembered the actions of the previous day and envied for it not to have happened. Although he felt this way, Dark knew that he needed to make things right with Rose. At this moment, he ventured the many miles that separated him and Rose's humble abode.

His arrival was the least of Aqua's concerns. That morning, she had had enough with Rose's nonsense and used her water controlling abilities to lift her up to Rose's bedroom window.

It was to her surprise to see that other than the many plants in her room, there was not a living soul. Aqua was speechless. At the same time, she was terrified and angry. 'How could Rose just leave like that?' Aqua thought. Her mix of emotions clearly showed because the skies turned black and it started thundering.

Aqua immediately saw Dark and rolled her eyes. He was the cause of this problem and she did not want to deal with him at the moment.

"What happened? Is Rose alright?" Dark asked, concerned.

"Well, after I told her about you, she ran to her room, locked the door, and climbed out of her window. Yeah, I'm sure she's sitting down, licking lollipops, and being the happiest she has ever been!" Aqua sarcastically responded. Sarcasm was the only way she knew how to be calm in circumstances like these.

Dark just stood there in silence. He knew that if he spoke, he would probably make Aqua go crazy. He thought intensely of where Rose could have run off to. All of a sudden, a light bulb lit up in his head, and he saw images of the mountain flicker in his mind.

Suddenly, Dark mumbled, "I got it."

Aqua was confused at the sudden noise. "What did you say?"

"I know where she is. She's at the mountain."

At this moment, the trio rushed to the mountain, panting after running only a mile. They all knew that they needed to get to the mountain as quickly as possible. Aqua could see that they weren't going to get to the rocky landscape at the rate they were going, so she used her water controlling powers and lifted everyone up and flew as if they were on a plane. This helped them get to their friend quicker. As the mountains got in sight, they could see Rose on a bed of grass. She was sleeping.

Seeing this, the group of friends immediately calmed down and were relieved. All of a sudden, Dark hopped off of the flying water blob and ran to Rose. He shook her to the point of which she woke up abruptly. It was at this moment that Rose remembered all of the pain and sadness that she experienced when she found out what Dark had done. Here he was, in her face, nearly yelling at her to wake her up. All of this pain made her infuriated. Rose pushed Dark away.

"Stay away from me, you monster!"

Dark was astonished to have heard those words come out of Rose's mouth. They flooded his heart and weighed it down like a hundred pound weight was tugging at it. He was near the point of tears as he thumped upon the grass. Rose quickly got up and started screaming at him.

"You are this menacing man that manipulated my feelings! How could you have done this and lived life like nothing happened? You are heartless, and I never want to see you again!"

Dark's face was covered in tears when Aqua and Rage ran over to calm Rose down.

"Rose, please calm down! You said yourself that nothing comes out of hurting people." Aqua explained, hoping that Rose would realize that she was being completely irrational.

Rose couldn't have been more enraged at this comment. 'Aqua knew that he had done these things, yet she had never even thought to tell me about this. She let me walk straight into the arms of a monster,' Rose thought. She then pushed everyone back about ten feet with the help of her plants. Rose's anger grew into hate, and she then lifted herself off the ground with the support of her vines. If anyone tried to get near her, she would swing a thorny vine at them. Low and behold, Rage ran to her and burned one of Rose's support beams to oblivion. As soon as this attack was done, Aqua drowned the other half of her precious plants. Dark just sat there, amazed at the violence that Rose created. Rose kept attacking her friends. As they struggled to keep Rose from destroying anything, Dark slowly got up and walked to Rose. He used his shadow power to keep him from being easily seen in Rose's sight.

His approach was sudden to Rose, and she was shocked that he had the guts to walk up to her after all that she had said to him. Dark used his shadow magic to corrupt all of her fighting plants, and quickly stopped her from making new ones.

"I know you are angry at me for not telling about my past before, but I was so afraid that you would leave me. I was right to assume that, but you don't understand. You made me feel like a brand new man. You gave me a second chance, and I don't ever want to hurt you like this ever again. I hope that you can find it somewhere in your heart to forgive me someday," Dark apologized.

A tear ran down Rose's face as she realized that she was hurting Dark more than she was actually hurt. Her heart broke as it dawned on her that she had let ignorance overcome her mind and rot her from the core like an apple. She rested her eyes upon Dark and nodded.

"I forgive you"





# My Home



# "My Home" by Emma Rose Bufkin

## Second Place--Middle School Division

Sunlight and shadows flashed across the mountain. This mountain was my home, and it had been since I was born. My father's, father's, fathers, worked this land day and night, and his work paid off. We were living on about 500 acres of land. The land contained a big red barn, our white home, a lush forest, and a pond with water as cold as the snow on a cold winters eve. There was also the land that was left to grow crops and raise cattle. I loved it up there; I thought it would be my home forever.

Life isn't perfect and it seemed I wasn't going to receive my dream of falling in love and raising my own children on that mountain. The government was ordering us and our neighbors off of our land so they could build a resort to bring in tourists. That was the last thing we needed, more snotty, rich people taking over the mountain, my home. Just in time to make us move too, with Mama expecting another baby, a baby that unlike the rest of my four siblings and I would never swim in the pond, never smell the morning air on the mountain after it rained, never know this land we'd grown to love.

We were heading off towards the bustling city of Denver that day. I knew I should've been helping Mama and Papa load the wagon, but I had to sneak out and enjoy the mountain one more time. I knew we were luckier than some of our neighbors since, we had a place to go. Some of them were packing off and heading to California, where they hoped to find work and a home.

My mother had a brother who lived in Denver, so unlike all of those unlucky souls heading off to what they hoped would be a better life; we were going to live with my uncle and aunt who hadn't been blessed with children. Many people would be excited for our journey, but I wasn't, I was heading off to a town where people would pass each other on the streets and not stop to chat, where there were automobiles everywhere, and worst of all where I wouldn't have my beloved mountain.

"Abigail, come inside and help me load the children in the wagon!" Mama called from the house. I looked out past the mountain for the last time and ran towards our house to help.

After everything was loaded, we were on our way. We had to sell all of our livestock; there wasn't anywhere they could live in a big city like Denver. It killed us to see them go, but we really had no choice. As we slowly made our way off our beloved mountain and into the city, I could feel the butterflies in my stomach; what if I didn't fit in at the school, what if I didn't make any friends, and worst of all, what if I forget my beloved mountain? I quickly pushed that thought right out of my head, how could I forget my home, the place I belonged? It was silly of me to even have such a thought. But still, there was always the possibility I liked the city more. After all, Daddy was one of nine children, and all but two of them, including Daddy, moved off to the city.

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Uncle Josh and Aunt Jane welcomed us into their home with loving hands. I had a room to myself, which was nice, because on the mountain I shared a room with my two sisters. However, I hated how the school split students up into different classrooms depending on what grade you were in, instead of keeping everyone in the same class. And, I did not fit in with the other girls. They were always off shopping or gossiping, and they never had time to play a game of kick ball or bake. As far as I could tell, I was going to hate Denver. All I wanted to do was go back to my dear mountain, where I fit in.

I decided to give Denver a little bit more of a chance though. I mean sure it was different, but different can be good. A week passed by but, I still didn't like Denver at all. After a month, I still couldn't say a nice thing about Denver.

After a month and a half, I started to consider running back home to the mountain. I could go deep into the woods and build a small one room cottage. Berries and nuts could be used for food. Plus I knew how to hunt and fish. All I'd have to do was build my cottage close to a water supply, and I'd be perfectly capable of making it on my own.

As the months went by, Denver wasn't getting any more enjoyable, and the thought of running away became more and more pleasant. Finally after I failed my mid-term history paper, I had had enough. I had always been an excellent student, but in Denver, I just couldn't grasp what they were attempting to get across to us. So, that night I took a knapsack from my closet, and filled it with clothes, food, a pocket knife, and matches. I knew this was probably a bad time to leave, since Mama was so close to giving birth. She'd need my help with the younger ones after the baby arrived. But, I was done with the city; all I wanted to do was go home, home to my mountain.

After a weeks journey, I was back home, but the mountain didn't feel the same. Our house and barn had been taken down and the pond had been filled in. Even though the neighbors were all gone, I felt like I was home. That's all that mattered, at least I thought.

I went into the woods to try to build a place to sleep that night. I collected pine needles for a bed and wood for a fire. Then, I went to collect some berries for dinner.

I know I should've been excited to be home, but all I could think about was what Mama, Papa, and the children were doing. Were they worried? Did they notify the police about my absence? What was Mama going to do when the baby came? I'd never get to meet the baby. Mama wouldn't have the help she needed. I mean sure she had Aunt Jane, but she had never had children and didn't really know how to take care of them. I hated to admit it, but I missed Denver, not because I loved it or even liked it, no I missed it because that's where my family lived.

All day I thought about my family, Mama was going to have another baby; she was going to need me. This beautiful mountain I had lived on all my life didn't feel like home anymore. My house wasn't standing on it, the barn, and the pond all gone; nothing I knew was there anymore. My family, they were down in Denver, probably worried, wondering where I was.

That's when it hit me; this mountain wasn't my home anymore. A home isn't where you've grown up, or where your ancestors lived. No, a home is where you're family is. Sure I might miss the mountain, but it wasn't my home, Denver was. That's when I

knew I had to go back, back to Denver, back home. My family was there, needing me.

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Usual





# "Usual" by Anika Nelsestuen

## First Place--Middle School Division

*Sunlight and shadow flash across the mountain. The sun sinks down behind them, setting the clouds aglow with pink. A comet hovers on the horizon, flying lower and lower by the minute. As it glides downward, I can feel the burning heat it radiates growing greater. It seems to be moving faster as time progresses. It slams into a nearby grove of trees, a mere fifteen feet away. I'm thrown backward and my head crashes into the ground, the world turning black around me.*

I jerk awake, my heart pounding. That nightmare equated to my life twelve years ago, when I was but an innocent five year old. The Society was fully instated a few years before I was born, and the employment was still a mess, so there were no scientist to predict the comet that collided with a small Colorado town, taking so many lives. I was lucky to live.

My LifeCollar beeps at me. It was what jolted me out of the nightmare. If it hadn't, the chronicles of my almost death would probably have continued through my subsequent hospitalization, and so on.

The LifeCollars are devices issued at birth by the Society. They are powered by your nerves' electrical impulses, so they never need new batteries. The Collar essentially functions as an all-purpose computer and virtual reality simulator. They respond to nerve impulses, and through a chip installed in our frontal lobes, they stimulate our brains to see/hear/feel/whatever anything we want. It's really interesting technology.

I turn to look at my clock, and I see the second hand ticking, ticking the time away. The clock says 6:28, so I should probably just get up before my alarm goes off. After sitting up and turning off my alarm, I swing my legs over the side of the bed, rustling the sheets cascading to the floor. I must have pushed them off during the night.

In the bed across the room, my little sister, Emmy, stirs. She picks her head up and her eyes are open, though still bleary. Gah!

I did not want to wake her up. With her nightmares, she needs every bit of sleep she can get. Plus, she doesn't need to get up for school for maybe another half hour. And, honestly, who wants to get up *earlier* than they have to? She blinks the sleep from her eyes and looks at me, propped up on one elbow.

Yawning, she mumbles "What are you doing up so early, Heather?"

"I have to go and get in line for the paperwork office to turn in my job selection form. Remember?" I whisper back, "Yesterday was my sixteenth birthday." Here, when you turn sixteen, your schooling's over, and how far you went/what you did in your studies determines your assigned job. And your job determines how often your requests for extra food, new furniture, etc. are approved. I'm hoping to be assigned as an Official, one of their computer programmers. Of course, they haven't taken anyone from my sector as an Official in twelve years, but one can still hope.

Emmy responds with a sleepy "Oh, yeah. I forgot." She drops her head back down onto her pillow and drifts back off to sleep. Emmy and I live with our sixth foster family. While the Society tries to place us with healthy, loving (or at the very least cordial) families, the last five have not worked out. See, Emmy's always had a photographic memory and a tendency to say gory, morbid things. So after she saw Mom and Dad's deaths' (thanks, comet!) from our kitchen window while they were outside, hanging out on the lawn she's had even more creepy stuff to say.

Which, long story short, has caused us (complete with necessary paperwork!!) to be returned to five different Society child service buildings. We 'just didn't fit in with their household' (prim and proper Mrs. Brodter). Emmy had an 'uncool vibe that didn't mix well with their auras' (Seriously, Mr. Lance? I mean, yeah, you're a meditation/yoga instructor, but do you have to take it that far?). So it goes through all of the families that couldn't wait to send away the problem child, and so had to send away the good one too. Sigh.

I open the door slowly, hoping it won't creak, and roll my eyes when it does. It seems like everything in this old house creaks when you step on it, move it, or touch it. I slink quietly out the doorway and downstairs to the kitchen. I'm halfway through my

portion, with its calories carefully calculated to me alone, when my current foster mother, Ms. Wellstaf, enters the kitchen quietly.

She whispers "You'll get your job assignment this evening." It's a statement, not a question. I give a nod and swallow the last of my cereal. I reach over to the stack of papers lying on the table next to me and pick them up. After sticking my dishes in the dishwasher, I shove my feet in their shoes and run out into the beautiful sunrise. With the sun just above the Mountain Sector Mountains, the clouds turn pink. Pink.

I fall to the ground, curled in fetal position, clutching my head as if would help keep the vision from tearing through me like a barbed knife. When it catches hold, I'm there again, in the place of my dreams. The place with the pink sky. This is the *other* reason why no one wanted me and Emmy. Anything that was there that day sets me off. Aspens. Blue dresses (I was wearing one). And pink skies... Unfortunately, my LifeCollar can do nothing to stop the visions. I recover and get up off the rough cobblestone street. I take off at a sprint, and make it to the paperwork office just before the rush.

That evening, I turn up my LifeCollar message alert as loud as it will go. All day, I have been antsy, unable to focus on the tasks Ms. Wellstaf sets for me. When I finally here the ding, I open the link not without fear. After all, this determines my entire future. I skip all the legal gobblydook, and glance down at the job assignment. I zoom unintentionally, and I see it. I got in. I am the first Mountain Sector resident to become an official in twelve years.

Two weeks later, I'm done with training (completed in record time) and have been assigned to program a LifeCollar app that simulates various scenery to relax the mind. The name is going to be ZenWorld. I lean back in my chair and stretch. We actually use old fashioned computers here to work rather than our LifeCollars, and I've been hunched over its screen for a few hours now. I put my hands back on the keyboard, and continue to work. About an hour later, around 11:30, I'm running checks on one the scenery options and I see that instead of the waterfall (programming done by a still-in-school intern) cascading downward, it's spraying out to the sides. I am so annoyed, because this is my

very first job, and I want to do well on it, and some random intern screwed it up for me.

I download a copy to my LifeCollar, so that I can show it to my supervisor when I talk to him. Walking quickly out into the hallway, I head towards Dr. Gutteg's office. I near the doorway, then slow as I notice the hushed voices inside. I will myself to stay back, give them their privacy, but my curiosity gets the better of me. I stand directly beside the door and strain my ears for their words. I turn on the recording feature on my LifeCollar.

An unknown voice of an older man says "One quarter of the Collars' mind control systems in this sector have been compromised by an unknown outside hacker! Do you realize what this could mean for system overall? If they can hack that much, they can hack it all, and if they disable all of our control systems, then if we lose control of the population, we lose it for good."

Dr. Gutteg responds "it's quite possible that those were tampered with by their owners, and were weakened."

"No," the other voice responds darkly, "This was a warning." I back up from the doorway quickly, and just in time, as the door flies open and the owner of the strange voice storms out. Dr. Gutteg pokes his head through the door frame. He's a small, frail man with graying hair, and a balding scalp. I can see the look in his eye when he notices me. Worry, perhaps. Fear of being unveiled? Maybe. I remember my recording, and stop it. I'll review it and figure it out later.

"Ah, Heather. Good. I was wondering how your project is coming." I can feel him wondering what I heard, what I know.

"It's going fairly well, but I found a large problem with the waterfall simulation. Here, I copied the program into my Collar. I'll send it to your computer. Just give me a sec to pull it up..." I trail off, pulling up the link. In a few seconds I hear a beeping noise signaling a received email emitting from his computer. He pulls it up, watches it, and frowns.

"Oh, dear. This is a rather large problem. I'll have one of the part-time interns fix this right away." His eyebrows are raised, and I would bet that whatever intern did that particular piece of programming is not getting a job here any time soon.

"Thank you." I turn on my heel and briskly walk out the door, down the hall, and into my office. As soon as the door is shut, I use my Collar to play the conversation through my mind.

What does all this mean? "Mind control systems ... compromised by an outside hacker.... if we lose control of the population, we lose it for good." That all seems pretty suspicious to me. And what Dr. Gutteg said, the stuff about tampered with Collars, well, why would anyone want to tamper with their Collars' basic operating systems'?

The only possible situation I can think of that might fit this conversation is... that the Collars can control people's minds, and some people have realized it, and are fighting back. But.... This is just so unlikely! Still, Officials are talking about it, so it must be true! My eyes widen as I realize: If they have mind control, they probably have tabs on what everyone does on their Collars. And if I know things, they might have to control me to keep me from fighting back.

I delete the recording, hook my Collar up to the computer and erase all of the e-evidence that I made that recording. After that, I hack my Systems, and deactivate the 'Remote Control' tool. It's supposed to be created so that you can hook your Collar up to other devices, but now I suspect otherwise. Through the rest of the work day, I can't seem to sit still. My mind keeps just jumping back to my recent discovery. That night, I go home, and when I wake, Emmy is a zombie.

Well, not literally. But she's not acting herself at all. She hasn't said a single morbid/creepy thing in hours, and that's creepy in itself. And she's not the only one acting differently. Ms. Wellstaf isn't nearly as birdlike. And at my required hour of physical activity, all the other teenagers are acting like angels, and when I'm using the elliptical, the answer hits me like a sledgehammer. They activated the Collars' mind control.

Mr. Mysterious from Dr. Gutteg's office yesterday must have convinced the people in charge that there was a wide spread security risk, and controlling individuals wasn't enough to keep there from being riots. That must have been the update sent last night. I guess I was right about what it was disguised as. Thank

God I found out, and deactivated it in time. I don't want to be a Society Zombie.

I finish my hour and hurry to work. When I see if I can still link my Collar and computer, it-sure enough-still works. That function must be hidden somewhere else in the miles of code in Systems. After a few minutes, I finish my assignment, but I don't send it yet. I want some time to find out what's really going on. Two tries later, I'm in Dr. Gutteg's account. I click on the first email, and glance through it. Nothing of value, just a work update. The next seven emails fall into the same category, but on the ninth one, I strike gold.

The reason for the Collars' mind control activation was that some people had contacted the Canada~Britain Alliance to smuggle them out of the country, away from the laws. Of course, they used their Life Collars to do it. Genius, guys! \*Eye roll\*

After about an hour of hacking into every database accessible through the U.S.'s network, with all its black-listings, I find a way into the outer Internet, the one that has no limits. It comes up with something called 'Google.' Judging by the search icon next to the text bar, it's some kind of database you can search through via key words.

I type in 'Contact CBA' and hit enter. Over a billion results come up. I'm staggered by the sheer mass of them. Is there really this many ways to contact them? I click the first one, and watch the webpage load. I see a promising item right away. 'Immigration Process.' I bet that they code-named it that, just so that if the Officials in our country kept tabs on their sites, they wouldn't be too suspicious.

I pull it up, and it shows a form with an enormous number of questions. It requires an email. Dang it! I can't use my Society one. I return to Google, and type in 'free e-mail.' The first link is called free mail. Sounds useful. I enter, and sign up. Hopefully the Society doesn't check the member list for its Society citizen's names.

I go back to the immigration site, and fill in lots of questions... name, age, date of birth... Location: U.S., Mountain Sector. Then I hit one that puzzles me: Reason for Immigration. I eventually just put "Oppressive rules." I finish the form, then send it in.

Three weeks later: I apply for a vacation to the Northern East Costal Sector. After several highly productive weeks at work, they grant permission. Once there, on the third day at noon, I meet a CBA representative at the Stone Beach. She walks with me for about a mile. Then we cut off my Collar, and climb aboard a plane, leaving the Collar in the trash. We take off, towards my new life.





**To Reunvial**



# "To Reunvial" by Jacqueline Dunn

## Honorable Mention--High School Division

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*"Sunlight and shadow flashed across the mountain. All that used to be, ceased. Sunlight turned to flame, and the shadow's definition narrowed to be the shape of that magnificent Beast. Her silhouette danced across the peaks, her tongue lashing fire whenever she tossed her mighty head. No one recalls her exact visage, for every man perished upon meeting her eyes, pits that carried fire into the looker's souls.*

*"But rebirth always follows apocalypse. One mountain withstood her grandiose temper, and its peak became the axis of reconstruction. A sanctuary rose from the ashes, a place for refugees and their families. Over time, as recollection of the Beast became sentiment and fairy tale, the sanctuary grew into a town, and that town grew into a magnificent city: Renuvial."*

Silas opened his eyes and smiled at the speaker, the storyteller, his brother.

"Jay, let's go to Renuvial."

"Come on Alice, you know Wonderland doesn't exist." Jay winked at his younger brother and shoved him, knocking him gently off the bed.

"But wouldn't it be seriously cool? And how do you know, maybe it does exist. Just because you haven't ever been to the moon, do you think that's fake?"

"That's different, Silas. There's people who've been to the moon, and we see it in pictures. Renuvial is just some place I made up out of my imagination. I tell you this every time." He sighed, but there was a twinkle in his eye. "I've gotta get going to the shop before I'm late, but I'll catch up with you later, alright?"

"Okay, but—" His voice faded as Jay ignored him, grabbed a ball cap and his keys, and left him alone in their shared room. As soon as he heard the front door slam shut, Silas finished his thought, quietly and to himself. "It might've come from your

imagination, but how could it've just appeared there? There's gotta be some truth in it. The story's gotta come from somewhere."

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"I'm home!" At the voice of his brother, Silas grabbed the drawing he'd been working on and tumbled out of the bedroom in a flurry of colored pencil shavings and eraser dust.

"Jay! Jay, look!" Silas thrust his masterpiece into his brother's hands, but Jay turned it away and rubbed his eyes.

"Not now, please, I'm tired."

"But I made a picture of Renuvial, see? So it does exist, because now there's a picture of it, and I know what it looks like, Jay. I know it from my mind, not imagination, so it's real. So we can go to it."

"I said *not now*. I just got back from a bad shift at work, and we're going to meet Mom and Dad for your appointment. Maybe later, alright?"

"Okay."

Silas let the picture flutter from his hand onto the carpet, and trudged after Jay to the pickup, where he had to sit in the back among old car parts from his brother's job. There were a couple old side-view mirrors, and forgetting his dejection, he plucked them up with delight, making them face each other to create a Yatraina. Smiling, he whispered the word to himself under his breath. "Yatraina, Yatraina..." He recalled the time Jay first told him the story, now his favorite.

*"A long time ago, way before the Pyramids and long before Hercules, there was a simple woman called Aina. She lived in a distant land, India, where people rode elephants garnished with gold chains and silk shawls. Aina owned a small elephant, a young cow whom she dubbed Yatra—'Journey' in our tongue—in the hopes that the creature would guide her to something new, something worthy. You see, Aina was an inventor, an innovator. She discovered things, crafted things, marketed things that the world had never seen, and these things amazed the world. But these things never quite satisfied Aina herself; she never ceased craving more: a better thing, a bigger thing. And one day she found it.*

*“The peak of the dry season had descended upon the inventor's town. Everyone sweated, and everyone thirsted, but none more so than Aina's Yatra. The elephant shook like a grand earthquake, her knees too weak even to support her small master. Aina led Yatra by a short length of rope in a quest to find water, and they chanced upon a well-concealed cave in the side of a lone mountain. It appeared as a gaping mouth, looking to ingest unlucky travelers, but inside dwelt shade, so the two entered. A soft dripping noise blessed their ears, and Yatra lumbered to the back of the hollow, where darkness bestrided all. Hesitant without a torch, Aina followed, but water hadn't caused the dripping; the liquid looked like quicksilver but appeared more translucent. It trickled from the left corner of a dark green orb, and when Aina touched it, it blinked, in reality an eye, weeping. Her curiosity piquing at the corner of her mind, she collected the liquid and transported it back to her workshop. For many days, she toiled around with it but couldn't seem to make any use of it.*

*“In her concentrated fascination with the substance, Aina had forgotten Yatra, and the small beast died of thirst. In grief and guilt, Aina mourned, forgetting about the silvery droplets until they accidentally spilt onto one of Yatra's tusks, and stuck! Aina coated the entire tusk in the liquid, and it reflected light in the same way as a still lake. It was a miracle.*

*“Soon after, a tree near her workshop tumbled down, and Aina sliced the trunk into thin boards to paint. She finished the job in two days, and the result was magnificent: a perfect image presented itself to whomever looked into them of themselves. People from all corners of the earth came to observe and purchase the creations, eventually called 'Aina's' for short, translated into our tongue as 'mirrors.' Two very wealthy men from the far north bought the flat planks, and when they were facing each other about to leave, they gazed in astonishment at the reflection in the mirrors. A tunnel formed in each of the reflections, and disappeared when the holders moved. Multitudinous people tried to enter the tunnel through one of the mirrors, but all failed until Aina herself tried, and succeeded. She said that the tunnel brought her to a secret place, the place where her dreams dwelt. It is said only the honest of mind may travel via 'Yatrainia' or 'Journey-mirror.'”*

*“Hey Jay?”*

*“What?”*

"Do I have an honest mind?"

"Yeah buddy, you've got the most honest mind there is."

"I don't wanna see Dr. Clark today."

"What are you talking about? You see her all the time."

"I'm not seeing her today, though."

"Silas—"

"I'm going to find Renuvial!"

"What—"

But Silas had already hopped out of the truck and was tearing down the rocky slope by the clinic. He held a side-view mirror in each hand, and laughed as his legs carried him faster and faster toward his dream. Feeling it in his gut, he knew that in Renuvial, there was no Dr. Clark or semi-daily clinic appointments, or pills every morning with breakfast. Instead, there were only people like him interested in listening to stories, people from all walks of life who brought with them tales of their distant lands. And Silas was finally going to find them.

Entirely focused on the idyllic image in his head, he failed to keep track of the uneven ground passing rapidly beneath his feet, and a large rock caught hold of his toe. For a brief second, Silas hovered above the earth, managing a thought of panic before gravity wrenched him back into its angry grasp. He tumbled a couple of meters, for he had been going very fast down a very steep slope, before his vision cut out with an agonizing jerk of the head.

Blinking painfully, he peeled his battered body from the dirt and sat up slowly, an odd tingling sensation traveling down his spine. He rubbed his neck and winced as pain shot outwards. Wondering if perhaps he could have been knocked out, he searched the sky for the moon and found it at exactly the spot it had been before his spill; he figured he had only been out a few seconds. Still plenty of time left to find Renuvial.

Ignoring the pain and the tingling, Silas hustled to locate his mirrors and continue the search for the mountain entrance, where he knew the hidden city must be. He found the mirrors propped against a large boulder, but something seemed off about them; a pale glow emanated from their edges, and the image warped around the reflection. Curious, Silas struggled to cre-

ate a Yatraina, dropping both mirrors in shock when he finally managed.

To make sure his eyes weren't deceiving him, he tried again, and shouted in delight when the surfaces heated again, and began to vibrate. As he held them in position, both mirrors began to warm rapidly, the glow becoming stronger and beginning to take on a golden hue. Hardly daring to believe it, Silas lowered the Yatraina to foot-level and attempted to wiggle his shoe through one of the mirrors.

It worked.

Feeling as though the ankle had been plunged into thick, melted caramel, Silas kept moving the mirrors higher on his body, until the tunnel had consumed half of it. He wriggled and contorted his body until the whole thing had been shoved into the tiny side-view mirror, and then his vision went dark.

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*“Born of settled ash and tongues of red, Phoenix is the carrier of hope during the ravages of fire. His song rings above the sinister crackle of crumbling wood, and his feathers absorb the flames themselves, lighting his plumage with the luminosity of a million sunsets. He protects the innocent and the honest, loyal to his death when he is consumed by the very inferno that created him.*

*“Phoenix never survives the entirety of a fire, but he never dies, either. His cycle is constant as the moon, revival always ensuing fatality, dependable as a promise.”*

The cacophony of singing birds disturbed his dream, a memory of one of Jay's stories, and as his eyes fluttered open, he glimpsed paradise: Renuvial. Joy and fulfillment filled his heart, and he stumbled up a grassy slope towards the top of the mountain, crusted with glass buildings and skyscrapers that kissed the clouds, like jewels at the peak of a crown. Closer and closer he approached, the city coming into sharp definition, pristine, pure. Silas wanted to start running towards it immediately; he felt infinite energy course through his veins, fueled by ecstasy, but he barely caught himself before one foot had dropped off a hidden precipice.

"SILAS." A booming voice erupted from the chasm, sinister yet feminine. The Beast.

Silas felt stupid; how could he have forgotten? The Beast still lurked around Renuvial, awaiting her chance to annihilate the last mountain. The abyss he stood before encircled the city like a moat, not intended to entrap the residents, but to keep out the Beast. And if it could keep out a monster like her, there was no way a meek human like himself could get past it. His dream died.

"SILASSSSS." A sleek head peeked above the crest of the chasm, green and scaly, with eyes like glimmering onyx. A forked tongue danced in and out of a crooked smile while she rose up, towering above him, and he could tell by the gleam in her eye that she was looking for a game—a game with only one winner, and one loser. Opening her mouth, she winked slowly, and Silas smelt the corrosive aroma of burning flesh, from deep in her throat. He squeezed his eyes shut, bracing himself to meet his doom, and recited a story in his mind to distract himself, one of Jay's favorites:

*"When the sea nymph Thetis gave birth to her first and only child, she fawned over him like all mothers do; she fed him more than frequently, placed his need for comfort over her own, and felt it each time he cried like a thorn in her own heart. All these are perfectly normal things for mothers to do, but Thetis cherished her little boy more than normal mothers did. She never wanted her son to feel any pain.*

*"She would go to any lengths to ensure her little Achilles's immortality, so when he became old enough to hold his breath, she brought him down to the River Styx, where she dunked him several times until she thought the entirety of his body had been caressed by the enchanted water. However, being a nymph, she could not touch the Styx herself, or else face death, so she had to hold Achilles by his left heel; thus, she failed to submerge that tiny part of him. For a while she remained concerned, but eventually satisfied herself with the thought that never had a heel been the target in any battle.*

*"And to this day, a heel has never been the target in any battle, but not all attacks meet their targets. Such was the case with a stray poison arrow in the final battle of the Trojan War, when the weapon went astray and laid mark to Achilles's only vulnerable spot, his Achilles's Heel..."*



The smell of burning enveloped his body in a shroud of heat, but only for a second before vanishing with a sudden shrill cry of the Beast. He opened his eyes. Thousands of feathers rained down around him, and he heard a loud screech, like that of a large bird. Looking up, he saw Phoenix, dropping his flaming plumage on the Beast, where the feathers disintegrated upon meeting her flesh, leaving circles of burning acid.

Fire defeated the Beast of fire. She fell back into the chasm, limp, while Phoenix perished in a veil of his own flame, quickly as he had come.

Silas flinched as a feather drifted towards him, but the flame snuffed out a few feet above him, leaving the plume a vivid orange. Smiling, he reached up to grab hold, admiring the brilliant color against the brilliant city. However, as soon as his fingers closed around the shaft, his vision went black, the orange burning into his memory.

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A shooting pain down his neck woke him up, and Silas wrinkled his nose at the antiseptic smell of what seemed to be a hospital room. He opened his eyes to blurry vision and even more pain, intensified by a cry of relief from Jay.

"You're awake! Buddy, how do you feel? You got a concussion!"

Silas shifted to face him and felt a sharp protrusion prodding at his back. Reaching down, he pulled out of the blankets an orange feather.

Jay winked.



# The Unexpected



# "The Unexpected" by Mariah Mayhugh

## Honorable Mention--High School Division

The sunlight and shadows flashed across the mountain and I smiled, flipping my brown braid behind me. Climbing this mountain had been hard, but it had been worth it!

Ever since I could take my first steps I not only loved to hike, but I also loved the outdoors. I've been on everything from nature walks to hiking trips since I was seven years old, but I never got to LEAD one. Until today.

At sixteen, I was finally old enough to lead a hike. This was great for me, because I've always been independent and a leader, not a follower.

"Hurry up!" I yelled behind me. The hike crew wasn't keeping up very well. "The campsite is close. We can camp there and head back in the morning."

I whip my head around, all smiles, but I'm met by moans and groans. I catch my friend Mia mouth *Bossy* to Star, another friend. When Star doesn't do anything in my defense I can feel my smile dampen.

I knew most of the group was only there because I was leading it. They weren't trained hikers, like me, but am I really BOSSY?

Nah, I decided. I just do things my own way. That's not being bossy...that's being *right*.

I scamper down the hill and five weary friends follow. When I see the familiar stream that I've passed by so many times I'm almost inclined to jump in like when I was little. But I quickly chase that silly thought away.

My friends, though, don't hesitate. They dump their gear at the sight and peel off their sweaty socks and shoes.

"Let's go!" Tracie calls out, already halfway to the stream. Star and Mia are close behind her. The two others in the group, Joanna and Michelle, who I don't know very well, shrug and kick off *their* shoes.

“Hey!” I yell, but everybody is too busy whooping and splashing to hear me. It was a long, hot hike and everyone was T-I-R-E-D. “We have to set up camp!”

My response is getting flicked with water in my face. I wipe it away angrily. I signed and began to unpack myself. It’s totally fine, I thought, I unpack by myself. It will be much easier and MUCH faster.

I’m pounding the nail of Star’s tent into the ground when Mia runs up to me, smiling and wet. “Hey Aspen,” she says. “Need help?”

“No, I got it,” I mumble. Mia looks confused and little hurt. Because Mia’s one of my friends, I quickly take pity on her and ask her to roll out the sleeping bags so we can sleep outside.

“Uh...sorry, Aspen, but I really don’t feel comfortable doing that,” she says.

“Don’t be silly, MIA! Everyone likes sleeping under the stars!” I say, exasperated.

Mia giggles a little. “Then why did you just set up two tents?”

I can feel myself blushing and I quickly tear one down. I’m about to go after the second when Mia says, “Don’t both. I’ll sleep in the tent, okay? But don’t worry,” she adds when she sees my fallen face, “I’ll still hang outside with the rest of you tonight.”

I watch as Mia crawls into the tent. No way was she sleeping in there! I raise my foot and kick it down, which takes only a fraction of the time it took to put it up.

“What?” I can hear Mia shrieking. “ASPEN!”

She emerges from the tent, black hair tangled. Her lips are pressed in a firm line. “I am *not* sleeping outside.”

“I’m the leader, Mia, and what I say goes. So you *are* sleeping outside,” I feel her firmly. Mia shakes her head and walks away. I’m pretty sure I hear her murmur “bossy.”

When the sleeping bags have been arranged in a circle, everyone comes in from the stream. Mia rolls her eyes at the sleeping bags but the others don’t seem fazed. I’m pleased by this.

“Okay, so Star, Johanna, you two go get some firewood. Michelle, tie up our food so bears don’t get it. Tracie, Mia, you two go down to the lake and get some water for cooking,” I tell everyone.

“What do we look like, slaves?” Tracie mumbles but she heads off to the lake with Mia.

Everyone else grumbled a bit, but in the end they all do their jobs. I check on Michelle first. She’s eleven...the youngest...and I gave her the easiest job.

Or so I *thought*. “Michelle! What are you doing?” I yelp.

“I...I’m tying up the food. Like you said,” she responded meekly. ALL of our food had been tied up, not leaving a single marshmallow to roast or anything to eat for dinner.

“Oh, Michelle,” I said crossly. “Let *me* do it.” I roughly took down the bag and removed the items we’d need. Then I hung it back up. Much better.

“Aspen,” Michelle said timidly. “Why didn’t you just TELL me what I did wrong instead of doing it for me?”

“You’d probably just mess it up again,” I snap. “It’s easier when I do it.”

I start to walk away when I hear her calling my name. I turn around. “WHAT?!”

“I...well, I think the knots coming loose,” she said.

“The knots fine,” I huff but by the time I’ve finished saying that Michelle has tightened the knot. When I turn away for good I see Mia and Tracie, back with the water.

“What are you guys doing back so soon?” I asked, genuinely curious as I felt my anger drain away.

“Tracie had a great idea...” Mia started.

“It was partly yours,” Tracie says giving Mia a hug. I roll my eyes.

“Would one of you just please TELL me!” I explode.

“Yeesh, fine,” Mia says pulling away from Tracie. “Since the stream water comes from the lake and we’re going to boil it anyway we thought it would be more efficient to get some water from the stream.”

I frown. “I told you guys to get LAKE water.”

“Why?” Tracie asks. “It’s faster to get it from the stream.”

Before I can come up with a response I see Star and Johanna coming up the hill, their arms ladled with wood. I run to meet them and gasp when I see the wood.

“It’s soaking wet!” I turn a piece over and over in my hand. “We can use this!” I emphasize “dry” and “wood” as if they were little kids.

“Chill!! There’s time to find more wood,” Johanna says. “Star and I will go back out right now, kay?”

“Don’t...just don’t,” I tell them. “I’ll do it myself. You’ll probably mess it up AGAIN and it has to be perfect. Get it?” I scowl and turn on my heel down the hill. But before I know it I’m tumbling DOWN the hill and soon I don’t see anything but black.

“Should we move her?” “Is she okay?” I can feel my eyelids flutter open as I listen to many comments tumble over each other like puppies. When my eyes open fully everyone stops talking.

Everyone being my fellow hikers. I shake my head trying to shake away the pain but I wince and lie it back down

“Are you okay?” Star asks quietly.

“What happened?” I ask instead of responding.

“We aren’t sure.” Tracie says. “We just heard a loud thump and saw you at the bottom of the hill.”

“You passed out and everything,” Michelle says. I notice her eyes are red. She’s sniffing and I’m guessing she was crying.

“She was the first to spot you,” Star adds. She drops her voice, “She thought you were dead.” I giggle slightly.

I start to stand up, but quickly collapse so I’m sitting on the dewy grass again. I can’t imagine what’s wrong and the throbbing in my head doesn’t help.

“Uh-oh,” Mia said. “Look at your ankle! I think you sprained it.”

I glance down at my sneaker. My sock is puffy and a little above it is bruised. There’s no way I’m walking on THIS foot. “What should we do?” Star asked, concern woven into her voice. “Should we get an adult?”

An adult! My first hike as a guide and an adult has to come? *Not* happening. I spring to my feet. Well, Maybe not spring, more like *stagger*, but I’m up. I’m trying to balance on my good foot but it isn’t really working. I grimaced with every step and the girls swarm me.

“Are you SURE you’re okay?” Michelle asks.

“Maybe you should elevate your foot,” Mia suggests.



“Once when I sprained *my* ankle my mom put ice on it. We don’t have any ice but we do have cool water,” Star said.

I wave them away as I stumble clumsily up the hill. Soon I’m half-crawling. “I’m fine, really.”

“Ooo-kkay,” Johanna says slowly, but her face tells me she isn’t convinced at all. When I reach the top I see five tents and in the middle is a great bonfire. I see the water the girls have already boiled set aside and 5 marshmallows on sticks, ready to be toasted.

“You guys did all this?” I exclaim. “It looks great!”

“Yeah,” Star said shyly. “We were going to surprise you when you got back with the wood.”

“We *did* set up tents,” pipes up Mia. “It took us forever, but nobody really wanted to sleep outside.”

I stumble the last few feet to the lawn folding chairs we’d brought and gratefully sink into one. I look at my foot, then the tents. “I guess I’ll sleep in a tent, too.”

“You know...you’ve kind of been acting like we can’t do anything this whole trip,” Johanna says carefully, kneeling next to me.

I raise my eyebrows. “How?”

“You got really mad when the wood got wet and wouldn’t let me and Johanna go out and try again,” Star says.

“You took down the food and got what you needed without telling me what I did wrong,” Michelle adds. “I also noticed the knot was coming loose but when I fixed it you didn’t seem to care.”

“When Mia and I got the water,” Tracie says softly. “We thought you’d be proud that we came up with a new way. Instead you got mad.”

“Basically, you’ve been really bossy,” Misa says. “You wouldn’t even play in the stream!”

I feel hot tears running down my cheeks. “I’m sorry,” I choke out. “I really am.”

“Will you trust us about your foot? Star asks. I close my eyes. Aspen White has never needed help before. I’ve been independent, a leader. But...my friends have some good ideas, too. Maybe it’s a two-way street and I need to listen to *their* ideas?

I slowly open them and look at the black and blue mess attached to the end of my leg to the hopeful faces around me. "Yes. Just don't do anything crazy," I warn.

"Trust us," Mia said, and Michelle smiled.

Star gently tugs off my sneaker. The girls fill a baggie with ice-cold water and wrap it around my ankle. Tracie says I can have her chair so I can keep it elevated. I have to admit it feels better to go along with my friends, rather than fighting.

I feel much better when I snuggle into my sleeping bag that night.

The next morning I slowly open my eyes and see another person sleeping at the campsite. I gulp when I see her.

It was my nightmare: my MOM had come.

I gasp. "How did my mom find us?"

"I called her," Star says calmly. "We brought a cell for emergencies. Your mom brought her van. It's close by." "What? You SAID...." I let my voice trail off.

"We said we wouldn't do anything crazy," Mia says. "Now come on, do you really think you could hike back?"

I wiggle out of my sleeping bag and wince. The swelling has gone down, but it still looks huge. I try to stand and promptly fall down.

"See?" Johanna calls from where she's taking down her tent. I groan, then sigh, thinking about yesterday. My friends were right then and they're probably right now.

I needed to trust them.

I crawled over to mom. "Mom," I whispered. "Mom!"

Her eyelids flickered and she slowly opened her eyes. When I came into focus she groaned. "Don't start with me, Aspen. Please."

"Mom, that's not why I'm over her," I said slowly. The *old* Aspen would have begged her to leave, that she was fine on her own. But the *new* Aspen? She knew better. I needed to be open to other people's ideas and accept that I wasn't always right.

"I'm over here to say," I tried to swallow but my mouth suddenly becomes dry. "All this time you were right. *I'm* not always right and I need to be more open-minded."

Shock covered my mom's face. She sat up. "Who are you and what have you done with Aspen?" she demanded.

I laughed. "I'm serious! Last night I was being stubborn..."

She playfully rolled her eyes. "Now that's the Aspen I know."

"Well you'll be glad to know she's gone," I said solemnly. "See, I knew I couldn't walk, much less *hike*, but I wouldn't let my friends help me. I wanted to prove to them AND myself that I'm a good leader." I shook my head. "But I failed."

My mom sat up and grabbed me into a hug. My first reaction was to jerk away, because after all, I am 16! But I let myself relax and I squeezed her back. It felt nice.

"Oh baby, is that what you think?" She asked me. I nodded miserably. "You didn't fail!"

"Yes, mom, I did," I insist. "I can't lead anyone back, and..."

"What?" she asked gently. A tear dripped from my eye and onto her should.

"They were right!" I cry. "They came up with a million good ideas and I was so bossy I didn't want to listen."

"Aspen," she said softly. "That was wrong; I'm not saying otherwise. But did you listen to your friends when you hurt yourself?"

I nodded.

"Did you apologize?" she asked. I nodded again, a bit more confident. She put her hands on mine.

"You didn't fail, Aspen. You grew as a leader and deep within yourself."

Sometimes life is unexpected. We might think we have a perfect plan, but something comes along that throws us. You can't prepare for those things, as I learned on this hike. But you can be prepared with friends and family who will help you every step of the way.



# Strength in the Shadows



# "Strength in the Shadows" by Emma DeHerrera

## Third Place--High School Division

Sunlight and shadow flashed across the mountain of screams in the back of my mind as the memory passes. I remember her veil, draped across her face, evil delight shivering in her black eyes, the blue fabric whispering over her lips which are pulled into a smile.

A sharp slap rips pain across my shoulder blade, bringing my wandering mind back to the present. The pain stabs my bloodied shoulders and I clench my teeth together and take a heaving breath, trying to subdue a ragged scream in the back of my throat, already raw from the unsuccessful effort of keeping it in. Shredded skin hangs off of my chest, ragged and limp, the hot breeze grabbing at my sliced clothes, plastered to my sweating body with perspiration and blood.

The blackness stabs at my eyes like that knife.

My arms sit helpless in the cords that I could have broken yesterday.

That witch.

Her eyes flashed coal, the last thing I saw before the dark smothered me with sweaty hands into the world of the blind.

A whip devours my skin, this time flashing its cold naked sting at my face, tearing across where my eyes were. Stomach clenching, head spinning, screaming magnitudes of agony, intense hoards of guilt and shame, the weight of it all presses deep onto my shoulders as I gag on the immense velocity of it all.

Just breathe in.

"Look at him now. The strongest man alive. Oh, he can't even break these ropes," A voice splinters in my ears. A cord pulls my legs out from beneath me and I tumble onto the glossy marble floor. I feel something snap in my wrist.

A husky, strangled scream roars in the back of my mind.

I realize it's me.

Just breathe in.

"Just take him into the court and get it over with,"

I'm yanked to my feet, stumbling in the darkness, the warmth of the sun on my face.

The air murmurs, increasing increments of volume with each step I take, the roaring of the crowd, vicious and set to watch me.

Watch the strongest man alive shrivel.

The hands of the guards stretch my arms away from my body, the sting of the raw, open flesh burns in the sunlight. Smooth stone greets my fiery hands and they tie my arms in place with the ropes.

Breathe out.

Their laughs echo in my mind, fading from my consciousness as I remember her.

Her laugh.

Breathe in.

The delighted laugh when we talked.

Breathe out.

The nervous laugh when she realized I had deceived her.

The immoral laugh when she saw she had won.

She had won.

Breathe in.

She had defeated the strongest man alive.

Where everybody else had failed, she defeated me.

Breathe out.

Blood fills my mouth along with complete numbness in my face, the shivering sound of a knife fills my ears. I know that the guard has cut my cheek across my jawline. I suck in a strangled breath, heaving out saliva and blood through my parted lips.

I can imagine their faces, filled with delight and horror at the very sight of me.

The strongest man alive.

Half dead, weak, not able to stand up to the people he had already defeated.

I brace my hands against the stone slabs at both sides of me, caressing the smooth unblemished surface, rounded and I recognize them as pillars.

I know where I am now.



The temple.

Tied to the pillars that criminals are whipped in public at or just set there till they die, while an ever watching, ever eager crowd watches to scoff and spit.

"Just tell me, I want to know." Her voice slips into my mind, smooth as cream.

"I can't tell you that."

"Not for me?"

"No."

"Then let me guess. Just tell me if I'm right okay?"

"Well, I don't know..."

"How do you feel now?" A shout stabs my mind.

"You still as strong as you were?"

"Where's your bravery now?"

Breathe in.

"Where's you're ever loving King? " The mocking voice pours like syrup.

Ignore him. He knows nothing.

That persistent voice keeps itching.

"What happened to him always being there?"

Ignore him.

"Why isn't he answering you? He as weak as you?"

Just. Ignore. Him.

"Oh, I see now, he was never THERE ."

That's it.

I suck in a deep breath, wishing I could rip out the voice box of that man.

No holy prayer enters my lungs. No breath of praise fills my mouth. Just a single plea.

One more blessing of strength. Please.

I brace my hands against the wall.

Breathe in.

I stagger my legs against the floor so that I'm standing.

Out.

My head hangs, chin touching the cold blood on my bare chest.

In.

Flex my muscles.

Please God. Strength.

Out.

In.

I pull my mind into concentration and heave my muscles against the pillars pouring all of the strength left in my body, pushing, my body gushing violent force against the pillars.

"Give up."

"Just give it all up."

"You lost in the end."

"You've lost."

A tumbling sound fills my ears just as the last of my strength begins to leave but I don't stop pressing everything I've got onto the supports above the temple.

The world crunches around me, a chunk of rock falls and lands on my body and I fall, and for the last seconds of consciousness I listen to the chaos as it blossoms around me.

I'm sorry God, I've failed you. Forgive me

I just want to be with you.

The world floats around me. And pain is gone.

# And the Heavens Split



# "And the Heavens Split" by Sariah Smith

## Second Place--High School Division

Sunlight and shadow flash across the mountain.

I watch the clouds skim over the pensive sky, mottling the mountain dark and light and dark again.

The clouds are memories. They sail across the sky like so many ships, sweeping and grand and so full of sorrow. How can they be so white and pure? They will soon age silver with beads of rain, and then? Then they will weep. How can they masquerade as something so innocent when in the end, they can turn only to sorrow?

But perhaps my view of the sky has been corrupted by what the clouds gave me.

Some other girl might have thought the cloud's gift was a blessing. I don't know. I wasn't some other girl. I was me, and I was terrified. Some other girl might have thought he was an angel. As for me? From the very beginning I knew he wasn't an angel, though I cannot possibly describe *how* I knew.

If I were forced to give a reason for my certainty, however, I suppose I would say that angels are supposed to be perfect. They are meant to be flawless, protectors from human folly, beings unfathomable to mortal minds. Aren't they?

He was so many things. He was a hundred thousand things, but I would be a fool to claim that *perfection* was one of them. I was a fool then—false love and true fear will do that to a person—and now that I've paid the price, I am loath to be one any longer. I don't want any connection to the naive, weak, helpless girl I used to be.

Plainly put, I lived in the mountains then. I would never name the precise location; I would do anything to forget that place. (Of course, it's too often that we can never have what we want most. It's funny, really, that life is like that.) I will say, though,

that I lived with my parents and sister in a house of love and laughter and light. And I will say that that little home could have protected me, if I had only cleaved to it. It should have been enough, it should have been my everything, but I always wanted *more*. What “more” meant I never knew, but finding it somehow meant that I needed to wander the forest surrounding my house every moment that I wasn't imprisoned in school, climbing trees, weaving flowers in my hair, imitating bird calls, and pressing leaves in my leather-bound journal.

Oh, how I loved my journal. I filled it with observations about the world around me, little poems and ditties, sketches of plants and animals, rubbings of leaves and rocks...and especially with notes about the sky. I don't remember when I started paying so much attention to the sky—the habit must have started when I was very young—yet every day I made sure to note its color. When words failed, I drew it, using the jumble of colored pencils at the bottom of my backpack to sweep blues and grays across the page.

Because of my fascination with the sky, I can flip to July 16th in my journal and remember its exact shade: a too-still charcoal, the clouds hanging from its expanse fat and sluggish with rain. I remember stalking through the forest that day, bored and lethargic for no other reason than the fact that I was a seventeen-year-old girl perpetually searching for something she could not find. I drew the sky in my journal, I picked flowers, I sang...everything which I normally loved but which seemed unbearably monotonous that day. I wished that something would happen, that I would find my “more.”

Then.

Then, like a miracle, I did.

A raindrop alighted on the tip of my nose, and I quickly wrapped my journal in my jacket before stuffing it into my backpack to save it from the downpour that would soon follow. Sure enough, the single raindrop soon escalated into furious sheets of rain. The rain soaked me to the bone, but I didn't care. I felt *wild* that day. I knew something was about to happen, and I knew that it just might be what I was searching for.

I hoped there wouldn't be any lightning. My parents were quite care-free, content to let my sister and I do as we pleased.

They were of the belief that anything that happened was in God's hands and out of their own; they seemed to believe that our safety was in all reality a divine concern. However, after a lightning-struck tree four yards away from me caught fire at age nine, they became adamant that I should come inside the moment I saw a single bolt of lightning.

On July 16th I found that the real danger was not, as they thought, in the lightning striking me or my surroundings. Oh, no, it was extraordinarily worse.

Because that day, the heavens split with lightning. The forest was light, it was ozone, it was noise. A bomb had gone off, I was dead, I was *dead*—

And it was over. My ears were ringing and I felt like my whole body was buzzing, enough that I didn't believe I could possibly be seeing the body on the ground in front of me. It must have been an adrenaline-induced hallucination, I thought. *It must be*, I told myself as I bent over him. Then I saw his face.

And  
I swear  
time  
stopped.

I could have stared at him for minutes or hours or days. Seconds bled into centuries, millenniums into mere fractions of moments. Time meant nothing. The world had stopped spinning, the universe had frozen, my thoughts dried in my head.

It's the eeriest thing, though: for all the time I spent staring at him, I cannot remember what he looked like. I know the sterile, distant facts. I know he had porcelain-pale skin bruised with freckles, a crooked nose, white hair without shine, and lips of the palest pink. I know he wore a gray shirt and jeans but no shoes, and that he was not so much skinny as skin stretched over a tumble of bones. I know what he should look like in my mind's eye, yet when I try to string the facts of his appearance together, I can't turn them into the image of a boy.

Even with the thousands of words I later wrote in my journal, I can't picture him. I wrote that he looked like rain smelled and that the blue of his eyes made me feel infinite and so many other, stranger things, but I don't know what any of it means. I'm afraid of what it means.

He terrified me. In an instant, though silent and lifeless, he had tangled my very soul in his pale grasp. I couldn't look away from his cold, somehow beautiful face, would rather have died than looked away.

The spell only intensified when he opened his eyes and drank in my face. "Hello," he said in a soft, whispery voice that sent tears trickling down my cheeks.

The rain had stopped. Surely he had done that, this magical boy. "What are you?" I said, my voice hardly louder than snow-fall.

He sat up gingerly in a single slow, shaky movement. "You would not know what to call me. I am of the sky," he said, shrugging slightly. "I am of the sky, but the clouds could no longer bear my presence, and so the lightning sent me here." He touched my cheek, as if to see whether my skin would feel the way he imagined it would. "I suppose you might say that I am nothing and everything like you."

My skin felt cold where his fingers had touched it, as if he had turned it to granite. "You don't belong here."

A shadow crossed his face. "No. No, I do not. And I am certain you are not meant to know that I exist, but at least I know now that mortals can be far more beautiful than I imagined," he said with only the ghost of a smile.

"I...you can't..."

"Never mind that. You will help me return, won't you." It wasn't a question. He sighed. "I am too weak now. I have lost too much of my life force. But you can help me. You *will* help me."

The tone of his voice chased chills up my spine. Somewhere within a shred of my soul he had not yet stolen, I found the courage to mutter, "You can't talk to me like that. I don't have to do anything for you. For all I know, you're not even real! For all I know, you're a figment of my imagination, and I'm going crazy..."

I trailed off; the look on his face had turned my marrow to ice water. "Merely walk with me. Spend a few hours walking by my side, where is the harm in that?"

A boy like this? A boy not even human? There was harm even in speaking to him. Yet the brave shred of my soul withered,



and I found consent tumbling off my tongue: "I guess there's no harm in that."

Now that all is said and done, I wonder if I could have resisted his spell. Was it inevitable, or am I simply weak? The thought haunts me.

I helped him up. We began to wander. He began to slowly kill me.

It took a few minutes, or so I would guess, for me to say anything at all, then many more before I truly realized that he would listen to me. Then it wasn't long before I was telling him everything: the names of plants and animals, jokes that made me laugh, how the forest looked blanketed in snow, my dreams and wishes, how anything and everything made me feel. He learned every characteristic of my hippie parents and brilliant sister, he listened to excerpts from my journal. He hardly spoke himself, however, just held my hand—when had he taken it?—and occasionally offered a question or laugh or some flawlessly charming compliment. Only now do I realize that every single remark he said to make me feel beautiful, funny, and smart was actually sarcastic and condescending. Then, I never would have guessed.

We roamed for hours, it seemed, though the sun's position never wavered. As time passed (or rather, failed to pass) some remote fraction of my mind realized something strange. That tiny subconscious part of me realized that as I tired, he grew stronger. Color seeped slowly into his hair and complexion, his step became more sure until he was all but dragging me behind him. In contrast, my step plodded and my eyelids sank with exhaustion. Breathing became laborious; a heavy ache consumed my entire body.

My conscious mind did not notice the cold, subtle numbness shivering leisurely up my arm. Starting with the hand he held.

We stopped to rest often. We would sit against a tree, I writing in my journal while he stared into oblivion. The rest, if anything, only increased my fatigue.

Soon nearly every sentence out of my mouth turned into, "Can we stop for a while? I'm tired," "I need to sit down," "I don't feel very well," "I can't walk anymore," "I...feel funny..."

He would stroke my hair and squeeze my hand and look at me with such concern, almost tangible worry. Pretended fear for my well-being.

I loved his lies.

Everything about him scared me so much, I wanted to scream. Wanted nothing more than to *scream*.

I loved him.

I loved him.

*I loved him.*

Finally, I couldn't stand it any longer. He had to know.

"No one understands me like you do," I murmured, words clumsy with exhaustion. "The people at school, they think I'm strange, no one will stoop low enough to be my friend. My family loves me and I love them but I, I don't know, I'm different. You..."

"I know."

"I love you."

"No. You don't," he whispered into my hair. And he folded me into his arms and kissed me.

He was marble and ice. He had no warmth, so he leeches away mine, all melting soul and the flush of heart's blood. I felt a desperate, bitter cold start in my lips. And spread.

The cold poured through me, and I wanted to rip away from him but my strength withered and died and oh, even then I loved him, even then I would have given my life for him. Even as he drained the life out of me.

He would have killed me. The only thing that saved me was a single, simple chain of thought flashing through my mind.

I thought of the fire that had raged through the forest years and years before. I thought of the heavy rains that soon followed. I thought of how the rain flooded the burn scar and devastated any houses the fire hadn't already.

*What fell from the heavens killed people then and what fell from the heavens will kill me now.*

With that, I found the last of my energy and tore away from him. I used the last of my courage to run like the devil himself was chasing me and I don't know, maybe he was.

I stumbled and fell, but he never caught me. Maybe he had stolen enough of my energy to return to the clouds, or maybe he had decided to search for a new victim...maybe that new victim

was my sister. Whatever happened to my family, I do not know and am too frightened to find out.

All I know is that I have never stopped running, not really. I am making my way across the country in hopes that he won't find me—a girl can get by if she hitch-hikes and works and begs and steals enough. Although I never stay in one place too long, I am inexplicably drawn to the mountains. That's where I am now: tucked away in a mountain like the one where the cloud's gift...curse...nearly killed me.

Soon I will leave this place too. But for now I watch the patterns of light and dark formed by the clouds' movement. I watch them shift and melt and change.

And as I watch, I cry.



# Wings



# "Wings" by Maggie Art

## First Place--High School Division

Sunlight and shadow flashed across the mountain. From her perch atop the roof of her apartment building ("One of the largest buildings in the city!" her father had boasted upon his hasty signature on the lease) Birdie could peer over the concrete quilt of her town and admire the raw cuts and cliffs of the Rocky Mountains. She'd always found the juxtaposition of the man-made and the natural intriguing, and even her ricocheting thoughts on this life-altering evening couldn't hinder her fascination.

Perhaps life-ending evening would be a more appropriate wording. This was, after all, the night Bernadette J. Sterne would finally walk off the jagged edge of her towering edifice and end her life, never having to take her eyes off the mountain. This was the night Bernadette J. Sterne would die.

Her feet were dangling off the edge. Looking at the ground beneath her, Birdie could almost imagine herself standing on the sidewalk (the same sidewalk she would soon paint red) instead of gazing down upon it. She didn't know why, but it made her feel better, like she was simply joining the other humans wandering the labyrinth instead of jumping to her death.

Last night, as Birdie played her final sonata on her piano, her fingers had gotten twisted in their tango. Her nails got caught in the ravines between the keys and the notes on the pages (the same notes she had played countless times before) had suddenly twisted together to form a single picture: the inky image of her father. That was when Birdie knew what she had to do. In her stolen moment of pianissimo, her life had reached its crescendo. It was time for her to die.

There was a time, Birdie remembered, when her parents had been characterized by their closeness. They would waltz together, in their minds and in the kitchen, breathing each other's air and synchronizing their pulses, ballerina fingers twirling over

smiling faces. They had the kind of love poets craved to capture within their honey-soaked words, the kind of love that bloomed every time their eyes joined in a sweet, rooted embrace.

"How did you know Daddy was the one?" Nine-year-old Birdie had asked her mother, chewing on the end of her auburn pigtail.

"Oh, honey," Birdie's mother, Anne, had answered. "I know every time a herd of elephants thunders in my stomach when I look at him. I know when the lilt of his inhale lulls me to sleep every night. I know," Anne giggles. "I know because I've never itched for a Marlboro, yet I always want to taste the wisps of smoke that curl into your father's chapped lips." Anne hugged her daughter. "I have to love your Daddy. He gave me my little Songbird, didn't he?"

Birdie would play piano for them every night, hardly noticing the way her father's hand would stroke her mother's thigh, as if he was playing his own instrument. They always sat so close, their fingers clasped like puzzle pieces, gasping in moments of trembling forte and holding their breath in moments of rest, applauding loudly after every performance. No matter how many times she played Tchaikovsky's concerto for them, they would pretend it was unlike anything they'd ever heard, praising their little Songbird in her mastery of the music. The edges of Birdie's mouth would always creep upward, as if attached to a puppeteer's strings, and they would laugh together, their three voices joining in a song far more beautiful than anything Birdie would ever play.

Then something changed.

Birdie had always thought of her family as the ivory keys of a piano, always close and always clean. But her father, she soon realized, had always been a black key, a stark shock of darkness coming between her mother and her.

It began with severe subtlety. Her mother would come prancing down the stairs still wearing her lacy nightgown (which Birdie would always try on when she was playing Rapunzel) and her father would harshly order her to go get dressed. "The neighbors will see you, frolicking around like that. Don't you have shame?" There were always comments about Anne's "revealing" clothing, sticking into her like the knives Anne would use to cut



her husband's steak while she was only permitted to eat salad (she had to choose between cheese and dressing).

Their arguments at night were soft and controlled, words blurring and twisting together like a mosaic, and always ended quickly. Birdie had assumed their mouths had gotten distracted doing other things instead of finishing their conversation.

Her mother would always wait until after her husband had left for work to read the comics section of the newspaper and laugh out loud, as if the sound of her joy was something taboo, something to be hidden. He would peek in the windows exactly ten minutes after leaving and ten minutes before returning, trying to catch his wife doing something wrong (like their too-friendly neighbor). There was always tension, always sadness.

Their fairytale love had turned toxic.

Birdie remembered her mother calling her into her bathroom one morning, when she was thirteen. "Darling," she had crooned. "Don't you love my new lipstick? It's called Spicy Cinnamon. Isn't that silly?"

It was a lovely, deep burgundy color, drastically different from Anne's usual soft pink. Birdie had absolutely loved it.

Her father had not.

Anne was in the kitchen scrambling her husband's eggs and toasting his blueberry bagel when he whipped her around. "What the hell is this?" He had demanded, pinching Anne's bottom lip.

Anne immediately turned away, hiding the color she was so excited about before. "It's just some new lipstick, Mark," she had whispered. "Don't you like it?"

"You look like a tramp, Anne. Take it off."

"No," Anne trembled. For a moment, they had just stared at one another, the silence pregnant with words not spoken and thoughts not acknowledged. Their eyes no longer danced when they met. Birdie then watched her father grab a washcloth from the sink, clench the back of Anne's neck, and scrape the lipstick off his wife's mouth, ignoring her whimpering and protesting.

Later that night, Birdie had found the gold and black tube buried in the trashcan, the antithesis of its used-tissue and wrapper bed. She had also, when she hugged her mother goodnight, traced the scratches on her mother's neck, feeling like headstones in a graveyard.

Birdie had worn the same color lipstick the day of her mother's funeral, which happened to be the day after Birdie's sixteenth birthday. Her father hadn't said a word, but scraped it off of her when they returned home that night.

Down below her deadly throne, a siren screams. Birdie stiffens, thinking someone noticed her sitting atop the building and called the police, but the ambulance streaks away. No one's noticed the girl hanging her legs off the edge of the building—the bird in her nest. She could do it, right now. All it would take is a slight shift of balance, a lean forward and it would all be over. She wouldn't have to remember anything ever again.

Birdie returns her gaze to the mountain. She couldn't do it yet, it was still too light outside. Down below, a little blonde girl was wandering the sidewalk, throwing grubby fistfuls of popcorn into her mouth. What would that girl do if a body suddenly crumpled next to her? Suddenly, the little girl's father swept her up in his arms, and the girl shrieked with surprise and glee. Birdie's heart ached.

The night before her mother had tied a rope necklace around her neck and hung herself like a sweater on a coat hanger, she had sat at the foot of Birdie's bed. "Your father is crazy," she had stated without emotion, as if she were reciting the ingredients for a snickerdoodle recipe.

"Momma?"

"He is, Songbird. All men are."

"Mom..." Birdie had reached towards her mother, but what had made her mother human had evaporated long ago. Birdie realized in that moment that she had already lost her, that there was no getting her mother back. It had happened bit by bit, she knew, but now it felt immediate. There was a shock in the consciousness, in the understanding that what once was would never be again.

"Listen to me, Bernadette," Anne had said, her voice stony and cold. "The women in this family have always become victims to their husband's insanity. They've always stood, rigid, after they leave for work, waiting for him to come around again and stare at them through the windows. They've always resisted buying the pretty dresses and the nice makeup. They've always patiently

denied the endless accusations of sleeping around, even when they've done absolutely nothing to suggest any kind of unfaithfulness. Your grandma," Anne choked, "Your grandmother would sleep with a steak knife underneath her pillow, clutching the icy blade in her hands in case the madness she knew existed within her husband pounced."

Birdie had suspected her mother was leaving, she just didn't know how permanent it was. "Mom. Don't leave me with him," Birdie had begged.

Anne had laughed, but it didn't sound like a song anymore. It sounded like a dagger. "You better get used to being alone, Songbird," she warned. "If you're smart, that's all you'll ever know."

A tear fell onto Birdie's leg and slithered down her shin, sliding off and plunging down the same path Birdie's body was soon to take. After Anne's death, Birdie had replaced her in her father's life. Memories, locked in cages in the back of Birdie's mind, snarled and leapt to the front, licking their chops.

Her father, choosing her outfits in the morning. They were always modest, skirts below the knee and necklines at least to the middle of the neck. Her father, aggressively shoving her around and controlling her like his little doll, as if she weren't real and breathing but porcelain and painted. Her father, coming into her room at night, crying about missing his wife, searching for someone to love him as she had...

No. Birdie wouldn't remember. She had folded these things into origami cranes and tucked them into the back of her mind, their creases never to be unfolded. This day was about forgetting. Forever.

She hated how he'd made her body feel like a cage, how her bones had suddenly become bars. Often, she would find herself tearing at her skin, picking away at every place his sorry-stained lips pressed themselves uninvited. The scabs that formed were only reminders of the bloodshot eyes that didn't look at her-only through her. He'd painted her black and blue, his private, breathing canvas for everything he'd never wanted to admit was rattling within him. She wore his sin as scars.

To him, she was just a hollow space, something to be filled, and something that would fill him. She felt so empty.

After every suicide, the family and friends always say, "We had no idea," and "There were no signs," but these, Birdie thinks, are self-assuring lies. A person can force the corners of their mouths to curl upwards but they cannot force joy into their eyes and there's only so much makeup can do for the nights where sleeping felt too much like dying and waking up would have been a disappointment, so there was no rest at all. Her father would probably claim that this came out of nowhere, but there were signs stitched into her existence, that all existed because of him.

It was getting darker. Birdie tried not to think about what this meant, tried not to imagine what would happen after Birdie's soul no longer occupied her body.

What would her father say to the neighbors? To his family? How could someone explain losing both a wife and a daughter to suicide? What would her funeral be like? Birdie didn't have many friends. At school, she was the girl who didn't dress like the others and didn't wear any makeup, the girl who kept to herself because she didn't want anybody to see the yellowing bruises scattering her pale skin, like fallen leaves embedded in snow. Would her father cry? Would her grandparents be there? Would her grandmother tuck her knife within the pocket of her black dress?

Birdie almost laughed now, imagining it. Her grandmother crying as they laid her body to rest, using one hand to dab at her eyes with a tissue and using the other to grasp a knife, her grandfather trying to hide the madness in his eyes. Her entire family was playing one sick game of Russian roulette.

It was dark now. Birdie could hardly even see the mountain. She knew it was time.

Swallowing loudly, she swung her legs around and stood, teetering on the edge of the building. When birds are young, the parents push them from their nest so they are forced into learning how to fly. Birdie had been shoved from her nest far too early, and now she would fall.

From the corner of her eye, something glints. Birdie gets down from the ledge and goes to it, summoned like a spirit in a circle of kids eclipsed around a Ouija board, and picks it up, smoothing

it in her hand. The tube was black and shimmering in the moonlight. It almost looks like a bullet.

Birdie clutches it in her trembling hands. An unopened tube of Revlon's Spicy Cinnamon lipstick.

Birdie does not believe in signs. She does, however, believe in truths, and this is hers: in her life, she has seen and experienced terrible things, and she will continue to be battered by terrible things. But from here, right now, she has the choice of how those things will change her.

Somewhere in the darkness, a bird sings. A songbird.

Birdie closes her eyes, forcing another tear to escape to the sidewalk below. She knows the choice she's made. The tube of lipstick falls out of her shaking hand.

And in that moment, standing on the edge of the apartment building where a person completely broke another person, where she had found her mother hanging like a church bell, where her father had done unspeakable things...No.

In that moment, Bernadette J. Sterne grows wings.





