

# INSIGHT 2021



## The New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning Annual Learner Writing Contest



# INSIGHT

## Volume Seven, 2021

### *New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning*

This is the seventh year NJALL has held an adult learner writing contest. We continue to be grateful that we can provide an audience for adult learners across the state. This year we had over 100 submissions, our highest total ever, and we would like to thank all of the writers for sharing their work with us. We would also like to thank all of the teachers and tutors who encourage and support their students. We hope that more students feel that this contest is something they would like to participate in.

Our annual conference was virtual this past spring, and in keeping with tradition we invited a number of the winners to participate in a session in which they read their work and talked about their writing process. The session was well attended, and attendees felt inspired by what they heard. Although being together is certainly preferable, even in Zoom space it was great to be able to come together around a shared love of writing.

We look forward to reading the submissions for next year's contest and celebrating students' work in whatever capacity is possible.

Stay safe.

Erik Jacobson

*Chair, NJALL Learner Writing Contest*

Additional 2021 Reviewers: Melissa Backes, Hope Blecher, Carol Cochi, Debbie Krause, Margie Levine

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## ABOUT THE WRITERS

### Georgina Alzaga



My name is Georgina Ramirez Alzaga. I'm from Guadalajara, Jalisco Mexico. I have lived in Lawrenceville New Jersey since 2016 with my husband and my two kids, Diego and Natalia, who are my huge motor. Thank you LNJ, NJALL for this opportunity to share with others my thoughts, feelings and memories. Thank you, dear Catherine Mitch, for helping me as a teacher and friend. This is my third award! Now I would like to write a book with my memories, poetry and photographs.

### Ruihong Cheng



I'm an active member of the Writers' group run by tutor Nancy Demme and also an ESL student in "Writing in English." I love writing fiction stories and sharing thoughts with others.

### Ernest Davis

Ernest Davis has been a fisherman for most of his life and was a captain of a fishing vessel. He is currently incarcerated in New Jersey

### Pallavi Jain



I am a homemaker, love to read, write and paint. Thank you NJALL for giving me this opportunity.

### **Priyanka Jain**



I am Priyanka. I am of Indian origin and currently living in Voorhees, NJ. I love travelling to new places and writing short stories. My hobby is cooking Indian food, especially Indian vegetarian recipes.

### **Georgina Jerez**



Georgina Jerez has been in the United States for close to 20 years and decided two years ago that she wanted to learn English. This factory worker takes classes with LVA on Saturdays with one tutor and another on Wednesday evenings. She is a hard-working mother of two grown daughters and is an advanced ESL student. Georgina has made monumental improvement since she first registered with LVA as a low beginning ESL student.

### **Murad Karasoy**



Murad and his family moved here from Turkey. A life-long learner who holds two PhD degrees, Murad is a very motivated and engaged student who takes advantage of all the opportunities available to him through his program. When he heard about the NJALL Writing Contest he knew he wished to contribute. Drawing inspiration from his own experiences, he wishes to share his experience with everyone.

### **Megan Kazier**



My name is Megan Kazier and I am an English major at Atlantic Cape Community College. My dream is to one day be a published poet and author. I am the first from my family not only to attend college, but I am also the first to receive a high school diploma. I am 28 years old and I love to travel. I hope my next adventure takes me to the Azore Islands of Portugal so that I can explore my heritage.

### **Erika Montoya**



I was born in Venezuela. I have been in the United States for 5 years. I came to this country seeking protection and freedom and I found more than that. I found a new world where my words have been listened to, no matter if those words came from an English learner whose voice trembles with each word pronounced. I can just say thanks from the bottom of my heart.

### **Janet Ren**



I am Janet Ren and I'm from China. I used to be a middle school teacher and now I'm a student of Mercer County Literacy. I've lived in the US for ten years. I like to improve my English in many ways, such as reading books and writing down my thoughts in poems or essays.

### **Susana Rodriguez-Acosta**



My name is Susana Rodriguez Acosta. I came to this country seven years ago, bringing a suitcase and a heart full of dreams. When I arrived in the United States, I was afraid of not reaching my goals because of the language barrier, my economic status, and the challenges I faced regarding discrimination and racism. However, I have overcome many of these challenges, and I have been inspired never to give up.

### **Rosa Romero**



Rosa grew up in Ecuador taking care of her nieces and nephews, whose parents had emigrated to the US. She came to the US herself 20 years ago to join her brothers and sisters who had already settled in New Jersey. She started out supporting herself as a manicurist. She met her husband when he was a chef. He now repairs HVAC systems. They settled down and had two beautiful children, whom she takes care of at home. Rosa joined LVA in April during the shut-down, and has done a remarkable job keeping up through remote learning on her phone and tablet. She has two tutors, Karen Cardell and Barbara Landrevie. She joined with the hopes of passing the GED and helping her children with their homework. She has been doing a great job supporting her children through their remote learning at home.

### **Alec Kyle Santos**



Alec Kyle Santos is a student majoring in Literature with a concentration in Creative Writing and a Minor in Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Stockton University. He's taken elective courses in both creative writing and media, including video production and photography. He first began writing in middle school and developed his writing ability from there, with heavy inspiration drawn from video games and other forms of media. His favorite genres of literature are Fantasy and Science Fiction.

### **Sreeja Muraleedharan Sreelaja**

I am Sreeja Muraleedharan Sreelaja, a teaching professional from India. I moved to New Jersey in 2014. My interests include photography, painting, writing, and travelling.

## **2021 Award Winners**

### **Memoir - First Place**

*Dear Nanny*

**Georgina Alzaga**

My dear nanny, Guadalupe, was born in a small township and came to my house when my older sister was 1 year old. She never had her own babies and maybe that was the reason that she took care of my two sisters and me with passion, devotion and love. After we grew up, she took care of my nieces and nephews too. My dear nanny was with us for 49 years.

She was a beautiful, poor and un-alphabeted woman, but after my sisters and I helped her, finally she could sign documents with her own name. Indeed, she learned some words and numbers too.

I have wonderful memories of many roles my nanny had in my life. For example, she was my mom, my grandmother, my sister, my confidant, my friend, my support. She was part of my family.

She cooked delicious Mexican food. Her seasoning and love in every meal made me feel like a happy girl, but one of my favorite meals was her amazing enchiladas. They were made with special and thin tortillas, chili sauce, chicken, cheese and on the top potatoes, carrots and more cheese. When I remember their flavor my mouth is watering...so delicious!

She sang strange songs to us, to put us to sleep and I remember one perfectly: "Mrs. Santana, why does the baby cry? Because an apple has been lost. I'll go to the orchard and I'll bring two, one for God and another for the baby." She and I played with my barbies and toys and we both spent amazing afternoons while I waited for my mom to come home from work.

On weekends, she invited me to her house, which was far away from my house. I loved the adventures that we had in the bus, making different things together. Staying together were some of my favorite moments. She always gave us the best of her, with little things and details.

She was generous all the time with her salary. She gave us little gifts like candies, toys, cloth or just a special dinner like roasted chicken, tacos with tepache (fermented pineapple drink).

When I was in College, I sang English songs and she told me, “What is this music? What are they saying?”. She didn’t understand English, but she said the first word that she heard and after that, we both laughed a lot.

She couldn’t take care of my children, because she hadn’t enough energy to do that. I would have liked my children to share more time with her. I share with my kids special moments, memories, teachings and events that we shared together...they are my treasures.

My Nanny in her last days, lived in a poor neighborhood with her poor family. I had the opportunity to see her last year. She was in a wheelchair and my heart was suffering. I spent an amazing time with her, seeing her smile, talking and remembering some of our memories. That was my best gift.

I told her how much I loved her, no matter how many kilometers separated us, while I had been living in the US for that reason my heart and my thoughts were with her.

My Dear Nanny, my old lady even though your body isn’t with me, I know that now you are in a better and peaceful place. Thank you, whatever you are. You have a HUGE and really special place in my heart. I’m grateful, you’re in my heart, in my thoughts and in my life forever.

## **2021 Award Winners**

### **Memoir - Second Place**

#### ***How I Became a Fisherman***

**Ernest Davis**

Growing up, I had a very interesting life. My mom, city. My dad, country. Even though I lived in the city I spent most holidays and weekends in the country with Dad's side of the family and, of course, I learned a lot.

See, my dad owned two small fishing boats, but his main job was a bricklayer. My family owns 1,000 or more acres of land, and we have our own construction company, farm, church, cemetery, etc. I mention these job opportunities because I've tried a few and, as I got older, I knew that I wanted to become a fisherman.

By 18, I had gotten a job at the docks working in the plant where they unload boat when they come in off the ocean. I always went to work and worked hard, and I always listened. I wanted to master my position so I could move up. While at work, I knew that captains who came in would sometimes need a crew man or new crew for various reasons. I also knew that they mostly wanted experienced and older fishermen to take out in the winter time because the seas are so rough and dangerous. The summer time as training season for the inexperienced because the seas are mostly calm.

Well, while working one weekend, Captain Jimmy came it to work on his gear (nets and cables), and I didn't know that he was sitting to the dock because he was short a crew man. As my shift ended and I was washing the dock down, he happened to be standing there. So, when I looked up and spoke as I always did, he said, "I've been noticing how hard a worker you are and how dedicated and on time you are." Then, he asked, "How would you like to go into fishing full time?" Of course, I said yes. And that started my commercial fishing career in 1999.

Now, being a fisherman is a very exciting, but dangerous job. In one day of leaving the docks, I had to navigate in all kinds of weather and sometimes even cook while steaming out to the fishing grounds. It can take anywhere from a day or less to get there, or a week or more depending on what port you leave from and what port you are going to, plus it depends, as well,

on how high the seas are. Depending on the seasons and what I'm fishing for, in one year I'll fish from the Gulf Stream (shrimping), to the U.S. Canadian coastline (scaloping), and sometimes even fish in the canyons of Alaska.

I like doing all the night shifts, because you have to be multitalented to pay attention to the radar to keep from getting in an accident, while keeping an eye on your gear, all while setting and hauling to make sure the crew is safe while the cables and heavy steel doors are moving. Even though on T.V. it looks as though you can see everything because you are so close to it, you can't, it's impossible. So it was my first job to warn the crew of danger from the wheelhouse, which sits 15 to 20 feet above the deck.

Once we haul back, until the limit of that trip is caught, we have long, sleepless nights. You have to work hard and steady and also fast and careful to get the catch on ice so it will not spoil. Just because it's cold out doesn't mean that fish won't spoil on deck – it has to be freezing. The crew will get rest between hauls if there is time, which almost never happens. But, they are well rested on the way to the fishing grounds.

Overall, this is a great career. Besides the money, what gets my adrenaline going is riding the rough seas. I can't say that I get more of an adrenaline rush going up and down a 50-foot sea than riding a roller-coaster coming down a 100 foot drop. Hopefully, these ins and out of a day at sea will attract future generations of fisherman.

**2021 Award Winners**  
**Memoir - Third Place**

*Life Is Uncertain*

**Pallavi Jain**

It was a rainy evening. We were going from Bangalore to Chennai for visa stamping. We had an appointment at 7:30. As we were leaving the rain started but we had to go there because we had an appointment. That time my daughter was 2 years old. While we were half way, heavy rain started. Somehow we reached the immigration office by walking. Due to the heavy rain, they cancelled all of the appointments. While returning we saw heavy floods coming our way. It was unexpected because by that time the gates of the dam were opened. We were stuck in the middle of the way. The water level was increasing very fast and very soon reached till our chest. My husband carried our daughter on his shoulder and I was holding all the documents over my head.

We were scared, lost and confused about where to go, as we were not aware about the city and the area. Then a guy told us to take the next left turn as the water level was a little less over there. We didn't know what to do other than go with the flow. We took the advice and took the next left turn. We came to a place where the current was very high but two people were standing in the middle of it with long bamboo to help people cross the current. Without them we would not be able to cross the current.

While we were scared and looking for a safe place to reach, our daughter thought that we were in a water park and she started asking to get down so she could play in water. After going further the water level came down and we took a deep breath. Suddenly we saw our hotel across the street. Really that was the best moment in our life. that feeling was like we got another life. Safely we reached our hotel. But all the scenes were scrolling in front of our eyes. After all we realized those two people came like an Angel and saved our life. That's true life is uncertain but God is everywhere and inside everyone. He can come in any form to help you when you really need him.

**2021 Award Winners**  
**Non-Fiction - First Place**

***Justice for Venessa Guillen Update***

**Georgina Jerez**

Nowadays, it is easier for people to learn about news and events happening all over the world. Almost one year ago, April 22nd, 2020, a young woman soldier disappeared at the Fort Hood Military Base. This base is located in the southern United States, in Texas. Her name was Vanessa Guillen. She was a young Latina soldier, and she was 20 years old. At the moment when Vanessa Guillen disappeared, she was serving in the US ARMY.

Vanessa's family reported her missing on April 23rd on the Fort Hood Military Base in Killeen, Texas. As you turned the TV on, you could watch Vanessa Guillen's mother asking for justice for her daughter. Vanessa's family fought with a corrupt system, which didn't do anything to find her. When the Army ignored her case, the family organized marches and protests around the country. There were more questions than answers in her case, and there was a demand to know what really happened to Vanessa Guillen.

This case clearly showed the lack of immediate action by the Armed forces. Why did they ignore the plea of Vanessa's family? What prevented them from doing an investigation on Vanessa's whereabouts right away? The family had been pleading for months to be heard. It is important to know that this case was made public by the pleas and requests of Guillen's family. Two months later, Vanessa's body was found by a contractor working in the area. Partial human remains encased in concrete were found. Her body was discovered on June 30th near the Leon River, twenty miles away from the Fort Hood Military Base. It was too close for the public not to pay attention.

The length of time it took to find Gullien's body and the lack of information released to her family have the public alarmed. This was possibly showing the hidden culture in the military to maintain everything as secret. This was not the only case where a Hispanic soldier had died in the military. This raised more questions, such as who was the military protecting? Vanessa was clearly the victim in this case. Were they protecting those who were responsible, or their own

reputation? How long would we continue to see cases like Vanessa's? There needs to be a change in culture within the military and within society as well.

This case is important, because we can learn from it. In doing so, we try to install more policies to attempt to prevent another tragedy like this one. The lack of action prevented the military from bringing the main person responsible to justice. Vanessa's family keeps marching and asking for justice. This goes beyond bringing someone to justice but ensuring equal rights and respect to the lives of others. Vanessa's family says they need justice and transparency from the US Army and we should demand the same.

Vanessa was a soldier who was only trying to protect her country, and she can be considered a hero. Vanessa's family asked Congress to pass a law under Vanessa's name. This law would protect women who will want to serve in the US Army.

The bravery and strong fight of Vanessa's mother made the difference in bringing this issue to light in society. Her hope is that it won't happen again.

**2021 Award Winners**  
**Non-Fiction - Second Place**

***Dictator and Democracy***

**Murad Karasoy**

On Wednesday, January 6, I returned home tired in the afternoon. While I was lying on the sofa and resting a little, I opened my computer to read the article about the American elections that my tutor Marla sent. While looking at the article, I noticed live broadcasts going on everywhere. I was curious what was going on. I opened one of them and I saw the angry crowd trying to enter the Capitol Hill building: they were hitting cops, breaking windows, climbing up the building. These images reminded me of the horrible days I lived through years ago. While watching the footage, I lost myself and I would remember that time.

It was Friday night July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016, and it was a calm night in Istanbul, Turkey, at least that's what we thought. The theater started with a lie about a coup. A top-ranking general sent official orders saying, Turkey was being attacked by Isis. It was lie. The unarmed military students returning from training were stopped on the Bosphorus Bridge and were lynched and killed by the vandals who poured into the streets because of the dictators' orders. Fighter combat planes flying above us dropped sound bombs. From the sound of the big, strong bombs the windows of my apartment buildings were shattering. Later in the night, the angry crowd vandalized and threatened all opposing people, marking their homes with spray paint and ransacking their workplaces. That night, there were 251 people killed, and 2,194 people were injured.

One day later, according to the findings made months ago, 125,628 people were fired from public service. Of these, 20,000 soldiers, 40,000 teachers, 10,000 academics, 30,000 police officers, 7,000 judges and prosecutors. Fifteen private universities were closed. Five hundred thousand passports were canceled. Over 500,000 people were investigated. One hundred and fifty thousand people were arrested. Currently 60,000 people are under arrest. Eight hundred babies aged 0-2 are still in prison with their mother. One hundred and thirty journalists are still under arrest. Five hundred private schools were closed. One hundred and seventy-nine media

outlets were closed 53 newspapers, 37 radios, 29 publishing houses, 20 magazines and 6 news agencies were closed. These closed institutions were plundered by pro-dictatorial vandals and their signs were broken. All of this with the provocative rhetoric of a dictator who rules the country illegally. Like other thousands of people, I was detained and investigated. Because they saw us as terrorists. We could not even make a simple bank transaction.

I was tired of living under threats and discrimination. We had to come to the USA by making the decision to leave the country as a family claiming exile-imprisonment. While watching the events on January 6, all the members of my family gathered in the living room and were staring at me. My oldest daughter was wiping my tears. My wife was giving comfort by putting her hand on my shoulder. Everybody was scared, but nobody was talking. My little son, who just went to the second grade, broke the silence: He said, "Dad, are we going to move out of here too?" I held myself and stood up, "No, we will fight to protect democracy as part of our new American society."

**2021 Award Winners**  
**Non-Fiction - Second Place**

*Never Give Up*

**Susana Rodriguez-Acosta**

People have different backgrounds, cultures, experiences, languages, ways of expression, and different views to see the world. I did not realize this until the day (seven years ago) my parents told me that we were moving to The United States of America (USA). I was excited to live in another country with my whole family because I had lost the opportunity to share important moments with my father. He used to travel several times throughout the year to the United States because of his work. I did not imagine the changes and challenges this decision would bring to my family and me. I encountered a different language, a different culture, and I did not have a job.

My name is Susana Rodriguez Acosta. I am from Mexico; Spanish is my first language. I could not continue with my education in Mexico because I could not afford to pay for college. Moreover, there were no colleges near where I was living. If I wanted to continue studying, I would have to leave my house, which added more expenses. When I finished high school in Mexico, I got a certificate in Microcomputers in a technical education center. This certificate allowed me to start working in a computer shop where I did minor computer repairs. When I moved to the United States I was excited because I knew I would have an opportunity to go back to school, work, and succeed in life. However, going back to school was not an option for me at that time. I had to work in order to help my parents stabilize our economic situation. Education had to wait, and I thought I would never reach the well-known "American Dream."

My excitement of living in another country did not last long. As soon as I was in American territory, I started to hear people talking, but I could not understand anything they were saying. My fear increased when I wanted to communicate with them. After a few days of living in the USA, I wanted to begin a "normal" life as I was used to in my country. However, simple things such as shopping, going to eat out, talking to a doctor in a check-up appointment, and getting my driver's license at the motor vehicle office, became a complete challenge for me.

Sometimes, I was reluctant to go to a restaurant because ordering food became a very uncomfortable experience.

The language was not the only difficult issue I faced when I came to the USA. I was living in another country with people from different places, which means different cultures. As soon as I started to relate and incorporate into this culture, I noticed that people around me had a different lifestyle and perspective to see/respond to certain things. For instance, our neighbors were from Turkey. They had a shoe rack outside their front door. Before entering their house, they took their shoes off and put them on the rack. My first thought was that they did not want to dirty their carpet. It took me a long time to understand that it was a cultural belief.

Another issue that I encountered when I moved to this country was finding a job. Since we had only been in this country for a few months, I did not have a car, and I did not know the city well. I could not work in the place I wanted because I did not have a means of transportation. I got a job as a waitress in a restaurant that was near my apartment. This was a hard job and did not pay well. Because I did not speak fluent English, and I did not have a high school diploma, I could not work in the place I wanted. By that time, I did not know enough English to carry on a conversation. Moreover, my high school transcript was not accepted in this country.

I understood that the first step to do better in this country and help others was to learn English. After working two years in restaurants and grocery stores, I decided it was time to go back to school. I attended free English classes offered by a public library, a church, and an organization called Gateway. While I was taking these classes, I was getting ready to take the GED Test. I was working in the mornings and studying in the evenings. In 2016, I took the GED Test, and passed. I searched for financial resources that allowed me to continue my education. Since I started as a full-time worker and student, I have missed many important moments with my family. However, I am confident that all this sacrifice and effort will be worth it. Has it been easy? Of course not, but my heart is still full of dreams, just as when I arrived in 2013. Fortunately for me many of my dreams are coming true.

I became a U.S. citizen in June 2018. I graduated from Cumberland County College in May 2019, and I transferred to Rowan University. I currently have an Associates Degree in Early Childhood Preschool Education, and I am working on getting a Bachelor's Degree. I am working in a public school as a Special Education Instructional Aide. My job, my family, friends, and my

tutors have encouraged and supported me to pursue all my future personal and professional goals. I will become the first generation in my family to get a bachelors' degree. I am also looking forward to getting a master's degree in Child Psychology.

Since I was a child, I wanted to help others and inspire them. When my teacher and family asked me, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I never gave them a precise answer because I did not know what I wanted to do. As time passed, I discovered the answer to this question. I want to become an educator. Being an educator will allow me to help, teach, and inspire children to reach their goals. Seven years ago, I was concerned about not reaching my dreams because of the language barrier, my economic status, and the challenges I faced regarding discrimination and racism. Nevertheless, I have overcome many of these challenges. I have been inspired never to give up, and I am confident that I will succeed in life.

**2021 Award Winners**  
**Non-Fiction - Second Place**

***Kids Left Behind for a Dream***

**Rosa Romero**

When the President Trump Administration rolled out its “Zero Tolerance” policy, hundreds of migrant children were already being separated from their families. This is the history of thousands of families who take a risk to cross the border with their kids, because all of those families have only two choices: leave their kids behind or take them across the border to have a better life together.

Unfortunately, all of those kids who are left behind grow up with a family member or somebody who does not even know them. Sadly, those kids grow up without the love of their parents. It’s heartbreaking. Just imagine one day those kids go to sleep seeing their parents’ faces, and the next day they wake up, they have to realize that they may never see them again. They grow up with an emptiness in their hearts, hating their parents for not being with them when they need them the most, which is during their childhood, because the early years are the most essential to have a good bond. Parents and children pay a very high price to have a better future, but losing their relationship can also hurt a child for life.

My husband was one of these children. He was separated from his parents at ten years old. His parents stayed in Ecuador and sent him across the border to live in the US with his older sister. At that age, he could not understand how serious the situation was. He was simply excited to go on a trip. As an adult, he still experiences the loss of his mother and father deeply. His mother passed away before he was able to return to Ecuador to see her again. Looking back, he is grateful for the hard decision his parents had made to give him a good life. Still, in his mind, the last image of his mother saying goodbye haunts him.

## **2021 Award Winners**

### **Fiction - First Place**

#### *Lovely Birds*

**Ruihong Cheng**

The warm sunshine illuminated the earth, the green grass grew out quietly. The branches shocked gently in the breeze, it seemed to have grown a lot of arms waving to the people passing by. Spring returned to the earth, everything recovered. The birds came to my backyard more and more. Red-winged Blackbird, Cardinal, Dark-eyed Junco, Goldfinch, Blue Jay, Chickadee, Woodpecker, Sparrow, Hawk, Robin, Lark, and many more.

A cardinal frequently visited my home. I put a bird feeder on the deck, it came there every day. There was a tuft of feathers on the cardinal's head that looked like a fashionable young boy's hairstyle. It probably knew that its feather was too bright and eye-catching. It always looked around for fear of bad guys following and attacking. After the cardinal was full, it flew to a big tree to sing. It had a loud, sweet singing voice. Whenever I heard the cardinal's singing, I would temporarily forget Lady Gaga.

Among my frequent guests, there was also a blue jay. When it came, I would hear its loud voice and stop my work to see it no matter what I was doing. The blue jay's blue feather was like the color of a sunny sky. It stood on the deck and was always brave and upright, full of energy. It was like a brave young warrior.

The mourning-doves came most frequently. They used my feeder as a canteen and came several times a day. When they were eating, they were like unruly children, getting food everywhere. They were also like planters. In fall, I always harvested a few sunflowers and a small amount of paddy and sorghum.

Sometimes I saw a woodpecker, it often stood on the chunk of the big tree, and knocked catching small bugs. Someone said that "the woodpecker is the doctor of the tree". I don't know whether it can really cure disease of the tree. Sometimes I was even worried that if the woodpecker hit the big tree so hard, it would hurt its brain. I heard later that Woodpecker's brain bone structure is different from other birds, so I didn't have to worry about it hurting its brain.

The woodpecker's climbing ability was first-rate, and it was a bird climber without a seat belt or helmet.

A few years ago, a robin built a nest under the deck and it laid three eggs. I was very excited and watched them every day. About a half month later, three little birds broke out of their shells. The birds' mother went out to catch bugs for its baby birds. When their mother came back, the baby birds opened their mouths, waiting for their mother to feed them. I was surprised to find that the birds' mother didn't eat the food it brought back and it ate baby birds' poops. Perhaps it was to clean the nest for the healthy growth of the birds. The mother of the birds was great. After one month the baby birds had grown feathers. Then one day suddenly, I couldn't see the birds. Their feathers were plump, and they started to create the world on their own.

I am even envious of the birds, they have a pair of wings, they can fly everywhere they want to go. Migratory birds such as geese can fly 800 kilometers away in one day, although they only eat grass. They have such strong energy, this is beyond human reach. The birds are human's angels, they bring us happiness, joy, peace, and hope.

**2021 Award Winners**  
**Fiction - Second Place**

***The Unexpected***  
**Alec Kyle Santos**

I

A soft murmur and shift of the covers stirs you awake. You hear the bed springs creak, a familiar weight settling at your side. Dazed as you still are, and even with a sleep-addled mind, you move reflexively, making room for you both. Pressing your back against the wall, you feel as she pulls herself closer to you, her head resting in the crook of your neck, arms encircling her and legs intertwined. You sigh contentedly, breathing deeply her scent, the presence of what had been previously absent comforting you. Eyes still closed, you feel her lips part as she whispers, her breath tickling your neck.

“Long day...”

You simply nod your head, feeling all of the day’s stresses and responsibilities weigh heavily upon you.

“Hmm...” She hums, idly running her hands across your back in smooth circles.

“Feels like it. Your shoulders are tense.” She remarks quietly, her fingers reaching up and massaging the knotted muscle there. You feel yourself loosen at her gentle touch, silently marveling at how easily she comforts you. The shared warmth between you both seeps into your bones, your body relaxed, and you once again begin to feel the familiar lull of sleep tug at your mind.

“I love you.” You hear her whisper softly, before the darkness of the night finally takes you.

In the morning, when the rays of dawn cascade through the curtains, you open your eyes and find yourself alone. The night before is nothing but an afterthought, a vague sense of feelings that you ignore as you drag yourself to your feet. A slight breeze drifts through the open window, the chill causing you to shiver, though it wakes you and you feel your mind more clearly. You rub the sleep from your eyes, and very deliberately check the time on your phone sitting atop the

nightstand. It's early, easily an hour before your alarm and when you need to be awake, but you think—you know—you won't be able to sleep again. Sighing, you pocket your phone and move into the kitchen, starting your coffee maker as you make ready for the day. Watching behind you as you walk away, her likeness behind a fractured pane of glass, the frame scuffed and worn, faced deliberately away from the bedside as it sits atop the nightstand. You delude yourself into thinking that so long as she remained unseen, you could forget. But the mind is a terrible thing, a very fragile part that holds onto what was once important, that which had once brought solace now only brings grief.

"I love you." And so you did.

## II

As soon as you walk through the door you can tell something's wrong. It's dark, with the only source of illumination being moon light filtering through the windows. You make your way toward the kitchen and find her sitting there, alone amidst the shadows. Her head turns to face you, and you think for a moment that you could see tears in her eyes, as if she'd been crying. Worried, you step closer but stop as she speaks.

"Why?"

Her voice comes out low and pleading, raw with emotion, with the pain she felt.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

It's at this point you can see it, despite the dark, the scattered stack of letters across the dining room table: referrals for treatments, notices from your doctor, all of it out in the open painting the picture quite clearly.

A few months, that's all it took. You'd never really wanted to hide it, especially something so important from her, quite the opposite in fact. But, you were selfish, you couldn't let go, couldn't bear to tell her the truth, afraid of what might change. You thought each day that you simply needed more time to find the words, the right moment to tell her everything. Now it was too late.

You move closer, standing at her side. She looks up at you, both sorrow and anguish etched into her face. You reach toward her and she quickly falls into your embrace, sobbing quietly in your arms. You caress her head and pull her close, whispering to her that it'd be alright, that you were alright, that everything would be alright.

You tell her that you're sorry, for if nothing else, that's how you truly feel. You never meant to hurt her, it was your furthest intention in fact, but you didn't know what to do.

A few days later you're both standing outside the doctor's office, waiting for them to call you in. You feel nervous, having been avoiding it all this time, but she takes your hand in hers and turns you to face her.

"Hey, it's gonna be okay. We'll be okay. No matter what happens, we're in this together."

And she smiles at you, giving your hand a reassuring squeeze. It's almost enough to make you believe that, that everything would turn out okay. At the very least, you know you won't be alone for a while.

Not yet anyway.

### III

You're sitting in a room with a man in a white coat seated across you. He's reviewing some documents, patient charts, explaining to you some of the statistics and facts. It doesn't make the truth any easier to hear.

"... And where we go from here with the available treatments, I'm afraid none of them are particularly effective. Do you understand?"

You take that information numbly at first, considering everything, all the implications. In a matter of minutes, your whole world has changed, life would never be the same after this. You think to ask, to question, is there anything else that could be done? Was there no other options? But, you know, deep down, that if there were he would have told you. So, instead you ask how long? How much time is left?

He references his notes and gives you a rough estimate. It's not very promising.

"I'm sorry," he says with genuine honesty, sympathy clear in his words.

You can only nod, thanking him for his time before you leave.

When you return home, you can hear her in the kitchen washing dishes. She calls out to you as you stand at the table sorting through the mail, a few referrals for treatments from the doctor amidst the papers.

"Welcome back, how did it go?"

You hesitate, lost on what to do, how to answer. Feeling the weight of the doctor's letters in your hand, you simply stare at them, uncertain. Another moment, a drawn out silence, you

clear your throat and reassure her. Pocketing the letters, you tell her it went fine, that you were fine, that everything was fine.

“That’s good. Hey, so did you feel like watching a movie after I finish this up? I heard about this one from a coworker and I’m really interested in seeing it.”

You smile despite yourself, coming up behind her and kissing her fervently. You tell her to go ahead and get it set up, you’d finish the cleaning. It was the least you could do. She beams at you, giving you a quick peck before retreating upstairs.

For some time, you just quietly wash the dishes, letting your mind drift about aimlessly as you think about what to do. This, all of this, it wasn’t going to last much longer. The more you think about it, the more you know, there was only really one thing you could do. She is all that matters, her happiness, that’s what you keep coming back to.

#### IV

You pull into the driveway, the car’s wheels turning along gravel slick with rain before coming to a stop just in front of the house. The lights are on, and you think you can see a shadow, her silhouette moving just beyond the curtains. You take a shuddering breath, killing the engine as you try and settle your nerves. You’re home early, having asked to leave work before your normal time, so it’s right about now that she’d still be preparing dinner. You pat the side of your pant leg, feeling the weight of it in your pocket, noting that it almost feels heavier. You close your eyes, debating with yourself if this is the right time, if you should wait until after, that maybe you aren’t quite ready yet...

Sighing, you shake the thoughts from your head and exit the car. As you make your way to the door, each step that brings you closer takes even greater effort than the last, and just when you think you might turn tail and run, you grab onto the door handle, grounding yourself. Taking a calming breath, you reach for your keys, only for the door open. You look up and find her smiling at you, her hair done up with an apron tied about her waist. The interior lights bathe her in a heavenly glow amid the night, and once again you think about how lovely she looks no matter the circumstance.

“You’re home early,” she comments, her smile widening.

You return the gesture, if a bit strained, but no less genuine.

“Come on, dinner will be ready soon,” she states, grabbing your arm and beckoning you

in. You pat your pant leg once more for good measure.

An hour later, after you've finished eating, you try and work up your courage. Throughout dinner you were barely able to meet her gaze, and even now your eyes flick about nervously. Finally, when it seems that she could take no more and would push you to speak your mind, you stand up and approach her. She seems confused, noticing your apprehension as you take her hands in yours and kneel before her. Her eyes widen at this, that brilliant and beautiful mind you fell in love with starting to comprehend. Slowly, with a shaking grip, you take out a small black box from your pocket. She gasps, understanding dawning on her. It's a brief moment of stunned silence, but a moment nonetheless, and it is all you need to resolve yourself. You say the words, feel your heart swell in your chest as you notice the tears in her eyes, and she watches you, unable to contain her happiness. You look at her, your whole world, the person that completed your life, and ask that question you both know the answer to.

“Yes.”

## V

You're sitting in the dining room having dinner, nothing save for the sound of silverware—clattering and clinking together—the utensils scraping across plates could be heard. It's the quiet, the silence that you fear most, but it's become routine between you both. You've gone on like this for quite some time, slowly losing grip with whatever it was you once had. You don't want to admit it, but you both know, you know yourself that the treatments aren't working, you're not getting better. This, this is only temporary. It can't last forever.

And so, you've resolved yourself to do what you felt was best, knowing how it was all going to end. Slowly, you pulled back, cut yourself off from her. You forced yourself to change, to hurt her, to be something she'd hate, someone she couldn't love anymore. It was hard, more so than anything you'd ever done, but it was working, at least for a while.

“You can't do this.”

You'd forgotten who it was that you had fallen in love with: a woman whose brilliance and beauty was only matched by her stubbornness, her refusal to let you go. She'd caught on to what you were trying to do, how you were trying to push her away, but that wouldn't change your mind. Even as she tried to hold you close, even as she cried and begged for you to talk to her, as she accused you of being selfish, you couldn't let her be tied to you.

“You selfish bastard! Listen to me, I’m right here! I’m not going anywhere, so please, just stop... Stop trying to push me away.”

You didn’t answer her, couldn’t, afraid that if you did, all your efforts would be for nothing. As painful as it was, you knew that this was for the best. She’s suffering now, blaming herself, but eventually she’ll turn that pain into something else, something that will help her finally forget you. You refuse to be the thing that bars her from happiness, to be the one she holds onto, to keep her from moving on. She deserves far better than you.

The lawyer finishes explaining the details and passes the document toward you. You find two lines at the bottom, one filled with a beautiful scrawl you’d recognize anywhere. It’s ironic, you think, that after a year of not really seeing each other, she’d just been in this room not even a few minutes prior. You think to ask how she’s doing, if she’s found someone else, or where she is now. You don’t, reminding yourself that no matter what, she’s no doubt happier than she would have been had she stayed. And that’s more than enough. Taking the pen, you sign your name. Just a few strokes of ink and you’ve officially cut off yet another part of yourself. The weight in your chest doesn’t feel any lighter.

## VI

A few years later and you’re still around, though no longer living in the same neighborhood. She’d offered you the house in the settlement, but you didn’t take it. Neither of you did, probably feeling that it would remind you too much of each other. At least you liked to think that was her reason, you knew for a fact it was yours.

You continued your treatments, and though you weren’t seeing any major improvements, your condition was no longer worsening. So at the very least, you were looking at a pretty steady time table. Upon returning home, you begin sorting through the mail and find a plain white envelope. Turning it over, you feel your heart stop. Written in a neat cursive is your name, in a style you’d recognize anywhere despite not having seen it for years.

Opening the envelope you find a letter enclosed within, embroidered in gold with floral designs. It’s a wedding invitation. At the bottom, you find her name and another, one you don’t recognize. But you know, deep down, in a time before it had once been yours.

The celebration was rather extravagant with many people in attendance. You recognize a few faces, mostly friends and family from her side, but did well to avoid them. Any who

happened upon you by mistake don't quite know who you are. You don't blame them, after all, a person could change a lot in a few years. Thoughts of your own wedding surface, and you're reminded how it was a small, more private and humble affair. Though that made it no less significant, at least in your mind. You torture yourself and wonder if she still thinks the same, then stop. You aren't here for you, you're here for her.

Sometime later and the ceremony commences. You sit in the back, away from the door where she'll enter, hiding amidst the crowd but still giving yourself a view of the front. The music soon begins and the doors parts, revealing the bride-to-be. She's smiling, radiant in that long white dress and gown, stunningly beautiful. The mere sight of her takes your breath away, even after all this time. She walks down the aisle, and you force yourself to watch. She's now standing before her husband, her new husband, laughing at a private joke shared between them. The pastor addresses the crowd.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to address the union...”

The words fade in the background as you focus on her, seeing how she smiles and admires the man before her, looking at him with the same love and tender affection she'd once looked at you with. And it's at this point, you know, you feel that you could reassure yourself with the knowledge that she's happy. She's moved on, just as you wanted, and yet, you feel as if your heart is going to shatter all over again. You've no right, you tell yourself. You did this yourself. You felt it was for the best, and it was. Leave it at that. Let go.

## VII

Night is fast approaching, many of the guests leaving or preparing to. You're still here, though you're not quite sure why. You think that you want to speak with her, to see if she remembers, but you know you won't. You're too much of a coward and... there's no reason to. Seeing you again, nothing good would come of it. Just pain for you both.

Then why? Why would she invite you?

That damn voice in your head keeps asking the question you both want to know the answer to, that you both know the answer to, but just refuse to acknowledge.

“Hey you.”

You stiffen, realizing immediately who it was, and before you can think of a response she's stepping in front of you to try and see your face. You avoid her gaze, still not quite able to

look her in the eye, but reply to her greeting nonetheless. It's enough for her, as you see her smile.

"I've been looking for you."

You look up, surprised, unable to comprehend why she would seek you out. Your confusion must show, because she moves closer, taking your hands gently into her own.

"I wanted to ask how you are doing. And..."

She hesitates, and you find yourself automatically squeezing her hands, as if the last few years hadn't happened. She closes her eyes, sighing, trying to hold back tears.

"I want to apologize. I know how hard this must have been for you."

You shake your head, laughing hollowly at that. It was never about you, you tell her.

"It was always about you. I just..."

She pauses, as if to consider what to say, then suddenly she's wrapping her arms around you and you're dragged back to a moment that feels like a lifetime ago.

"I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

You shake your head once more, and simply hold her close, not quite able to help yourself. You reassure her, telling her that she has nothing to apologize for, that it should be you asking for forgiveness, for all the pain you've caused her. Eventually, she asks that same question you've constantly asked yourself since that day.

Are you happy now?

## **2021 Award Winners**

### **Fiction - Third Place**

#### ***Together Is a Beautiful Place to Be***

**Sreeja Muraleedharan Sreelaja**

One day while I was on the way to the office, my mind was full of the planning for the new construction project. That was the crucial time of the year; the first weeks of April. Usually my manager does all those things. But on that year, he was on leave for attending a marriage. So, I was in charge. I was travelling in a public transport bus, suddenly my cell phone rang. I picked up the call - that was my Mom.

“Alexa...”

“Mom, how are you doing.”

“Good. I have to tell you something.”

“Yes, Mom, tell me.”

“I have got a phone call from Pamela on today morning.” She stopped for a while and continued, “She was crying when she was talking to me...”

“What happened?”

“Actually, I don’t know, she was weeping. Something hurt her a lot; may be the problems with her husband.”

I thought for a few second and answered, “Mom, you don’t worry, I will go her home and take care of it.” Pamela was one of our close relatives. We were like friends since the childhood. Usually she calls me not my mom. “Why did she call my mom today?” Then a tug of war occurred on mind with my professional and personal emergencies; and the personal win. Then I called one of my colleagues and handed over the duties and informed that I would be on leave on that day. After making all phone calls and arrangements; I realize that I was standings in a bus stop nearly five to six miles away from Pamela’s home. I called a Uber taxi for my next travel to there. When I reached in front of her apartment, I realized that she was ready to go out.

She told me, “Alexa, you come with me.”

“Pamela, what happened? Where are your kids?”

“I don’t know. They may be with their dad.”

I surprised with that, why did she vigorously talk about her kids. Without any other thought, I decided to travel with her. While driving, she talked to me several incidences caused for her grief. Most of them are based on the problems with her husband and his family. When we reached the Midtown shopping center, she parked the car at the parking lot. I thought we were there for some shopping. She pushed back her seat and close her eyes with her left hand. I looked around, and open the door. “Pamela, I will be back in five minutes.”

I saw a Dunkin Donuts on the corner of the mall and walked towards there. I didn’t know what should talk with her - I’m in a big confusion.

“Two medium coffee.”

“With sugar and milk?”

“Yes, please.”

“Anything else?”

“Nothing.”

Actually, I didn’t have any idea about Pamela needed anything.

“Pamela, coffee.”

“Oh! Thanks.” She opened her eyes; they were filled with tears.

“Pamela...”

Her phone rang two times, she picked up.

“David, I parked in front of the Sears.”

I knew David, he was working in a law firm but why he is here. I didn’t ask her about that. He came and sat in the back seat of her car. “Hi. Alexandra, am I right?”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t expect you with Pamela.”

“Actually, it was not planned, she came to my apartment on morning. I invited her to travel with me,” Pamela replied to David.

Further we three travelled together, when the car reached the countryside, she reduced the speed and parked in a lonely place. While I was looking at the surroundings, she was talking with David about the legal issues. “Her kids were missing for the last two days.” David told me.

“What? She didn’t tell me anything.”

“She called me on yesterday night; her condition was really pathetic. That’s why I

cancelled my appointments. She is one of my good friends.” David was so sympathized to Pamela.

“Where is her husband now.”

“I don’t know. He picked up the kids from school. I’m trying to contact with his family”

“My friend Carla knows his sister. They are staying in the same apartment.”

“Oh! then you can help us to overcome this situation. You try to contact Carla and collect details of Matthew.”

“Sure. I will.”

On that evening I called Carla and enquired about Matthew. Carla knew that the kids were staying with their aunt but she was not sure about Matthew. She tried to collect the details from some of their family members. It’s a big dramatic story; Matthew and his sisters were included the play. That ladies were frequent visitors to the kids’ school and made a lovely bond with them. They make a fabricated story against Pamela and the kids believed that. So, the kids became against Pamela.

Carla tried to talk with the kids; but there is no use. They said, “It’s really boring while staying with Mama. Here is a lot of fun. We are going to shopping and weekend dinner from outside and plying with cousins. And, a lot of games are here.”

They all were trying to change the kid’s mind. Pamela was not financially sound as her husband’s family, so her kids had to compromise a lot of things when they were with her. She loved them a lot but she couldn’t afford all of their desires. Two days before her elder son Elive’s birthday, he asked her, “Mama, I want a Nintendo – Switch as birthday gift.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a computer game.”

“OK, I will try.”

On that evening she went to the Best Buy showroom to bought that game. Then she realizes that it cost around three hundred dollars. She can’t afford that; she had only a part time job and a minimum salary. With that salary she had to afford the apartment rent and all other household expenses. Her husband rarely spent some amount on that. She bought a toy sports car from there as a birthday gift.

After opening the gift box, Elive was disappointed. He said, “I don’t want this.” He didn’t say any other word and sat on the corner of his room and closed his eyes and ears. Pamela tried

to explain her situation but he was not ready to hear anything.

The same situation happening in her younger daughter also. She wanted costly cloths and accessories. Both of them couldn't understand Pamela's situation. They were always comparing with their friends and cousins; most of them were from wealthy families.

Most of the times Matthew was with his parents and sisters. He had two elder sister and one younger sister. The younger one was in Seattle, Washington and elder two were living in the same town. Matthew had run a good financial agency and was making a good amount of money on each month. But nothing reached his own home; a good portion were going to the pockets of his greedy sisters. On the other hand, Pamela was struggling to handling the family expenses. Carla collected all the details related to the issue. One day Pamela, David and me were decided to meet her. We arranged that meeting in a Mexican restaurant. Carla came on time. I have introduced her to others.

David: "Did you talked with Matthew?"

Carla: "I have tried; but he denied to discuss more about the family issue. Always his sisters had an upper hand on him. Once I had talked to the kids, but they were not interest to stay with Pamela. In their mind, all the happiness was in their aunt's home."

David: "We have to break that belief. What do you think about that ladies' intension of kept those kids?"

Carla: "Nothing other, only the money."

David: "I had tried to contact Matthew, but he didn't pick up my phone."

Carla: "Can you come one evening in our residential colony. I saw almost all evening him walking with his kids and plying with them on our tennis court."

David: "Sure, we can plan it on today."

While they were talking Pamela and me were silent, she held my hand and weeping often. She didn't eat anything for lunch. It's around one half after the sad things happened, Pamela looked weak and aged by ten to fifteen years.

David noticing her occasionally and he said, "Pamela, be strong. We all are with you, we definitely overcome this situation. I like an out of court settlement of this issue by thinking about the kids."

Carla: "Pamela, are you coming with me? You can see your kids."

Pamela's eyes were sparkling through the tears. It was Carla's first meeting with Pamela,

even though she would ready to take challenges for Pamela. But in my mind a thousand of question popped up, how did David overcome all these issues in a few hours. I thought it was not practical, but I decided to accompany them.

We reached around 4PM at Carla's apartment and waited there. David was busy on his cell phone; discussing with his colleagues the legal matters of the issue. When Matthew and kids came out Pamela couldn't control she run away to her kids. They were really shocked by saw her present situation.

David: "Matthew, is it a good time to some serious talk."

Matthew: "Ah...Yes.."

Matthew couldn't deny at that time; David used that situation very well. He explained the legal issues if Pamela file a legal suit against him. After a two hours of talk Matthew came to understand everything. David showed him the bank documents which shows details of the amount his sisters withdrawing each month.

David: "Matthew, I am really sorry to say that, it's cent percent your problem. Why didn't noticing all these financial things. You can help your sisters but don't forget your wife and kids. They are your family."

Matthew was silent and finally he decided a coming back to his own family. That was a memorable moment for Carla and me; a get together of a broken family.

"Alexa...my duties were over." By starting his car David told me.

"Oh! David...I forget about your remuneration."

"No... Alexa... I don't need any penny for this...that happiness is my remuneration."

David drove slowly, while we were looking up that Carla told me, "Good people bring out the good for others."

## **2021 Award Winners**

### **Poetry - First Place**

#### *Sweet Plums*

**Erika Montoya**

My loved Brother  
Today, in the middle of my weekly shopping  
Between bananas and tomatoes  
I found red plums.

The noise around me  
Made silence,  
My mind traveled 24 years ago,  
To our small city,  
so distant that looks like another life.

Remember?  
Each month we used to buy  
two plums and one sweetened milk,  
our monthly rewards  
nobody except you, can understand  
the huge pleasure that we felt  
in the first bite.

What selfish we are  
We did not want to share with anybody  
Our delicious delicacy.  
It was our moment  
To talk about our first love deceptions,

Our dreams, our plans to will  
Without parents around

What young we are  
What innocent we are.  
Now with a sea between us  
I brought the plums home, I put sweetened milk in it  
and in memory of us, I took the first bite.

While I taste the sweet flavor, I wonder  
What happened to our plans?  
Our dreams? Our family?  
And the most difficult question,  
The question that made me  
Suffocate a cry in my throat,  
And move the head to banish an idea,  
That question is  
Will I see you again?

**2021 Award Winners**  
**Poetry - Second Place**

***Grandmother's House***

**Erika Montoya**

There was a house on my memory  
It was my grandmother's house  
Special and humble Refuge  
Where siblings, cousins, neighbors and friends  
found cold water, warm food and hot coffee.

The house was big and unfinished  
Witness of a better and unknown past  
Reminder of happy times  
When we used to dream  
in the same time zone.

I remember smells, sounds and flavors  
Tight to the house like the soul to the body,  
Little details coming to my mind  
The aroma to pineapple and papaya dessert,  
The delicious guavas growing up in the backyard,  
the noise of the plastic sandals  
that my grandmother used to wear,  
noise so annoying thirty year ago,  
today endearing and unforgettable.

I have been dreaming with come back  
But nothing is the same  
She is not there,  
The house lost its soul.

New owners cut the guava tree  
Arched windows were removed  
They put cement in the garden  
Killing all plant that one day  
Used to lived there

What can I do?  
Just rebuild the house  
In some corner of the world  
Where people can feel safe  
loved and satisfied  
hoping that some day  
when I am not here  
someone will remember my house  
like a refuge, this will be my gift to the world.

**2021 Award Winners**  
**Poetry - Second Place**

*Loneliness*

**Erika Montoya**

Today is a day like any day  
Just I feel more alone than any day  
My family and old friends are far away  
They built a world without me  
A world with different rules  
Rules and codes that I cannot understand anymore.

My lover is here but his mind not  
I suppose he feels the same loneliness than me  
Just he is incapable to think about it  
Instead, I am incapable to think in another thing  
He is sounds, I am words  
He is earth, I am air  
He is strength, I am sensibility  
Each day I try to build a bridge between us,  
But any attempt is vain  
The distance is bigger each day  
I suppose that someday time will do his job  
And my heart will understand that  
The spirit's loneliness is worse than body's loneliness.

**2021 Award Winners**

**Poetry - Third Place**

***The Color of His Own***

**Janet Ren**

The sun is shining through every branch.  
The wind is gently breezing.  
The wild geese are heading to the south.  
The field, leaves and fall mums.  
The pumpkins, crops and sunflowers.  
The ray of sun, fading the colors of its own.  
Blending the world into lovely gold.

**2021 Award Winners**  
**Photography - First Place**

*Enthralling*  
**Priyanka Jain**



**2021 Award Winners**  
**Photography - Second Place**

*Keystone, Colorado - Feb 2020*

**Megan Kazier**



**2021 Award Winners**  
**Photography - Third Place**

*A Ray of Hope*

**Sreeja Muraleedharan Sreelaja**



**2021 Award Winners**  
**Photography - Third Place**

*Blue Shores*

**Alec Kyle Santos**



## **Memoir – Other Submissions**

### ***I Remember***

**Martha Diaz**

When I was a little girl in Colombia, every Saturday and Sunday, my brothers and I woke up early to watch cartoons on TV. Some of those cartoon characters were animals. They had many adventures in the forest, through the mountains, with flowers, bees, dogs, and kids. We used to see the snow and imagine how it would be to play with the snow someday.

Now, I am living in the United States where I have been able to experience many of those adventures with nature, my family, my dog, the seasons, and the snow. In my free time I enjoy going outside and seeing some details of each season. All my passions and the admiration for everything around me is helping me to have a better time and make me happy. In the meantime, I am looking for ways to improve my life and get my goals. I am taking some English classes, I am waiting to get the vaccine and then to get a job.

I hope to learn better English as soon as possible. I would like to write and speak more professionally. I like this country and I would like to get the best for me and my family, with a nice job, good salary, and comfortable life. I need to be a more empowered woman, using all my capacities. I want to continue enjoying my garden, the weather, snow, flowers, plants alongside each beautiful season. Someday I would like my dreams to come true.

### ***Harvard Grad***

**Pat Dunstan**

I screamed at my college age son, “omg you failed gym...how can it be...I am spending money I don’t have and you get a grade of a F in gym.” At that moment I knew he was not going to graduate from college in four years.

In June 2005 I was so proud and full of joy and excitement to see my son graduate from high school. I remember my brother jokingly say, “you are acting like he graduated from Harvard!” I knew that in September of 2005 he would be off to college. I knew he would

graduate in 4 years (2009) and begin his life.

Although the college was only a few towns away, I wanted him to live on campus to get the college experience. He knows education is important to our family, and I was sure he would do well. I encouraged him to study something practical like accounting or engineering so that when he graduated, he could easily get a job and take care of himself. I was also sure he would then pursue a graduate degree like his dad and me.

His first semester grades were not impressive, but I chalked it up to the adjustment period. During the second semester, my neighbors would say, "I saw your son today...I would get very angry because he should have been at school. I would then call him only to hear the sound of a ringing phone or voicemail.

At the end of the second semester, the grades were poor. Nonetheless, I was hopeful because I knew he was smart but he was not applying himself. We then entered the third semester. I would call to give encouragement, but all I would get was no answer or a busy signal.

On those occasions my stress level would rise, and I would call the school security office, because as far as I was concerned, my son was missing. Eventually, one of the security officers, impatiently advised me that my son had taken the phone off the hook.

At the end of the third semester, he failed gym. We had a big argument and he left home for months. I didn't know where he was. My heart hurt, and I couldn't sleep. When it rained, I pictured him wet without an umbrella. When it was cold, I pictured him without a warm coat. I was sure eventually I would get sick from stress.

Eventually I learned from one of his friends that he was staying at Rutgers with friends. I went to see him and we spoke. I told him all his friends are going to school except him. Does he think they are going to be friends with him once they graduate and move on?

At some point there came a time when he was thinking about coming home and working. I advised him I didn't need a roommate so if he was not going to school, he couldn't move back. At that time, he told me he wanted to be a firefighter and had been volunteering.

I didn't really know what firefighters did and certainly there were only a few fires. I told him the only way I can support him being a firefighter is if he gets a college degree so he can be the best firefighter there is.

By now my dreams of accounting or engineering were gone. I didn't care what he got a

degree in. A degree in basket weaving was good...it's a college degree. He returned to college and surprisingly graduated with decent grades.

He worked in business for a short time. He seemed ok, but was never excited about work. About 6 months after he started working, the Fire Department called. He had completed all the prerequisites for a firefighter and was selected to join the force.

We lived 5 minutes from the firehouse where he was assigned. His job started at 8 am, and he was up and out the house by 7am. He had a kick in his step. He was energetic. He was happy. For me 2012 was my best year, because I observed my son strong, brave, independent and happy.

. . . . all the things I prayed and wished for when he was born.

### ***Memoir***

#### **Marie Dutervil**

My name is Marie Dutervil. I was born in the South part of Haiti, and raised in the North in the small village call Cabaret. It was very joyful to live there with different people who came from all over the country.

At that time the zone had a big industry where people can come and find jobs to do, and support their family. Close to my house was a married couple with many children. The husband was the only person working to bring food in the table, while the wife stayed home to take care of the kids. The husband got up at 3 in the morning every day to go to work. Also he was a very aggressive person who assaulted and abused his wife almost every day. People stood up around the House to watch like a good movie.

My Country has no laws to protect people against abuse, assault and more, and in this case it wasn't easy to find a police officer to help you, they all did the same beating and assaulting women. The violence became so intense, one morning after the husband went to work, she packed her belongings and run away, and left the kids in the house. After she left, the children knew the darkest moment in their lives. There were 4 children, the oldest was about eight years old. They had no relatives around. People showed many acts of kindness, but not enough to replace their mother. Despite the help from some good samaritans, the oldest one had to taking care of the rest, cooked, washed clothes while the father working.

As a little girl who lived nearby, I was growing up experiencing many kinds of abuses among women in my country which made me start thinking how the future will be. I was so distracted by all these things happening. When I came to America, I see a huge difference between United States and my country regarding protecting people. I know in many Countries people are seeking for Justice especially for women. I hope one day Justice will be served for all.

## ***Memoir***

**Ann Fu**

The vivid images of Japanese style wood houses always popped up in my memory whenever I was thinking about my childhood. The Kitchen was also a dining room. The living room would become our bedroom when all futons and pillows were pulled out from wall closets before we went to bed. By comparing our home to current day standards our home was very primitive. Even though my family later moved to a new apartment with all modern facilities, what happened in the old household was deeply rooted in my mind. Sunlight, heat and humidity were like being on a year round tropical island. The rainy season started at the end of May and wound up in July. The humidity in the air was unbelievable on rainy days . I felt I was immersed in a steam room all day and I smelled like a salty fish. The only reward after the rainy season was an almost three-month-long summer break for us. No homework, no tests and no nagging from teachers or parents, I felt liberated!

I am the youngest in my four siblings. When we were young ,after school , instead of playing outside with our neighbors, finishing our schoolwork and chores were the first priority. We were the only family in our alley whose kids did not participate in any after school activities. We complained and we felt we had been left out by our friends but it was a rule that my parents set up when I started in grade school. We all sat around a big table in the kitchen doing our work. Mom always sat next to us knitting her never-ending projects. The contrasting scenes between the laughing outside, shouting noises and the inside calm, silent moments created an indelible impression on me. Without doubt, we benefited greatly from these disciplines of our early days.

During the era of my upbringing , we did not throw away any stuff. I got passed-down clothes, books and backpacks from my older sister and brothers. Mom was always

disassembling or reassembling used yarns to make "new" outfits for our siblings. Today, we call it recycling and appreciate its value, however, an uneasy feeling of frugality often came on me at that time.

I was so eager to grow up and vigorously pursue new opportunities in big cities or even abroad. When I had time to slow down and look back on my childhood, sadly, lots of nostalgic things were not there, especially my parents. The Chinese Civil war made my parents flee to Taiwan in their early 20s. The young couple was forced to settle down on a totally strange island and raise a family from scratch. The task was daunting and their struggle and difficulties were enormous. Rarely did they mention any difficulty in front of me or my siblings. They tried their best to create a safe and warm environment around us. However, I strongly believed that hardships must play a toll for my dad's health. He died at 61. Too young!

The island has changed a lot since I left decades ago. All my familiar landscapes like rice fields, wood houses and big lush trees are gone and the joy of seeking happiness in a simple society became history too. I miss its bright scorching sunlight and hot, humid heat!

### ***Don't Look Back***

**Roberta W. Jackson**

Our sixth-grade teacher Dr. Weinberg was worried about us, and the change of our school system in the Bronx, New York and the school changing from the one in the lower in the lower part of the South Bronx.

Dr. Weinberg was going to take us up to the Junior High School. We wore white blouses with blue silk scarves and navy skirts. The boys wore dark blue pants, white shirts and blue ties. Dr. Weinberg was a dentist in the rich part of Manhattan. He didn't have to be a teacher. He came up there to help us. On this day we were going to our new school, and he was going to take his class there about two or three blocks.

He told us not to look back when he leaves us, but to look straight ahead to a new future in life. When he walked away from us and went to the door of the auditorium, I was crying, and I looked back. And he was looking back too. And the class was looking back at him. And we all cried.

***Memoir***

**Stephania J. Jean Baptiste**

When I was 6 years old, I remember my aunt send a letter for my mother because found a job for my mom.

I will never forget that day, my mom got up early in the morning and make a great cleanliness in the house, and then took the bus to go to my Aunt's house. She got in the way of the bus and the driver make an accident many people died in the accident but my mother is not dead, she broke her foot and her arm. The people who were there said my mom said please save my life, I'm not dead. After that there is a friend of my father who would go to work and said to his driver let me see if I know someone there. He get out of the car, he saw my mother on the ground with blood and took her to the hospital. When my mother arrived in the hospital, they bring her into Operating room and then check everything. After that the Doctor said she broke her two feet, she has surgery in her feet and then they put a cast for her. My mother spends three months in the hospital my Aunt and my Grandmother also do everything for her because she's in a coma. After that finally the doctor decided to put a metal stick in her feet and send her home.

One day my mom's friend came to visit her. When he came, he says I would like to cut my friend hair but my family said no. He said if he cannot cut my mom's hair, he will go back on his city. After a lot of dispute finally my family agree with him and then he grabs his scissors to cut my mother's hair and starts in front of her head and my mother makes a noise and blood starts to flow. When they look, it was pieces of the windshield in front of my mom's head. She went back to the hospital to remove the pieces of windshield.

My mother still has iron in her feet but she is alive, and we thank God for her life.

***A Vacation to the Bahamas***

**Yvette Chambers**

In 2015 my sister and I planned a vacation to the Bahamas. We were on time for our flight and so was the flight. We landed at the Sunny Island of the Bahamas. The flight was good out of Nassau Airport, and we arrived at the hotel of our choice, EL Greco. We fell in love with the awesome atmosphere of this beautiful place.

After quickly checking in, because we were hungry, we found a nearby restaurant. We enjoyed a delicious dinner of lobster tails, potato wedges and salad, along with tall cool glasses of water. We then returned to our hotel to rest.

The next day we started at the Ferry Port, where we took a boat ride across town. The waters were crowded with people and other small watercraft. The tour guide told us about the Beautiful Island and the history of the family names. The scenery was lovely, the weather was amazing and the water was simply wonderful. While we were enjoying the other side of the Island, we saw many docked boats belonging to various celebrities. We strolled along the walkways noticing the lovely restaurants, gift shops and children's toy stores. We really enjoyed the day which ended in a beautiful sunset, ablaze with vivid colors.

The next day we took the bus to a nearby town store where there was an assortment of various items to purchase. We then visited a fruit stand, a flea market and enjoyed an awesome Junkanoo parade. This turned out to be another incredible day. Back at the hotel, we had to ready ourselves for our return trip. This is certainly a place we would love to revisit.

### ***Memoir***

#### **Thierno Oumar Diallo**

My name is Thierno Oumar Diallo, I was born on 01/16/1989 in Guinea-Conakry (Africa). I grew up in Guinea. I studied French and I got my high school certificate in 2009. I came to the United States in 2019.

I started to study English ESL at LA CASA DON PEDRO level one and two. I got my certificate for it, because they don't have more programs. Now I study at 1199SEIU Training and Employment Funds. I need to improve my English language to continue my study.

I am working a warehouse at Amazon but it's not my ideal place for the work. In Guinea, I studied from University Gamal Abdel Nasser-Conakry of Medical school and I have my Certificate of Training Completion and I worked at the hospital one year before I came USA. I came to the USA, I have the dream to become a graduate a specialist pediatric in the USA and help children for health.

In my free time I talk with my fiancée, my daughter who is 19 months old, and my parents and I watch the Netflix, CNN and YouTube podcast to improve my English.

## ***My Troubles: My Journey through the Storm***

**Tina Dickinson**

Let's start at the beginning, when I was a kid. Some of it- I remember. My mom was a heroin addict and my dad was an alcoholic. There was a lot of abuse directed at me from my uncle, my mom and my dad.

Being born addicted to heroin, while also being raised in the drug and criminal world wasn't my idea of living in a great family, but it was my family. Basically, it was all I knew.

So let's jump ahead a little. At the age of two, I was put into foster care. I bounced around a lot. Somehow, my mom would finagle the system and get me back. She needed money, and I was there to help her make ends meet. Enough said!

When I was about six or seven I went to live with my uncle, my grandpa and grandma for a while. It was there that I was raped by my uncle. It seems I've dealt with all the abuse one kid should *never* go through.

When I turned seven, I was taken in by a family for about six months. There, I was raped yet again-only this time by one of the boys in my "new family".

After that I was moved to a group home, and from there, I went to school in a "Group Home Complex". I lived there for a while until I became a ward of the state. With that, my name was changed, and the idea was that my family could never hurt me again.

Shortly before my eleventh birthday, a family came to interview me. I spent about two months going back and forth from that family back to the Group Home Complex. When I was eleven the state decided that I could move in with that family.

This time, my name was formally (and legally) changed from Athena Douglas to Tina Dickinson. I was adopted, and from there, a new journey began.

A genuine, new name and a new family. It was great! I went fishing, horseback riding, and I went to a real school. It was my idea of a true family. I had one sister and six brothers; two of those brothers were also adopted. It was amazing to fit in!

I'd continued to attend school until I was about halfway through ninth grade. By then, I'd gotten raped again, lost a brother and lost a boyfriend-all in that same year. My life felt out of control, and as I dropped out of school, my world seemed to go downhill from there. I really rebelled against my adoptive family. I went to all the hot parties, and I started to drink a lot. My

world seemed to be so chaotic.

Then I met this guy named Kevin. My sister also had a boyfriend whose name was Aaron. When my sister was nineteen and I was seventeen, we moved out. It was fabulous! I moved into an apartment with Kevin and went to college for my CNA training. Shortly thereafter I learned I was pregnant. Although my life was going relatively well, I couldn't stop the booze or the parties.

And then, the unthinkable happened. I tripped and fell-and I landed so hard I had a miscarriage. Kevin was done- he couldn't take my antics anymore. He blamed me for the loss of our baby, and he left me. I couldn't say I was surprised, but I did drop out of college, and at the age of nineteen, I got locked up for two years. I was released from jail when I was nearly twenty-three.

At that point, I'd lost all contact with my adopted family, and then, while in Colorado, I met Chad. There I was, a royal mess at a bus stop with what seemed like a million bags, and a handful of crack, going nowhere fast. He approached me late at night from a local Sonic, where he'd been working, and asked me if I needed a place to stay and (probably too eagerly) I said, "Yes."

I went to his apartment and took a shower, and I tried to get a few hours of sleep before I'd have to pull myself together and leave in the morning. When I woke up and grabbed all my stuff to leave, he stopped me as I was literally walking out the door. He said, "You can leave with all your bags and your drugs, and go back to the streets, or you can throw the drugs out, put your bags down and marry me."

I chose to flush my drugs and settle down, in hopes of a better life. I definitely didn't want to go back to the streets. His mom gave us a car and we travelled to Jersey where he'd been born and lived most of his life.

We didn't have a lot of money. We'd camp and sleep in his car. On the way to his hometown, he'd find odd work here and there. When we got to Jersey we still slept in the car for a while, until he found more steady work and we got a room.

He helped me get a job at Sonic and shortly after that, I found another job at Simply Gourmet packing school lunches for private schools. I had two jobs.

Life was cool! I even managed to talk to my family here and there.

Ultimately, though, I cheated on him, and he left me. There I was, on my way down

another bad road. I found my way to this Gentlemen's club where I performed a couple of times. Shortly after, I was hired as a “Regular”.

At some point I became friendly with a woman who showed me the lifestyle of a successful escort. It seemed only natural that I, too should escort and continue part-time work at the club.

Eventually, I ended up living with one of my regulars. His name was Carlos. I was drinking all the time and making lots of money from dirty old men. I had my ups and downs, through that journey of my life.

When I was twenty-six, I discovered that I was pregnant again. I was still drinking a lot, and as a result of my lifestyle coupled with some medical issues, I lost this child too. I was about six months along when I lost her, and In 2013, I ended up reaching out to my “Escort Connection”, and I asked her where I could get some coke.

In the back of my mind, I knew my past would return to haunt me down the road. Still, I continued to drink and party and engage with much older men- all the time- just to support my habit. Then, once again, things got bad. I got raped by one of my customers and two of his friends. It was a rocky road through that seven years of my criminal life, landing in and out of jail regularly.

The last time I was incarcerated, I spent nine months in prison. I was 32 when I got my break. My family hired me an attorney. It was a long process. I was offered drug court, and I took that offer because I needed change. Besides, I was facing a lot of time, so my journey began once more, and the opportunity I'd always been seeking began.

I left prison, and I went to John Brooks for six and a half months. While in this facility, I also celebrated my thirty-third birthday. After I completed the program at John Brooks I went to a halfway house called Angel of Hope. I spent five months there.

Not long after, I'd made it to the halfway house, I was witness to a tragic incident involving my boyfriend. He'd relapsed and was experiencing an overdose. I'll never forget the call I got from his friend as he repeated the address of the motel they'd been occupying.

I left Angel of Hope, immediately. By the time I arrived in his room, he was already gone, so I just held him for about an hour or so, and then, I too, relapsed. In a matter of moments, I'd just let go of two (whole) years of clean time and sobriety.

Although coping with the loss of someone I loved so much was really hard for me,

I ended up turning myself in, and three days later, I started over.

Now I am at Real House where I've dealt with my fair share of deaths during the past four months there, but I've gotten through it all, and I've grown, and I've learned from my pain and my past.

Just for today, I'm clean. I'm an active participant in Doors to the Future, and I'm becoming the woman I always knew I was. I talk to my family all the time, and as of this writing, I just got my transfer approved. Because of my struggles, and through all my hard work and persistence, I am in a good place in my life, and I couldn't be happier. Today I put my past to rest.

God has truly blessed me.

### *Village*

**Carol Fang**

According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, village is “a group of houses and other buildings that is smaller than a town, usually in the countryside.” When I looked it up in other dictionaries, I found the explanations were quite similar. If I were still young, I would fully agree with this. But my life experiences let me have my own opinion about it. Concretely speaking, I think VILLAGE contains more meaning than the definition above. There are three stages for me to understand what VILLAGE is. These stages are as follows.

Firstly, I thought a village was a place where I was born and raised. It's called Huoxin, an exact place as the definition that dictionaries gave. Huoxin was located in a hilly area in the southeast in China. There were about 65 families who lived together. Two one-story buildings were their public properties. One was a primary school, in which we had two teachers handling five different grades with around 70 students. The other was a one-husker rice mill. The deafening noise of the husking machine could be heard all year round. Villagers had about 1/15-acre arable land per capita, less than 1/13 of the average of that in the USA. To feed the dense population, adults had to work very hard. They tried their best to get grain crops three times a year in the same paddy fields. On the hills where it was hard to reclaim to rice fields, millions of tea trees were planted to make cash. Except for Lunar New Year, villagers of all ages were busy with their duties.

This was my village and all my world when I was a child. It looked as if the life there

was tough, lacking and boring. Well, for a girl at the time, I found the village was a fairyland. Because I had many friends to play with, and my home was always there to welcome me from having fun freely outside. No fear, no worry, no tears.

The second village I lived in was named Zhongguan Village. As I longed for studying in a city, and thought Zhongguan was a rural area, I never put any college there in my wishlist when I was a high school student. Unexpectedly, I was enrolled by a college in Zhongguan. Because of the rules in that era, I couldn't refuse it. What a disappointing admission it was! However, soon after I arrived at my college, I realized it's neither smaller than a town, nor in the countryside. Quite the contrary, I was surprised by the huge gap between the two villages. Compared to Huoxin with only three students admitted by colleges ever, in Zhongguan, most young people I saw on the road were college students. Instead of paddy fields and tea plantations, there were dozens of buildings full of classrooms, and millions of books were collected in a library. If Huoxin was a place that made me feel satisfied with the basic needs of life, Zhongguan was a place where I was fulfilled by spiritual demands. From then on, my thoughts had wings. What I was concerned about began to exceed what I saw. And it's there that I learnt a phrase of Global Village.

Yes, Global Village. When I lived in Huoxin, villagers' lives seemed to never be affected by what happened in another village, even as close as only half miles away. Seldom had villagers care about the world out of Huoxin. But these years, day after day, villagers got lots and lots of information about things in the other part of the world just like nearby when they took a look at apps on their mobile phones. This kind of information flow caused the changing of people's lives. Here are some examples. The first one happened several years ago. It was said that the poor harvest of napa cabbage in South Korea caused vegetables' prices going up in Shandong province in China. Second one is because of less passengers travelling abroad, the economy was hit badly in those countries where the tourism industry took a big portion of their GDP last year. The last one happened recently. My dad has been living in Huoxin with my mom, and runs a hardware workshop by himself. Last week, he told me about his price negotiation with a trader. Dad said, "I told him that the price of copper screws should be raised, because the copper price in London had been raised a lot." I'm always so proud of my dad. Still, I was surprised by his mention about London's price. You see, a senior villager in his eighties, with only six-year schooling, he cares about what happened thousands miles away just as in his village now.

Aircrafts let the barriers of coming and going disappear, and shortened the physical distances in their minds between countries, while the internet helped people all over the world get information without time differences. Hence, the interaction among people global-wide becomes unprecedentedly close and frequent. Isn't it a village-like globe now?

As a result of what I have experienced, I dare say, human's view expanded their acknowledgement of some definitions. I heard Elon Musk's SpaceX is about to send humans to outer space. Maybe the word VILLAGE will contain more meaning in the future. I look forward to seeing that day, and hope it will be no fear, no worry, no tears, and sustainable.

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### ***My Angel, My Mom***

**Margarita Headman**

One of my favorite writers, Pedro Calderon de la Barca, wrote, "What is life? A madness. What is life? An illusion, a shadow, a story. And the greatest good is little enough; for all life is a dream, and dreams themselves are only dreams".

Many times, I heard my mother say, "daughter, life is not easy but you only have one, so

live it with immense joy.”

Talking about the being who gave me life is not easy because I feel that I lack words to describe such an admirable being, full of light and strength with an unshakable faith in God, with a lot of goodness in the heart, with the wisdom that life over the years gave her. I wish these lines could capture my admiration for my mom, for everything she did for me over the years.

My mom, Lucila Salinas, “mami Lucy” as her friends affectionately called her, was born in the romantic Bohemian district of Barranco in the city of Lima, Peru on October 29, 1935. She was thus a lady in all her dimensions; always dressing elegant with very natural make-up. My mother was always beautiful and that is how she has stayed within my memory.

When I was a little girl my mother instilled in me a love of reading, especially poems. I feel like her favorite hobby was helping every person that came across in her life.

She always told me, “Listen to the advice of adults. They are full of experience and wisdom but it is your option to listen, my daughter, because life will teach you with stumbles and bumps and each of them will give you a lesson and a learning.”

Also, my mother would remind me about life using these phrases:

“Only ask for perfection when you are perfect. Remember, people have to make their own mistakes and accept their own shortcomings.”

“The past is a cemetery. Always close the door and drop that key. The future is an unknown. Don’t be upset or scared, your BEST moment is right now.”

"Sometimes it is good to be silent when the sadness of the soul is very deep."

“Create your own wings and learn to fly; make your own decisions and learn to be happy.”

Through these lines I wanted to give honor to my mom’s life, to her temperament, to the way she saw problems. I remember her saying to me, “Daughter, remember that every problem has a solution. Do not worry so much because these problems will always pass.”

I remember the day when my dad died, she told me, “Don't cry because the people you love never die in our hearts.” My mother used to speak from the wisdom that her years gave her.

You know, mom, when I close my eyes I can still hear your voice, maybe because deep inside of me you are there. I continued to grow the white roses that you loved so much and the

love of the birds that you liked to see in flight always towards the sky. I keep your teachings in my soul because they made me a better human being, I will not be sad because I know that you would not like to see me like this. I look in your words for the strength that you had but you know mom it is very difficult because God created a human being like you only once like the moon and the sun that always shines in the sky.

Finally, how do you remember the being who gave you life? You can remember them from sadness or from joy. You can remember them from anguish or from faith. You can remember them from loss or from gain.

I choose to remember my mother from joy because she taught me to always smile. From faith, because I know that where she is she will always take care of me and someday God will bring us together again. From gain, for all that she gave me in life; her advice that helps me live with the wisdom and strength that she taught me.

I love you mom. Sending a kiss up to heaven.

With love, your daughter,

Lupita

### ***Memoir***

#### **Megan Kazier**

I am the girl that made it out of a toxic family. I am the girl who escaped poverty. I am the girl that broke the cycle and in doing so, broke my family apart. I wanted a better life for myself so much that my family couldn't be happy for me and ended up resenting me, exiling me and leaving me devastated.

My story begins with my grandparents, who were most often referred to as gypsies. Gypsies do not have roots completely adhered to the ground, gypsies have no obligations of where one should be, and never any reason to ever come or go. There is a sense of excitement in being free; although, what good is freedom if it hurts the people you care about along the way? I have seen first-hand how the nomadic lifestyle can cause negative effects. You see, when I say "gypsy" I do not mean the beautiful and fearless Esmeralda from the Disney movie, or VW bus driving teenage hipsters. I mean, the not so glamorous gypsies. Gypsies do not always tell

fortunes and shake tambourines. They can be someone you know, and maybe you never realized it. Men and women of all ages and sometimes, being a gypsy can even run in the family. As if being a gypsy were a trait or birthmark getting passed down from generation to generation. In some cases, gypsies are just normal people who at some point in time lost their way and are unwilling to make a change in order to find a way back.

My parents and grandparents traveled the United States in an RV for years back in the late 1980s. My older sister was born in Orlando, Florida while they were visiting Disney World in 1989. My sister's first home was that RV and it was my grandmother's last home as she lost her battle to breast cancer. I was born a few years later in 1992 in Rhode Island where my family called home. Shortly after my birth, my parents split up and I would no longer be a part of my father's life. Since my grandmother and father were no longer with us, my family consisted of my mother taking care of her father, my sister and I.

Once again, the gypsy tendencies were starting to set in. The need to not feel stuck, and the urge to pick up and leave again was speaking loud and clear in my mother's ear. Perhaps it was the constant notion that the grass is always greener on the other side, an unexplainable void they could not fill, an emptiness that could only be subsided by distraction. Therefore, we moved to Maine, feeling like there was nothing left for the family in Rhode Island.

On a morning like any other, my mother took my sister and I to Dunkin Donuts, but this particular time, we picked up coffee and an assorted dozen doughnuts for a friend of hers that was in the hospital. At the time, my sister and I did not know who was there, or how important our first impression would be, but this man would ask my mother to marry him.

Their wedding day should have been such a harmonious day for all, but it brought my sister much worry. Something was aching in her stomach. Something was just not quite right. I am not sure if her suspicion was fear, some sort of *déjà vu*, or maybe just some bad food that caused my sister to feel this way. All I know is that for some reason I did not feel the same way. I did not get the bad feeling about my new step dad or his intentions. That is me in a nutshell though. Even at four years old I was seeing the one small percent of good, instead of focusing on the much larger portion of bad. I wanted to give the benefit of the doubt, believe this was my mother's happily ever after, and our family's fairy tale ending. I was optimistic and to this day I am still not sure if that is my best quality or if it quite possibly my worst, potentially both.

My step dad was a hardworking mechanic with an unquenchable thirst. Not the kind that Gatorade could help with either. Every night he would come home with a new pack of Budweiser cans. Twelve, eighteen, a twenty-four pack of beer, who knows how much this man could polish off in one night.

It was not all Marlboro Reds and Budweiser though; he was a great dad who taught me a lot about life. When he was sober, we would go on hunting trips so far up north you would think we were in Canada. He was the one taking us camping, or to the circus. He protected us as we walked through haunted houses at Halloween, no matter how scary the man with the chainsaw was. He was the one to give us piggyback rides and pushed us on the tire swing. Considering we were never his real kids; he loved my sister and me as if we were his own.

On the bad nights, he would start drinking, and my mother would send my sister and I off to bed. She would hide the sound of our step dad yelling with music or she would turn the TV up very loud so we would not worry. The next morning my mother would photograph and then hide the bruises so people would not see.

Applying makeup and wearing turtleneck sweaters, she tried her best to conceal the hurt, but the look of worry and the fear on her face was sadly not something she could cover up. Luckily for me, I was at such a young age when this was going on, I guess my brain blocked most of the bad times out. I remember him getting mad about salt once. He threw the whole salt shaker out the front door. I can recall him saying, "Damn you, if you do not stop adding the fucking salt, I am going to throw it all away!" So, he did just that, he threw the salt away and with the salt shaker went the hopes of living happily ever after.

My sister on the other hand was not so lucky. Being older and wiser, she was unable to just ignore and force herself to forget. Up the street from our house lived a county sheriff. We had a trail in the woods that led to his house in the case of an emergency. For the record, I do not mean a fire emergency. I mean, "Our dad has gone off his rocker, we need to get out of there." type of emergency. My sister needed to be prepared at any moment to open the bedroom window, break the screen, get herself and I out of the house and safely through about a mile-long trail in the woods, which would most likely take place after dark.

For years, my sister was frightened for our mother and myself. A burden that no child should have to endure, and one that stays with you for your whole life. The weight of the world was on our shoulders knowing our mother was a victim of domestic violence because of our step

dad's alcoholism. Regrettably, we could do nothing about it. I could barely reach the top shelf in the refrigerator, and I wanted to fix something that is broken beyond belief and was most likely never complete to begin with.

After catching the school bus with my sister, I went to class wearing shorts when my favorite teacher noticed a bruise on my leg and asked me what happened. I explained to her that my step dad and I were play-wrestling and he had bit me. Sweet, innocent Meg, what have I done? Without thinking this was wrong or unusual, I was honest with my teacher and confided in her. I understand now that she had no other choice but to report this matter to higher powers, the States Department of Child Services. Along with a social worker investigating our family, I had to visit the guidance counselor every day to talk about the events that happened the night before at home. I was about eight years old at the time and was asked to write in a journal, notes and pictures about my family life. We made the book out of pink construction paper and loose-leaf notebook paper with flowers that I had drawn on the cover.

I never imagined that my pretty pink notebook would one day be used as evidence in court in order to have charges pressed against my step dad and eventually aid in him and my mother getting a divorce. Even though I know it's not my fault, I still hold myself accountable. If I had just lied and said I fell off my bike, or if I had just kept my mouth shut, maybe they would still be married. I can't help but feel as if my eight-year-old self was taken advantage of, made to believe that all would be okay if I just told the truth.

Sadly, everything was not okay and life just got worse, but this is when I have to remind myself that having a dad was not worth my mother being abused. Despite the pain inflicted on me, I learned that I did the right thing. I still wonder where the small pink journal could be, perhaps locked away in a dusty file cabinet in a government building somewhere, no longer holding any power to alter the lives of anyone.

One of the worst journal entries I wrote was about a cold wintery night when my step dad, on one of his rampages, was, once again, upset about something my mother did. My mother, sister and I stood in a row in front of the television in our living room. Across from us my step dad was yelling at us and the tiny living room of the single wide trailer we lived in. With every drunk slurred shout, it felt like the room was getting even smaller and closing in on us. A few feet in front of us, he stood cursing up a storm while stumbling over his steel toe boots. He reached for one of his hunting rifles, the gun safety off, and started waving the rifle all over the

place and aimed the rifle at every single one of us. He asked us if he should kill himself while rotating the gun, and putting the end of the barrel in his mouth. He turned to my mother in a defeated voice and said, “You might as well pull the trigger, because you’re killing me anyway.”

No one was hurt, but my mom, sister and I will never be able to recover from standing there in a line, staring at the end of the gun barrel. We cried and begged him to put the gun down. I do not know what he was upset about; maybe he was angry because of work, maybe I did something to displease him, who knows. Regardless of what spiked his anger, staring down the barrel of a loaded gun is like staring into the future you may never get to live. You are flooded with thoughts and feelings that bring up every single regret you have, all the happy memories you keep, your dreams, and the hopes you had for the future. You see all these possibilities looking back at you while waving goodbye.

Memories like that never fade away as much as we would like them too. They haunt us all the time. Sometimes, during the day, you will just see an image or hear a noise that brings you right back to how you felt that night. Every time I see a hunting rifle, there is the image of him inches away from taking his own life, or even scarier, taking ours. When I hear a gunshot, the sound instantly takes me back to what could have happened that night. These emotions rush through your body and mind while you try to maintain your composure, or in other instances you get the cold sweats which wake you up in the middle of the night, and all you can do is breathe while reassuring yourself you just had a bad dream, it’s not real, and they can no longer hurt you.

That haunting night was the last straw for my mother, and she knew we had to leave. She could not risk that ever happening again, as we may not be so lucky the next time. They ended up separating, forever this time and once again, my mother, sister and myself were on our own. Living in the woods in Maine is a time I will never forget and will forever be appreciated. The years we spent there gave my sister and I stability. Growing up in a forest is a blessing that I will be eternally grateful for. My home was peaceful and that land satisfied my hunger to explore and gave me room to grow. Maine will always be my home. I hope to return someday to breathe in the fresh air. Be captivated by the sweet sound of nature that stole my heart as a child. That land was my nirvana, my happy place. It may not be appropriate considering how much hurt that place brought my mother, but that house is the first place I remember being or calling home.

We moved out of Maine down to New Hampshire where we had family close by. Then after a few short months we moved back to Maine living in multiple towns. For several years,

my sister and I attended up to three schools in an academic year. At one point, my sister and I were sleeping on a kitchen table which could convert into a bed in a camper that belonged to my mom's new boyfriend. He also just so happened to be closer in age to my sister and me versus our mother. I try not to judge, but the truth is we really did not have anywhere else to go. Right when life seemed things could not get any more stressful, my mother did not practice safe sex and found out she was expecting. By this time, the year was 2002. I was ten years old and my mother was thirty-eight and about to have another child. I felt like my world was falling upside down. She could barely take care of herself, my sister, and I. How was she possibly going to be able to support another child?

After a long nine months, at 2:07pm on April 7, 2003 in Bangor, Maine my mother gave birth to my precious little baby brother. I knew then that my “bigger sibling duty” was to take care of him just as my sister did for me. I am forever grateful my mother had another child, despite the ten-year gap between him and myself. My brother has brought so much joy to our lives. Even now, I do not think I could have ever lived without him. Twenty-one inches long, seven pounds eleven ounces, he was a bundle of love. He had the biggest, bluest eyes I had ever seen with bright blonde hair. He was so handsome and I knew he would one day break some hearts.

Unfortunate events occurred between my mother and brother's father, which caused us to leave Maine again, and instigated my mother to never return. We headed back to New Hampshire. That fall I was starting the sixth grade and Andi was beginning her second year of high school. A few months later, the eviction notices were piling up, my mother had been hired and fired from all the local nursing homes, and we moved away to a small town close to family. My mom struggled to raise us, consistently losing jobs because she was sick, or didn't have the gas money, or she could not find anyone to watch over my brother. I regret so many of those moments I told my mother I did not want to babysit. Maybe if I had just been the obedient daughter that helped her mother in need, my life would not be so difficult. Perhaps that was karma's way of teaching me a lesson. I pray one day, I will learn that this guilt is not my cross to bear and I can set the pain down, but for now I am building up my strength.

My sister slowly started tumbling down her own path of rebellion and insecurity, leaving me treading just trying to stay above the water. Not only was life exhausting never having cable, internet, or a phone, but there were times we didn't have water or electricity because the bill did

not get paid. I am convinced this is why my mother owned so many candles and oil lamps. Boiling water for a hot bath or getting used to cold showers were just the beginning. Even though she was a single mother raising three kids, help was always there. Every month she would receive child support checks for my siblings and me, food stamps, or WIC checks for baby formula. Churches would offer food baskets for holidays including turkeys for Thanksgiving, presents for Christmas time, and even donated a car to her. On more than one occasion, I had to give my mom the state quarters I had been collecting so that she would have money for gas. Even if I had all fifty states, she would have only got \$12.50... Even with the world's gracious generosity, things never got better.

Moving at least a dozen more times in Manchester, Chichester, Pembroke, and Concord we were running out of options in New Hampshire. Running out of money, running out of places for my mom to work, running out of faith. As depressing as our situation was, I at least knew that I would have a promising future if I ever wanted to open up a moving business. For the longest time, I had so much anger towards my mom for her choices and decisions she was making. Not only did they affect her, they affected us. My siblings and I were defenseless to what was going on. Innocent bystanders dragged along by my mother's gypsy lifestyle.

My sister had already moved on and wanted to start her own life. She decided to follow our mother's example by dropping out of High School. After all, moving once again while in High School can be very scary and intimidating. She was working her own job, and in her own apartment. I was envious that she got out, that she no longer had to suffer from our mother's rash and illogical decisions. I needed to be strong for our brother though. He was so young and naive, oblivious to the hardships our family faced. I needed to put on a brave face for him.

We had to move out of our duplex in Concord when the eviction notice came once again. This time we were living out of my mother's car. The idea of my brother sleeping in a car seat broke my heart. The look of defeat on my mother's face was one of the most depressing views I had ever laid my eyes on. The bitter cold New Hampshire December nights turned my heart and the windows icy cold. My mother packed all of our belongings in a storage unit. We spent Christmas that year with each other in my sister's tiny apartment. What little money my mom had she spent on presents for my brother. I felt incredibly helpless that winter. That Christmas did not even feel like Christmas. I do not mean the lack of gifts, or the fact that we were not in our own home, but even our hearts weren't in it.

My mother got the crazy idea to move to South Carolina where we had some family friends, but I was so adamant on staying with my family in New Hampshire, my god mother offered to let me live with her for as long as I wanted. It was such an ugly fight, I was in the process of filing for emancipation. My mother asked me to drive down with them for the weekend, just to visit because this family friend was on their deathbed and suffering of cancer.

Heading for Columbia, South Carolina was my mom, my sister, her boyfriend, her boyfriend's friend, my brother and I squished inside a five-passenger car. We made it all the way to Virginia before breaking down. My mom's car did not even make it the trip. At a small-town diner, late in the night we sat twiddling our thumbs, trying to come up with a solution. The diner was iconic and 50s inspired and all we could afford were glasses of tap water. It was quiet, you could feel in the air how heavy our worry was. Even if my mom's friend came to get us, they would only be able to fit three people in their car. None of us had money or any way of repairing the car. My mother was already using my sister's paycheck to pay for gas and tolls. Our saving grace was a very nice older couple who offered to drive us in, ironically, their RV. So much for never getting into a vehicle with strangers. It was then that I could officially say I have hitchhiked! Even though we probably looked mental, I didn't care. Their RV was better than the tiny car and we were able to watch the Lion King and stretch our legs. Unsurprisingly, my mother emptied the car of our belongings and left the car there, never called a tow truck or had any intention of coming back to claim it.

Once we made it to South Carolina, I discovered no one was not sick at all, and I would be attending a new school on Monday to finish out the last semester of 8th grade. At first, I was extremely angry. My mother tricked me into moving a million miles away from home against my will, and I didn't even get to say goodbye. She manipulated me into believing someone was dying. I am ashamed my mother chose to play the "cancer" card considering it was what she lost her mother to. It appeared that my mother had lost track of her moral compass.

She took away phone and internet privileges so that I would not be able to plan my escape or call home to my family. Regrettably, it was official, in January 2007 at fourteen years old, I moved to the deep south. Opposite from what I had suspected, it ended up being wonderful. I started seeing that perhaps we did not have the same taste in food, or we sounded just a little different from each other; Once acceptance took over and stubbornness took a step back, we are all just people. Being different did not make me weird, it just made me, me. With

time, I was able to share my background and my culture with the people that made their way into my heart. The secret of happiness that comes with looking out at a fresh blanket of snow.

At first, I did not want to try, I did not want to go through the trouble of getting close to people, just to have to say goodbye later, or worse, not even have the opportunity to say goodbye. I became a member of a local church and the leaders there became my family. They held my hand while I prayed angrily at Jesus for making things so difficult for me.

My first day of high school I met my best friend for life. In fact, looking back, high school was a joyous experience for me; I graduated as a junior and most importantly all three of those years were in the same school. Granted we moved houses a bunch of times, but at least they were all in the same school district. I am often asked why I decided to graduate a year early, and my most common response is all of my friends were a year ahead of me. The truth is I did not want to risk moving again while still in school. At times, I did not think I was going to be able to pull it off. I didn't have a computer or laptop in the house, so I had to buy one, and since I didn't have a couple hundred dollars all at once to drop on one, I did what my mother would do. I went to a rental store and rented a laptop. When my mom did not pay our internet bill, I would have to sit in a McDonald's just to use the Wi-Fi to complete my online classes. Sometimes it felt that maybe this was her way of trying to keep me trapped. As much as I tried to get out, she tried just as hard to keep me where I was.

At the time, I never did stop to think about how the day I would leave the nest would truly affect my mother. As always, I was so self-absorbed in my own needs that I never took into consideration how that must have made my mother feel. All parents are supposed to let their kids go one day, and yet it seemed mine was deliberately trying to make me fail. I was living in an alternate universe, a world where people are so scared of being left alone, they drag everyone else down into their own slumps just so they don't feel lonely. It is baffling how one can do that to someone they love, but this was just the tip of the iceberg and I would later collide with everything that lied under the surface.

On the surface, things seemed to be okay, and I did my best to put on a front, but people do not change overnight. My mother was still having problems with keeping a steady job. She decided to become her own boss and open a home care business. I was proud of her entrepreneur attitude but was also skeptical of what she would do and how things would turn out. She did not

have any business experience. She was notorious for not doing her research; no matter how many times I told her, her ignorance is not an acceptable excuse.

Before I knew it, my friend's dad, who was our neighbor at the time, also a county sheriff was at our doorstep asking to take my mother to the downtown station. He was nice enough not to cuff her and she left quietly while I distracted my brother in the other room so he would not be able to see what was going on. One of my mother's clients was pressing charges against her dealing with insurance fraud. There was my mother's mugshot on the local 6pm news. She ended up being charged with two felonies. False Swearing and Exploiting a Vulnerable Person. It seemed as if this was the end. After everything, we went through this was the darkest time and the only thing left to do was pray for a brighter day. My mother was released and I knew then I needed to leave her home.

I traveled for a while, returning to New England to amend all the broken family ties. I was even able to reconnect with my biological father. I found the restaurant where he worked in Woonsocket, Rhode Island and I introduced myself. It was quite the odd reunion, seventeen-year-old walks into a bar looking for her long-lost dad. It had been so many years, and it knocked him off his feet. Granted he seemed to have been more interested in my sister than me, but I assume it is only because he had been able to spend a little bit more time with her versus me. We still talk every once in a while, mostly about the weather. He is getting better about it though; it is a work in progress.

I just wish he understood that it is not okay that he probably does not know what my favorite color is, or what sport I played in school. He stole away our right to have an overprotective father. The kind of father that stays up all night waiting for you to get home from a date. The kind of father that puts the fear of God into the eyes of whoever may dare break our hearts. I want him to know that he missed watching two great girls grow up into strong beautiful women, which he can take no credit for.

I want him to understand how much it hurts me to know that no matter how many birthday, Christmas and Father's Day cards I send him, I for some reason will never get one in return. I want him to know how many birthday candles I blew out wishing that he would spontaneously show up and burst through the front door. All those wasted wishes. It pains me that I had to go looking for him, I had to hunt him down. Just to discover that he never stopped whatever he was doing, to ever look for me. I want to know if he regrets picking his career over

us. I want him to know that my sister and I cannot just forget about him not being there. Most importantly, I hope he realizes that when he left all those years ago, he forfeited the right to one day walk my sister and me down the aisle. After all, how can you give away someone that you already gave up?

Let's fast forward to 2012, I never went to college as getting a job and making money was at the very top of my priority list. I was living in an apartment with a roommate, and life was good, I was content and happy. I landed an entry level position job at a logistics company, and I was so proud of myself for getting a Monday through Friday 9am-5pm job. Sometimes I only had \$20 to my name, but my bills were paid, I had food in the fridge and gas in the tank and that was okay, that was enough for me.

Then I met a guy, he was handsome, kind, and nothing like me. His family was normal, he had a great engineering career, he was perfect. When Christmas approached, we had only been officially dating a few weeks, but he gave me the most wonderful present ever. I do not mean the lovely heart pendant; I mean the joy on my little brother's face Christmas morning. You see, he helped me afford every toy on my brother's Christmas list that year. My sweet boyfriend saw an opportunity to give back, and he did not judge family about our lack of money. He did not expect to be paid back either, not that he would ever let me and did not seek recognition.

As much as I would love to say that my life turned around and things have changed, nothing is ever that easy. My family still drives me crazy and as much as I try to rise above, I still in some cases remain the same innocent bystander. After eight years of believing our storage unit full of our belongings were still waiting for us, I was wrong. I must have been wearing my rose-colored glasses again, looking up at the ceiling trying to find the word gullible. Once again, I was let down. My mother lost it all. I cannot act shocked because deep down I think we knew it was going to happen all along. I just did not imagine I would be driving a thousand miles towing a U-Haul for nothing, but my mother, bless her heart, is full of surprises.

Out of everything, I think that might have hurt the most. It was not just her stuff or my stuff; it was irreplaceable family treasures. Baby pictures, school yearbooks, homemade videos, my grandmother's jewelry box, it was all gone. It all started to make sense, all those times I offered to pay and drive to get our belongings, I was always denied by my mother. I did not understand why she would not just let me help and why she was being so stubborn. She fills my

head with false hopes and continues to do so. The only thing left was her father's flag from when he served in the Navy. My sister holds on to that now for safekeeping since my mother can no longer be trusted with family heirlooms. The only other comment I have to say about that trip is it was a very long, quiet drive home. I do not mean to be so materialistic; after all, it is no different from any family who ever suffered a fire burning down their home. There are things that are more important, I just cannot help but think about how I will never be able to compare my baby photo to a child I may have one day to see how similar they are.

For whatever it's worth, I really thought the worst was over. I thought my twenties were finally my time to shine and live the life I have always wanted. My boyfriend and I traveled, took vacations, moved into our own house. I know growing up was probably the biggest blessing I was ever given. The chance to create my own life. Being able to make my own decisions and learn from my own mistakes. Granted, I am in my early twenties and have my whole life ahead of me, but I have an old soul with enough wisdom I could give someone in their nineties a run for their money. As much as I love my family and where I am from. That is just one part of who I am. My past is not my whole life and I will not let it hold me back from a bright beautiful future that I just need to reach out and grab. I no longer have to worry at night about money, where I am going to live next, or where my next meal will come from.

All my life I had been searching and I finally had found it, peace of mind. I found stability in myself. I know that in order to survive you must wake up each day and go to work. I know that you must pay your bills before spending unwisely. I have learned that title loans are pretty much the worst thing you could ever do. I am not saying that money fixes everything, but I believe staying humble does. Life is not about letting your experiences define you; it is what you take away from those experiences and how you let it affect you. It is about breaking toxic cycles and overcoming adversity. Changing for the better, changing for a brighter tomorrow, never settling, and always having faith.

All these years I was optimistic that things would get better, that life would turn around. I told myself that it may be rough now, but it would not last forever. I am proud I had that outlook and point of view. Hope is a strong thing. It is the difference between my open heart and my sister's cold shoulder proving to be strong. Perhaps I am the gullible one handing out third and fourth chances to undeserving recipients and my sister is the wise one guarding her heart. We may have the same wounds, but we cared for them in our own different ways.

I remain to be optimistic about life and what my future may hold. After all, being optimistic hasn't let me down yet. I often think too hard in situations where I feel tested by a learned lesson. Knowing when enough is enough when it comes to alcohol, or maintaining outstanding attendance at a job you have been at for nearly a decade. People say that we are often a product of our environment and I kindly disagree every time. If that were the case, I would be flaky, unreliable, alcoholic in need of some anger management classes. Those that know me are well aware that I am quite the opposite.

Knowing that people do not always break the cycle frightens me and makes me question if one day possibly having my own family is the right path for me to take. As often as that crosses my mind, I do my best not to dwell on such thoughts. I may not know exactly what to do, but I have learned what not to do and I trust that is enough to get me through whatever life may throw my way. Growing up may have been bitter at times, but it is the sweet outcome that had made it worthwhile. Now I strive to be better, I want to be just like all the people who ever took time from their lives to help my family. I want to help others in the same way. That is a beautiful chain that I hope does not end, Unwavering love, the kind where people help people. Not for personal gain, but because it is the right thing to do.

In January of 2017 My boyfriend took a job in New Jersey and I decided to move with him, leaving my family in South Carolina. He proposed to me and I said yes, but this is not a happily ever after. My family came to resent me for the size of the house we bought here in New Jersey. My sister and her husband began to hate me because of the wedding venue we chose instead of hosting a backyard wedding as they did. I was called a "Rich Bitch" for asking my brother-in-law to wear a necktie. He held my niece hostage and would not let her be my flower girl, my sister barely agreed to stay in the ceremony. My life was imploding minutes before I was to walk down the aisle. My family left me and I begged my mother to stay with me. My mother looked me in the eyes and said, "I have to go, Andi is leaving, I have to go."

I pleaded with her to stay. My mother looks at me again saying she can't. I hastily told her, "If you leave my wedding, I will never talk to you again." and with tears filling my eyes and disappointment hanging in my heart, she looked at me without an ounce of remorse in her eyes and said, "That's fine."

My wedding had a total of nine tables, six were occupied by my husband's family, two were for friends, and my family, we only needed one, and in the end, only one seat was filled. As

I walked back into the reception, there at table nine, sitting all by himself, was my father. The one person who stayed. The one that was never there for me was still here celebrating me. The proudest man in the room to be the father of the bride.

It is now 2021, and my sister still refuses to talk to me. My phone number has been blocked. All social media is cut off. They deleted me from their lives. Four years and one pandemic later and my sister still refuses to accept any of my apologies and attempts to make things better. I never imagined that my big sister would one day hate me so much. I never in my wildest dreams could have conjured up a life in which my niece doesn't know that she has an aunt that loves her more than anything in the world. My mother and I have managed to work past our differences, but I will never be able to forget that she left me that day. I pray every day that my sister changes her mind, that she will one day allow me to be part of her life. However, I understand that she is most likely not the one in that relationship calling the shots. I understand that day she had to choose between appeasing her husband or being there for her sister. I used to think that she didn't love me enough and that is why she let me go, but now I just think she didn't love herself to stay and be strong and I am unsure which is the greater tragedy.

I have hated myself for four years because of what happened. I have to actively try every day to not think about the fact that my family hates me so much they couldn't stand me being a part of their life anymore. I try with all my heart not to resent my marriage because every single wedding anniversary I have is going to be another year marked that my family no longer wanted me. So perhaps happy endings don't always involve the prince finally returning your lost shoe from that party years ago. Just because something didn't turn out the way you expected to, doesn't mean you weren't worth it, the course change just means there's a greater plan in store for you that is beyond your current comprehension. Perhaps, a part of your happy ending is learning that being "right" is usually never worth the costs it takes in order to prove it. Maybe your happy ending is taking the liberty to forgive yourself instead of waiting for someone else to do the honor. Maybe your happy ending is merely the beginning of an endless pursuit of finding peace in the tiniest fractions of progress.

***You Never Know***

**Nina Lisouskaya**

This story happened on the eve of Indian summer. My two friends and I were on our way home from school. We always walked the same way, but on that day one of our friends suggested going another way. I had never been to this area before, and I was not sure that we would be able to get home, but at that moment I was curious. After all, a change of scenery is never bad.

The day was sunny and warm. Since it was only the beginning of autumn, the foliage had not yet turned colors. A light warm breeze blew, swaying the branches of slender birches that grew along the road. We walked, talking about everything, and looked with interest at this unfamiliar place. It was an ordinary residential street, just like many others. I don't remember any memorable details.

At some point, a large stray dog ran out to meet us. It was half our height with short brown hair. We thought that the dog wouldn't pay attention to us since it was initially calm. But when the distance between us was already insignificant, the dog turned sharply and began to approach us, as if preparing to jump. I knew many stories when people were attacked by dogs, but I never thought that this could happen to me-someone else, but not me.

At that moment the world around me stopped. I just couldn't move. I was so scared. My instincts were so frayed that I could not hear what was happening around me. I couldn't utter a word. My voice trembled as if I were stuttering. My heart was beating at a frantic pace. I'd never been so scared. I remember how I stared into the dog's evil eyes and could not look away.

A terrifying roar broke through the ringing silence from the grinning mouth of the dog, and I continued looking into her scarlet eyes and I was still petrified. It seemed that now she would jump on us, and the only thing I could do was stand behind my friend.

When I thought that she would start attacking, I noticed a man. He was walking past us. I thought that he would somehow help, but he just continued walking. He passed without even looking in our direction. After that, I became even more scared. Pure fear mingled with despair. I stared at the man's back while the dog continued to come closer. On that warm autumn day, we were lucky. The dog turned and ran away as abruptly and unexpectedly as it had appeared. Everything happened so quickly, but at the same time, it lasted forever. The vacuum around me disappeared at the same moment as everything ended. I didn't know how my friends were feeling,

but I think they were as disoriented as I was. We decided not to go that way ever again. Finally, we returned the same way that we came. As a result, our journey home took twice as long as usual.

When I got home, it seemed like nothing had happened, but it only seemed so.

I remembered for a long time this short moment during which I experienced so many emotions.

We must always be careful and think before making decisions. We got off easy, but it could have ended much worse. You never know who or what might come your way. Maybe you will be lucky, maybe you won't. The saddest thing is that many people can remain indifferent to you and your problems. It may happen that people will not even look at you, as that man did. He simply walked past three children who were nearly attacked by a possibly rabid dog.

### ***The Girl With The Broken Frame***

**Angelica Medina**

I was only 15 when I finally broke. I became weaker but at the same time stronger, I knew how to keep my walls up so high that no one knew about the voices in my mind that were starting to take over me. In a way I became a girl with a broken frame. But let me start from the beginning, where all my emotions started to pile up. Where piece by piece I started to break, started to change. Where piece by piece I started to become my own best friend and my worst enemy.

It was July 4, 2011 when my family and I just moved to the United states and we were staying at my aunt's house. At first I thought we were only going to stay there for a couple of months until the doctors could take away my medicine. It wasn't until I got out of the hospital that I realized we weren't going back. No! I realized this, the second that my parents transferred me to a new school. However, I still had a tiny hope that when I left the hospital we could go back to my old school where I had friends, to my old school where I was social, to my old school and town where I knew almost everyone and also everyone knew me. But that tiny little hope was crushed and instead of going back to the place where I felt free, the place where I used to call home, I had to accept the reality that we weren't going back and this new place was now my home. Even though that was a little bit stressful for me as a kid...that wasn't what caused me to change.

That story actually starts at school. September 2, 2011 was when I first started school,

even back then I was a shy person, so for me starting in a new school where I didn't know anyone was terrifying. And quite honestly it wouldn't be until the second week of school that I started to realize that I was changing and it wasn't for the better. At the time I didn't care because I was lonely... I wanted friends, and I didn't care what I had to do or how I had to act. As long as I was able to have someone I can call a friend , as long as they were happy, as long as they could stay with me I didn't care who I had to become.

Years after years passed by and I only got worse, my parents were still fighting and I was actually also starting to fight back but instead of fighting with my parents, I was fighting with myself. You see over the years voices in my mind started to appear. Sometimes they were good and counseled me when I felt alone, but most of the times it was telling me that everything would be better if I disappeared; telling me that everything was my fault, my parents fighting my fault, my friends being upset with me my fault, my family having a bad time it was my fault, it was my fault that everyone was slowly leaving me behind, seeing people closed their forever open door in front of my face.

12/3/17

*This is a place that I'm going to let go of everything that I'm feeling and no one is allowed to read this except me. However if someone is reading this, that means I'm no longer here. What you'll find in this journal is emotions, whether it be because I'm trying to console myself through my troubles or I'm writing about me having an emotional breakthrough. Mom if you are the one who is reading this, then I'm sorry for what you're about to read...and in case I'm not by your side at this moment...than mami I hope you know that I Love You.*

All my emotions all my failure started to pile up in my mind and in my heart that by the last year of middle school I practically lived in the nurse's office. Almost every time it was because my heart began to hurt, which caused me to be out of breath. Most of the time, I used to go to school in the morning and be out before 2 o'clock. It got to the point that my parents will always be with their phones, and wait for the school nurse to call them. I always felt bad about bothering them but I couldn't help feeling an intense amount of fear whenever they wouldn't pick up their phone because I knew I had to survive being at school with me and my two friends,

which were called depression and anxiety. These two always stuck with me through thick and thin but of course they never had anything nice to say. Sometimes it even made me feel like I was dying just by being around new people. I guess you can say I became my own best friend and my own enemy.

12/ 04/17

*Today wasn't a bad day. Although, at the beginning I didn't know why I was so afraid, I was only able to calm myself down after I entered the school grounds and saw that my friends were in a good mood. I remember before entering the building hearing my mother say " Be yourself ."* Those words are simple, but why is it so hard for me to follow through? I don't know who I am. Am I a leader or am I the clown? Even though my friends don't call me a clown, I feel like one because I acted like one just to make them happy. I always tell myself " If they're happy, then I'm happy, " but most of the time even if they were to smile or laugh, my heart will feel sad because of the things some of them have said and done. But even so I still call them my friends.

I chose to ignore how bad I was getting until I reached the age of 15 where I finally broke. Well, let me clarify, it was by the end of my 15 years a couple of months before I turned sixteen. I used to go to church a lot and every time I would pray to God to let me know I wasn't alone in this battle, to let me know that he still loves me, to let me know that I can make it out alive. It was confusing because he would tell me the answer to my prayer but I still thought that I didn't deserve his forgiveness or his love that I should just leave this world and everyone will be happy, that's why every time I said goodbye to anyone I said as if it were my last words to them letting them know , that I care for them but of course since by that time I was good at hiding what I felt they never pick up on that.

After having multiple breakdowns and almost leaving this world I knew that I had to change, that I had to start reaching out to people calling for help, before it's too late and that's what I did. I started to talk to people about the voices in my head and what I was feeling. In my own way I started to reach out, those that cared grab my hand but those that did not they let go. I was starting to get better but for some weird reason my wounds were still not healing. It took a while for me to realize that the reason why my wounds were still not healing was because I still was holding back on a lot of things and even when I had too many bags on my back I made room

for other people's bags as well. It wasn't till I had enough and was able to let go, that I was able to start my healing process.

That was three years ago. Now I'm an 18 year old Christian girl who is currently enrolled in school studying for the HSE (High School Equivalency). I'm planning on continuing my education and become a lawyer. For fun I like writing poems based on my experience and emotions. I managed to turn one of my poems into a song. I composed the music, recorded the song in a studio and just released it on YouTube. It is called , "I Know I'll Be Safe."

I guess this is where my story ends or does it?

### ***My Journey on Earth***

**Gerda Charles Noelsaint**

My mother tell me my father tell her he love her. He like to have a child with her. She agree they make love. She get pregnant.

It wasn't easy for her during her pregnancy. My father get involved with somebody else and left her now she's on her own. She have to do hard labor, will she seek with me in her belly. She have to wash clothes by hand and iron it by hand for pick up. She have to carry heavy dirty clothes on her head after cleaning the clothes ironing with a heavy iron. You have to put coal in it to warm up the iron. It was not easy for her, for delivery she have to carry the heavy load of clothes on her head. Beginning the day I was born we were living at the mercy of God and the mercy of others.

She forget herself, concentrate on me. She was poor and happy at the same time because she have me and love me.

### ***My First Pet***

**Puja Paliwal**

Every summer my younger brother, two older sisters and I left our home in New Delhi, India and spent our summer holidays at Grandma Tara Sharma's house in Old Delhi. We had so much fun there because we were all similar ages. My sisters, Rani and Seema were 12 and 10-

years old. My younger brother, Mohit, was 5 and I was 6-years old. And one big thing at Grandma's house was Mona. Mona was a 10-year old big, black, shiny haired healthy body, girl dog. She was our favorite!

Mona, that year, had a big surprise for us. We started the summer holiday as usual. We reached grandma's house and started to look for Mona. I saw she was sitting on her couch. She looked so ill and tired. It was so opposite of her behavior because we knew her as energetic and friendly.

Then Mona saw us and started playing with us. She was so happy but now she looked at us quietly. I asked Grandma, "She's not happy we came here?" Grandma smiled and told us, "No. She is so happy to see you. She has a big surprise for you. Just wait some days."

We all were bored because after playing with our friends, we came home and wanted to play with Mona. But she was not ready yet. We all waited for her surprise.

After five days, the next morning was a very big morning for us. We woke up and went to Mona's room. There, we saw so many puppies. I screamed a little, "Oh my god, they're so cute!" I ran near Mona and touched all the puppies. They all looked like wool. I started to count how many puppies were here. "One, two, three, four, five, six." I asked, "Grandma, is it six?" She smiled and asked us, "Yes. How is your surprise?" We all shouted "Thanks Mona!" and started playing with the puppies. They all were so small and couldn't open their eyes yet. There were five black puppies and one white one. They were four boys and two girls.

For the rest of the summer, we played most of the time with Mona and her puppies. Our summer holidays ended and we were ready to go back home. We got sad because we had to say goodbye to Mona and her puppies.

I asked, "Grandma, can I take one puppy home?" She replied, "Why not take it?" I saw one white boy and took it. I was so happy because that was my first pet in my life. I named him "James" and have so many great memories of him.

### ***My Brother-In-Law's Dream***

**Edna Pineda**

In Honduras, in the department of Comayagua, there is the city called Siguatepeque surrounded by beautiful forests, with a very pleasant climate. My brother-in-law, Jaime Alfredo

Girón, lives in that city, a man passionate about coffee cultivation. This passion was inherited by his father, who was originally from Piraera Lempira, near the border with El Salvador. Due to his studies, Jaime had to move to the city of Tegucigalpa, putting on hold his dream of being a coffee farmer. While he was studying, his family was forced to move to the city of Siguatepeque. In 1987, practicing his profession as a doctor, he was presented with the opportunity to buy a piece of land located in a village called La Danta, with an altitude of 1720 meters above sea level. This is a perfect height for growing coffee.

Over the course of all these years he has faced many difficulties. In 2012 Jaime suffered a serious accident. Pruning trees, one fell on his leg causing a fracture in his knee. He underwent delicate surgery. He was very sad and all of us thought that he would not recover. It took a long time for him to return to his normal life. But with the help of God and a lot of therapy he managed to recover and return to what he was passionate about - growing coffee.

Currently Jaime is a retired doctor completely dedicated to his dream. He employs 25 families and provides free medical assistance during the harvest that begins in December and ends in April. Jaime gets up at 4:00am in the morning, going to each of the houses of his employees, providing them with transportation to his place of work. The work day starts at 7:00 a.m. and ends at 4:00 p.m. Collecting is often a lot of fun as employees tell anecdotes and jokes throughout the work day. At the end of the harvest in April, Jaime celebrates the season with a delicious lunch for everyone, rewarding the best employees for their performance during the harvest.

Doctor Girón, as he is known, is an admirable man who never gave up on fulfilling his dream. He is worthy of my admiration for his constant struggle every day. My brother-in-law Jaime Alfredo Girón is a source of pride for our family.

### ***Higher Education***

**Ellen Smith**

You were not encouraged to go on to higher education after you finished high school. Get the education that was given you and make something of your life. Nothing was said officially or out loud, but one understood what it all meant. In other words: keep yourself. In grammar school the girls went to the middle school once a week to learn how to cook and sew,

the boys took workshop.

If you didn't get a job, the girls got married. And the guys got themselves a job in a factory or went into the army. Now that's not to say that many didn't accomplish their dreams or desires. But they would have fulfilled those sooner or earlier in life had more encouragement been given no matter what the circumstances at home were.

In spite of this we were encouraged at home. You were taught values. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Choose your friends wisely. Think before you leap. And definitely your Word was your Bond. The funny thing about these values is that they didn't cost a dime.

If the person didn't encourage you, the schools definitely didn't. Whether you were a good student or just mediocre you were taught the same.

One of my highlights in Plainfield was when a person who grew up in the same school system came back to teach. She and I will just say Barbara went on to college, but came back to help our children—giving them strength and encouragement.

Strength: you have it in you.

Encouragement: that anyone can do it.

### ***NYC, Getting Lost in a Train***

**Priyanka Sodhiya**

I remember that was my first visit to New York City. I was overwhelmed with the excitement, after all I was about to live my dream. I wanted to look best for the trip so I planned my outfits a day before. I had to pack my food, because being vegetarian; availability of suitable food might be a challenge. I packed a light jacket, soda cans and cookies. My excitement to see skyscrapers and the Statue of Liberty which I had only seen in movies didn't let me sleep. The next morning, my husband, son and I, started early for NYC. I wanted to spend as much time as possible in the city.

We took the train to the One World Trade Center. There was a rush in the train and it was tough to get a seat. When my destination arrived my husband got off from the train in a hurry. Doors closed before my son and I could get off, and the train moved. I panicked and scared to the thought of getting lost as it was my first trip to the city. All hell broke loose. My eyes were full of

tears.

I tried calling my husband but there was no network in my phone. I had dilemma whether to get off to the next station or go until the last station? What If I don't get the return train to the One World Trade Center? Quickly I regained my composure and started to inquire people about How to get back to my destination. One passenger next to me sensed my fear and calmed me down by telling that this train would return to the same station again. I borrowed his phone and called my husband and asked him to stay at the One World Trade Center train station. I thanked the passenger for his help. I heard a lot about helpfulness of US people in general but that was the first time I actually experienced it. I felt a sigh of relief by talking to my husband.

I held my son's hand tightly and moved closer to the door. This time I made sure that we were the first to get off the train. I waved to my husband as soon as I saw him waiting desperately for us at the station. Though we were lost only for few minutes but it felt like a reunion after years. I visited New York City many times later but this story is reminiscent.

### ***Valentina: An Inspirational Woman***

**Sreeja Muraleedharan Sreelaja**

Valentina, she is one of my eldest friends. I came across her on last year, in a language lovers' group. She is from Ukraine. Here she lived with her big family consist of her children and grandchildren. Last year she was blessed with a great-grandchild.

Once she shared her childhood memory with us: her parents were lost in the Russian war when she was 11 years old. After that, she came into a shelter run by the Russian government. But she is remembering those days by her own words, "That was happy days; there are five other girls nearly my age and we six tried to enjoy those days."

These words came only from a bold woman. I think she is emphasizing the social and family restrictions present on those days in Russia. They may got more freedom in that shelter. She studied sewing from there and she worked hard. Later she became a fashion designer. Valentina was the first person; I had met in my life who faces directly the disasters of war. I want to say "Hats off" for her great success in life.

Now she is in her early 80's. Last New Year's day, we are all discussing our new year

resolutions. As usual most of the resolutions were related to weight loss and dieting. But she said, “I want to study more and more English.”

Once we were discussing the ‘NEWS’; Linda asked us about our NEWS? She added, “Good or Bad anything...”

“If there is No News means it’s Good News.”

But I have only bad news to share, “My mom was hospitalized for the last week, even I can’t talk to her on those days. I know that she is struggling in her fourth stage of cancer. I fear that...”

I can’t continue after that, Valentina took charge on that moment and said, “I have a bad one to share, but comparing to Sreeja’s news my case is nothing.”

“Last Saturday me and my husband going for fishing in Delaware River. After that when we came home, we realized that my husband had lost his cell phone...”

By continuing the talk, we can understand “how wonderfully she is enjoying her retirement life”, she is accruing a lot of knowledge too. She is independent of herself; drives to the libraries and keeps learning new things at every moment.

One Tuesday morning when she saw me, suddenly she asked me, “Can I congratulate you?”

I surprised about the matter. Actually a few days backs I have told her about I had an interview on the day before. I forgot that incident. But she remembered that one. I said, “I cleared that interview, got the job.” She congratulated me with a hug. She didn't leave any occasion to congratulate others. She is really an 'inspirational woman'.

She always tried to correctly pronounce my name. I know my name is so difficult to pronounce. Most of people wisely skip that task but she didn't. She asked me to write down my name in her book and repeat it several times and finally wins the task. “How enthusiastic she is!”

### ***Sailor: Story***

#### **William Willoughby**

In the fifties, I was employed on an oceangoing freighter (ship). It was an opportunity to travel and see the world. Working on various vessels making many ports of call was an adventure I dreamt about. I traveled to five continents! There I had the opportunity of meeting different

people and nationalities learning to appreciate and respect all cultures. This was a blessing.

My voyage originated in New York going to Japan and the Far East via the Panama Canal. The canal separates the two continents. The two oceans are different depths. When taking a trip through the Canal there are sets of locks which lift vessel in increments one lock at a time. The “lock” holds water like a tub and it is filled up. When you reach the 85 feet up, you look down to the water and it looks like you are on the top of a skyscraper building when everything below looks smaller. They go from sea level up to 85 feet up above the Atlantic sea level. On the other side of the canal the ship is lowered to sea level and finally up over that of the Pacific Ocean. It is like the ship is going over a crest. It is amazing a truly ingenious feat of engineering!

Our next port was Long Beach, California, USA to Manila, the Philippines. It was a beautiful, peaceful Pacific Ocean trip. The ocean was basically smooth with some tolerable swells. God’s blessing.

Our next port was Hong Kong and finally Osaka, Japan. Here the ship was overhauled on dry dock for a month. During this time the engine was repaired, and the hull was scraped and painted. Japan truly impressed me. I especially noticed the people’s politeness, cleanliness, and honesty. For example, my friend and I took a taxi to a hotel up in the mountains. The fare was 2,000 yen. I paid 3,000 yen by mistake! The following morning my companion said, “The cab driver wants to see you.” To my surprise, he returned the 1,000 Yen overpayment!

## **Non-Fiction – Other Submissions**

### ***What Angers God the Most***

**Anonymous**

A world divided by hate is what angers God the most, because hate leads to racial injustice and violence that destroys God's creation, leaving fear and sadness in our hearts. Knowing that, we are alienating ourselves farther away from God and his promise, by holding on to hate. It is like a poison in our hearts that doesn't allow us to see all the good things we have accomplished so far, and we will lose if we fail to change the way we see and feel about the world.

We know hate brings nothing but misery, unhappiness and destruction into our lives, and that is the complete opposite of how God wants us to live our lives; which is happy, contented, grateful for everything he has done for us and, most important, to love one another.

But we know for a fact that the only thing that we have done is disappoint God, who disagrees with the way we behave toward each other, and this is the reason why we need to acknowledge that we have a big problem that is tearing our world apart. It has been going on for too long and is still causing so much damage to the world. We can no longer ignore the effects of hate.

Therefore, it is urgent that we look for a solution to stop hate from contaminating the hearts of our future generations so they can live a better and happier life in this world, by focusing on something more positive and beneficial to them. Most important, we want God to be proud of us, his creation.

### ***Make No Law***

**Anonymous**

The framers of the U.S. Constitution circumscribed the legislative power of the Congress with respect to religion; that is, Congress shall make no law respecting or abridging the free expression thereof; yet an inherent facet of the Republican party is Evangelical fundamentalism;

in other words, a greater part of Christendom, second behind Catholicism, is the Republican party. Their pro-life, pro-death penalty stance is a contradiction in itself; but, what is more contradictory is the patriarchal system that they have set up in order to control the bodies of women; their reproductive rights, which are – to use a term – God given; and that is precisely the point. Christian Conservatives feel as though since it's within their religious domain that they should have a right or a say in its management and maintenance. Evangelicals are the ones who want to strike down the Supreme Court decision of *Roe v. Wade* for self-righteous and selfish reasons that they try to justify with the Bible, the so-called infallible Word of God. In the eventuality of a Supreme Court decision to strike down *Roe v. Wade*, the mere implications of which would send ripple effects throughout the nation, would touch every female who is able to carry to term because the Republican party, at least at the behest of Christian Conservatives, would want it that way. Thus, in effect, the Republican party would unfortunately be in reverence of an establishment of religion. The mere fact that Republicans are persistent in their attempt to control the reproductive rights of women in their “noble” cause, to preserve human life, that they interpret from the Bible for justification. They themselves are in violation of the Constitution when they show little to no respect for the prohibition that it entails for Congress to make no law respecting an establishment of religion.

### ***Keep Fighting***

**Daneesha Canty**

In this day and age, we are so consumed with everything going on around us-things that for the most part, won't even matter when our time comes. We tend to lose focus on the things that make life worth living, and we crowd our minds with problems and obligations that will still be there even when we are dead and gone. Who would have thought that Our World would be so shaken to its core by COVID-19?

Who would have believed that we would be on lock-down for so long, taking so many months from us? Millions and millions of people were sick with no cure in sight until this point one year later. Families lost loved ones day after day. Hospitals became overcrowded, people lost their jobs, and most families went hungry daily. Suicide rates climbed during the early days because people couldn't adapt to the everyday changes that were taking place. Everything

changed: the way we went to the doctors to the way we shopped for food and everyday essentials. Even school systems throughout the world were affected.

The sadness this pandemic has brought us is unexplainable. At one point I felt myself slipping, losing control over my mind. I just knew I was going crazy. I could not understand why our lives had been affected so tremendously by a virus, a disease. We've been hurting mentally, physically and emotionally. There have been 2.68 million lives taken. I lost my job because there was no work. This only made matters worse for me. No job, no income, still trying to figure out how to pay my bills, let alone eat.

I was thinking nothing will ever be the same again. I was so lost, I started praying to my Higher Power more and more, asking for guidance throughout this time. I've come to realize that I've actually made so many great changes that are better for my future.

As our world fights to normalize again and overcome this pandemic, I'm taking the steps necessary to overcome my own shortcomings due to this disaster. I now continue making myself a better version of me. I will always pray that we stay strong, masked up and six feet apart. Let's continue to help one another. We have shown great progress so far: let's keep that going!

### ***What Happened in Texas***

**Nohra Colon**

In the beginning of the month of February, 2021, the State of Texas suffered from a winter storm. The storm caused the natural gas to freeze through. This caused many Texans to lose electricity for days, and not to be able to find food in the supermarkets. Some Texans passed away, because they had hypothermia. The energy system of Texas wasn't prepared for drastic climate change. In the future they need to change to something more sophisticated that can handle extreme weather, so that this doesn't happen again. My sister, who lives in Texas, reported that the supermarket was empty the last time I called her. She was concerned about the temperatures, because she cannot handle the cold weather.

## ***COVID-19 Mentality***

**Reilly J. Fitzsimmons**

My mother was diagnosed with Pancreatic Cancer on September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019. The COVID-19 Pandemic shortly followed in March, 2020. This new setback in the life of my mother would prove to be detrimental, as the world she had come to know came crumbling down before her eyes.

The COVID-19 Pandemic was terrible for my grandfather and great uncle, who saw their world coming . Many individuals are even worse off because they lack a positive, fighting spirit in these challenging times. Vinny had been staying at Jefferson Cancer Center in Pennsylvania when the COVID-19 Pandemic first started, diagnosed with Pancreatic Cancer just like my mother. Blame for the virus gets us nowhere in recovering and Vinny's story is a very emotional event where I wish there was someone or something to blame. Like many things in life, it was beyond my control.

Before the pandemic, I would drive with her to chemotherapy at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center at Cooper, in Camden. My senior year was almost entirely spent with my mom when I got done school, and I didn't mind at all. My mother is one of the most positive humans in the world and always reassures me that she can beat cancer, an inspiring display of strength and perseverance. These traits would become extremely necessary for the looming threat of COVID-19 around the corner.

Many of the shutdowns and conditions of COVID-19 were beyond the common people's control, and people still won't accept the conditions that come with the virus. Acceptance is the first and most important step, because we will never be able to control everything in our lives, and we will never develop and grow as individuals if we cannot accept that. The application of acceptance is essential in developing a positive outlook and never giving up. Look at this as an opportunity to sharpen your discipline and character, instead of treating it like the worst thing to ever happen.

COVID-19 brought an onslaught of challenges to the entire world, with many people losing their jobs, businesses, and lives. The task at hand for my mother was beating cancer during a pandemic that came with some of the most strict rules set in place ever. My mother and I still went to M.D. Anderson together, but now I found myself waiting in the car for hours, to

eventually drive her home.

The pandemic forced my school to transition to exclusively virtual classes, and the rest of my senior year was spent doing assignments on my phone, in a parking garage, all alone. The time spent talking to my mother on the drive to Camden was the only time I spent interacting with humans in real life. She would fall asleep as soon as we left, from the aggressive symptoms of Chemotherapy draining her energy.

The mental state for people in the pandemic is quickly descending, with each day seeming more uncertain than the last. Acceptance is one of the most difficult skills to master and apply, many people understand the concept of coming to terms with the truth, but most struggle in applying a genuine feeling of acceptance to their life. Coming to terms with our lives and problems isn't easy and can be emotionally draining and strenuous, but the true beauty in the process is never giving up hope for the future.

We were never upset at the situation, but rather grateful that we still had each other. We both kept each other positive when one of us got down, easy to say being I wasn't the one facing the most difficult circumstances possible, it is hard to fathom the mental toll taken on by my mother. Being pumped with one of the strongest drugs in the world, running our debt through the roof, being isolated for hours on end, and doing it all with a deadly pandemic on the prowl, my mother never gave up.

My Uncle Vinny was sixty-five years old when he passed away from COVID-19 "complications." Vinny was my grandfather's closest brother, and they served in the United States Air Force together for fifteen years. Vinny and his brother had been serving a country that would ultimately fail them, but they weren't aware of it yet. He could not leave because of his health and was quarantined within Jefferson, where he would eventually contract COVID-19. Vinny passed away in the night and the virus became more real to everyone in my family. We all knew a funeral must happen, Vinny was one of the best Americans to ever serve this country and a model citizen in every way possible. Instead Vinny received a drive-by-funeral, where a unit of three hearses drove by my grandfather's house for ten seconds, with a casket somewhere among the cars. His lifelong best friend, his closest brother, who served alongside of him in the Air Force for fifteen years was given a ten second drive-by-funeral with a few honks as opposed to a ceremony and heartfelt eulogy. It is hard to imagine how my grandfather coped with this catastrophic loss and lack of closure.

My mother's outlook on life and optimistic approach kept me sane during this time. My mother was truly tested when the pandemic happened, and it seemed like just another obstacle to motivate her. My mom's ability to stay positive and hopeful in the darkest times is something that will always stick with me, and an ability I will strive to obtain for the rest of my life.

This sums up the entire up-rooted nature of the COVID-19 Pandemic, and shows me how blessed my family is to have this strong-willed, positive mentality in the face of uncertainty and fear.

It seems impossible to be hopeful for the future with the current circumstances of the world right now. I am personally seeing people all around me giving up and being compromised by the virus. I understand there is no clear end in sight, which is exactly why being positive and having hope is all we can do. Getting knocked down is essential in choosing if we want to get back up or not. All the merit of one's character stems from their ability to handle adversity and adapt from it. The pandemic has knocked down each and every one of us, with no clear ending to the virus in sight, we are being tested and can actually become stronger from it.

### ***Citadelle Laferrière***

#### **Roselene Francois**

I would like to talk about my experience with a special place I visited in the Caribbean. This place is named Citadelle Laferrière. It is an ancient castle that was built with a fortress to protect the town. It is located 3,000 feet up, at the top of Mount Bonnet L'Eveque, in North Haiti. It was used in combat against the French- mostly for protection, and it was the first structure of its size made by freed black slaves. From a distance, the structure looks like it's rising up-out of the mountain itself-so strong and powerful.

Citadelle Laferrière is a beautiful place to visit. It is one of most frequently-visited tourist destinations in the Caribbean area, especially in my home land of Haiti. You can take a nice long walk to the top of the building, and see everything for miles around.

I really enjoyed our visit when I went there with my family. We learned a lot about the history of our ancestors and our great nation. This ancient military fortress has a beautiful design and an amazing view.

My family and I had a great experience there. I would advise anyone who has the opportunity, to go and see this beautiful landmark. It is something you will never forget!

## ***Jainism - A Way to Reach God***

**Pallavi Jain**

My name is Pallavi. I am from India. Today I would like to talk about my religion. I follow Jainism.

Believers of Jainism can either be Digambar or Shwetambar. The word Digambara is made up of two words: *dig* and *amber*. Dig means sky and amber means clothes. In other words, the sky is their covering. Followers of Digambara don't need clothes to cover themselves. Digambara Jain monks left everything that belongs to connect their past life, even clothes. Swetamber word made with two words shwet + amber. Shwet means white and amber means clothes. They cover themselves with plain white clothes. Swetamber Jain monks wearing white clothes.

I follow the Digambara culture. Digambara monks lead a very hard life. They do a lot of meditation because they want to connect with the Divine. They eat once a day because that is enough for them. They eat food in their hands. They don't touch utensils because they are afraid to kill tiny insects. They eat standing in one place. They visit different houses for food. They sleep on mats because the regular bed will give them comfort. If they do that they will have problems in their meditation and disconnect the path to becoming a God. They do not travel by vehicle due to fear of harming small creatures on the road. They walk from one city to another. They do not travel when it is raining. If they have to travel they walk and they look four steps ahead of them.

They do not speak after the sunsets due to fear of insects going in their mouth. They do not want to hurt any creature or anyone because they want to believe in non-violence. We try to follow some rules such as we do not eat food after sunset, some people do not eat root based vegetables like onion, potato, garlic, etc. Being vegetarian and eating before sunset are healthy practices.

## ***Life***

**Alkareem Jenkins**

Life can be so divine. Depends on how you treat it. You will encounter many different personalities: negative and positive energies. It's all on how you react. You have those who really want the best for you in life. Then there are those who are just self-centered and try to use you for their selfish gains. There are also many who are petty and try to be what they are not, thinking that they are better than others. But they are truly weak and afraid of changing themselves for the better because they stay closed-minded. They fail to take constructive advice. They ultimately end up losing their lives or their freedoms.

Life is the best gift. Don't take it for granted: you only get one.

## ***Myth Of Sisyphus***

**Megan Kazier**

The Greek myth of Sisyphus is examined by Albert Camus in his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" and also in Richard Taylor's essay, "The Meaning of Life." Whilst pondering the meaning of life or what it may look like for one to live a meaningless life, both scholars concurred on writing about Sisyphus. A conniving and hubris man, who swindled the god Hades himself into bonds, is the subject tested for the writers Camus' and Taylor's philosophical research. Sisyphus is sentenced by the gods to a lifetime of pushing a boulder up a mountain and after finally emerging to the top, watching it roll back down again. If readers are able to think outside of religious or divinity commitments and imagine Sisyphus idyllic, the comparison Camus and Taylor describe is clear. By picturing Sisyphus content with his fate of pushing the rock, readers can apply the myth to one's repetitious series of days, careers, family roles, or moral obligations and ethics. When the gods condemned Sisyphus to his eternal mission, they also in turn removed the drive which strikes individuals towards seeking the meaning of life. Gifting Sisyphus with this destiny gives him purpose despite results ever being presented.

Camus describes Sisyphus as an “absurd hero” (Camus 2); he is a desperately, hard- working individual who will never know what it is to feel accomplished or finished. Sisyphus becomes aware of his fate and surrenders to the gods’ will; this is shown to Camus during the minute Sisyphus has made the final push, and it is the second of relief as the giant stone is gravitationally pulled back down to the foot of the mountain. “At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the liar of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock” (Camus 2). The awareness Sisyphus possesses leads Camus to believe that Sisyphus may be considered tragic; compared to someone unaware of the boulder standing in front of them when staring at the surface of the monotonous life being led. “The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and his fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious” (Camus 3).

If Sisyphus is coherent to the situation of his fate and riddled with responsibility of the actions which lead him there, he is simply a victim of the absurd thought that he has earned his punishment and has no other option but to push his rock, in just, becoming blissfully complacent with the future being set forth in front of him. “All Sisyphus’ silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him” (Camus 3). It is here acceptance is shown to unite both happiness and the absurd, and why Albert Camus ultimately concludes “One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (Camus 3).

Richard Taylor dives into the ideology of a meaningful life and how that may appear in a person today. Taylor describes a force pulling people towards the desire or need to find their purpose or meaning in life. This lack of knowledge and undeniable ache to know its existence can consume someone, leaving them with only negativity and worthless emotions. People thrive and wish to know that their lives will not be in vain and will one day amount to something life altering and monumental. The grit and tenacity needed to make an impact triumphs over the idea of going through life without mattering or having significance. “It is not that his great struggle comes to nothing, but that his existence itself is without meaning” (Taylor 3). Readers can not only see the similarities within their own lives to Sisyphus and his rock; they can also grasp Sisyphus was inadvertently blessed with a purpose when penalized to rolling the rock. Taylor suggests when the gods condemned Sisyphus, they showed mercy. The act was an attempt to avoid a punishment that led to an ending or one day resulted in boredom. The gods relieved him of ever feeling the need to seek out a purpose, escaping him from the evasive quest for life’s true

meaning. “Nor need he even fear death, for the gods have promised him an endless opportunity to indulge his single purpose, without concern or frustration” (Taylor 5).

When thinking of Sisyphus and focusing on him being happy and comfortable with his predicament, connections can be made to daily lives today. Picturing Sisyphus joyful paints him in the image of a mortal and not a myth. While Sisyphus may have an abnormal purpose, he has a purpose nonetheless, and the matter is not anyone’s concern to determine whether or not that is satisfactory or not. Everyone has a rock, everyone has a hill, all of mankind is straining every day to battle upward. Camus and Taylor were not only able to detect and analyze Sisyphus and mark him a tragic hero; they both executed articles explaining the links between finding purpose in what may appear to be a meaningless life and the optimistic attitude needed to embrace the journey.

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## ***How Human Become Heroes — Internal Crises in Mythology***

**Dylan Ryerson**

Throughout the course of history, mythology has been present as an important cultural tool used for storytelling. Given the span of time of humanity’s existence, it is obvious that certain writing techniques would be repeated across multiple stories and myths. Because of this, people are able to hone in on what exact purposes these repeated storytelling elements serve. Through this examination, the Hero’s Journey was formed. This chart helps readers further analyze almost any story, given that so many stories fit into the archetype of the Hero’s Journey. One example of a repeated storytelling element that will be examined in this paper is the use of internal conflict in the crisis stage of the Hero’s Journey of “Chi Li Slays the Serpent”, an ancient Chinese myth, and *EarthBound*, a 1994 video game.

In “Chi Li Slays the Serpent”, the crisis stage of Chi Li’s journey takes place when she first meets the serpent in the temple. Despite her courage and conviction leading up to this moment, her determination to slay the serpent is replaced by a sudden rush of paralyzing fear. She was not truly prepared for the horrifying nature of the serpent. In this moment, she is faced with the traditional defining factor of the crisis stage in the Hero’s Journey: rebirth. In order to give herself the power to take on the serpent, she must rid herself of the fear inside of her. Fear is a primal human emotion, and simply overcoming is a difficult or even impossible task for any ordinary person — ridding oneself of it is definitely a moment that could be considered a rebirth. By ridding herself of the fear that holds her back from slaying the serpent, Chi Li becomes a new version of herself — one that is capable of taking on the beast before her.

In *EarthBound*, the main protagonist who undergoes the Hero’s Journey is a young boy named Ness. Ness is a chosen boy who is prophesied to destroy Giygas, an evil alien overlord known as the “Universal Cosmic Destroyer” and the “Embodiment of Evil”, and therefore preventing Giygas from sending the universe to the horror of darkness. Ness was told of his capability of defeating Giygas by a bug from the future named Buzz Buzz, who also gifted Ness with the Sound Stone, an object capable of collecting melodies from eight specific points in the world. With the Sound Stone and the help of three important friends, Ness travels around the world to the eight locations. By doing so, he will collect the power of the Earth itself, which will allow him to move on to defeat Giygas. However, once Ness successfully collects the eight melodies from around the world, he enters the approach stage of his journey — the stage defined as the approach to the hero’s crisis, their ultimate obstacle. Once Ness collects the eight melodies, he enters the spirit realm of Magicant, and must travel to the Sea of Eden at the deepest point of Magicant to face his crisis, a being called “Ness’s Nightmare”. Ness’s Nightmare is representative of all of the negative emotions that are within Ness’s being. Giygas’s greatest power is his ability to manipulate the evil within all things, both living and nonliving. By having even the slightest essence of darkness within his soul, Ness is unable to stand against Giygas, and therefore he must first destroy Ness’s Nightmare. This is his crisis because by defeating Ness’s Nightmare, Ness experiences a rebirth of himself where he emerges from battle with evil and darkness fully gone from his soul, therefore armed with the power needed to face his ultimate foe — Giygas.

The crisis stages of “Chi Li Slays the Serpent” and *EarthBound* bear striking resemblance to one another. Both stages are internal conflicts that take place before the actual battle with their ultimate foes, being the Yung Serpent and Giygas respectively. A basic look at the Hero’s Journey might lead one to believe that the crisis stage would predominantly or even always be represented by the Hero’s ultimate challenge or conflict — the battle against the main antagonist. However, in both of these stories, the crisis can more accurately be described by the events leading up to said final battle. In both of these stories, the crisis stage is a moment when the hero must rid themselves of human emotions that hold them back from facing their foe. For Chi Li, this emotion is fear, and for Ness, it is evil. By facing their crises, these heroes emerge with the same prize representative of the treasure stage — the ability to fight their final enemies. With her new, fearless self, Chi Li is now capable of facing the Yung Serpent; with Ness’s new, pure self, he is now capable of facing Giygas. This also means that not only are their crisis and treasure stages reflective of one another, but their result stages as well, because the result of their treasures are one and the same — the defeat of their foe. The crisis stage is ultimately the most defining similarity, because these other stages are so similar because of the foundation that is set for them by the use of such similar internal conflicts in the crisis stage.

One of the most interesting things about the similarities between “Chi Li Slays the Serpent” and *EarthBound* is that, culturally, these stories are nothing alike. The former is an ancient Chinese myth that debatably challenges gender stereotypes and has been passed down generation after generation, and its full history is not even known due to the actions of China’s first emperor. The latter is a Japanese video game from the 1990s full of Americana and a bizarre sense of humor that didn’t sell well and went relatively unnoticed until it developed a cult following over the years, primarily being exposed to the public due to its characters being included in the *Super Smash Bros.* series. Nothing about the culture surrounding these myths are even remotely similar — not even their mediums as works of art are even closely related; yet, they share such similar elements of storytelling. If anything, this makes it evident that there are very specific elements of storytelling that are guaranteed to fulfill a certain purpose. Both of these heavily disconnected stories used similar internal conflicts that resulted in about three stages of the Hero’s Journey being nearly identical beyond a surface level across both stories. This is definitely a testament to the effectiveness of the writing techniques employed in these stories. By successfully ridding themselves of basic human emotions and attributes in order to

save grand amounts of people, our protagonists evolve from ordinary humans to heroes. They have shed their human flaws in order to emerge a hero with great power, enough to destroy monsters threatening humanity at large.

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## *Unfamiliar*

**Priyanka Sodhiya**

When people are new to a country and are not familiar to things, they can make mistakes. Sometimes it could be serious or funny. But every incident guides us and gives learning's. Being a stranger, people face many challenges. But gradually, we enjoy learning different things.

Since my childhood I wanted to visit The United States. The funny thing is - those days, it was difficult to even remember the name of The President of America. Now when I finally arrived, I have quite a few incidents. I want to share couple of those.

I did not know much about fire alarm. One day I was roasting corn on the gas top, and it suddenly started emitting smoke. There were two fire alarms in my apartment, and they started ringing. I panicked and put wet towels around those to turn them off. Meanwhile my neighbor already called 911. By the time the fire alarms stopped, I heard a fire truck parking in my apartment's parking lot. I got scared as I saw the firefighters and thought they would put me in jail or least I would have to pay fine for the false alarm. To my relief, they only came to my apartment to check if everything was fine and left soon after. I got the learning of why fire safety procedures are important and how to follow them.

The other incident happened when I visited Water Park in Six Flag. I was interested to try Aqua loop ride but it had long queue. I waited for almost 50 minutes to climb up to the top to get my turn. The Instructor there explained how to keep you safe while you are in ride. By the time, he finished, I got very scared and started shivering. I finally decided to quit the idea of the ride. I

told him that I did not want to go to the ride and would climb down through stairs. He tried to persuade me a lot to not quit. Many people in the queue too encouraged me to not being scared. One lady even asked me to come with her, however I felt embarrassed and politely declined.

That time, I realized that people in the US are warm and helpful.

### ***The Necessary Evil***

**Alec Kyle Torres Santos**

Those predisposed to religious thought or faith to at least a minor degree might possess some familiarity with the hypothetical syllogism that is the Problem of Evil. For the uninitiated or those unaware of the term, the Problem of Evil can be best surmised with the following:

“ If God is God, God is not good. If God is good, God is not God” (Mitchell 182).

Strictly speaking, it is a logical dilemma that tries to reconcile the traditional theistic view of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God with the existence of evil and suffering in the world. It is a logical problem, one that only affects those who believe that there is a God who is both all-good as well as all-powerful. “In its simplest form the problem is this: God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false” (Mackie 1). Though a number of solutions do exist for the Problem of Evil itself, perhaps the most effective is the establishment of evil as a necessary contrast to good.

Before further elaborating on the nature of evil and its apparent necessity, theism and its subsequent views must be explained first and foremost. In reference to the text, *Roots of Wisdom: A Tapestry of Philosophical Traditions*, “Theism refers to belief in a personal God who created the world and who continues to be connected with its processes and with us... Theism describes the God of the Judaic and Christian traditions who is the source and creator of the natural world as well as its loving protector” (Mitchell 174). The implication behind the terms creator and protector suggest the aspects of a God who is both omnipotent and omnibenevolent. Traditional theists are firm believers of both elements, insisting that God is both all-good as well as all-powerful, but it begs the question, why does evil and suffering exist in the world if that were the case? This is where the Problem of Evil arises.

J.L. Mackie, an Australian philosopher who made several significant contributions to the

philosophy of religion, metaphysics, as well as the philosophy of language suggests three main solutions to the Problem of Evil in his work *Evil and Omnipotence*. Of particular note is the second, “‘Good cannot exist without evil’ or ‘Evil is necessary as a counterpart to good’” (Mackie 2). In questioning God’s apparent power or benevolence in reconciliation with the evil that currently exists in the world, the idea is that evil itself is not the crux of the issue, but rather it serves a necessary purpose, the counterpart to good, for good cannot exist without evil and vice versa.

As it were, Mackie also suggests as a possible solution that a theist simply give up at least one of the two propositions that constitute the dilemma. If one is prepared to accept a reality where God is perhaps not wholly good, or not quite omnipotent, then the Problem of Evil shall not arise. However, both facets are essential principles in the views and thoughts of theists in regards to their deity, God simply must be both all-powerful as well as benevolent, it seems impossible to think otherwise. To do so would contradict their faith and belief immensely, it is for that reason that Mackie’s first proposed solution to the Problem of Evil is not acceptable for most.

Now, as to what was previously discussed, Mackie’s second solution of evil being a necessary counterpart to good is not only an acceptable solution, but it also serves as an explanation suitable even for difficult cases. To explain, were evil to not exist, so too would good cease to be. Evil is necessary in that it provides contrast, it allows for divergence to occur, a disparity between that which is considered desirable versus that which is not. “The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain” (Mitchell 184). Imagine having a life where there is no struggle, no challenge or conflict, everything sought after comes easily without great effort. To live such a life, a person would not know the true value of what they have, that is because it is all they’ve known and will ever know. If there is nothing else, no adversity or hardship, then the contentment that comes from overcoming such things or not having to face them at all times will not be present or exist for that person. Imagine American society before 9/11, specifically the views of the citizens regarding airport and airline security. Following that tragic event, people valued their safety and security so much so that they willingly sacrificed the freedom of privacy to metal detectors, luggage scanners, and security checkpoints, all in hopes that there would be no repeat of the event in the future. Certainly, if the attack had never happened, then there would be no need for such measures. However, people can

recognize better that which they take for granted if they have a basis for comparison, knowing that their current lifestyle and/or circumstances could be far worse, simply because out in the world and in the past there have been such cases. The joy that stems from prevailing against such trials and tribulations far outweighs the joy of not ever having experienced them, if only because the necessary contrast that evil serves makes the good all the more valuable, as it is not guaranteed.

Be that as it may, there are those who might argue that the extent of evil and suffering that currently prevails in the world is unnecessary, that the terrible tragedies that have occurred in history need not have happened. In such cases, were the greater extent of evil to be erased where events such as the Holocaust or 9/11 were to not exist, then something else, the lesser evil would take its place and become the greater. Something as trivial as not leaving a sizable tip or even simply forgetting to in the first place at a restaurant could very well become the greater evil in a world where there is no preminent comparison, at least as far as mankind's mentality is concerned. Given the fickle nature of morality itself and its inherent subjectiveness, the issue of perspective is also of great importance. It is a matter of human perception, a great evil appears only terrible and tragic because it is the greatest amount of evil fathomable that currently exists in the world. Were that evil to be changed or erased, whatever might take its place would be viewed as the same psychologically, because that is now the greatest evil imaginable.

Evil as a concept is just that, evil. Lesser, greater, middling, there is no real difference in the end. The degree is arbitrary, the definition blurred. As it stands, were the existence of evil to be erased in the world, even if only the greater extent of it, humanity would find the lesser form and name it the greater evil so as to take its place. There must always exist a contrast, just as a shadow cannot exist without light, so too can good not exist without evil. Evil itself is not the root cause of the problem, rather it is the solution.

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## ***Online Shopping in America***

**Baochun Shen**

Online shopping, as the name implies, is buying products via Internet instead of going to the store physically. It is more popular since covid-19 not only in America but also in the world. When we shop at home, we do not need the 3Ws: wear a face covering, watch the distance, and wash hands frequently.

I live in Newark, west of Hudson River; it is close to New York. There are many shops on Market Street, and a Wholefood supermarket on Halsey Street. I used to go to downtown Newark or Manhattan to shop. I like to go to store physically browsing, touching, feeling and examining the products I want to buy. I also like to communicate with people. I learned a lot of colloquial English while I talk to salespersons when I shop. Window-shopping brings me satisfaction. However, when the pandemic came, I had to shop online. Now, online shopping is my main way to buy the necessities for my family, it changed my life style. After one-year online shopping, I found some advantages and disadvantages of this kind of shopping, and what customers should pay attention to when we shop online.

### **Advantages:**

*\* First, online shopping saves time and energy.*

We go to the website and browse and buy at home, and saves time and energy. Before the pandemic, I need several hours to shop. However, one online shopping takes me from a few minutes to about half hour.

*\* Second, the price on the website is reasonable.*

There are two big sales in America, Black Friday in November and Presidents' Day in February. On Black Friday, some products are up to 70% off. If you buy electronic devices, there is a big discount. It's the best time to buy a laptop, cell phone, iPad and so on. If it is not a holiday sale; the price online is also a little cheaper than offline.

*\* Third, we have more choices to buy in an online shop.*

If you go shopping physically, you only can buy the products in one store. Your choices are limited; if you shop online, you can buy the merchandise in all chain stores in stock of America.

*\* Fourth, the retailers find the customers' demand quickly and easily.*

If some sorts of products were sold quickly, the retailers would try to manage replenishment, and keep the balance of supply and demand.

*\* Fifth, items exchange and return easily.*

At the beginning, I was afraid to exchange or return the items if I don't like. But then I found it is easy, for an example, I ordered a navy blue jacket for my husband but the color of the jacket I received is different from the picture. I called the customer service and wanted to return the jacket. The customer service sent me a return label with barcodes and a packing slip with the detail information of the jacket by email. I dropped off my package in the UPS spot near my home. They processed my refund immediately when they receive my package.

### **The disadvantages:**

*\* First, some fabrics and colors may not be exact the same as the picture.*

Like the jacket, I returned. Usually, the color of the item in the website is nicer than the actual ones you received.

*\* Second, expired date can't be seen.*

If you shop groceries or health supplements, you can't see the expired date until you receive it. Although it is still in the period of Best If Used By, but some products' expired date is approaching. Not like the physical store, you can see the expired date clearly. If it is not good, you just don't take it.

*\* Third, delay delivery or lost package.*

If it is a big holiday or severe weather, your package usually is delayed. You can track your package with the order number. Once you couldn't track it, then your package may be lost. You need to contact customer service immediately.

*\* Fourth, online Shopping addiction*

Shopping online is exciting. When you browse various items with reasonable price and a big deal, you want to buy more. And you often receive enormous emails with "Reward", "Flash Sale", "Bestseller", "New Arrivals", "Final Hours" etc., you read these messages unconsciously and buy more subconsciously. If you haven't made your decision, you put the commodities in your cart first. Then you will receive email immediately: "You've got great taste. So why over think it?", "Hurry, your cart expires soon." It needs strong self-control, otherwise, online shopping likes drug, you may addict to it.

**What should we pay attention to when we shop online?**

*\* First, find the trusty official websites, such as: Amazon, Walmart, Macy's, and some official sites. Don't be greedy with the price! Be careful of being cheated.*

*\* Second, read the review of other customers' comments.*

They can help you find detailed information about the item you want to buy.

*\* Third, use the chat box or phone number (if you can find) to contact customer service.*

If your package is lost, you contact the customer service about your package and want to reship or refund. Remember to take a picture or screen shot of the record of your chat. It is the proof if they didn't process your reship or refund.

*\* Fourth, select the safe way to make payment.*

In order to protect your bank account, you'd better pay by PayPal, Apple Pay, Zelle, Venmo, etc. They can keep your credit card information safe, and give your bank account one more protection if you encounter fraud.

*\* Fifth, standard free delivery method is your priority.*

Last Mother's Day, I bought a necklace for my mom via ziacouture.com which is the website of ZIA Couture Jewelry. I paid \$10 of shipping for security. But no one called me when it was delivered. The mailman put it into my mailbox. If the package is big, they just left at front door. So, there is no difference no matter what kind of shipping method you choose.

This is my one-year experience of shopping online in America. There are pros and cons of this shopping method. But in my opinion, its pros are more than its cons. Using Internet as shopping medium brings us great convenience and is changing our lifestyle.

***Peace in the World***

**Olga Shmakova**

The sun is shining, the birds are singing, everybody is feeling light and happy. But, the quiet is no more because of the exploding bombs. It is beginning to feel scary, death is close. The children are crying, screaming, and some children are dead. The children died from little parts of bombs. Too many people died from war. I want peace on the whole planet, and happiness for everybody.

***President Biden***

**Fernanda Siguencia**

President Biden thinks that he is acting in favor of many undocumented immigrants, making laws that open the way for a work permit, future residency, and citizenship. This is good and favorable for many immigrant families who are undocumented, but we know that it will take time for the approval process to reach a mutual agreement. While that comes, we must not lose faith and hope in God that it will be for a better United States.

## **Fiction – Other Submissions**

### ***Helping Hamlet***

**Montserrat Limon**

Dear Abby,

I am writing filled with sorrow. I am facing one of the most difficult times in my life. My mom just married the man who killed my father and my soul is plethoric with pain and darkness. All these obscure feelings come to me as a waterfall causing turmoil in the calm water of my soul, washing out with violence all the good thoughts and positive forces within me. I am in the midst of a troublesome decision: end my misery by finishing the life of the cause of my suffering or comfort myself with the silence and peace of eternal rest. I find both options to be profoundly wrong, difficult and definitive, nevertheless, I am sure there are no more alternatives for me. Please help me to find an end to my torment.

Yours, Hamlet.

Dear Hamlet,

I understand that you are having a rough time. I am certain that one week in Encinitas will help you clarify your thoughts and improve your mood. I sincerely recommend taking morning walks, attending yoga classes, practicing meditation, and eating healthy. All of this will help you think more clearly. In the meantime, you should go out with some friends or family members and share your perspectives -no murders, please (wink, wink)-. You should also make an appointment with a shrink. Keep doing this until you are 85 and then, decide.

Sincerely, Abby.

***Blu***

**Kennedy Pettaway**

I have a friend named Blu who is obsessed with the color blue. She enjoys eating blueberries and Bluebell-brand ice cream from New Orleans. My friend never seems down and out. You would think she would be because her name is Blu. Whenever we go out, Blu tends to wear a lot of funky colors that are mixed with blues. I asked her one day what color dress she would wear to her wedding. She replied, "Nothing but blue." Who says brides have to wear white, especially when their name is Blu?

***The Story of the Star Fruit Tree***

**Hong Tran**

A long time ago, there was a rich peasant living in a village who had two sons named Hug and Dee. These sons lived together after their parents passed away. Before the father died, he had asked his older son, Hug, to give half of his inheritance to his younger son, Dee. When Hug got married, however, Hug and his wife did not keep his father's last wish. They decided to keep most of the inheritance and gave Dee and his wife only a small rice paddy in a barren farm and an old star-fruit tree. Nonetheless, Dee and his wife were pleased with what they had and continued to work hard. They always took a little time to take care of the old star fruit tree and trade the star fruits for food in the nearby market. They worked hard so they could earn enough to live.

The elder brother Hug became lazy after marriage. He left all the hard work to his younger brother Dee and his wife.

Luckily that year, the star-fruit tree had a lot of fruit. The younger brother and his wife were very happy, and they planned to sell this fruit to purchase rice. On a hard-working day in the garden with the star fruit tree, Dee said to his wife:

“My darling, take a bite. It’s delicious! It smells good. It really is my family's children, isn’t it? My darling, let me get you a drink from the well. Let’s get our work done faster before it is dark.”

The younger couple took good care of their garden, hoping for a bumper crop. The elder brother was afraid his younger brother would keep a greater share of the crop, so he told his wife to make the younger couple live apart.

The older brother was very greedy and claimed homes, fields, gardens and cattle left by his parents. He had left his younger brother only a tiny home and a small piece of land with the single star fruit tree.

But the younger one hardly complained as he was very kind. He took care of his star fruit tree, watered it every day and worked hard.

The star fruit tree produced fruit unusually well that year. All its branches were weighed down with ripe fruits. The younger couple were very happy. They hoped to trade the star fruit for rice.

One day, a big Raven landed in the tree and ate the fruit. The younger brother sent the bird away. Surprisingly, the Raven said: “I will pay you for the fruit with gold, be ready with a three-foot bag and follow me to get it”.

Hearing those words, the younger couple were very excited and decided to do as the Raven said. The wife sewed a bag of three feet. The star fruit tree had produced very well this year. This basket of star fruit could trade for a lot of rice. She told her husband: “Go away! Don’t eat our fruit. Let’s do as the Raven said”.

The next morning, the Raven came back, ate the star fruit and invited the husband to sit on his back with a bag. Dee climbed onto the Raven’s back, and the bird flew high into the air. The bird flew through high mountains and over vast seas and then landed on an island full of gems and jewels. The younger Dee was delighted as he had never seen so much gold. He filled the bag and climbed back onto the Raven’s back for his flight home.

From then on, the younger brother and his wife were rich. They used part of their money to help the poor people in the village. “Oh my god! What a lot of gold! We can live a new life,” said the younger brother.

The elder brother, Hug, was surprised by his younger brother’s Dee's sudden wealth, and went to check it out. After hearing the truth, he offered to trade all his fortune for only the

hut and a star fruit tree. The younger brother Dee agreed. The elder brother and his wife became very happy, turned all their property over to his younger brother Dee, and moved into the hut under the star fruit tree.

One day, the Raven came as usual. Hug the elder brother pretended to send him away. Again, the Raven gave the same words: "Star Fruit I eat, with gold I pay, be ready with a three-foot bag and follow me to get it."

The elder couple and his spouse discussed making the bag. Because of his greed, however, the elder brother Hug told his wife to make a twelve-foot bag instead of three-foot one. He said: "Make a twelve-foot bag for me. A big bag can hold a lot of gold. I want to make a bigger one. The three-foot one is too small."

The next day, the Raven came to take the elder brother to the place of gold. The bird also flew through high mountains and over vast seas and then landed on the island full of the gems and jewels. The elder brother was blinded by a mountain of gold. He quickly filled both the large bag and his pockets with all the precious jewels.

One the way back home, the Raven struggled to stay in the air with all the extra weight. He asked the elder brother to throw away some of the gold, but Hug did not listen.

The raven became angry. He tilted his tired wings and dropped the elder brother Hug and the bag off into the sea. It was all over for the greedy elder brother Hug. That is the end of the star fruit tree story. Through this story we have learned that the older brother died due to his greed, while the kind-hearted younger brother Dee lived a happy life with his family forever. The moral of the story is you should always be good, take care of others, and never be like Hug.

## ***Victorious***

### **Jonny Yoza**

Victorious is 11 years old. She is skinny, tall and has long black hair and freckles. Her mother died when she was 9 years old. Her father was sad sometimes because he missed his wife so much. Victorious wanted to buy a present for her dad's birthday, but she had no money to buy anything.

One day, when she was on vacation, she went to work with her father. Her dad does

maintenance at a gated complex. There she met a little chatterbox named Mike. Mike likes to play tennis so he offers to teach Victorious how to play. He told her there will be a tournament in two months. "There will be money prizes. First place wins \$100, second place wins \$50 and third place wins \$25." Mike said.

Victorious hoped to win the tournament and get the money to buy a gift for her father. They both trained hard for the tournament. Finally, the day arrived! Victorious took her dad to watch her play. Her father didn't know that she could play tennis, so he was surprised. She won the games easily until the last game when she had to play against Anne, the best player. Anne had won the last two years. Victorious' opponent had been training for three years, but she didn't know that Victorious would be a thorn in her side.

After an hour of play both girls were very tired. Anne did not understand what was happening. This game should have been easy for her. The game was tied 5 to 5 but Victorious wouldn't give up. She wanted to win first place. Finally, Anne won the game! Victorious couldn't believe that she had lost; she started to cry. Her father said "Victorious, why are you crying?" She explained to her dad that she wanted to win the tournament to buy a gift for his birthday. Her dad hugged her and said "In my eyes you are always a winner. You are the only gift I need."

## Poetry – Other Submissions

### *A Kid from Queens*

**Trevor Adderley**

I got so much in my thoughted space, just thought I'd share some memories.  
Page One is where we seem to begin- raised in the Bridge- never an easy job  
Even walking to school you risk gett'n jumped, stabbed and robbed

Grandma just *pray'n* that her grandbaby do right.  
When the street light hit  
in the crib is where she wanted me.  
Learned every flick that was out word for word  
If Hot 97 played it  
I heard it  
first.  
This ain't no dress rehearsal-this is *my* life!

The things I seen  
in the light of day  
would make you think twice:  
Gett'n split with a brick and stripped- naked to the core-made to walk on all four.  
Forced to walk thru the hood look'n weak  
To this day homies don't wanna hear  
him speak  
can't stand to look at the fool he's become.

My grandma's since passed away-  
and I hope she's watch'n me  
I'll see you  
on Page Two  
stay tuned- there's *way* more to me.

***Lost and Confused***  
**Georgina Ramirez Alzaga**

My heart is confused and divided  
half is happy and half is sad  
because of my departure.

The life is complicated  
with a lot of challenges  
goals and changes  
but I know that better  
things are coming  
for me and my family.

I'm lost between two countries  
In the first one, I was born  
In the second one, I found amazing people  
It's... where we feel safe  
    ... where we have better opportunities  
    ... where we can enjoy a better quality of life.

I've been lost and confused for a while  
I've friends but sometimes  
I feel strange, I can't fit in  
My City looks different every year  
It's...sometimes crowded  
    ...with more poor people  
    ...with more problems.

I'm lost and confused  
I need to figure out

where is the best place to be  
where is the place...where we feel safe  
...where we can stay together  
...where we can follow our dreams and desires.

***My Beloved Mother***  
**Georgina Ramirez Alzaga**

My beloved Mother,  
I'm so proud of being your daughter  
Today, I could see you  
Talk to you, hug you  
Laugh and sleep with you  
Like when I was younger  
This gives me such happiness.

Every story that you share  
With me and my kids  
Has your own style  
When you describe and remember events  
People and places  
You carry me back to the time.

Some experiences are good  
Others are sad or nostalgic  
But it is always delightful listening to you  
'cause you are a cumulus of knowledge.

Thank you mother  
For showing me the correct way

To be a good human being  
In all stages:  
As a woman, mother and professional  
To be brave at all times  
Not to cry unless it is necessary  
To be patient all the time  
And Grateful  
No matter how the situation is.

*Silence*

**Georgina Ramirez Alzaga**

When your silence  
Says more than your words  
And your words  
Sounds like an excuse.

When your silence  
Gives me reasons  
To run away and never  
Come back.

When your silence  
Shows me how easily  
You can forget and lay waste to  
Our lives, our memories.

When your silence  
Kills me  
I can see how fragile  
Everything around me is.

***That You Don't Lack the Love***

**Georgina Ramirez Alzaga**

Be careful in your life that you don't lack love.

That you don't wait for something that is not coming  
That you are brave enough to break the chains  
That bind you and  
Don't let you fly.

Be careful in your life that you don't lack love.

That you don't stop hugging  
That you feel this vibe that is special  
And touches your soul.

Be careful in your life that you don't lack love.

That you don't stop kissing  
And feel the contact and closeness  
Between us.

Be careful in your life that you don't lack love.

That you miss what gives you happiness  
Even though it comes sometimes with adversity  
Even when those adversities are negative.

Be careful in your life that you don't lack love.

To be yourself  
To feel, cry and yell  
To cry and think  
To share your crazy things  
To dream and fly  
To escape from your reality for just a while.

Be careful in your life that you don't lack love.

To fight for your desires

To fight for your dreams.

Be careful in your life that you don't lack love.

'Cause with your love

You can achieve unimaginable things

You can touch hearts

And transform lives.

### ***A Season's Cycle***

**Priscilla DeVine**

A season brings a new bud. This season is full of warmth and growth.

A season comes to an end, it brings cold wind, the sun takes a step back.

A season fades the green to brown, it's time for the tree to watch the cold wind push the once buds to the ground.

A season changes the short life into a dance, as the leaves dance on the wind, they spin and glide, the branches of the tree sway, as if saying good bye.

### ***Eye Pictures***

**Priscilla DeVine**

My eyes have taken many pictures, of you. These pictures reflect your growing and learning. The pictures are not separated into happiness or sadness, they are in order of time. If I could separate the two my pictures would all be of you. For you are my greatest happiness and sadness. My happiness is so powerful that it actually turns to sadness, because the pictures show how fast you grow, and someday I will have to let you go. As I try to rob time by pressing rewind. I laugh and smile for awhile, then time comes back, and I know I will have to let you go. When you go, my happiness will also, But, remind me from time to time to just press rewind, then, there you will be, with me!

***Love Our Home***

**Carol Fang**

Open my eyes, sunlight fills the room.  
March it is, when will my rose bloom?  
Again over there, big black trash bag with a broom.  
“Oh no, stop to avoid problems’ loom!”

Bag’s easy to buy, people use them often.  
Money’s yours though, think about the carbon.  
If small one’s enough, save leftovers to be a ribbon.  
Stop using large one, before saying pardon.

Birds falling from the sky, for losing home to move far.  
Overused poly bags, feel helpless even biochar.  
Polluted water ruins the sea, the worst kind of scar.  
Ice melting in the South Pole, tears of our blue star.  
Think to take action when reveling in a bar.  
If walking’s okay, keep away from a car.

At least now, earth’s our only home.  
In case it’s gone, is there a ready dome?  
For seven billion humans, no way to find one by Chrome.  
Change our behavior, build earth our Rome.

Love flowers bloom, love birds fly.  
Earth’s our common home, you know why.  
Care for our surroundings, let no lives cry.  
Start from me and now, don’t wait ‘til July.

***My Butterfly***  
**Priscilla DeVine**

You start out shy and gentle as if cocooned  
I watch you bloom  
As you I start to feel the gloom  
There is no need for me to lead, you have found your way  
I must watch as you grow your wings  
As I sit and think of all the things you've done to make me laugh  
The stages of your life bring me here  
This stage is where I know the need for Mommy now turns to Mom  
Just remember when your wings are grown, and the wind is too strong to hold on,  
you can always come home.

***My Life***  
**Priscilla DeVine**

What have I started? Three separate lives not including my own.  
Can I finish what I started?  
This is hard for three individuals to count on me.  
If I fail, what will be of my three? I fight with all my might, to stay on top.  
I must not stop, for if I stop my three may not make it to the top.  
My life has reached a peak, I must now find a way to push the three, to seek and find, their place,  
But, not look behind.  
Forward is the way I hope to see them stay, for behind they will not find, the place which is  
Divine.

***Without Any Remorse (WAR)***

**Priscilla DeVine**

Some can see, yet some remain blind.  
The seeing are free, free to see the end.  
We may lead and guide with no hope of the blind ever finding the end.  
We may lead and guide with no hope of the blind ever finding sight.  
Can we make the blind see?

***I Love 2020***

**Pallavi Jain**

I LOVE 2020 because This year taught me a lesson about life. I am thankful for 2020 because that time we realized life is more important than anything.  
We don't need to be rich and famous, we just have to be happy and healthy.  
I knew 2020 was difficult for many people but it made us a fighter against the problem and life has the power of self healing also.  
Now 2020 is gone but it taught us the beauty of life.  
Now we understand the actual heroes in our society.  
Now we understand the importance of home and family..  
Now we understand we all can be happy with less things.  
We learnt to live in the present first and keep the future at 2nd. Time is always changing, never stay in one position .  
Like that every problem is gone, never stay in the same position.  
TWO SIDE OF THE COINS.  
2020 teached me balance, and to treat nature also equally. Till now we are treating humans as superior to every other species but that's not true.  
2020 showed two sides of coin and both are equal. Now we learnt about the balance of life and nature.  
We have to keep balance between health and wealth Whoever kept the balance of saving and expenditure Those people understand the actual meaning of 2020.

## ***Fear***

**Slily Joseph**

We need to redirect our focus to eliminate some distractions and confusions in our minds.

As a lot of people can see in today's society, social media almost controls many people's minds.

People would email you, text you, give you a phone call when they can rather than visiting you.

It's even worse now with a disease that is killing people all around the world, that . . . even gives them a possible excuse to avoid either talking to people face to face or meeting at a place.

I know that I'm scared of lots of things such as flying, heights, snakes, police, making some decisions sometimes, failing, et cetera . . . I realize, perhaps, they're right to be afraid of people today, because I've never been afraid like I am today.

We need that one-on-one real life interaction that we used to have in the past.

It seems like waking up from a deep nightmare and falling right back asleep.

What I mean is that, it's like nothing is real in today's world.

Things that never happened in the past, is what we're living today.

I've heard even when there used to be war, churches never closed.

Today Covid-19 broke that barrier and closed all church doors.

So many things change . . .

I've also learned that the day of inauguration of a new president in the United States, the former president is always there to congratulate, encourage and show their support to the new president. However, last time I checked it was a totally different story this year.

The whole world is living in fear.

The list is so long, but I'll state a few things that make people in extreme fear . . .

Fear of being unemployed, getting sick, going to war, being detained or getting arrested for no reason, losing their property, not having health insurance and also being afraid for their future.

A country that used to be proud to say that, "we welcome people from all over the world, your race, religion, background don't matter..." but now you're walking in the streets and afraid to encounter a xenophobe. It's sad! And I wonder if we can still use the idiom that says, "once in a blue moon" because it's like everything is common now.

Folks, I know we talk a lot . . . it's time to put what we say into action.

***Choices***

**Megan Kazier**

I choose every day to see the faint light,  
In a place and time so grim, I hold hope.  
I will choose peace over a winless fight.  
I pray we don't fall down this unsafe slope.  
I practice relentless optimism,  
And beseech the biased hatred expire. Paint each day with colors from my prism, Maybe then  
our broke world can aspire. We don't need perfect, nor need to keep score, We need equality,  
forevermore.  
I choose to have faith, in spite of the hate.  
I choose to be kind, despite the wreckage.  
If we do not change, I fear for our fate. Will you choose love and carry the message?

***Maine***

**Megan Kazier**

My home lies deep in the hidden forest  
With many trees so tall and evergreen  
Hundred acres of freedom and promise  
Sadly, it would not last past year thirteen  
Mud came every year in April and May  
Cold came in winter by Mr. Jack Frost  
This land will always be my home, I say  
Because it's the place I never feel lost  
Summers hold mosquito bites and campfires  
Days spent on adventures while exploring  
Smores melting and swings made out of tires  
I spent my nights dreaming and transforming  
My home lies deep in the hidden forest  
With many trees so tall and evergreen

***Still Here***

**Megan Kazier**

I have to tell you I am so glad you're still here.  
With your feet on the ground, despite that hard year  
You sure would look beautiful wearing a halo, With your head up in a cloud. But I would miss  
Your warmth and gentle glow. They say only the good die young  
Guess you were destined to be bad  
But if being imperfect keeps you with me  
Let's run far away and always be free  
I don't want to miss you; I don't want to lay flowers at your grave  
I want to love you forever, it's true,  
And you're stronger than you know, please do not cave.  
I have to tell you, I'm so glad you're still here  
Staring back at me in the mirror.

***Where Did You Go***

**Megan Kazier**

Where did you go my dear friend? I'm sorry to have caused offend  
I didn't mean to pick that foolish fight I would give anything to redo that night  
Where are you my sweet sister?  
I'm sorry about your angry mister  
I did not mean to cause you pain  
I never meant to leave you out in the rain  
Where did you go my dear friend?  
I am sorry I went off the deep end  
I didn't mean to end up a fancy fool I never knew family could be so cruel  
Where are you my sweet sister?  
I'm sorry I outshined you with my glitter I didn't mean to break everyone's heart I never meant  
to tear our family apart

***Sunday By The Bay***

**Megan Kazier**

White lace brushed across my face  
Words I wish left unsaid  
Too many not so happy tears shed  
Buttons and flowers  
Egos as tall as the highest towers  
Curses made and promises broken  
Love that was left unspoken  
Bands of rose gold  
Little hands I no longer get to hold  
Smiles stolen that should have been mine  
Ripped away with the words "that's fine"  
Days passed and memory starts to blur  
But knowing what I do I wouldn't go back to the way things were You ask for money, for help,  
for everything from me  
But when I ask for you just to see  
You let me down  
And my anger was sound  
One day was all I wanted  
But now I am forever haunted  
Tainted and wasted  
Manipulated and isolated  
Space requested  
And feelings left devastated  
Maybe one day we can be friends again  
Since me being in your family is just a ball and chain  
You can try and delete me from your life  
But I will always remember the big brother that gave me a pocket knife You can hold people  
hostage, that's out of my control  
But trust me when I say it's going to do more damage to her soul

I am still looking for the silver lining  
I pray for the sun to start shining  
I will forgive but I will not forget  
And you will never scare me with your threat  
Sunday by the bay  
I just wish you would have wanted to stay

### ***The Strength***

**Nancy Llanos**

One day the world stopped and chaos was generated.  
Maybe it was change, opportunity, or possibly punishment.  
Words were silent and the actions raised their voices.  
Looks became the language of love as we were unable to hug.

A disease woke up and our attachment to life changed instantly.  
Staying home was an obligation.  
Nature freed herself from her greatest destroyer.  
She was finally able to take a little breath.  
The time that was fleeting now became eternal.  
The family absorbed our greatest energy.  
The silence was enough to discover how forgotten God was.

A new beginning is coming where you and I are equal and where injustice, corruption, and economic inequality evident at all levels that corrode society will end. No longer will we be a society where millions of people around the world suffer the impotence of not being able to do anything or find the solution and in which perhaps death would be the best ally. It is precisely at that moment where love takes strength and helps us to be brave and more human, to get up every day with the firm conviction of giving the best of ourselves to others, regardless of whether there is a family bond; even exposing our security and our life because is it worth living if we do not have love to offer? The facts speak for you and me. After all, we have to act more and speak less, because only you, only I can bring about change. It is in our hands to make that difference!

***The Girl with the Broken Frame***

**Angelica Medina**

She was young when they took the photo  
Of a happy family  
But no one knew what was really going on  
Between them

They looked happy and cheerful  
Friends and neighbors envied  
Their home  
Their family  
Their happiness  
Their success  
They were the perfect picture

But when the door was closed  
And eyes where no longer upon them  
The frame starts to break  
And the glass starts to shatter  
The little girl tries to pick up the glass  
And repair the picture

But when the glass hurt her hand  
She released that her family  
That she knew and loved were no longer there  
And the happy ending to her story was way too far to reach

She started to ask herself when will the people realize  
That they're not perfect and that her family is broken  
The picture that they all admired and wanted to be  
Needed repair beyond anyone can see  
But for now she continued to be the girl with a shattered family  
The girl with a broken frame

*I Will Wait*  
**Angelica Medina**

We found him when he was young  
We found her when she broken  
We found them when they were alone

Tried to repair the pieces  
Of a puzzle that was left unsolved  
Saw all the broken photos  
In a burn down home  
Tried to put them together  
But they said to leave it alone  
Tried to give them a smile  
Or a laugh that would do

But they close the door with a lock  
And shut themself in their room  
Tried to give them what they lost  
But what I gave wasn't enough  
What they needed  
It was gone  
What they wanted  
It disappeared

But I will wait  
Until the day I can get through  
Until the day they could find trust  
Until the day they could love again  
Until the day they would accept me  
As part of a family  
Until then  
I will wait patiently with my arms open

***Should I***

**Angelica Medina**

Sitting alone in my bedroom  
Thinking of all the possibilities  
Of I what I can do  
Should I close my eyes  
And never wake up  
Letting the coldness  
Consume me  
Or should I lower the walls  
Surrounding me  
Letting people get through me  
Should I trust them  
Will they deceived me  
Will they leave me  
What can I do  
When my whole world broke in two  
I guess I'll just lock myself in my room  
Until God could heal my wounds

***Time***

**Angelica Medina**

Time could be your best friend  
But it could also be your enemy  
It could go by fast for you  
That way you can get out of something that you really don't want to do  
But be careful  
Because it could go so fast  
That you would miss out  
On the people and things that surrounds you  
Then you start to wish

That you could turn back time  
To be able to fix  
To be able to make it right  
And appreciate what you had  
But like the saying goes  
You cannot turn back the clock

***I Know Who I Am***

**Angelica Medina**

I love hearing  
your voice.  
I love talking to  
you. When I feel  
alone as if no one  
is by my side- as if everyone has turned against me- to the  
point of letting myself sink in the ocean- Full of lies, rumors,  
hate , self doubt, pain. You lift me up and carry me back to  
safety. Letting me  
know that no matter  
what happens  
you will never  
leave. Even when  
everyone does  
you still remain.  
Because of you  
I came to realize  
I'm worth more  
than what other  
people perceive  
me to be.  
I know who I am.  
Do they ?

***The Balloon***

**Olga Mikhailovskaja**

Childhood is like a floating balloon –  
Of different colors, ethereal, light!  
When you possessed it, you were over the Moon!  
No matter if it was yellow, pink or white.

Do you remember the multi-colored inflated orb?  
It was like a pre – Columbian globe.  
It seemed like the whole immense world  
In your diminutive hands you could hold!

Do you remember? There was gray rain.  
We went somewhere on a dark train.  
You tightly held your happiness by the string,  
Even when you fell asleep...

But... We always stumble over BUT or IF...  
Accidentally you lost your grip...  
Your eyes followed your treasure flying into the sky,  
You stood there numb, couldn't even cry...

It turned into a dot, so far and black.  
You understood – it wouldn't come back.  
Tiny balloon, drifting off to the sky.  
It was your childhood saying GOODBYE.

***A Woman's Thoughts***  
**Olga Mikhailovskaja**

A woman would like to know...

Why is my hair covered in snow?

Why is the light of that star crashed?

Why is my heart smashed?

Why did his wind from warm to cold blow?

Why do feelings die and flash?

What can help them to grow?

How to remember to throw out the trash?

Who was more talented – Liszt or Chopin?

How to have time to prepare lunch?

Was it a painting by Gauguin?

Where can I buy a parsley bunch?

A woman has hundreds of synchronous thoughts!

They are like fountain sprays!

She is confused... She doubts... She prays...

She is capricious, even jealous sometimes...

And do you want to unravel

What in her mind's mess?

Don't even try to guess!

***Life's Mystery***  
**Olga Mikhailovskaja**

Sometimes life goes abruptly up.  
Sometimes it goes abruptly down.  
Someone is aiming to hold sway,  
Someone is simple and unknown.

There are no uninteresting people in the world!  
Everyone gains special light from God.  
Everyone has feelings, dreams, a heart,  
And everyone plays some unique part.

So many people live around us!  
We are often indifferent to them.  
We tend to think we know all  
About parents, friends, a neighbor's gal.

But everyone is a mystery!  
The human life is a star history!  
A person dies... He takes with him to the grave  
The first bird song, first kiss, and first sea wave...  
Not just a person dies!  
The whole world's gone with him!  
We cannot change

this awful algorithm...

***Blue***

**Olga Mikhailovskaja**

I want to buy a light blue dress,  
Blue like the summer sky.  
It is the color of my happiness,  
Blue like your favorite tie.

Blue can invite me into your heart to fly.  
Blue doesn't bear any hideous lies.  
Blue can be fragile like a butterfly,  
But can sting like Arctic ice.

In my memories you are nameless,  
But you have a color. It's blue.  
I keep in a jeweled chest your curly tress.  
The chest is also blue.

Like you.

***Eternal Spring***

**Olga Mikhailovskaja**

Rustling and crunching under your feet.  
Dead dry leaves swirl and litter the autumn street.  
You hear their sizzle: "Time flies, all is in vain..."  
And dark thoughts drill your brain:  
In vain! In vain!! In vain!!!

They sting you like a swarm of bees.  
They prick you like thousands of needles.

Stop complying with the leaves' lies!  
Open shutters of bottomless eyes,

Put Cerberus at the souls' gate,  
Part with your sadness and welcome a joyous date.  
What does the refreshing air bring?  
Spring!

New Spring!!

Eternal Spring!!!

***A Love Endless***

**Erika Montoya**

Years ago, I heard about a love endless Were the times,  
When love was sprouting  
everywhere  
Songs was inviting to fall in love unbelievable love stories were written  
The war had over  
Giving passed to unexpected coming backs.

She was an adorable woman  
Worthy daughter of his dedicated professor He was a handsome man and brilliant student, She  
was sweet, lovely, kindhearted  
He was Funny, friendly, and eloquent.

The inevitable happened  
They fell in love  
She loved his freshness,  
his joyfulness, his novelty ideas  
He loved her sweetness, her innocence  
She was so different from the women she had known before.

Years passed it,  
Kids, travels, houses, Too much happiness, Just can rouse envy.

From a dark corner  
A broken heart was looking at them,  
It was looking them with fascination,  
Almost without notice  
Her admiration was becoming envy  
She wanted him to herself,  
She wanted those staring, those attentions She wanted to become his cause of adoration.

Years passed it  
Envy won  
Another woman took his hands  
Finally, she got the house, other children. Travel and money  
But she never got his attention, his staring. Life was full of noise  
Parties, friends, meetings,  
Music, business.  
Time passed almost without him noticing.

Years passed it,  
He run away to that life  
He was trying to find  
something lost time ago,  
but the death found him  
In a lonely highway  
One woman  
Supported by the law  
got his death body,  
His grave, his business  
The other supported by her prays, got his soul.

Years passed it,  
Today, while a woman lies in a bed, Waiting for inexorable death,  
Another heartbroken woman  
Convinced that she will never get his soul Signing a paper to return his grave  
So, when the time comes  
they will rest together forever.

***Our Land Is Sad***  
**Erika Montoya**

Our land is sad  
Most people have run away Only seniors have stayed  
To die under the burning sun.  
Loved things are sad  
Loved things were too weight To bring with us  
Loved things had been forgotten And dust have covered them.  
Pets are sad  
They were abandoned  
In a hurry to scape  
Owners are no hungry anymore  
but pets have continued hungry until last breath.  
Loved Land nobody has stayed to fight for you  
But your sadness is our punishment and your revenge, While you are sad,  
We that born inside your borders never could be happy.

***I Think Always***

**Puja Paliwal**

I think always,  
No verity in our daily days,  
All people fixed in database,  
Kids not playing outside,  
Only playing video games inside,  
No one create any creativity  
We all become online puppets  
Technology grasps our freedom  
With no available internet  
We get upset in our childhood  
We have so many memories good.

But in present  
Life so different  
TV, computers, laptops and phones  
Create for us big artificial zone  
Kids, teens, adults, seniors  
All spend life around their gadgets.  
We connect with others online  
But don't know what's going on in our own family  
That's the dark side of the digital world.

We have bright side also in this world  
They help us improve ourselves  
Whole world develops so fast with this help  
We reached the moon, Mars or other planets  
We gets new technologies,  
Knowledge and advance gadgets

In this pandemic they help us so much  
We take classes at home in one touch  
It's fact, you use anything unlimited  
They harm you, in life you something deleted.

We need balance in digital and real world  
So we get benefits of both worlds.

***Fireworks***

**Janet Ren**

A lightning cut through the night,  
Shining in the darkness.  
The fireworks spread its colors like a rainbow,  
Arching above in the sky  
Like blossoms trembling in the wind.  
At the crack of a new dawn,  
As the first light of a new day  
Spreading its faint glimmer  
entering our hearts gently.  
They merged their beauty into hope,  
For the sake of our life.

***I Am From***

**Susana Rodriguez-Acosta**

I am from mornings smelling like roses in spring.  
I am from the loud crowing of a rooster in the mornings, the silent trees in the evenings, and the  
illuminated, calm skies at night.

I am from the nice, warm breeze in the summer and in the winter.

I am from a place where autumn does not always mean leaves falling or spring means flowers growing.

I am from a place where death does not mean the end, and birth does not mean the beginning.

I am from a place where Santa Claus does not come in December, but the three kings come in January.

I am from a place where souls can be full of dreams and a list of goals can be as long as a river, but reality can be as cruel as the desert.

I am from beliefs and values that are the most memorable and respectful ways to engage with others.

I am from greetings, solidarity, and union floating in the air.

I am from a place where I go back every time I need to remember who I am and where I go.

### ***The Accursed One***

**Dylan Ryerson**

Like one that shines more brightly than the rest,

Of star than shine within the galaxy;

It's his that over time shall prove the best,

Of countless souls each fighting to be free.

By name alone selected to be held,

By chains ever immortal like the gods;

But when the peak of minds and bodies meld,

The soul within shall conquer any odds.

And a soul ablaze with flame unmatched,

Went on to conquer any willing foes;

An egg from which a grand evil has hatched,

Surpassing even the gods with threats to pose.

Indomitable spirit as his wings,

He freely soars, the deadliest of kings.

**2020**

**Vanessia Sanders**

Darkness and flashes from the past.  
Wondering what's around the bend?  
Dare I ask, imagine what is to come?  
Gray places that are engulfing us with pictures of pain, grief and heartache.  
Trying to cope with the torment.  
Such despair replaying troubling visions that are always there.  
Brutal screams that come from within.  
We all are going through this in some form or other.  
More intense each time.  
It is continuing to happen to all of us each and every day.  
One year down, another to embrace.  
Nightmares, cries, hollas, wondering why.  
I need to understand.  
I pray someday soon all will be well.  
Or is this truly hell?

***Cry of Freedom***

**Yeissa Torriente**

Our father who art in Heaven. Hear the cry of freedom. May his kingdom come to Cuba and grant those who have died both on land and at sea rest and peace. Give today the daily bread to the Cuban whose belly is empty; forgive the dictators and we will help them find their way out of Cuba. Do not leave us helpless and show us the way of truth. For ever and ever I will shout, "GOD BLESS CUBA!"

***Feeling Like the First Star***

**Harry Usui**

I'd like to burn my old sweaters that insects have eaten.

I'd like to burn my favorite books.

I'd like to burn my cellphone.

I'd like to burn my school bag.

I'd like to leave everything behind.

House, friends, teachers, mother, father, brother

But I will feel very lonely

Because I cannot burn my heart and body.

Although I will feel afraid and may lose my way,

I want to decide for myself

To find out what the most important thing is

To find out who the most important person is

Feeling like the first star that twinkles in the evening.

I burned my old sweater yesterday and it brought back many memories.

I felt sad and lonely.

But I also felt strong and determined.

Feeling like the first star that twinkles in the evening.

***The Important Things Are All Free***

**Harry Usui**

The important things are all free

The light of the sun

The green of the field and the mountains

The rain and the water of the river

The greetings of the morning and the evening

The prayers for God

And the love of my mother.

**Photos – Other Submissions**



*Wonderful Sunset*

**Georgina Ramirez Alzaga**

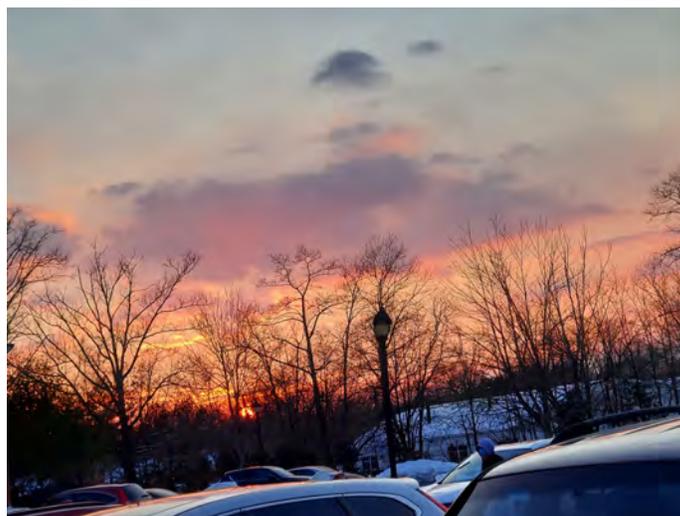


*Macchu Pichu*

**Margarita Guadalupe Headman**



*Mountain Shot*  
**Araceli Mateo**



*Untitled*  
**Enmy Ochoa**



*Estrella*

**Consuelo Ospina**



*Green Plant Shot*

**Laura Petit-Frère**



***Honduran Coffee Beans***

**Edina Pineda**