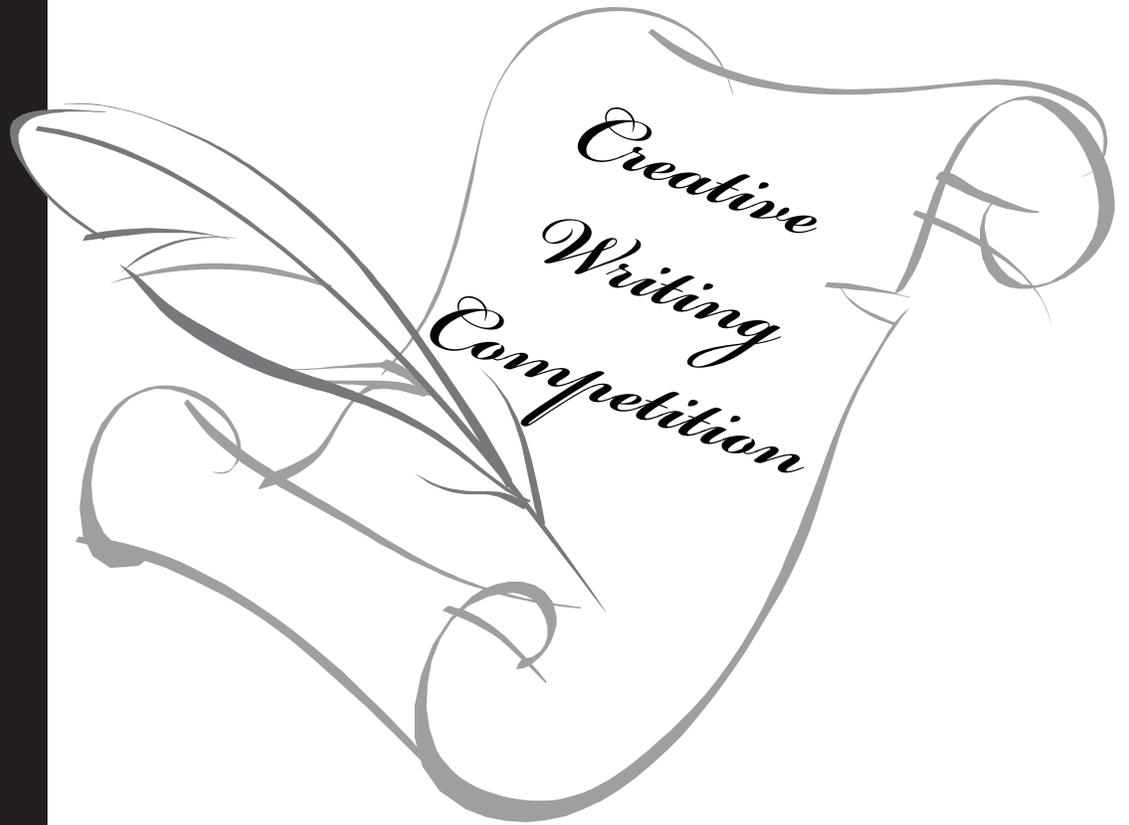


**The Ohio State University at Lima**



*for Allen County  
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Mariah Fleming  
Bluffton High School  
First Place

## A Thunderstorm's Valley

They stand on the porch  
And watch the storm appear,  
The trees begin to whisper  
As the wind blows cold.

The day becomes dark  
But the town flashes with light  
For a split second,  
The lightning comes closer.

The thunder blows its horn,  
In the distance it creeps with the light,  
Making rhythm and music.

The fragrance of rain  
Starts to fill the air,  
The rain comes down like pellets,  
Hitting the flowers with its splashes.

The storm's path  
Becomes a mess,  
The storm begins to vibrate  
Throughout the land.

They all go inside  
And watch through the window,  
While Mother Nature  
And earth are in a messy fight.

The water runs down the roof,  
Falls silent in the air,  
Hits the puddles,  
Drops splash everywhere.

The muddy river  
Starts to rise, then pours the water  
Into the forest,  
And onto the green tier.

The storm is violent  
But moisture's breath calms it,  
Life everywhere  
After a spring thunderstorm.

Later they stand on the porch  
And watch the storm fade,  
The mind becomes still,  
The moon comes into sight,  
The earth is swollen, but satisfied.

Alex Anderson  
Bluffton High School  
Second Place

## Different

The hatred that is surrounding me  
In this world of woe  
Is rhythmic,  
Ongoing,  
Seeming to have a steady pace.  
Every day a new person reveals hatred  
For nothing more than appearance.  
Comparing,  
Choosing friends to be choosing hair dye,  
Is not right  
But not unbelievable  
For this comparison  
Is still made across the globe.  
Why does the deep  
Coffee-colored skin  
Stop one from love,  
Friendship,  
Or vice versa?  
Skin too pale to be loved  
By the dark, too dark by the light.  
Does night not entwine with day?  
Does love not follow male and its opposite  
Despite color skin,  
Shape of eyes,  
Size of body?  
Love is blind, they say,  
But how can this be  
When we stop ourselves,  
Put up a wall in our minds,  
From becoming close  
With difference in appearance?  
Opposites attract  
Only if we allow our minds to open  
To the different.  
If one is shallow enough to discriminate,  
One could pass up a love  
True enough to deflate all the hatred  
There ever was, is, and will be.  
Love should be blind,  
But how possible is this  
Without an open mind?  
It is not,  
For the blind  
See with the mind.



Danielle Fraser  
Lima Senior High School  
Third Place

## The Wolf's Cry

Somewhere in the night a wolf cries.  
He cries for his world, lost in the past filled with blood and sorrow.  
He mourns for the ancient wilds that were once the West.  
What Happened?  
He asks.  
Why did this happen?  
Why forget the beauty of this land?  
Why forget the song of the wind?  
The Wind that once carried the beat of a million drums.  
Drums of celebration, mourning, and war.  
Drums that are now lost to most.  
But Listen. Not with your ears. But with your heart.  
Only then will you hear them, the drum to whose beat a way of life was lived.  
Wild and Free  
Like the Wolf.  
Like the Eagle.  
Soaring high above Mother Earth is Grandfather Eagle.  
Like the wolf he wonders how the people, free and wild as the wind, could be chained.  
Chained by the men of the land over the sea.  
Where are the warriors, proud and strong, that rode to war?  
The men seeking guidance upon the mountains high.  
Warriors do not dance the Sundance of old any longer.  
Why?  
Why could they not stay as they were?  
Where did they go?  
Grandfather Eagle calls and only echoes answer.  
As many before he leaves his land. The land of his birth.  
The land of the Hills.  
The land of the Mountains.  
The Land of the Wolf  
The land that was lost.  
Lost forever to men who looked in scorn of freedom.  
Lost to men from beyond the sea.  
Lost but to memories.  
Memories of those who still hear the song.  
The song of the wind  
Only they hear the Wolf's cry.  
Only they really know.



Andrea Lee  
Bath High School  
Fourth Place

## My Perfect Winter Dream

Looking out of my frosted window  
I see a beautiful blanket of snow  
That had fallen during the night  
Without a footprint in sight

The sun shines through the cold air  
Creating millions of diamonds everywhere  
The glitter of the snow is very bright  
Making everything look so white

Through the wind the little ice crystal swayed  
Each snowflake is individually made  
They look like shooting stars  
Coming all the way from Mars

From the rooftops, icicles hanging down  
One was so big it touched the ground  
When the sunlight hits, it glistens and gleams  
Like a mighty sword from my dreams

Falling down from the sky like it's a race  
All the snowflakes lay in place  
It looks like it is all been placed  
It's my perfect little winter wonderland.



Lindsay Rae Jones  
Elida High School  
Fifth Place

## Fall

The reds, purples, browns, and greens  
How the wind blows and the spit of snow leans  
The chill in the air, the whispering among the trees  
The whistling in the wind, the rustling of the leaves  
It pulls on my eyes, a picture perfect scene  
I want to inhale the air; to taste the bitterness I see  
A beautiful melancholy, and a subtle, ignorant lie  
With a yearning deep inside myself to open up and cry  
The simplicity and complexity; a natural mesh of Heaven and Earth  
But they tend to never notice, to enjoy all of what it's worth  
It seems to make me happy; the reds, purples, browns, and greens  
And I feel it deep inside me, the beauty among the trees.



Keith Music  
Spencerville High School  
First Place

## The Heroes of Solus

Tymerius stood reading the scroll. It was an old weathered piece of parchment that might have been no more significant than a list of errands had it not been written in the cryptic language of the Colossus. The old mage ran a weathered hand down the strange letters that seemed to glow with an iridescent blue light, and felt at that point that he had obtained power of an unfathomable level. He had studied the Runestones scattered across the planet of Solus for years, and now he had uncovered their mystery. Even now, as he stood in front of the first of these ancient ruins, he could still not believe that he had found the secret to the Runestones, and the Colossi.

He was staring at a Colossus. Origin of what was prophesied as the Great Annihilation. The destroyers of man.

And no one would stop him from awakening them. How could they? No one knew what they were. The ruins had been speculated on for years, and one man, one very evil man, had unraveled their mystery. His story in his travels had been the same. He was a traveling cryptologist, writing a book on the mystery of the Runestones. No one dared question him—no one had reason to.

Tymerius raised his hand to his brow and wiped the sweat away. The scroll had taken him to the very center of the Terrorland, the great desert that occupied most of the land on the continent of Camora. This day was particularly warm, and the mage had not prepared for it.

Slaves scrambled about, making preparations for the awakening of this great beast. A dwarf stood to the side of Tymerius, and stared hard at the old mage. Hate flared in his eyes. Hate, not only for what Tymerius was doing, but for what he was.

Spellcasting is seen as weak and evil in the eyes of a dwarf. The philosophy of the dwarf was, “He who does with magic, is fearful. He who does with his hands, is a whole being.” Any dwarf caught using magic was to be caught dead. So spellcasting was left to the humans and elves. What use did a dwarf have for spells anyway? The hardiest of the three races, the dwarves had no need to change the world around them with trickery of the mind, and besides, dwarves felt much more fulfilled at the end of a hard day’s work, rather than effortlessly playing with the minds of those around him.

Finally, the mage approached the Runestone. The time had come.

Tymerius was a very slight old man, who spoke with a deep, haggard voice. Though in appearance he was not in the least threatening, he could send chills down the spine of the most fearless of elves, dwarves, and humans.

He cast a last look at the scroll to properly memorize the runes that would bring the

Colossus to life.

Tymerius drew the runes upon the rock, “It comes by the names Fate, Inevitability, Destiny, Doom. It lays upon these people a path of Death, Annihilation, Murder, Neutralization. It kills. It protects. It RISES.”

The sky gave up its blue color in favor of crimson. Lightning touched down all around Tymerius, the dwarf, and the rest of the slaves and soldiers that had accompanied the mage. Lightning struck dangerously close to the dwarf, who was knocked back several feet, and did not stand again.

And it rose.

Tremors ran through the ground. Tremors so violent it was thought at that point by many slaves and soldiers that Tymerius had just brought about the Great Annihilation with the awakening of one single Colossus. The Runestones shook, and began to move. Four times the height of the tallest man present at that point, the Colossus was massive. Two great horns protruded from its head. The eye was a giant diamond, and though every person present at that point was the type who would have cut the diamond from this beast’s head at any other date, did not, for the fear the Colossus presented. Six arms, three on each side, and each made of solid gold, flew wildly, threatening to hammer slave and soldier alike into the sand. From the waist down, the great beast was made of the purest black onyx.

The Colossus was a living treasure.

Every slave and soldier, excluding Tymerius and the incapable dwarf, knelt and bowed his or her head. Fear hung over every head like a vulture over a dying man. Then it spoke.

“The Colossus of Fate has been summoned, and the call has been answered. Who dares disturb the Colossus?”

Tymerius, a pompous air still about him, even now in the presence of such a forbidding creature, spoke clearly, loudly, so that everyone present could hear him.

“I have summoned you, Fate. The time has come for the prophecy to be fulfilled. The time for the Great Annihilation has come. And, I believe, you are to offer me something?”

The diamond eye of Fate flared a violent red. The mage had angered the Colossus.

“What insolence is this? I am the unmatched force of fear and power in this world and at my awakening I am met with insolence from an old man? And a HUMAN no less? I was under the impression that your kind did not live long enough to obtain any real level of power!”

Tymerius only smiled and lifted his other hand. All the while, the hand had been tucked securely inside his robes. Now unveiled, the Colossus, and everyone present, could see what the mage had been hiding this entire time. A gauntlet.

Odd looks shifted among the spectators to this odd show. Why hide something so mundane? The Colossus looked particularly confused, then amused.

“What trickery is this old man? Do you plan to fool me with a glove? An elderly man, trying to fool me with a glove?” A laugh rippled through the desert.

Tymerius maintained the smile, a smile that made several of those watching the goings on truly sick to their stomachs. The mage approached a young, strong looking elven male. With his naked hand, he took the elf by the hair and yanked upward. The elf winced in pain as he was brought straight up by the unnaturally strong hand of Tymerius. The elf stood, fear present in his eyes. His chin quivered. He knew what was coming.

Tymerius raised the gloved hand and placed it over the young elf’s face. A scream ripped the young elf’s throat. Suddenly, the old mage tightened his grip over the elf’s face. A green mist swirled around both of the two, obscuring both their images. Several screams joined the young elf’s, until the mist cleared. The elf was pale, withered. Tymerius released his grip on the elf’s face, and let him crumple to the ground. Two other slaves rushed up, screamed his name, tried to urge him back to consciousness. The elf opened his eyes, which had shifted to a deep grey color.

The elf began to go into a seizure. Holding his arms straight into the air, he began to shake violently, and cough and scream as if he were possessed. Then he stopped as quickly as he had started, and looked straight into the eyes of one of the slaves who had rushed to him.

One word crossed his lips. “Doom.”

The elf’s body went limp. Blood rushed from his face. Tears ran down the face of the two slaves that had rushed to him, who both jumped at each of the dead elf’s death throes.

Tymerius looked to Fate and held the gauntlet in front of the Colossus.

“Do you question me now?”

The dwarf woke. Sand filled his nose, his mouth, and his ears. It lashed at his back and opened old scars on his back and legs. In the time that he had been unconscious, Tymerius had left, as had the Colossus, and a sandstorm had begun. He opened his eyes to discover that his eyes were useless. The lightning bolt that had almost killed him, had most certainly blinded him. He stretched his arms in front of him, trying to drag himself to the closest shelter possible. He let out a loud cry. Burns covered his body. He wasn’t going anywhere.

He lay there in the sand for a long time, letting the sand rip and tear at his body, hoping that at some point someone or something would kill him. Release him.

He heard voices, assumed that the pain had finally driven him mad. Elven voices, they were. The dwarf, holding out hope that he had not yet lost all rational thought, screamed at the top of his lungs for help. Footfalls came quite near him. He opened his eyes, but

lacked the strength to keep them open long enough. He closed his eyes again, and fell into the black hole that was unconsciousness once again.

Griss poked at the book in front of him, studying the several spells of healing that he would need to heal the dwarf that lay in the bed in the room down the hall. It was in this time that he was not to be disturbed.

These cretins never paid attention to that, though. When Griss was in his study, the elf was never to be disturbed. They had brought the dwarf in two days prior, saying they had found him in the middle of the Terrorland during a march from the city of Kaer-Teis to the city of Damaerun, capital city of Talos. The only reason he had accepted taking in the dwarf was the fact that he was found in an odd placement, in even odder circumstances.

The elves of Talos believed that the Runestones spread around the continent of Camora were wayshrines of their god, Silvis. However, they had never seen the wayshrines NOT be where they were supposed to be. This time was different. The only reason this dwarf wasn't still laying in the desert was because he was found right where the wayshrine was supposed to be.

Griss looked to the door to shake away the tunnel-vision like effect that he experienced every time he read for long periods of time, only to see the door fly open.

An elf threw the door open and rushed into the room, nearly tripping over the desk at which Griss was sitting.

“Sir Griss! We have an emergency with the dwarf!”

Griss humored anyone who came in ranting and raving of “emergencies,” being that due to the usually calm state of EVERYTHING in Damaerun, EVERYTHING was an emergency.

“What is the emergency, Terill? Another cut on his arm? Maybe he has bled upon the floor,” asked Griss with sarcasm deftly apparent in his voice. The entire castle where the dwarf was being held was made of white marble which stains easily.

“No, Sir! He is awake, Sir!”

Griss was taken aback briefly. A true emergency? This is rare, he thought. An oddity in this place.

Griss stood briskly and ran down the hallway after Terill. He kept up quite well, being that he did not wear the customary robes of the healer, but leather armor. Griss was not the customary elven healer, however.

Upon entering the room, Griss quickly applied the spells to restore the feeling in the dwarf's extremities, restore his sight, and close the wounds from the sand. Griss smiled in satisfaction as the dwarf stared, astonished, through restored sight.

The dwarf looked to Griss, and said grudgingly, “Thank you. You’re the first elf to help me. Ever. You’re Griss. I’m Ligo.”

Griss was taken so aback that he almost stumbled over his own feet. “You... were at the Runestone when that old mage summoned Fate!” He was scared, for who knew where the mage was now.

Ligo said simply, “You got an armory around here?”

Two days later, they were off. Griss knew the location of Tymerius. They together would stop him, and the Colossi. They rode on horses, for days, without incident. Until one day, far in the distance, they saw it.

The final runestone. The Doomstone.

The Colossi stood in a circle, save Tymerius who headed the circle. From where they were, they watched as Tymerius raised his arms high. Two sharp rocks shot through the ground, and a giant gate appeared. The doors swung open, and out floated a cloud of fire.

Each Colossus spoke its name:

- Fate
- Life
- Death
- Balance
- Mind
- Heart

The sixth Colossus spoke, and instantly afterward, the flames took shape. The final demon spoke its name: Oblivion.

The Seventh Colossus, Oblivion.

Oblivion’s voice boomed over the entire continent, put fear in every heart.

“Who has interrupted my slumber?”

Tymerius was now humbled, “A servant of yours, Sir. Please accompany your brothers and me as we begin the Great Annihilation.”

A tear streaked Griss’ face. He looked to Ligo. “Know this, Ligo. The gauntlet he wears ties him to life. Remove it, put it on, and touch him. You will destroy him. And I will die.”

Ligo slapped the elf heartily, “You ain’t going nowhere, elf. YOU know THIS. We will walk away this day.”

Griss patted the dwarf on the shoulder and took off at a run. Ligo started after him, stubby legs carrying him as fast as his little legs could manage.

Griss hit Tymerius in the mid-section hard. The mage was dazed momentarily. Then he took hold of the elf's neck.

“YOU WILL PAY FOR THIS INTERRUPTION YOU HAVE CAUSED!”

The green mist came about. Griss felt his soul travel out of his body. Then he felt no more.

Ligo saw the green mist, and felt a sickness low in his stomach. Poor Griss.

The dwarf delivered a swift kick to Tymerius' ribs, and took hold of the gauntlet, pulling it off swiftly. He put it on, and grabbed the mage by his face.

“YOU WILL NO LONGER DO HARM! THIS WORLD NEEDS NO MAGIC, LET ALONE THE MAGIC OF EVIL!” The usually green mist was now black, the gauntlet turned on his master. The mage's skin stretched taut, then the eyes rolled back in his head. He died.

Ligo's eyes were wide with frenzied rage. He picked up the scroll, laying at Tymerius' feet, and threw it into Oblivion's flaming body.

A black smoke swirled into existence over the heads of the Colossi. The physical bodies of the Colossi were breaking down. The Colossi fought to maintain their bodies, but couldn't. They became one with the black smoke and were pulled into it. The gate from which Oblivion had come opened once more, and the black smoke entered. The gates closed and then began to crack. The gate exploded, and the sound reverberated across the planet.

It was done.

Ligo lay down and closed his eyes. He welcomed the coming darkness. He let it pull him under. Ligo woke up and looked at the elven maiden that hung over him and tended to his wounds.

“Where is Griss?” The first thing he said.

The elven maiden seemed sad at the mention of Griss, “He... died in the encounter with the Colossi. The nations of the Terrorlands and Talos are so grateful. They have buried him in the Yard of Kings.”

The Yard of Kings. In the short time that Ligo and Griss had known each other, he had found that Griss would have been thrilled.

The elf's voice cleared his thoughts, “Since you are awake, you are to report to King Elisteir.”

Ligo did so. He was given an outfit that was made of fine silk, which felt quite uncomfortable on the dwarf's scarred skin. However, he tolerated it since it was for the king. He walked the hall to King Elisteir's quarters. He did, however, take a moment to

look down into the Yard of Kings.

A large white and black marble statue of an elven warrior stood, surrounded by a garden. A fitting end to a great warrior. He entered the king's quarters.

He was an old elf. Sickly and bedridden, but still proud at his age, the king sat up as best he could.

“Ahh, the great warrior. I trust you have seen your friend's grave? I believe it is fitting. As for you, you will be not only awarded a place at his side in your death, but in your life you will be awarded with the Armor of Silvis. It is made of a fine metal, and has been made to fit your short, stocky stature.” The King smiled wholeheartedly. “Now go. Visit your friend.”

Within minutes Ligo was standing in front of the bravest being he had ever known. The dwarf had taken Tymerius' gauntlet, and now lay it at the base of the grave. He stared at the statue, and a tear ran down his cheek.

A fitting end to the bravest of warriors.



Dylan Terry  
Bluffton High School  
Second Place

## Escaping from Light and Shadow

The sound of katar and kampilan clashing accompanied the crack of thunder on the battlefield. The sounds echoed across the barren ground to the two men standing on the hill nearby. Abraham Hobbes and Keith Donovan stood and watched the tides of enemies change pace, the nearness of the enemies making their blood rush.

“We need to get back to the camp. The Acerbi scouts will find us if we stay,” Abraham said as he turned his back to the battlefield.

“It’s a wonder they haven’t discovered our camp yet,” replied Keith, still watching the fighting.

“It’s only been three weeks since we’ve set it up, and it’s out of the way of their regular patrols. Believe me, they will find it. It may just take longer than we expect.”

The human inhabitants of the island had barely escaped their village, and were, as far as they knew, the only living mortals on the island. The immortals had come a month ago from another realm, pouring from citadels that had sprung up suddenly on the North and South ends of the isle. No one knew where it had come from, and the only scouts sent to investigate had never returned.

The small village had been overrun in days, the two armies rushing through the streets, slaughtering all who stood in the way. A mere score had survived and fled to the shore, where they set up a small camp. The traits of the immortals were still mostly unknown to the humans, but there was a small amount of information they had gathered. The two armies, the Acerbi and Luminari, were sworn enemies from another realm, fighting for eternity. While the soldiers themselves were not immortal, the two leaders, Umbra and Lex, were immortal and could not be harmed as long as they were not within twenty feet of each other. If that boundary was crossed, they would become mortal and susceptible to the blade.

A small rain started, pattering against the two men as they walked down to the coast where the village was located. The small drops pattered against Abraham’s eyes, blurring his vision. The two men walked in silence the entire way back to the village, each one of them thinking about the coming days.

Keith was the first one to notice the black trail of smoke rising from the area of the village. He broke into a run and it took Abraham only a split second to follow after him, his thoughts screaming at him to turn back. They crested the last hill together, looking down on the smoking remains of the village they had thought was safe. Fires still burned on several of the houses, and piles of charred skeletons lay in the center of the village.

Keith fell to his knees, as Abraham ran down the hill, stumbling on tough patches of grass.

When he reached the first outlying huts, he noticed a small group of people in a circle around two others. As he made his way through the rain, he noticed that he knew one of the men in the middle, the village black-smith, Troy. Troy held aloft another man, dressed only in ragged clothes. He turned, showing the man to each person in the circle in turn. As Abraham approached, he could hear Troy speaking to the gathered people.

“We cannot trust this man. His floating ship served as a beacon to the immortals, and he is the reason the immortals swooped upon our village and killed all they saw!” The villagers punctuated each sentence with a cheer. Troy, not noticing Keith and Abraham, continued on. “He brought the Luminari and Acerbi upon us!”

The man was fear-struck. Troy was an imposing man, nearly topping seven feet with dark brown skin and one working eye. The sailor struggled but could do nothing against the iron grip of the blacksmith. He noticed Abraham and, and noticed also the confused look on his face. Hoping to gain some sympathy, the man shouted out, “Kind sir! Please, do not allow this man to hurt me! I have done nothing but attempt to deliver information!”

The villagers turned to see who he was addressing, and several cries of relief when they noticed it was Abraham. Shouts of “Abe!” echoed as the survivors parted to allow Abraham through their ranks. Troy continued his speech, oblivious to the new arrival. As Abraham, approached the blacksmith though, he noticed him and his one eye widened.

“Abe, my friend, this man is responsible for the death today. His ship served as a signal that there was a settlement here. A score of immortals arrived and laid waste to the village before turning on each other. We killed the survivors, but we expect a much larger force once it is discovered these went missing.”

Keith approached then, his fists clenched in rage at his sides. The others looked at him and instantly recognized the look of loss on his face. Abraham turned towards his oldest friend, a grim look of apprehension etched on his face. Keith stopped just outside the ring of people and announced, “Those demons killed Carmen. They killed her and she did nothing to them.”

Tears fell down Keith’s face. It was the only time Abraham had seen his friend weep. He looked at the man Troy still held by the arm. “You said you were here to bring information. Will it be information that will help us strike back or is it merely more bad news?”

The man looked up at Troy, and the giant man let go of his arm, unceremoniously dropping him to the ground. He stood up and brushed his clothes off, a simple overcoat and breeches that were ripped in several places. He looked at each of the score of villagers in turn as he cleared his throat. “You all know the Luminari and Acerbi are immortal, unless they lose their life in battle. You probably also know that the leaders of the armies are immortal, yet are also invulnerable to the blade.”

The villagers nodded, they had already found this information. The man was not finished though. “The two leaders, Lex and Umbra, are masters of combat and excellent strategists. They are so evenly matched that their strategies are so in tune with the other’s that neither

side can ever gain a permanent advantage. However, the leaders are not always invincible.

“The two leaders are only immortal if they stay away from each other. The only way to kill either one of them would be if they were within a distance of around twenty feet of each other. If that happens, they become vulnerable, yet they are still excellent fighters. No mortal man could ever hope to be as skilled as they are, yet there is one way to kill them, which would also kill their armies.”

Abraham and the others raised their eyebrows at this news. They had not heard this information before, and it had huge possible ramifications. Keith, still in a rage, asked through gritted teeth, “If no mortal man can best the leaders, then why do you taunt us with this information?”

Abraham and Troy had both also lost loved ones to the immortals, yet they both shot Keith venomous looks. They wanted to know this information so they could possibly twist this strategy to their own ends. The sailor had seemed not to take any offense at this, and continued, “The only way to kill the two generals would be to force them to fight each other. As soon as they come into proximity with each other, they will be able to kill each other.”

Abraham thought about this new information. The only problem, he thought, was how to get the two immortals into a battle that would end both of their lives. Luckily, he did not have to think long before the sailor answered that question. “My village had infiltrated the citadels of the two heads of the armies. After some extremely careful manipulation and the loss of my entire village, the two generals believe the other tried to make an attempt on their life.”

An ominous air entered the man’s tone as he finished. “The two go to battle in three days. The two armies will hold their assaults while the battles continue, but the force of the blows will be enough to shake this island to the seafloor. You must prepare to leave before the battle, for you will either die or be subjugated under the ruling of immortals.”

The villagers broke immediately into conversation, questioning how they could leave their island home for other lands they knew nothing about. Suggestions about trying to wait them out were thrown about, and other suggestions ranging from hiding underground to willingly accepting slavery came to the front. The latter were immediately tossed aside, and eventually it was decided that they would leave the island somehow. The only problem was how.

Abraham turned towards the man and asked him his name. “My name is Harrison. I am from the small village on the north shore named Montgomery, which is no longer in existence.”

“Harrison, how many can your ship hold?” Abraham asked, an idea dawning to him.

“It was a fishing schooner, handled by a crew of thirty-five men,” he answered. Seeming to read Abraham’s mind, he said, “It could easily hold the score of villagers here.”

Abraham presented the idea to the gathering, and the agreement was unanimous. They would leave as soon as the necessary supplies were gathered, or in three days, whichever would come first.

The next two days were uneventful, except that scouts reported a huge surge of immortals arriving on the frontlines. The armies were trying to gather an advantage in the event their leader fell during the duel. The villagers split into sections, one section outfitting the schooner for sea-travel, one section responsible for gathering the food, and one section assigned to watch.

On the morning of the third day, the two armies suddenly reached a standstill. Blades were sheathed, and the screams stopped. From the high hill, Abraham could see each of the immortal citadels. First the Acerbi citadel, and then the Luminari citadel began to glow, black and white in the morning sun. The huge doors were flung open, and two small figures slowly moved towards the middle of the battlefield. The sea of figures parted before the figures until they faced each other. Abraham could not make out the arms of the figures, but he knew they had drawn their weapons.

The sea of immortals sunk to their knees, making it seem that the ground had sunken down a few feet. The sun glinted off the raised weapons, and flashed as the two collided. A very strong shockwave rushed up the hillside, nearly knocking Abraham onto his back. The immortals had joined battle.

The jags of onyx on Lex's Macuahuitl caught the diamond blades of Umbra's butterfly swords as the weapons collided. The force of the blows was so great the shockwave blew loose rubble and discarded weapons aside. The two knew they were fighting for their lives, which was a new feeling for each of them. As their weapons locked in another clinch, each stared into the eyes of his greatest enemy.

Abraham knew it was almost time to leave. He looked around for Keith, expecting him to be frowning as the two demons fought. Instead, he saw empty ground in all directions. At first Abraham believed Keith had returned to the village already, until he looked towards the immortals again. Large groups of Luminari had broken off from the main force and were pursuing a small black speck that Abraham knew all too well. He had hoped Keith's anger over his wife's death had dissipated, or at least was displaced by the upcoming voyage, but his friend seemed to prefer the up front and personal approach.

Other groups of Acerbi noticed the Luminari and were about to intercept their light-skinned opponents when they noticed the human they were pursuing. They immediately changed course, forming a pincer maneuver. The only way Keith could move was towards the survivors on the coast.

Abraham scrambled around and down the hill, moving with the shockwaves until one finally tripped his feet up and caused him to tumble down the hill. He reached the perimeter of the ruined village and shouted, "Go! The immortals come for us! We must depart now!"

His panicked shouts caused the villagers to hurry onto the ship, ascending the gangway

in an orderly manner as they had practiced. Troy and Harrison stood on the prow and watched in dread as the wave of immortals crested the hill. Harrison leaped over the railing and began to help the other up to the ship. Abraham saw they had the loading under control and now began to go back for Keith. He could see his friend's face clearly now and also saw the blood-stained sword in his hand.

Abraham waited until he knew Keith could catch up, and then ran beside him, feeling the shockwaves from the god-like strength of the immortal leaders. Keith dropped his sword, tears streaming down his face as he heaved with every step. "I just had to get some measure of revenge. I could not let those beasts that killed Carmen get off."

One side of Abraham's mind agreed with Keith's need, yet the other dismissed it as foolish. The ship was not yet fully loaded, and each of the villagers made last-minute relay lines to load as much food as they could. Keith and Abraham boarded the ship after the last of the others had embarked, Keith staying behind just long enough to untie the rope holding the ship to shore.

"Loosen the sails!" Harrison shouted to the hastily-trained crews. The patched sails fell down and immediately filled with wind. The ship slowly moved out over the water, the shockwaves only helping the schooner move along. The immortals reached the shoreline and immediately set upon each other, while several members of both side followed their bloodlust and leaped into the ocean to swim after the departing ship.

As the schooner sailed close to the coast, the hill on land eventually lowered and the battle between the two overlords could be seen through Harrison's telescope. He described the battle in gruesome detail, making mention of the feints and parries and other techniques the age-old demons used to their advantage.

The ship turned with the wind and began making way towards the mainland. The wind filled the sails even more and twin plumes of water rose from the back of the ship as it cut through the water. The villagers gave a huge cheer, believing their fear was over.

The two leaders felt the small nicks and scratches from the other's weapons. Umbra was beginning to become fatigued from blocking the bladed club Lex used, and Lex was not fast enough to always parry the blows from Umbra's twin butterfly swords. The two fought and fought, and all the while the two armies kneeled in reverence of their gods and leaders.

The ship was almost a mile out in the ocean when the fatal blow was struck. The island was a blur on the horizon, but suddenly it seemed a new sun was born on the horizon. The energy from the death of the immortal flung shockwaves miles in each direction, pushing waves that reached to the skies, and one of those waves towered over the schooner now.

Abraham warned everyone to lash themselves to the safety loops in the side of the ship, and then tied himself to a safety rung just as the wave came crashing down.



Gena Smith  
Lima Senior High School  
Third Place

## Where We Whisper

The place was foggy. Tepid and writhing while lost in emotion that no one really paid any deserved attention. You could feel the overdue and unthrown insults, spending time suspended, stagnant in the diseased air. This was what Sid had learned to hate. His face was plastered onto the walls behind me, old posters from bands that only the cults worshiped respectively. The solo projects that never made it because in the underground you stuck together. You valued each other.

Everything had to be appropriate. Everything had to be thought through because they were so judgmental, and the thing – the *one* thing that I genuinely didn't *get* – was that it was their *job*. And how I had never hated anyone so much for something that could potentially make my life so much *better*. This is what they were getting paid to do and in three minutes our future would be in their hands. It was all so violent, it was all so traumatic. The stage was a minefield and there we were, arms spread for balance while we tripped and stumbled over ourselves and hoped that we made it out alive. We *needed* this. We had no where to sleep tonight.

Their eyes were so intimidating, so nerve wrecking. Nerve *obliterating*. It was almost rude, almost volatile, the way they watched. Fingers maneuvering the ink; legs still and firm on the cement.

I had to hit every note. They had to hit every chord. He had to hit every beat. We had to be perfect. We *had* to be perfect in the way that we were destructively fabulous and so messed up that we were pretty. The unconventional nature of it all had me entangled. The way that none of this made sense. All we had to do was make them like us the same way every other basement, every other club, every other smoke infested bar before this did. *This* was nothing. *This* was just *appeal*.

They were rating us on a scale we didn't want to be on. It was so aesthetically dependant. It was so superficial, so unreal. It was so heaven-sent, though, and we *needed* this. We needed *them*. And though on an every day basis, on any *normal* night, we'd *want* the cheers, the screams, cat calls from women older than our mothers, whose breath held alcohol that we never got into, anyways. But not tonight. Tonight it was our friends. Tonight we had support to fall on. And, ironically, what little sound they *were* emitting was immediately hushed by cold hands of ushers and officials, standing off to the right of the stage. The judges needed to hear. They needed their silence. They needed to hear our *heart beats*, apparently. I'm not sure. Not *really*.

His hands gripped the mic in a cold sweat, struggling to keep it in midair; his voice had yet to crack. A small burst of frustration left his throat and he hit a note he'd been fighting with. I crossed myself in my mind and let my fingers play the strings of my precision-one. They were all feeling it. Eyes all closed, we had a mutual understanding between our minds and rehearsed performance. Under pressure we were brilliant liars. Faking like we were fine, but

we all wanted to cry. My legs were consumed with tremors but my wrists stayed firm and predicted. Pre planned movements, we weaved in and out of each other, sweat and spit and curses and tears all falling onto the stage, blood and silent screams while our backs were to the crowd, we'd never played this hard before. Never with so much momentum, so much *want*.

Our name echoed from the back corner. A barely audible whisper from the back tables where we would sit. Where we would watch bands before us, where we were whiteness to soul bearing and *selling*. Where *we* used to be the audience. Where we once dreamed from. Where we, not so long ago, would whisper the name of a group like us, like what we wanted to be. But now it had happened, the line had been crossed. We were in or out and it was nothing deeper, no more complex; it wasn't any more meaningful than that.

"Mikey!" My shoulder spun, my mind twirled, his nails gripped into me. "Mikey! Forward!" I could see the spit, the sweat, his lips in a forced scream over the music and I had backed up, now almost against the drums and I hadn't even noticed the force of the bass on the back of my thighs. Too preoccupied with the spinning floor and the trap door I wanted to fall through though I knew, somewhere in the back of my unrealistic tendencies, that it wasn't there. There wasn't even a *basement* in this place.

"Sorry." He didn't hear.

I can't explain a stage. I can't portray an audience. I can't express through words something that I'm not and have never been a part of. I was the player. I was the dream; they were the dreamers. And that's what they wanted. We had the poetry but we didn't have the right words. Not the ones they were asking for.

"Thank you, thank you." The cheers weren't enough to get us through. His suit was repelling the applause. "You- Cory, is it? Cory, your band is great but we just aren't sure that this is well, maybe *our* label just isn't the right place for you." They shuffled papers and Alex took a step back and looked as if he'd say *you're kidding, right?* But they weren't. "We have good intentions, we aren't here to tell you that you suck or anything like that so don't take this the wrong way. But thanks for coming out, and keep playing. You'll find your niche."

We filed off before he was done talking and took seats in the back, in *our* back. In *our* bar. In *our* city. And they had the *nerve*. Because the next band took stage just as we sat and his smile lit up just from their *clothing* and it all made sense. We weren't wearing the right color, the right brand; our hair wasn't the right color...

But we *tried*.

"Let's just get out of here..."

Cory's face fell, his eyes found his hands that slept on his knees and his breath slowly made it's way from his lungs to his lips and if I hadn't known better I might think that he would just stop breathing all together right there in front of us. "I don't want to leave."

Alex's lips were pressed to his fist and he let out a bitter laugh through grinding teeth. "*Good intentions.*"

The smoke only seemed to grow thicker. The hearts only pumped faster. Their eyes were moving quicker, desperate to keep out the ash.

"It's just such *bullshit* and-"

"Alex."

"They have no idea how *hard* we play and-"

"Alex."

"How much we put into this shit and-"

"*Alex.*"

We were all staring at him but Cory just shook his head. Maybe it was a nod.

"Let's just *go.*"

"Shut up, Mikey."

"I'm not ready, Mikey." He was much nicer than his advocates. It would've almost been too far; too outlandish to put my arm over him, maybe tell him it was a mistake. But I knew better. "I'm not going yet." So he leaned forward and grabbed a glass of something that looked like something he wasn't old enough to hold and after he downed the entire thing, ice and all, he leaned back and pulled his knees up to his chest in that way that only thin, awkward boys can. He was preparing to watch someone take *his* dream and appreciate it ten times less than he would even *hope* to.

"They were assholes anyways and this band- Dude, I heard that they're related to one of the judges and it's all corrupt so it doesn't even count."

"It doesn't count, dude."

"Yeah, it's not even worth it."

He smiled. "I'm not leaving yet. I *know* we're better than- I just *need* to see."

"You need to make sure that your ego is still legit?"

"You could say that." There was a wave of calamity, this disastrous, raging sense of revenge. But in the secretive way that only hazed eyes can give away in hard stares aimed at the back of their heads. But there was a self love, too. A confidence that hovered over us. Over Cory. And he made everything okay. "Yeah-" He let out a deep breath and half of a smile. "You could say that."



Brittany Wrasman  
Delphos St. John's High School  
Fourth Place

## My Little Girl

The day was as gorgeous as a June day could get. The sun was sparkling on the water, the gentle, ocean breeze brushed across my face, and I was marrying the most gorgeous woman in the world. As she walked up the aisle, her beautiful, golden hair blew gently in the breeze. Her smile was bigger and more beautiful than it had ever been, and she walked gracefully towards me in her white, sparkling gown. The ceremony was at a beautiful ocean setting, with a big white tent. Beautiful red roses were scattered everywhere. We wrote our own vows and I pledged all of my love and devotion to the love of my life. We took a wonderful seven day African Safari honeymoon and began our exciting life together.

We began our journey in life together in humble surroundings. We lived in a small upstate New York apartment, with one bedroom, a pint size kitchen, and a tiny living area. We both worked our jobs supporting each other and our new life. I worked as a firefighter for the Ladder 93 fire department, while she worked on the 32<sup>nd</sup> floor in the North World Trade Center Tower. Our lives were coming together like pieces of a puzzle and our world was great.

After a couple of years of being married, our dreams were coming true. We had saved up enough money to buy a beautiful, two-story house in the suburbs of New York City. This dream home had three bedrooms, a beautiful office, a spacious living and kitchen area, and a gigantic backyard. After moving into our beautiful new house, we decided it was time for us to settle down and start a family. Three months after moving into our house, my wife discovered she was pregnant with twins! We were both very excited to bring two beautiful children into this world in just nine months, but there was so much to be done before they arrived. The nursery needed to be completed and the house had to be baby proof. All of our dreams were coming together until that horrifying September day.

I had reported to work at 7:00 am, while my wife had left for work at 7:30 am. At 8:55 am, our fire department had been informed that the North World Trade Center Tower had been hit by a plane and that our department was to head to the site immediately. As I raced to get my equipment on, my mind filled with fright and disbelief. The first thing that flashed through my mind was that of my wife's safety. I grabbed my cell phone and dialed her number as fast as I could. She answered her phone and asked me why I was so panicked. I told her that a plane had just hit the tower and that she needed to get out of her office immediately! In an awestricken voice she told me how she had left twenty minutes ago from her office because she was feeling very sick, being 7 ½ months pregnant with twins. Relieved that she was safe, I told her to go home and not to worry about me. As I hung up the phone, I told her how much I loved her and told her to stay safe.

As my fire department arrived at the towers, all our faces turned to fright. All that we could see was debris falling everywhere, black, deadly smoke, and the sight and sound of panicking people falling to their deaths. We were to report inside the tower to receive

further directions. Then the unthinkable occurred, the second tower had been hit! After that, the pandemonium worsened. People were running in and out of the buildings screaming, crying, and full of fear. Our department was instructed to go into the North Tower and help evacuate as many people as we could. At 10:07 am we felt a huge shake and heard a rumbling sound. It was confirmed that the South Tower had fallen and that we were to evacuate immediately before the North Tower fell too. I encouraged as many people as I could to follow me. As I ushered the people out of the door, I felt my stomach crawl into my throat. The sight was more horrifying than it had ever looked. I stood in awe at the sight of debris, smoke, fire, people screaming and running, piles and piles of twisted up metal. I could not believe how many people were helping others. After I scurried the people I had saved away from the tower, I turned around to see the North Tower collapse. I called to everyone around me to run, and I took off as fast as I could away from the tower. As the tower came to rest, dust and smoke filled the air. The air was like breathing through a plastic bag. I threw my mask on and froze where I stood. I could not see any thing around me and I stood in fear.

Two weeks had passed since that horrifying day, and to that date, fifteen of my fellow firefighters from my department were counted as missing or dead. I had been going to the site everyday searching for survivors and hoping I could find some heroic person alive. I never did find any survivors, but I did see and the men and women searching for hope in the rubble.

One month after September 11, my wife gave birth to two healthy and beautiful children, a boy and a girl. We brought them home to a beautiful, newly-furnished nursery, and a home full of love. From the time we brought those children home, I knew that our son was one of a kind and our daughter was going to be my little girl. As they grew our love just grew deeper for them.

The time was near for preschool to start, and my wife and I were struggling with letting them go. They were both eager to start preschool in the fall, and the day had finally come. Both my wife and I prepared the kids for school and I kissed my wife and two children good-bye and wished them all good days. To my shock, that would be the last time I would talk to my wife and son.

As my wife approached a light, the unimaginable happened. A driver, who I would later find out was driving drunk, had run a red light and crushed my wife's vehicle. Experiencing anyone's worst nightmare, I received the horrible call that my wife and children had been in a horrible accident and were being transported to St. Luke's Hospital.

I arrived at the hospital and was bombarded with nurses asking numerous questions, but I had a question for them. How was my family? They told me that my wife had gone into emergency surgery. My daughter was in a coma, and my son was sitting on the side where the driver had hit the car and was pronounced dead on the scene. My whole world had just fallen apart in a matter of minutes. My gorgeous wife was in critical condition and was on the verge of dying. My innocent son was dead. My beautiful little girl was in a coma, and the person responsible was conscious and in fair condition. All of my anger built up as I went from room to room to see my family lying on the beds lifeless and beat

up, and knowing that the one who injured them was living.

A couple of days had passed and I was to plan the funeral of not only my son, but my wife too, who the doctors could not save in surgery. As I laid my love and my innocent child to rest, all that I could think about is how I needed my daughter to pull through for me. I knew that I could not get through the rest of my life without her. Days, weeks, and months passed and my daughter still had not woken up from her coma. As a year drew near, I knew that I would have to find peace and let her go. The doctors gave her minimal chance to ever wake up again. The day had come to make that decision that I needed to make. I went to the hospital that day, kneeled by her bed to pray, and asked God to give me strength to move on with my life and to send my little girl to heaven with him. As I kneeled there in silence, I felt a gentle movement. I slowly opened my tear-filled eyes.

When I looked up, I was awestricken! My daughter, who had been in a coma for nearly a year, had moved! I wiped my tear-filled eyes and rushed out to the nurses and told them what I had just witnessed. As the nurse rushed in and examined my daughter, a smile came upon her face. She turned her head towards me and told me that my daughter was waking up from her coma. At that point, my heart skipped a million beats and I fell beside her bed. I grabbed her hand and thanked God for His miracle. As my daughter opened her bright blue eyes, I told her that daddy was here and she was going to be all right. She smiled at me and with her soft, soothing voice said, “I love you daddy.” At that point, I knew that my wife and son were in heaven watching over us with the Heavenly Father.

When I took my daughter home, she knew what had happened to her brother and mom. She squeezed me as tight as she could and broke down crying. All of the memories in the house were streaming back to her and she could not understand how something like this could have happened. I told her that we were going to get through this and we were going to push on with our lives.

As the years passed, she went through school without a mother and brother. I went on with my life without a wife and son. When each year’s anniversary arrived, she and I went to the graves of our family and kneeled beside them to pray for strength for the coming year. We told them how much we missed them and how we needed them to watch over and guide us.

As my daughter entered college and fell in love, I grew older and proud of how my baby girl was turning out. She graduated from college with a degree in psychiatry, assisting those who are alcoholics. A year after graduating college, she received a proposal from a nice, young man that she met at college. It was the day of the wedding, and I was preparing to give up my little girl. She had struggled all her life without a mother and now she was about to become a wife. As I escorted her down the aisle, in her mother’s beautiful white gown, tears of joy filled my eyes. My daughter was about to start a brand-new, wonderful life with her new husband, and begin her own family. As I hugged and kissed her one last time, I recognized how much she resembled her mother and I know how proud her mother would be of her. As the ceremony ended she was no longer a little girl, but a grown woman.

My daughter and I found peace with that drunk driver who had killed our family. Now,

she is helping those who have alcohol problems, and is preventing another family from going through the pain we had gone through. She is now the proud mother of a baby boy, and I am now the proud grandfather of a baby boy. She will never know how much I love her and how much strength she has given me to move on with my life, along with the help of God's "two special" angels in heaven. Even though in appearance she is no longer a little girl, deep down in my heart, she will always be *my* little girl.

Jordan Vaughn  
Elida High School  
Fifth Place

## Omaha Beach

When Janice Freeman woke up Saturday, she knew exactly how her day was going to unfold. She would wake her three children, Joshua, David, and baby Matilda, send the boys out to get eggs and wood while she fed Matilda. After breakfast, she would send the boys to pick up their father, Jim, while she started her cleaning. Jim would take the boys out to the barn and start working while she fixed lunch; they would eat and then relax until dinner. After dinner they would each do their evening chores, listen to the radio, and then go to bed. Her perfect Saturday was going as planned until the mailman, Mr. Clark, arrived an hour before he was due.

“Well good morning to you Mr. Clark. How has your day been?” she asked as she walked out on the front porch.

“I’ve been mighty fine, thanks for askin’ Mrs. Freeman!” he replied.

“Mind me asking what you’re doing here before you’re due?”

“I’d rather not say ma’am. I think it’s best if you find out from the letter than from me,” he said in an anxious voice.

“Read what? Mr. Clark, are you not telling me something?”

With that, he gave her the lonely letter addressed to her oldest son, Joshua, from the Department of Defense. Janice knew what was inside that envelope. She knew that her son was going to fight in this war. She knew he probably wouldn’t make it out alive with all the diseases and soldiers killed in battle. Falling on her knees, she prayed a silent prayer, “Dear God, please don’t let my son die in this ongoing war. Let no harm be done to him. Watch over him and comfort him in his time of need. In Jesus’ name, Amen.” By the time she walked inside, her dress was tear-stained, her eyes heavy, and her body ached all over.

“What’s wrong Mama? What happened? Are you alright?” Joshua flooded her with questions.

“I’ll get there when you return home, safe, and out of harm’s way,” she said as she handed him the dreadful letter.

Before he even opened the letter, she went weak at the knees and dropped to the floor, knowing that he would accept. Her husband walked in, wondering what the fuss is all about.

“What happened in here Janice?” he demanded.

Without a word, his son, with trembling fingers, handed over the letter. Immediately he

started shaking when he saw who it was from. A million questions ran through his mind, but not a word left his lips. Joshua looked at both his parents while his lips formed words he thought he'd never say.

“Mom and Dad, I know that since I'm your oldest son, you don't want me to leave and fight in this war. I'm willing to lose my life and my family for this country. I've been listening to the radio in my room and I'll be one of the first deployed. Mama, Uncle Jerry, Aunt Cathy, and their boys were at Pearl Harbor when it was bombed. They've killed my family, and I'm going to fight. I'm sorry.”

With that, he took the letter from his father and walked upstairs to get packed. Jim sat down next to his trembling wife and held her. They sat in silence for quite a while until he broke it with words of comfort.

“God will keep him safe.”

“I know,” she said, “I know.”

That evening, Joshua was on his way to war, leaving behind sad and weary parents, crying siblings, and his hometown which he knew he may never see again. Sitting on a nearly empty bus, he looked around, and he saw a couple men, young and old, bold and weak. Some were crying and some praying. He bowed his head as he could no longer hold in his fear. “Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.” When he was done he looked up from his tear soaked hands. The bus was now full. He looked once more, this time, no one was crying, no one was praying. People were talking to one another, making friends, so they weren't alone. Moments later, the bus stopped. They were at the Louisville airport. On the plane, Joshua picked a seat next to a very nervous young man.

“Will you pray with me?” the young man asked.

“Of course I will. ‘God is my strength...’”

Janice was full of fear; fear of losing her son, fear of war, fear of not seeing his face every day, and fear of him being alone. She knew she had to be strong for her other children.

“They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk and not be faint.” She read this scripture from Isaiah every day, over and over. That's the only way she kept her strength. Joshua was assigned to Omaha Beach, a site many of his fellow comrades feared.

“That place is chalked full of grenades!” Private Smith said.

“Naw Smith! They have soldiers in the sand, and they just POP up and shootcha!!”

commented Private St. James.

“I think you’re both full of it,” retorted Sergeant Potter. “They hide behind barricades up on the hill off the beach. When the U-boats open, they open-fire. Some men don’t make it to the beach; some of them even drown because they can’t get their packs off in time.”

Joshuah was scared. He didn’t know who to believe. All he knew was that they all sounded scary. Honestly he didn’t want to go to Omaha Beach; he was terrified of the place. He knew that he had to go for his country, for his *family*. Every time he heard about Omaha, the one thing that kept him going was God’s word. “The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumble are armed with strength.”

After three months of worrying and waiting, Janice started to think the worse. In WWI, she received a letter from her brother within the first month of being deployed. She still thought of him from time to time. However she never got another letter from him again. She knew now was not the time to dwell in the past. She knew she had to be strong, for David, Matilda, Joshuah and *herself*. A litany that she said day in and day out kept her going. A week later, her letter came. She was just excited to know her baby was still alive. She wasn’t at all concerned with what the letter contained. A letter showed hope and gave her more strength than ever. After calming down and calling her husband in, she opened the letter, and started reading:

Dear Mom and Dad,

I’ve missed you dearly. I can’t wait until I come home, which may not be for a while, leading me to my point. I have both good and bad news. Mom, you probably want me to start with the good news, so I will. As you both have probably figured out, I’m still alive. I’ve met new friends here on the beach. I’ve come close with one man. He’s my age and the funny thing is his name is David also. So with him here, it makes me feel closer to home. He’s also a devoted Christian, which is *really* good for me, because I know now that I’m not the only one on the beach who has faith that we will survive. Now I don’t feel like I’m alone in this war. If he ever died, I don’t know what I would do. I would truly be alone. I have faith though, so I’m not worried about it. David and I are the snipers in our platoon. We aren’t too bad either! He taught me this prayer, “Blessed be the Lord who teaches my hands for war and my fingers to fight. My strength, my goodness, my fortress, my high tower, my deliverer, and my shield in whom I trust. Be not that far from me for trouble is near. Haste thee to help me. Oh my God, I trust in thee, let me not be ashamed. Let not my enemies triumph over me.” We say it every time we shoot, let’s just say, God is on our side. I also say scriptures so I don’t lose my strength. I’m glad to have Him in my life, because without Him, you and I both now that I would not be alive this far into the war.

Now the bad news. The fighting was horrible when we first arrived here in Omaha Beach. When the U-boats opened, the French opened fire on us. Some didn’t make it outta the boats, some drowned to death because they didn’t get their packs off in time, and most died on their way to the top of the beach where we were at. It was so gruesome; I hope I never see anything like that ever again in my life. The fighting now isn’t too bad, but Sergeant got word that they will bomb us or something like that (the communication here

isn't that great, so we don't really know what's going to happen). The French have only bombed us once but didn't kill anybody, because they got wrong coordinates. When we finally got off the beach, we came to Normandy, a village near Omaha, and took it over. We captured their tanks, but they moved pretty slowly, so it didn't really help us. Sergeant doesn't know how long we can hold the fort down, but everyone knows we will keep it down (Sergeant is a real downer).

Well, I must go, I miss you all dearly, and I will see you soon. I promise.

Your son,  
Private Joshuah Freeman

Janice and her husband held each other for a while.

"At least we know he's alright," she said.

"For now," he answered sadly.

Joshuah prayed to God that his parents got his letter. He knew that if his mother didn't receive a letter soon, then she would think the worse. He sat there for a while imagining what it will be going to be like when he strolls down his lane. There would be crying, laughing, and more crying. All of the sudden he heard his sergeant.

"Freeman!!"

"Yes, sir?" he replied shyly.

"Get ready!"

"Ready? Get ready for what sir?"

"Ready for battle! Where has your head been lately? What do you think you get ready for in a war, Private? A ballet class? NO! You get ready for battles!!" he replied, as nicely as he could.

"Sorry, sir," Joshuah said, embarrassed.

"Now, they're about a mile out, so hurry up, get your gun and go with Private Jackson to your post on the church bell tower. Good luck men."

*Good, thought Joshuah. I'll be closer to God.*

He ran over to get David, and they headed to the bell tower. When they arrived, they immediately saw their enemies. While he was shooting, Joshuah repeated a scripture from the Book of Psalms: "Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs on my head. Many are my enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy me." He never missed. After all the enemies had been taken care of, David and Joshuah walked outside to a group of men. They started to congratulate each other when they all stopped abruptly.

“Take cover!!” someone yelled.

“It’s an airplane!” said David.

“Run! Run! Ru-“

All was black, and all was quiet. No one screamed for help, no one was running to their post or to get their guns. Nothing. Joshua was on the ground, not moving, and barely breathing. He was angry, angry at his fellow comrades for not giving a warning, not watching, and angry at God for not protecting them and keeping them safe. He had to let his anger out somehow without moving, so he yelled out a scripture he knew too well fit the situation:

“How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me, there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails.” With that said, he took his last breaths.

One year to the day that her son received that dreadful letter, she received more bad news. Mr. Clark was due at four o’clock, but when someone in all black arrived in his place, she knew. She knew she would never see her son’s face again. She fell to the floor as she began crying. The officer came up to her with a saddened face.

“I’m so very sorry for your son’s death. I heard he was a good man.”

She didn’t say anything. Her husband came out on the porch.

“Sorry sir,” the officer said.

Jim sat down next to Janice. Crying he said, “He’s with God now, he’s safe.”

Janice never said a word. It carried on that way for several months. No talking and mopping around the house. On July 17th, it all stopped. She didn’t get out of bed. Jim came upstairs, and she started talking, “Jim listen, I know that I haven’t been a good wife or mother after Joshua’s death, but I can’t help it. God took my baby away from me. I’ve tried to get better; I’ve said so many scriptures, and read the Bible day in and day out, but look at me! I haven’t gotten better. It’s getting worse, and you know it. I’ve tried to be strong, but it’s just my time to go. Take good care of David and Matilda. I know you can do it, they love you to death, and so do I. I love you with all my heart, and I love our kids.”

A few hours later, Janice passed away. She left behind a loving husband, and two children. Jim had planned his son and wife’s funeral on the same day. They were buried side by side in the cemetery. People came and remembered their spirits, their bravery, strength and courage. No one mourned them, they celebrated their lives. Joshua and Janice were no longer in pain or without each other; they were in a better place.



Bobby Cotrell  
Shawnee High School  
First Place

## Idyllic Dreams

Prickling and tickling,  
The edged softness of the cool grass;  
Boundless and irresolute,  
The eternal sky stretching;  
Perfect contemplations.

Massive sky-towers spiraling ever higher,  
Lone and statuesque beneath the streaming sunlight;  
Idyllic wonder-scapes for pure abandonment.

Lost amidst the cool whimsy of the wind  
And the honeyed touch of a sunbeam;  
Dreams.



Brad Queen  
Bluffton High School  
Second Place

## Dreamer

Throughout all the land there is one  
Who is said to have been seen walking  
Through groves, near mighty rivers, and on mountains of great height.  
When spotted, she suddenly disappears,  
Leaving a gentle breeze behind.

Her countenance is said to be quite a sight,  
Her gown an astounding, spotless white.  
She travels barefoot and wears no jewelry.  
Her head is crowned with beautiful long, straight, golden hair.  
Her eyes are the color of deep ocean blue,  
A unique sparkle in them.  
The face of this woman shows not a single impurity.  
The sound of her voice is compelling and inviting,  
Sweet and sorrowful.  
She sings at the base of a river,  
With her eyes focused up towards heaven.  
Some have considered her to be an angel.

I have had several chances to see this divine woman,  
Catching mere glimpses,  
Yearning to get closer  
Without her noticing my presence.  
One day I sat lamenting,  
I could not find her.  
From within myself  
I was overcome with a soft assurance that enlightened my mind.  
As I stood up and prepared to head home,  
I felt that familiar breeze,  
Suddenly she appeared out from the woods.  
Wanting to speak with her  
I asked, "Why have you come to me?"  
She paused for a moment,  
Then responded in a soft voice,  
No louder than a whisper,  
"I will always be with you."  
What did she mean?  
Suddenly, once again, she disappeared,  
Leaving that gentle breeze.  
I went home  
Reflecting upon what she had said to me,  
Suddenly I awoke.  
She was only a dream.  
I now understand  
Why she will always be with me.



Alisha Sybert  
Lima Senior High School  
Third Place

## Secret Sin

there it lies  
in the deep shadows  
of a protected heart.  
the horrid blasphemy,  
the secret sin  
hiding dangerously, guarding itself faithfully.  
our precious flaw,  
our embarrassing acts,  
the ones too gruesome to share,  
too ashamed to admit.

when the shadows recede,  
and they will,  
our deeds bare gnarled, razor-like teeth  
stand at attention, to devour at any moment.  
with a hiss and a struggle,  
our torturous secret's exposed.

once again, we hang our heads in shame.  
denying the truth,  
refusing the abominable.  
rebuilding the fortress of darkness  
we attempt to deceive  
those who definitely know better.



Taylor Andrews  
Delphos Jefferson High School  
Fourth Place

## Winter Nights

I hear you in my stirring silence  
Remembering all those winter nights  
When I was waiting by the wayside  
For you so caught up in the knot  
Reaching then was far too frightening  
But sitting solemn all the more  
Wading here in mixed emotions  
I begin my break for shore  
Swimming in this strange confusion  
Of toiling mind through muddled thought  
Near blasphemy this time I'm dreaming  
To end this other one I'd brought  
Should I rend from me this memory  
Or leave it here of you and me  
Will I find some new direction  
In this endless shifting sea  
Slipping to the rising sun  
This night oh so many  
In this sequence one  
Strike the switch and  
Knock the stone  
And for sake of love  
Pull me from the snow  
As the sun burns through to fledgling spring  
This what I need to see  
Ice is melting on the beam  
And drifting to the sky  
In an embrace of which I've  
Dreamed and rested  
So many hopes and words upon  
Among so many winter nights  
To leave me wondering, restless  
To shun or show I could not tell  
But winter nights still hold their spell  
When summer comes so warm and new  
To give me strength to fly to you  
Purified by enchanting flames  
As summer comes I hope it stays  
A splint for anything that lay broken  
Left cold and hungry by the tundra frozen  
But warmth can so quickly fade  
As autumn evening takes the day

All the brilliant shining lights  
Run in ways I wish I'd grown  
Such past tense can fade in autumn  
But something still reaches for the nights  
Over fields of ochre stubble  
Like past romance lay in rubble  
In the fading rays of light  
Something in me spreads its wings  
Amongst the kindred flustered things  
And with the strength of summer days  
The wisdom of autumn and spring's healing ways  
Carries me now I am ready  
Onward to winter nights

Maggie Haiber  
Delphos St. John's High School  
Fifth Place

## A Brilliant Decay

cut and go so deep  
the bubbles of crimson  
the red lines of perfection  
blades razors broken glass  
him

cut and go so deep  
in the bathroom  
an empty copper tub  
a tarnished blade  
red

cut and go so deep  
get rid of the feeling  
of your loneliness, kid  
and the self-starving powerlessness  
of yourself  
pain

When I walked in to find you  
I witnessed this mess  
the tears trickling down your face  
seeping into the cracks of your palms  
death

So what's done is done  
It's over and gone  
And today we end in tragedy  
Our love failing miserably  
This is our end



Dennis Zelenak  
Lima Central Catholic High School  
First Place

## The Normal Servant

As M. David Breaux left for his ivory mansion on the outskirts of Natchez, he anxiously thought of his new “property” that he bought at the Harrison County Auction. It had cost him \$900 in gold notes, but to him, this servant would be one of the most industrial. This was not the first servant that M. Breaux had bought, and it certainly would not be his last. He already owned 120 slaves, a fair amount for this area along the Mississippi; however, for the distinguished sugar magnate, uniformity was his uniqueness, and method his maxim. Whether it involved the daily calculations of his profit or the assignments of specific jobs for each of his servants, he was exacting in every manner.

Within a half hour, the carmine tinted carriage gently stopped on the plantation grounds, with its two occupants exiting. Walking under the oak studded ingress, the bound servant obediently followed behind him. “Cyprus,” he said, staring at the submissive figure, “I am placing you to work at the mill. Though only 35 of my servants currently work there, you look strong enough to take the job. I will check your progress every three weeks.” With that, M. Breaux seemingly marched away towards the Main House while Cyprus was led to a stately grey building with large plumes of bittersweet smoke that sifted through its chimneys: la sucrerie. Upon entering, Cyprus was amazed at the efficiency and smoothness of the operation; everything seemed to work in unison. And so, for twelve weeks Cyprus toiled amid the piles of glistening sugar crystals, his work reflective of the methodical harmony of his surroundings.

On the thirteenth week, Breaux decided to make an unannounced check on the progress of his mill, and accordingly entered on Cyprus’ shift. Meanwhile, as Cyprus was preparing to make the robust Muscovado sugar, he saw field harvesters draw closer with more raw sugarcane. As they took their much awaited break, a curious silver glint caught his eye; intrigued by what it could be, Cyprus left his post. As he reached the loading area, he examined the glistening steel scythes with their worn-polished cypress handles; he was amazed at the simple, yet effective design as he picked one up. Before he could inspect it closer, however, a burning smell pierced his nostrils as well as Mr. Breaux’s - the sugar was burning! In his hurry to dash back to his post, he accidentally dropped the scythe, scratching the handle and chipping the tip of the blade. Breaux had already shut off the boiling system, and caught Cyprus halfway between the equipment and his assigned station. Sighing, Breaux pulled Cyprus to the side and asked, “Cyprus, do you think I keep order at this establishment just as a pastime? Do you think that the sugar you burnt and the equipment you break is tolerable? How could I trust you, a mindless worker, with my livelihood?” Cyprus, dazed at the speed at which everything occurred, attempted to pick up the scythe and hand it back to Breaux in a vain attempt of reconciliation; instead, he continued, “I thought that nine hundred dollars worth of wasted sugar and a worthless slave, would be hardship enough. I see, however, a battered scythe now only adds misery to my misfortune!” Pausing, he added, “No, Cyprus, I want you to have it. In fact, since you admire this tool so much, why not make good use of it?” Cyprus, who seemed dumfounded, only stared on. “Your curiosity has outweighed my patience! To recover my

losses, I want you to pick 150 pounds of sugarcane daily. This is double that of my normal servants, but you are clearly not one of my 'normal' servants!" With this, M. Breaux heaved a sigh, and walked past rows of ordered servants who were packaging the sugar for transport.

For months, Cyprus' routine was strenuous, to say the least. Up every morning at five o'clock, he first got the farm equipment in order and then made it to the dew laden fields by six. Unlike most of his fellow slaves that tended the fields two hours later, he singularly had to meet his 150 pound quota, which seemed harder to do each day. "I sho hope that Roulaison is a comin soon. Me, I can't wait till we all have us a party and Mista Bro is goin to give all of us workers a good break," thought Cyprus. The Fete de la Roulaison, or the Grinding Festival, came every October when the Breaux family harvested their abundant sugarcane fields. Friends from as far away as Meridian would come, and the evening would reach its zenith with massive bonfires on the levees. Additionally, M. Breaux made it a customary tradition to let the slaves have the two days of the Roulaison free of labor, something they prayed for each year. As his work days melted into weeks, the long awaited day finally arrived. Numerous guests appeared under the elegant, alabaster frieze of the plantation house, dressed in hoop skirts, frock jackets, and swallow-tail coats, all holding champagne punch filled with expensive chips of ice. Just less than a day ago, while Cyprus was weighing out his final reaping on a large brass scale, a celebratory gunshot was sounded on the whitewashed verandah. Amid the cheering of servants, the laughing of guests, and the sharp tuning notes of the fiddles, the Roulaison had begun!

Cyprus was overjoyed as he eagerly ran towards the small, white oak chapel located on the grounds of garden in the back of the galley. After the service, he headed to one of the nearby levees with the syncopated notes of "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" humming in the distance. Though he was not permitted to leave the plantation grounds, he decided to take a little promenade around the perimeter of the Main House itself. After he had admired the delicately handcrafted French windows and massive Doric columns, he decided to head to the levee to get a good view of the outdoor festivities being set up. Upon reaching the levee, he looked towards the tables and tents which were being lit by servants in crisp, white uniforms, since dusk was rapidly approaching. As he sat on the grass, mesmerized by the sounds of the river's currents behind him while watching the graceful movements of dancing belles, he saw five colored torch bearers make their way up to the levee around him. As he turned his head, he saw them serenely light the cypress wood skeletons of the bonfires. As the bonfires slowly crackled to life and blew mists of embers and sparks from the westerly winds, he watched them slowly make a turn towards the Main House. Cyprus's dream like reverie was abruptly broken by the sound of shattering of glass and the screams of women and children alike; they were torching the Main House!

Stunned by what he perceived as impossible, Cyprus ran quickly towards the house to see what was actually happening. By the time he reached the elegant verdigris framed verandah, the mid section of the Main House was beginning to smoke and the western section was already ablaze. As he ran in the back to look for help, he heard cries from numerous guests saying, "Somebody, quick! M. Breaux is still in the house overseeing the records. . ." Cyprus watched as a handful of guests tried to storm through the

back entrance, only to come out in seconds gasping for air with their clothing singed. Meanwhile, as groups of slaves scattered into the fields, they met little opposition from the fleeing partygoers. As Cyprus was bolting towards the gardenia garden entrance, he heard muffled cries for help from M. Breaux. “For God’s sake, someone, please help me! The fire has. . .”, but before he could finish, the western part of the house collapsed in an earsplitting roar, sending a shower of embers, glass, and smoke towards the escaping guests.

Cyprus, not knowing what to do, spied a broken window on his far right, and decided to help his master. After jumping through the paneless window, he entered the parlor, which was now filled with billows of black smoke and singed, dripping wax busts. He then navigated his way to Breaux’s study. When Breaux recognized the hazy image, he gave a slight grin of relief. Cyprus lifted Breaux to his feet and then proceeded to carry him from the blazing study to safety. Overcome by smoke, Cyprus gasped for his breath and collapsed immediately afterwards. Suddenly, there was another tremendous crash directly above Cyprus; moments later, the corridor was engulfed with flaming timbers. Ashen with horror, Breaux appeared petrified as he looked back just before he was dragged from a nearby window by two other planters. They escorted him to the area near the servants’ quarters.

As Breaux half laid on the grass, covered with cool cloths, he watched his palatial estate crumble to mere ash. Suddenly propelled by some force which can only be described as from the Divine, he slowly turned to Cyprus’ vacant cabin. Breaux, stunned and perplexed, whispered, “You, a mere servant, gave up your battered life for your master!” While trembling uncontrollably, he continued, “You clearly were not one of my ‘normal’ servants.” Lost in a web of confusion and panic, few recovering planters and their socialite wives would have noticed the usually confident and strong willed M. David Breaux huddled next to a rickety slave cabin, crying.



Elspeth Neville  
Lima Central Catholic High School  
Second Place

## The Twisted Window

The two houses sat beside each other on a residential street. They were built with a similar structure though the kitchens of each house face each other. The houses were separated by a dark alley that seemed to be more a part of the unfortunate looking house on the other side. The better looking of the two houses was the one painted blue. Around the house were beautiful flower beds and each flower carried itself erectly with pride just like the woman who planted them. The house across the alley appeared to be the complete opposite. It was painted a sickly shade of yellow and the house itself seemed to lean with a certain amount of gloom. Around the house were dark leafless trees with branches that poked out like scary fingers that scratched at its window panes in the night. An attribute that you could give to both houses were the large bay windows that extended from the kitchens. They were bright and allowed much sun to enter the houses. However, the residents in the yellow house could not be proud of their large window. The glass was shattered right in the center and you could ascertain trails of glass spreading out from the puncture in the center.

The neighbors had lived beside each other for several years but did not know each other well. They learned much of what they knew from observing each other through the large windows in their kitchens. Well, that is how Mrs. Springfield found out much about Mrs. Winterbourne. Mrs. Springfield kept a very neat kitchen that had all of the feminine attributes of style. Mrs. Springfield was very proud of her kitchen and all of its orderliness and beauty. She felt rather sorry for her poor neighbor Mrs. Winterbourne. Mrs. Winterbourne's kitchen was rather plain and although she kept it clean and neat it did not have much warmth. The only beauty that the kitchen held was the potted plant that Mrs. Winterbourne had placed on the sill of the broken window. It was a very bold red color and it was not of a species that Mrs. Springfield could identify. However, as of late the flower appeared to be wilting and had taken on a dullish brown hue.

One bright morning, while Mr. and Mrs. Springfield sat in their kitchen eating a splendid breakfast prepared by Mrs. Springfield, they observed something very odd. Mr. Winterbourne appeared to be cooking at the stove. Mrs. Winterbourne was nowhere to be seen. "Well, isn't it just like that woman to make her husband fix his own breakfast," Mr. Springfield exclaimed.

"Perhaps Mrs. Winterbourne is sick," said Mrs. Springfield.

"Oh, now I very much doubt that," Mr. Springfield smirked. "My guess is that she was just feeling a bit lazy today. You know it is very good of her husband to treat her so kindly when he has so much other work on his hands. Husbands take such good care of their wives," Mr. Springfield smiled broadly. Mrs. Springfield pursed her lips as if she didn't quite believe it and then began to clear the breakfast dishes from the table.

Mrs. Springfield had never really liked Mr. Winterbourne. He was a large man with

rough hands and a rigid jaw. She saw no warmth in any of his features. He had small brooding eyes that seemed to penetrate clear to your soul as if trying to divulge all of your secrets and insecurities. He put a nameless fear in the heart of Mrs. Springfield every time she observed his dark form. She could not understand why little and once beautiful Mrs. Winterbourne would marry such a man. He seemed to be very cruel to his wife. She never saw any sign of affection pass between them. It didn't even appear that Mr. Winterbourne let his wife decorate her own kitchen like her husband had. That one small flower in the window was the only sign of beauty in the room.

That evening at dinner, Mr. and Mrs. Springfield were once again sitting at their kitchen table. Through the window they could see their neighbors eating their dinner quietly in their kitchen. Suddenly Mr. Winterbourne stood, abruptly knocking over his chair in the process and stormed out of the room. Mrs. Winterbourne quietly laid down her fork, up righted the chair on all four legs, then monotonously began to clear the table.

"He doesn't appear to be very happy," Mrs. Springfield said. "I wonder what his problem is."

"He is probably angry because his wife appears to do nothing about that house," Mr. Springfield exploded. "You women need to learn your place."

"How can you make such quick judgments?! You don't even know her," Mrs. Springfield said in defense of the other woman. "Perhaps if her husband wouldn't treat her with such coldness and carelessness!"

"I know idleness when I see it," Mr. Springfield exclaimed and marched out of the room.

A very flustered Mrs. Springfield looked back into the neighboring kitchen. Mrs. Winterbourne sat in a kitchen chair with her head in her lap. Mrs. Springfield could see tears running down her cheeks and her small frame was rocking with sobs of helplessness.

"He must have done something awful this time," Mrs. Springfield thought to herself. "That poor woman must be in a horrible situation. I wonder if he abuses her? She must be at least emotionally abused. The woman is sobbing! What an awful man!"

Late that night Mrs. Springfield quietly crept into the kitchen for a glass of milk for she could not sleep. She looked through her window into the shattered one of her neighbors. She could see a candle burning brightly on the neighbor's kitchen table. Beams of light bounced off the shattered panes of glass in the window lighting up the dark kitchen. As Mrs. Springfield sat drinking her milk she saw a large dark form enter the kitchen and walk over to the flower sitting on the window sill. A hand reached out as to grasp the flower by its stem but suddenly it stopped. A smaller form appeared beside the larger. Mr. Winterbourne reached his arms around his wife and kissed her passionately. Then Mrs. Winterbourne reached for the flower, took it to the sink, watered it, and placed it back on the window sill. Mrs. Springfield turned around swiftly, poured her remaining milk in the sink, and walked back to bed. All the while she was thinking about the flower in the window and how it had appeared to have regained its red luster.

Karlton Dardio  
Spencerville High School  
Third Place

## Insanity on the Bounty

“Oi, Alfie,” Roger yelled, “Get in here!”

I ran inside, tossing my lit cigarette onto the pavement outside the door. “What is it, Rog?” He insisted that we call him ‘Rog’ so it’s like we’re friends and have affectionate nicknames for him, even though we all hate him with a fiery inferno of passion. “Did Larry knock over the chip display again?”

“Hey, shut up!” Larry called from the back room, where he was, no doubt, deeply immersed in this month’s edition of *Rawk Out* or some other music rag. “I didn’t do crap!”

“Both a yas, shut yer traps!” Rog interrupted. He tossed a mop at me. “Start cleanin’, chump. We’re closin’ early.” He did this all the time.

“Why?” I asked, not really caring, and knowing what answer I’d get anyways.

“Mind yer own bidness.”

See, Roger wasn’t the type of guy to support himself just with the gas station in which I was employed. He insisted on running a small, private, and highly illegal firm out of his station. In the back room, behind a fake wall he’d made me build, was Roger’s personal meth lab. It wasn’t anything fancy, just a propane can, some pots and pans, and a large stack of household cleaners. It suited Roger just fine, because he could sell crystal meth to any poor slob he wanted, and the telltale smell would be covered up by the everlasting stench of gasoline and broken dreams that haunt this building.

Roger was likely going to go hang out around the movie theatre, and offer hits to high schoolers who weren’t smart enough to just ignore him.

If it were anyone else, I would have reported him in a minute. Unfortunately for me, but fortunately for Roger, the constant stench of the lab helped keep me fully aware of the world, minimizing my hallucinatory experiences. They still existed, but only as sprites that danced around my fingertips in mid-air.

“Right then,” I said, and started mopping.

An hour later, I was walking back to my apartment, a crummy basement deal with barely-working hot water and roaches in every dark corner. As my feet pounded a steady rhythm on the concrete earth, my mind began to wander and imagine.

I wasn’t walking alone anymore. An eagle with human feet walked beside me, making catcalls at nothing. It was almost ten o’clock, so only the crazies, stupids, or criminally

inclined dared to wander, and I felt comfortable telling the phantasm to shut his trap or I'd shut it for him. He looked at me and slowly dissolved into thin air. I breathed a sigh of relief, and continued walking. From the night sky, there was a whoosh of air and pain on my head as he flew from non-existence to peck at my head.

I started running with my jacket pulled over my scalp, guarding myself against the beak and those talons growing from human toes. I had to leap to the side as three ninjas burst from an alley and leapt fifty feet to kick at my gut. I tripped on something and fell, running my palms over rough concrete and ripping the knee of my jeans. On instinct, I immediately curled into the fetal position with my hands over my head.

Nothing happened.

I peeked out of my ball, and saw no apparitions. No bizarre creatures or warriors. Shuddering, I stood up and brushed the dust and gravel from my clothes. As it just happened, my imagination had chased me directly outside my apartment building.

“Joy of joys,” I muttered under my breath, searching for my key. Right inside the front doors in front of mailboxes, my landlord was talking to a new face. Tall, with raven hair and pale skin, her eyes were green and they looked at me the way I looked at Roger every day. “What up?” I asked nonchalant, the very image of cool, with my dirty clothes and scraped hands.

The landlord interjected with an obscenity I choose not to reprint here as a matter of good taste. I will, however, tell you that it was a very succinct method for telling me to leave as soon as possible, which I did without hesitation.

I stumbled worn out down the stairs to my door. It was right by the washing machines, so I enjoyed the continuous rumble of either a running washer or the delightful clanks and small explosions of a busted machine. Today, the machine was broken, probably beyond repair, meaning I'd get to listen to my landlord curse and swear in wonderful new ways. Stepping into my apartment, I flipped on the light and closed my eyes so I wouldn't have to see just how many cockroaches skittered out of sight.

A unicorn sat on my sofa, its horn bright pink and blue striped. It turned to me and looked up and down. “Fun day at work?”

“Shut up.”

I shrugged and turned back to the deactivated television. I walked to the small screen and pushed the power button. “Sometimes, it works well to turn it on first.”

The unicorn pointed its horn at me, “You need a hit?”

“Yeah, why not?” I replied. My hands stung and my knee felt like I'd twisted it. A little stream of blue ribbon shot from the tip of the unicorn's horn and into my forehead. My heart-rate increased, pumping a combination of endorphins and epinephrine into my

bloodstream, making the pain melt away. I inhaled and exhaled slowly, letting my body relax. I was the only person I knew who could get that natural high whenever I wanted. Or at least, whenever I was around this hallucination. “Anything good on?” I asked.

“Dunno,” he replied, flipping through the channels with the remote. “Nothing fun or interesting, just news and violence.”

“Oh, glee,” I mumbled, walking to my bathroom. I needed a shower and a nap. I successfully attempted the former, but the latter was interrupted by yells from the washing machines. It wasn’t the landlord deep angry voice, but a female voice and equally angry, cursing up a storm of its own. I decided to investigate.

I found there the new woman my landlord had been talking to. She turned and looked at me, rolled her eyes and turned back to the non-functioning device.

“What’s up?” I inquired politely.

“What do you think is up?” she answered, slightly less politely. In fact, she used a few words which will be omitted from the conversation. “Thing ate my coins.” She hit the side of the washer and swore loudly.

I walked forward and pushed her gently aside before kicking the front of the machine. The jolt caused it to turn on and start rumbling. “It does this every week. You just gotta know how it work and how it breaks.”

“Thanks,” she said. Then there was that awkward silence that happens when someone becomes indebted to the person they had previously looked down upon. Most men would have used the situation to get her attention romantically. I decided to do the same, though my skills were a bit rusty, have never been used.

“So,” I said uncomfortably, “Come here often?”

She cocked an eyebrow and crossed her arms. Crud, I thought. Wrong line!

I tried again. “How about those Yankees?”

“I’m a Red Sox fan.” She started tapping her foot, indicating that I had one strike left.

“Wanna grab some coffee?” I asked tentatively.

She thought for a moment, stroking her chin. “Sure, why not.”

And that’s how I met Eva.

While we were at the coffee house, whose name will remain unspoken to avoid copyright

infringement, I discovered two distinct facts:

- A. I cannot stand frappuccino
- B. Eva cancelled out my hallucinations

This brought about a startling calm in me that hadn't experience since the eighth grade, the year I started seeing things. It was quite refreshing, to not look down and see an anaconda engulfing my foot, or see a flying squadron of Model-Ts floating across a blue sky. The rain was rain, not a thousand tiny needles falling from the sky. The clouds were no longer bright green and making faces. People no longer multiplied before my eyes and broke into random song and dance.

We were happy together, Eva and I. We had a lot in common, from our choice of books to the type of people we could stand to be around. She visited me at work one day and made life painful for Roger, who thought he might try to use his powerful charm to get her. And by charm, I mean body odor. Needless to say, his attempts failed miserably.

After three months without a mental breakdown or imagined physical object, I quit my job, no longer needing the smells to control my visions. Shortly thereafter, I called the cops on him. Turns out he was also wanted for a few cases of breaking and entering in Wyoming, so no great loss to the world there.

After six month, I'd gotten a decent job and saved enough to move to a better apartment a few blocks down the street. I moved what few possessions I wanted to keep and had a party with just Eva and myself, no unicorns.

She moved in with me shortly afterward, and I found myself growing accustom to a life of sanity. After a year, I'd saved up enough to put a down payment on Eva's birthday gift. It was a ring, the best ring I could afford. Silver with studded diamond, twisted around itself into a Celtic ring, I knew she would love it. I stepped through our door and reached into my jacket pocket, pulling the box out. I'd gotten off of work early, and she had taken the day off, so I was hoping to surprise her. I entered the living room and dropped the box.

There sat Eva, and next to her sat a blonde man, who looked far too tall, handsome, and strong for my delicate ego. Eva's lips and this man's lips were currently locked around one another, and both of them were so preoccupied that they had failed to notice me. But the noise of that soft velvet box falling upon the hard wood floors caught their attention. Eva quickly backed away from her lover and stood up. She said something but I couldn't understand her.

My eyes began to sting, and so did my chest, and head, and every other part of me. I dropped to my knees and began to cry. Both of the traitors spoke, but for some reason, I couldn't hear them.

Without warning, half of the apartment fell off of the building. The city outside was pure terror. Fire engulfed the buildings, and a thousand giants roamed the streets, clubs in hand, swinging wildly to bring down huge structures, allowing new building of spiked

black onyx to rise from the ashes and rubble. I ran to the edge of the floor and dove off, falling toward the molten lava running through the streets. I closed my eyes before I hit, and there was blackness for a long time.

I opened my eyes and was greeted by heaven. Everything was white, and held an ethereal glow. I looked up and saw the light of god shining down on me. I smiled. Maybe I would see Eva here. And then the images rushed back. Eva, the blonde man, the city on fire. My vision blurred and faded before refocusing.

No longer was I in heaven. I was in a small room, only ten feet by ten feet. The walls, ceiling, and floor were all covered in white fabric. I rolled onto my stomach and tried to push myself up, but my arms were pinned to my side by my new white jacket. With some effort, I managed to sit up against one of the walls. I saw a large door across the room. It was padded, just like the rest of the room. My body began to ache from the cramps in my muscles.

“You alright, man?” I heard, and looked to my side. The unicorn sat there, staring at me, concern in his large purple eyes.

“I think I might be crazy,” I managed to utter through the pain of my seizing muscles.

“You need a hit?” he asked. I nodded my head vigorously. His horn shot that familiar blue ribbon into my forehead, and I felt the world melt away once more.



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## Mysterious Ways

Richard opened his eyes to see white blinding light. He had no sense of himself, only that blinding light. Quickly, his mind raced, trying to develop some concept of what was going on. “Oh my God,” he thought, “I’m dead.” This is the white light everyone talks about on all those talk shows. How ironic that his last thoughts were about what he might be missing in life and now here he is dead. He was shaken from his thoughts.

“What’s the story here? Make it quick! Have you done the retrieval yet?” came a deep, gruff voice out of the light. The sound of it startled Richard.

“Auto accident, sir,” came a reply.

“Just starting the retrieval now,” added the second voice.

Richard tried to see beyond the light. He struggled to move his head without success. He struggled to move any part of his body without success. It was horrific to discover that he really could not even feel his body. Only his mind seemed to be in attendance and it was not very attentive at that. “What was going on?” he wondered. “If this was the famous white light to heaven, what is all the discussion and what would they be retrieving?” Richard was aware of someone standing over his right shoulder. He couldn’t see anything but could easily sense their presence.

“Have you got the indicator yet?” asked the impatient first voice.

“Ah, here it is, sir.” replied the second voice.

“What’s the readout? We have to be making some decisions here. The family here yet?” asked the first authoritative voice.

“Well he reads a 2 and 3. Not too good.” answered the second voice. Richard was near panic. He could only see the white light and hear only these two voices. If this were a hospital, wouldn’t he hear the commotion of a busy Emergency Room? And if he were dead, why all the talk of numbers?

“Well let’s see here, first number a two huh? Bring up the screen.” commanded the first voice. Soon Richard was listening to the two voices discuss his life.

“HMMMMM, not a church-goer it seems.”

“No charitable endeavors.”

“Scarce time for prayer, legitimate prayers anyway,” mused the first voice.

“You know, I am always saddened by the fact that most people feel prayers are for asking,” continued the first voice.

“Oh well, get on with the review.” encouraged the first voice. “I have to be making a decision.” Richard could not believe his ears. How could these people know all of this about him?

“The second number is three,” came the second voice.

“Well let’s take a look,” ordered the first voice.

“Oh my, two children who long for the attention of their father. I tell ya, these people who are blessed with children only to fail at parenthood. Then quickly accuse the woes of the world on God when the children get into trouble,” said the first voice sounding very irritated.

“He is married to a very good woman,” came the second voice as though to change the subject.

“Well, yes, but I see she struggles to stay in the marriage because of his lack of companionship. It takes two to make a marriage. Teamwork through good and bad,” returned the first voice.

“Hmmm, I really do not approve of his business practices. He does not appear to be totally honest with his customers. It appears he is selling for the commission instead of what the consumer needs. This is unacceptable!” uttered the first voice.

“Well sir, there is more yet to review,” said the second voice meekly. “The usual acts of unkindness seen in humanity.”

“I think I’ve seen enough.” said the first voice. Richard lay dumbfounded He no longer struggled to move. He just lay and listened. Listened to the reality of his life. They were reviewing and evaluating his life’s choices.

“I’ve made my decision. Go and get the medical team.” ordered the first voice.

“Yes, sir!” replied the second voice. Richard strained to hear at this point. The voices were dimming.

“You sent for me, sir?” said a new voice to the mix.

“Yes Doctor, I’ve made my decision for this case. Unfortunately, this is a soul who missed the true mission in life. He blames his misery on those around him and God, taking no responsibility himself for the choices he has made in life. His Worthiness Indicators were not good. My first instinct was to allow you to be as aggressive in his treatment as measured against his aggressiveness to be a good human being,” spoke the first voice.

“Wait!!!” screamed Richard inside his head and to no one’s heed. “Why is this happening? This cannot be how it is.”

“But,” continued the first voice, “He is greatly loved by his family, who knew the man as a good soul at one time. Therefore my decision.....”

Suddenly, Richard jumped with a start. He was still blinded and could not see. Blinking, he began to make out shapes. He heard his heart pounding in his head and the shapes became clearer. Familiar sounds surrounded Richard as he began to gain feeling again.

“Please God, he pleaded, let all of this have been nothing but a nightmare.”

Richard found himself lying in his bed. Wave after wave of relief washed over him. The sounds of his family in the kitchen caught his attention. Quickly, he jumped from the bed and ran downstairs. All eyes were on him as he entered.

“What have we done to deserve this pleasure?” asked his wife playfully.

“Yeah, Dad. What’s up?” asked one of the children. Richard looked at his wife and children and tears came to his eyes. How many years had passed since he had looked upon them in such a light?

“Well how about Dad joining you for breakfast this morning?” he asked. The response was slow but surprisingly welcoming. The family shared breakfast as a family for the first time in such a long time.

“Richard? How is it you have the time to be with us this morning?” asked his wife.

“I dunno. I guess I just realized what is truly important in life. You and the kids have always been there for me. Loving me when I really didn’t deserve it,” responded Richard.

“I don’t know what has come over you, but I am thankful to God to have you back,” replied his wife.

“And I am thankful to God for listening to your and the kids’ prayers.” stated Richard. He left to take his shower, leaving his wife looking after him perplexed by his last statement. Richard took his shower leisurely. Something he had not done for ages. He used this time to think about his life and the choices he would now make with careful consideration. He felt blessed to have been given the chance to re-evaluate his life by his nightmare. He stepped out of the shower and began to dry off.

“What a beautiful day.” he thought. As he turned to deposit the towel into the hamper, he noted something out of the corner of his eye. A spot, a red spot on the back of his neck that had not been there before.



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## Sonata

His parents had not understood why he cried over the blood on his violin. Because of that, he knew that they would not understand his current mission. They would not understand the need for the violin, the overwhelming rage he felt that such a fine instrument was forgotten.

A Stradivarius abandoned as simply as a badly written piece of music.

The fallout wind pushed him onwards. The powerful, imminent thunderstorm spoke to him in low rumbles, reminding him of a string bass and he wished he could feel the music again. He knew he would not feel music with others again for a very long time.

He rushed as quickly as he dared. People were dangerous. The Day was callous, unthinking of how it would ruin lives or improve lives. He remembered it clearly. He remembered the nuclear warheads launched against the United States, the intense crescendo and decrescendo of impending nuclear weapons as they came near and passed the house.

Rowan was not a mistreated boy, only misunderstood in ways other teenagers cried about, but did not really grasp. His parents loved him, but he was focused on one thing at this moment. He wanted that violin. He did not want anything more or less.

Rowan had been diagnosed with a mental disorder. He knew it didn't mean he was crazy. It meant he was different. He happily described it as like being the Stradivarius he wanted. Different, but in a good way. Beautiful, rare, but not compelling as the violin was. Only his playing ability was compelling to anyone.

Whispering to himself as he approached his small hometown and the university where the violin was located, Rowan reassured himself that he would run into no one that would impede his mission. Or kill him.

Repeatedly, with the soft confidence of a boy in self-contained solitude, he whispered:

“No one. It's quiet. Rowan won't run into anyone. They won't stop Rowan even if he does run into them. They're not really there. Not really there. They can't hurt Rowan. They're not really there. Not there at all. Not at all.”

The mad ravings of a delusional, lonely boy, he thought with bitterness. He made music. He was a music maker with passion. Of course he was lonely.

He checked his pocket to make sure he had the key he had borrowed from his father, who had been the university's Music Department chairman. It opened almost all doors to the university. He made sure he had the flashlight. Quickly, Rowan was on the university campus and in front of the music building.

It was not hard to figure out where they would keep such a fine instrument. Rowan went to the glass cases and realized he did not have the key for the case. Not even his master key would open the case. If he broke the glass, he would almost certainly damage his hands or the violin.

He used his heel to bust the glass. He was careful about the force he used so close to the violin. He made sure he found the case before he pulled the fine instrument out. He touched the cool wood and shivered. Rowan found the bow to the instrument and heard the thunder again.

He should go home.

But he had to play the violin first.

Rowan wished there was a shoulder rest, but he didn't care. Couldn't care. This was a Stradivarius and he had it now. He ran the bow along the strings and shivered. He played the first song that came to mind: a violin sonata by Bach that his father had long ago taught him. When he was finished, he was sure the Stradivarius was what he needed. As he finished, he cried out in panic as the thunder shook the building.

He had to go home. It was getting far too dangerous to stay outside. He packed the Stradivarius into the case and left the music building.

The wind whipped him furiously, denying him permission to go home and he felt lost. He had to get home to play the violin. The smooth wood under his fingers enraptured him as surely as his brother's sweetheart mesmerized Roman. He didn't care if he had someone like Katie as Roman did. The violin was all that mattered.

The violent storm terrified him. He kept going: pushing against the wind even after it knocked him to the ground. The Stradivarius was safe. It was in a hard case that was the best of its kind. The rain slashed him as certainly as a saber would have and stung his eyes, despite the protection of his glasses. He cried out with exhilaration when he saw the house on the horizon.

Rowan went in the front door and dug into his pocket, throwing the keys carelessly on the end table by the front door. He lifted the strap from his shoulder and carried the Stradivarius into the kitchen. His father stood by the stove and looked at him as he came in.

"Rowan has it, papa," Rowan said. "Rowan has it."

Jesse said nothing as he observed Rowan, who stripped off his soaked T-shirt and jeans. He changed into dry clothes and went back to the kitchen.

"Take it to your room," Jesse said. His back was turned to Rowan. "I don't want to see it."

"Rowan has it," Rowan said again and smiled. He took the case off the table and headed

up the stairs. “Rowan has it.”

In his room, he opened the case, pulled out the bow and violin. He positioned it to play.

He shivered at the simple open G and quickly warmed up. He played music from memory, but he couldn't remember any of the gentle, carefree music. He wanted to play happy music as he had before. He wanted to make his parents happy again and he didn't want them to keep fighting, but he could not remember. He only remembered the depressing, dark sections.

Fighting his tears, ashamed of his inability to fight them or remember, Rowan threw the Stradivarius on his bed and didn't care as the bow snapped when he threw it on the ground.

Down the hall, he heard his parents start to fight again and resisted crying. He was tired of this world; he wanted the old one back even when he didn't have a Stradivarius. He looked outside.

The rain was not as harsh. The wind was slowly wafting the scattered drops. They hit the window and Rowan couldn't remember-he couldn't remember...

The rain stopped suddenly. Rowan could not remember. He threw the violin off of his bed and buried his face into his hands.

He could not remember what it was like to play the violin for himself. Just himself.

Had he ever really known?

Down the hall, his parents fighting continued and more raised voices assured him he had not.

The dark gray storm clouds slowly moved west. He felt himself start to cry. In his room, Rowan was still alone. In his room, except for his own crying and his parents' declining argument, it was silent. And silent. And silent.







05-07