

## “Freedom” by Brooke Summers

*Photo - Flags*

Boom! Psshhh. Boom! Psshhh. There go the fireworks. Oooh. Ahh. Go the people staring in amazement. Everyone in the town came out to watch the fireworks. Everyone except me. I stare out from my bedroom window just to catch a glimpse of the fun. The American flags all lined up in a row, swaying in the wind with colors dancing in the background.

“Lizzie, we are leaving now. Remember, don’t leave the house, it is not good for you!” my mother said.

“It is just a cough mom!” I yelled back.

“Lizzie, don’t forget what the doctor said. We got to go now. I love you bye.” my mother called.

Slam! They shut the door and left to go to the park and join the fun. She asked me not to forget what the doctor said but how could I forget. A week ago I went to the doctor because I kept coughing and it got worse and worse. When we got to the doctor’s office we were waiting forever before Mr. A, his name is too complicated to pronounce so I just call him Mr. A, but when he finally got to me he said he had bad news.

He said “Lizzie, I am afraid you have a lung problem. It is called...” and I stopped listening after that. A lung problem? Great. The coughing might never stop. Right when I thought things couldn’t get any worse, the doctor restricted me to no going outside for three weeks. After three weeks the medicine he prescribed should kick in.

One week later and I am losing it. I just have a bad cough and today is Fourth of July. My favorite holiday but I cannot go outside and have fun. Not even on a holiday where we celebrate our country and our freedom. Not on Independence Day of all days where I can run around with sparklers and stare into the sky for hours just watching the colors burst, and then slowly fade away.

I am stuck here alone. Even my dog, Lucky, joined the fun. I thought that when my parents left me, they felt guilty that I could not come, but as I look across the street into the park, they are laughing, playing with my sister, Bailee, and enjoying themselves, without me. I am invisible, forgotten, a lost soul just waiting to be set free. Free to run, play, and simply sit there and watch the fireworks. All I want is to watch, gaze, enjoy, and be a part of the fun. Tonight I will dream of that fun. Dream of the fireworks. Boom! Psshhh.//Boom! Psshhh.

## “Flags” by Courtney Cassidy

*Photo - Flags*

“How are we going to tell them the bad news?” a soldier in the US. army asked.

“We’ve just got to rip off the bandage,” said another soldier.

“That poor family. . .,” spoke a third recruit while a tear rolled down his cheek.

On this day, we are celebrating the American soldiers that have fought for our country. We remember the soldiers that we have lost and the ones that are still fighting. Today, many soldiers are coming home to see their families once again. Sadly, not all of the recruits make it home.

One family will soon find out that their beloved twenty-seven year old son has died fighting in Iraq. This family is the Smiths. The Smith family consists of a mother, father, two sisters, and a brother who died due to getting shot in the chest four times. The Smiths were preparing for their son to come home when they heard a knock at the door. Mrs. Smith ran to the door expecting to see her son waiting at the door with open arms, but when she opened the door she saw just about the opposite. Three soldiers were standing at the door with their hats off and heads bowed. She knew what it meant right when she saw an American flag folded neatly in a triangle frame. Her son was dead. Just like that, a joyous day turned into a day of sorrow and loss.

“I’m sorry to say, Mrs. Smith, but your son Bradley has died in Iraq,” the tallest soldier explained.

Mrs. Smith’s heart sunk when she heard the words she was thinking said outloud. Now the whole family is at the door after hearing those dreadful, heart-braking words. They are all in complete shock.

“We are so very sorry,” said one of the shorter soldiers.

“Thank you for letting us know and have a nice day,” murmured Mr. Smith while accepting the flag case.

“God bless,” spoke the third and shortest soldier as they walked away.

The family was silent for a while when Claire, the youngest sister, broke the silence.

“Is Bradley gone?” Clair asked softly.

“Yes Claire, he’s gone,” whispered Donna, the eldest sister.

“If you’ll excuse me for a moment,” Mrs. Smith proclaimed as she bolted up the stairs to her and Mr. Smith’s bedroom.

The whole family could hear her sobbing upstairs as they still stood in front of the closed door, silent like statues. Soon Mr. Smith joined his wife upstairs and the crying continued even louder than before.

“Should we finish dinner?” Claire asked innocently.

“No Claire! Bradley died and you’re worried about dinner? Unbelievable!” Donna shouted at Claire louder than Claire has ever heard until they were both in tears.

As Donna walked away Claire spoke softly, “I miss him too, you know.”

Donna stopped and responded, “I know Clair’e, I know.”

The two sisters embraced in a hug, both of them in tears. Shortly after that Mr. and Mrs. Smith came down to join them.

As they were hugging, Donna proposed that they should go do something out of the house like walk to the park or go downtown. Mr. Smith, Mrs. Smith, and Claire all agreed that Bradley wouldn’t have wanted them to mourn, but to celebrate that he died fighting for their beloved country.

The Smiths decided that they should go to the Memorial Day parade. At the parade, everyone was celebrating, including the Smith family. While they saw colorful fireworks boom and heard the festive choirs sing, the Smiths had some memorable family bonding time because they all knew that Bradley was with them.

Though the Smiths evening started out terribly, it turned out to be a joyous day. At the fair, they made a tribute to Bradley by eating his favorite food, corn dogs. He always cherished the smell of a warm hotdog wrapped in flaky breading. The Smiths also sat by Claire’s favorite fountain and threw pennies into the smooth, cold water.

Donna went off on her own for a while to view the gravestones. When she arrived, she felt the hard, rough stones and thought of how soon Bradley would have his headstone here. The thought of her older brother made tears well up in her brilliant green eyes, the same color as Bradley’s. Bradley was Donna’s rock, he protected her and guided her throughout her life. She really missed him. Donna then decided to reunite with her family hoping that they would be in a better mood than she is. Luckily, the Smiths were playing Mr. Smith’s favorite game, ring toss. This cheered Donna up right away.

“What should we play next?” Mrs. Smith asked when they all got bored of ring toss.

“Can we please ride the carousel?” Claire asked excitedly.

## “Flags” by Courtney Cassidy

*Photo - Flags*

“I don’t see why not!” Mr.Smith exclaimed.

“Yay!” Claire said as she ran toward the slow-moving carousel.

While Mr.Smith and Claire were having fun on the carousel, Donna and Mrs.Smith were taking a saunter on the pier. They smelt the slimy fish and heard the atrocious seagulls flapping their wings. Mrs.Smith and Donna both avoided discussing Bradley, but they knew that they were both thinking about him nonstop.

After Mr.Smith and Claire had gone on the carousel countless times, the whole family decided that it was time to head back to their house before it got too dark. As they were walking, fireworks were still booming and the flags were still waving.

“That’s the brightest firework I’ve ever seen!” shouted Claire over the intense sound of the firework she just saw.

“Wow, you’re right Claire, that firework was really bright, but I think that the one over there is even brighter!” said Donna.

“Ok girls, let’s keep walking. I’m so tired I could sleep on the ground!” Mrs.Smith proclaimed.

“That wouldn’t be very comfortable, sweetie,” Mr.Smith said as they were all laughing.

“I’m really glad that we came to the parade,” Donna said as she yawned.

“So am I,” spoke Mrs.Smith. “Me too!” Claire exclaimed.

“Settle down now, Claire,” Mr.Smith said tiredly.

“Ok, daddy,” Claire murmured.

When the Smiths got home they all got ready for bed, but before they parted, Mr.Smith told everyone to come downstairs. He placed the flag case on the mantle in honor of their son, brother, and role model. The whole family agreed that it was the perfect place to put Bradley’s flag. As they said goodnight to each other one by one, the Smiths knew that Bradley wasn’t really dead. He was alive in their hearts.

## “The Other Side” by Jackie Zielinski

*Photo – Both Sides Now*

Ring!!! The bell rang and the school day was finally over. I grabbed my stuff out of my locker and walked to my best friend’s locker.

“Hey Becca you excited for tonight? It’s finally Friday!” I said to Becca from behind surprising her.

“Oh, hi Addy! I’m so excited for tonight! Is your mom picking us up?” she replies.

“Yea she’s in the parking lot waiting right now let’s go!” Becca and I walk out the school doors and to my mom’s van. We are super excited for tonight because Becca is spending the night at my house since tomorrow is my 14th birthday. We reached my mom’s van and got in.

“Hi Sweetie, hi Becca, how was your day?” My mom says smiling.

“Hi Mrs. Matthews, my day was good.”

“Hey mom, so was mine.” Becca and I smile at each other as we buckle our seatbelts.

“Dad and Jake are at baseball practice so they won’t be home for a little while. They are going to pick up pizza on the way home” mom adds.

“Ok, we are probably going to take a walk on the trail in the woods like we always do.”

We pull in the driveway after a two minute drive and Becca I run in the house. We set our stuff on the stairs and bolt out the door.

“Be careful girls! Remember what we’ve told you before! I’ll call when the guys are home!” we heard my mom yell from the house.

“Ok” I yell back as we run towards the woods. Every time we’re at my house we walk the trail in the woods because we just love it and it is right behind my house so it is not like it is far. The great smell of nature fills our noses as we reach the woods.

“So are you excited to be 14 tomorrow?” Becca asks with a smirk on her face.

“I guess”, I reply laughing. We reach the part of the woods where we would have to choose which path to take the one on the right or the one on the left. We always take the right path because we have been warned to not take the left path. We’ve always wondered why. All adults, especially our parents, tell us to never take the left path. When we ask why they always say we are too young. I really want to know what is on the other side. We both stop and Becca looks at me.

“Are you ok?” she asks.

“I think we should take the left path,” I spit out.

“WHAT?”

“Becca, haven’t you ever wondered what’s on the other side? Why everyone says it is so dangerous?” “I mean I guess, but Addy our parents said we are not allowed”. I look at Becca and turn to step in the direction of the left path. “Ok, I’m coming! Becca says a little way behind me. I want to see too.” I look back at her and smile. Neither of us knows where we are going. We are just following the path and seeing where it takes us.

We kept walking for a few more minutes, chatting and kicking rocks when we see a big hill.

“Hey, Addy! We should go climb that!”.

“Let’s go! Race you there!” I started running as fast as I could. I reached the bottom of the hill and started running up. That’s when I slowed down and lost energy. Becca ran past me, she has always been a fast runner. “Eat my dust” she yells laughing. Finally, I made it up to where Becca was and we both fell to the ground laughing. When we calmed down we stood up and looked at the view. We instantly noticed something and realized why our parents didn’t want us up here. It was another city it looked very strange and very different. It was like the total opposite of our city. It was dark and stormy and everything about it was very scary.

“Becca, I...I think that we should go back to my house”.

“I think that would be a good idea” she said. We were both in shock. Finally, we got the courage to turn around and run. We ran as fast as we could and didn’t look back. We finally reached my house and ran in slamming the door behind us. We stood there out of breathe. My mom walked through the kitchen door.

“Are you girls ok? What did you do?” she asked suspiciously.

“Nothing!” We both replied. Mom gave us one last suspicious glance and turned around back to the living room.

“That was close,” Becca said. I didn’t respond to her but gave her a worried look as if to say, yes it was. Becca and I ran upstairs up to my room. We both sat on the floor and stared at each other.

“How? I started to say.

## **“The Other Side” by Jackie Zielinski**

*Photo – Both Sides Now*

"I have no idea" Becca said.

"We need to go back tomorrow."

"Definitely" we ended the conversation and went to sleep.

I woke up and looked at my clock 8:57 am. I looked at Becca who was still sleeping. I leaned over and woke her up.

"Becca we should go now."

"Okay let's go". We tiptoed downstairs careful not to wake my parents or brother up.

"We should probably write a note so they don't get worried." I suggested.

"Good idea" Becca said.

When I finished writing the note we put our shoes and jackets on and went out the door. It's not until we reached the two paths before we really started running. We reached the hill and started running faster and faster. At one point we stopped to look back because we thought someone was following us but quickly turned around when we saw no one was there. We reached the top and just stared. We stood there for a few minutes until we heard a voice behind us.

"Looking for something?" I would recognize that voice anywhere. Becca and I turn around.

"Mom?" I said, "What are you doing here?"

"I believe I should be asking you the same question "she replied in a mad tone.

"But mom..." I started to say.

"But nothing, everyone has told you not to come here."

"How did you even know where we were?" I asked.

"Well, your note and the way you came running in last night." Becca and I glanced at each other nervously. We may be in big trouble but now we know what is on both sides and we will be back!

## “Diamonds In The Rough” by Meredith Schwartz

*Photo – Painted Lady*

12:15. Footsteps pounding and frantic running inside. A sign casually switched to closed, giving no indication to the passerby of what is truly going on inside. The bank Safe Trust quietly goes into a panic lockdown. All the customers are calmly ushered out by employees with overly bright eyes and too wide of smiles, who have rearranged their faces to give no hints of the terror they feel inside. They tell everyone there has been a gas leak and all customers in the bank must evacuate immediately. It's not very convincing, but the customers comply without question. After they walk out of the large metal entrance doors to the bank, they hear a click of the lock behind them. The lockdown consists of four major components, which start with a telephone, a gun threat, thieves, and ends with the diamond earrings. The telephone is the banks and was the way in which the thieves first got a hold of Safe Trust to tell the employees that they would be stopping by the bank at 12:30 sharp to pick up a pair of diamond earrings that they knew were being held in a high security vault. If anyone called the police or tried to stop it, “they won't even be able to find your bodies. The building must be evacuated of all customers but all employees must stay, to prevent this leaking out. If any resistance or disobedience is discovered, you will all suffer. " Before the bank employee on the other end can respond, the ominous voice clicks of and the line falls silent.

12:20. Only the employees are left in the Safe Trust bank , With only that wide echoing walls to repeat their hopeless laments. Time is running out for them to create a plan, but a plan must be made. Because, the diamonds are the most valuable item Safe Trust holds, many of the bank's most important costs rest upon the monthly payments from the owner of the diamonds. Not to mention the diamonds belong to the largest mob leader in the US, and if he finds out his diamonds are gone, he will kill all the workers at the bank, or so he's threatened. Suddenly employee Lana realizes that The windows that face this busy street are still wide open without the blinds drawn. As she walks towards the windows and begins to shut the blinds she sees something that both catches your eye and startles her so much that she takes a step back. And suddenly it dawned on her, how could she be so ignorant!?

It all fell into place. You see, the town of Stratsworth wasn't known for many things but the reason it was well known at all was because of its world famous circus. People came from all over the country to see them so they often ran throughout the day and night, resulting in people in their circus costumes walking the street when they had a little time before another big show. One of the painted ladies, Melissa Hastings, always wears an elaborate piece of stage jewelry, namely her big bold chunky sky blue stoned and white diamond earrings. Lana had just seen those earrings on Melissa, and quietly opened the door into the busy street.

12:25. Melissa was just waiting for the bus stop, ignoring the curious stares of onlookers who gazed unblinkingly at her painted and decorated body. She hears a noise behind her but doesn't bother to turn around under she hears a whispered voice calling for her. She whirls around, only to see a woman signaling to her, ushering Melissa inside a bank. She would have questioned the strangeness of the situation but the urgency in the woman's eyes prompted her to follow. Once inside, she found herself surrounded by a sea of frightened employees, all hoping Lana's plan will work. The large gold clock in the foyer ticks and ticks, reminding everyone of how little time there is left. An employee walks out from a hallway and into the group surrounding Melissa, with a box in his hands. Its gold, with dainty black lace encircling the lid, but it's small enough as to be surprising that its contents are the most valuable in the country. Melissa looks at it curiously; unaware of what's in it.

Melissa stands shocked and silent as she is told what she needs to do. Everything is moving so fast and the people around her are like blurry shapes. She hears " gangster" "earrings" and, "no time" in snippets of conversation. All she was told was that if she wants to save lives she needs to switch earrings, and fast. She quickly takes off her bulky earrings and hands them over to the man with the lace covered box. He opens the box to reveal the most dazzling stunning pair of diamond earrings she's ever seen, but what surprises Melissa the most is that they look exactly the same as her cheap theater pair. They're identical! But she doesn't have time to puzzle over the similarities before they're placed on her ears and she is shoved out a side door, just in time for her bus to arrive. She gets on the bus, and out of the corner of her eye she sees men in black walk into the bank through the back door. But she blinks and as the bus starts the men have disappeared, so she faces forward on the bus and believes all she saw was just a trick of the eye. Plus, Melissa reasons, she's going to be late for her next show so she puts her mind on the paint that's flaking off of her skin...

12:30 sharp. The employees stand quietly in the circle. They hear the click of a door and try to conceal their fear as they huddle even tighter together. In walks three large armed masked men dressed in black. How they got into the bank with a key remains a mystery, but the employees are a little too scared for their own lives to worry about something as trivial as that. The largest man, clearly the leader of the group gruffly demands, "well do you have the earrings or do we gotta tear this place up first?" A man steps forward and presents the now slightly wrinkled black laced gold box. The thieves take it in the pan opening see a pair of blue stoned and diamond earrings resting quietly inside. Without further questions the men turn to walk out, but before they leave the leader speaks to the group again and says "we will not kill any of you now as promised but be warned if any word slips out about what is happened here your lives will all be over." With those words ringing in their ears the men turn and leave the door shutting with a click behind them.

Everyone breathes a sigh relief, but suddenly tense up as yet again they hear a side door open. Afraid the thieves have returned they look at each of the employees look at each other with fear and wonder, but see none other than the owner of the diamonds, Tony Accardo walk in. Everyone begins to panic; he wasn't supposed to know the earrings were gone. The whole point was to get the real earrings back from Melissa, after giving the fakes to the thieves. Worried, everyone begins to speak up and try to explain but he cuts them off. " don't worry, I know that the diamonds have been stolen and that there was nothing you could do about it. "He laughs a short barking laugh. "The ones I gave you were fake decoys because I knew that my rival mobs would try and steal them from me. I can't keep them on me, it's too dangerous, but I made a replica and gave them to you to throw them all off my track. The real ones I put on the ears of a painted circus artist right here in Stratsworth. She thinks they're fake and no one would suspect such obnoxiously large jewelry on her as being real." He walks out of the bank, apparently not noticing that the faces of the employees had suddenly gone very pale....

## “Wanderlust” by Laine Johnson – Awarded Third Place

*Photo – Both Sides Now*

*Wanderlust* they call it. The irresistible impulse to travel, to join nature, to get out in the world. Why stay in one place when you have the opportunity to broaden your mind and widen your horizons? I have that desire to know where all the roads go in life, and what is really out there just beyond my reach. Think about it, travel makes one simple and modest because we see what a tiny place we occupy in the world. When I was just a young girl, my mom shared with me this quote, “The traveler sees what he sees. The tourist sees what he has come to see.” Ever since, I wanted to be the traveller, I wanted each destination to be pages in my endless book of “Wanderlust and Wonder.” There is much more to an adventure than sights to be seen; it is about the rebirth of the human heart in its habitat, and the idea of letting everything go while travelling to the place where you can truly live.

Dawn. The beginning of twilight just before sunrise. The time when dew drops dance on the tips of the unkempt grass, waving in the soft breeze. The time when the world is still, yet it is the very life of life. The time of day that is most alive, when the sun peeks over sleeping babies. I like to think of dawn as a bliss of growth and the splendor of beauty, for yesterday is but a dream, and today is another opportunity to uncover secrets of the unknown. I walk along the trail, a backpack upon my back and a water bottle in hand. I take each adventure as a time to never look back on the bad, to free the mind with each footstep towards my destination. In the distance I can distinguish the outline of three dark mountain tips, each with a dusting of white powder. The breath of the mountain hovers close to the cold sky, like the fog gliding off my lips on a cold winter day. The glorious sun highlights a quarter of the mountain peak casting a shadow across the others. The sun appears as if it is expecting me, waiting to spread its warmth on all creation. We wave goodbye to night together and greet the new day.

I settle on the mountain’s foot, ready to capture the moment with something more than just my eyes. Gingerly taking my camera from my backpack, I aim it Skyward. The tip of the mountain lightly touches God’s fingers. It is as if God is singing “Joy to the World.” The mountain is a tower, but it seems so delicate, very fragile compared to the great rolling skies of creation. The dreamers, the wanderers, the vagabonds are the ones that teach us to see the world through beautiful eyes. Right then, the wind whispers through my shirt and gives me yet another realization of why I chose the journey. It is only God, this mountain and myself present to look upon the world. I am a solitary wanderer, but I have the opportunity to take it all in. This mountain and my God never distract me from my path towards unforgettable bliss. Human beings are not shackled by the chains of life. No obligations. Remember that feeling, when the sight of the mountain was first captured. I know each trip I take. I will never forget my experiences. My emotions are so built up, I never fail to remember.

After noticing my camera battery running down, the mountains tell me it’s time to leave. The sun is calling for a hush, and God sees me getting tired. All three wanted me to stay, but we all had our business to attend to, and daylight was burning out. Everything must come to an end, and this day was just another that I would keep locked away. The feeling in my heart, the memories in my mind, and the embodiment of my soul. We part ways in a pace that is slow. I hike upon the dry dirt, a faint cloud of dust behind me, flowing towards the fading mountains and the setting sun.

*Wanderlust*, they call it. A hobby, a drug, an irresistible longing to experience what’s out there, and to see, know, hear, touch, and taste the world around you.

## **“Lone Rider” by Ana Ross**

*Photo – Cowboy*

The clock strikes noon,  
the town goes quiet.

Two towering shadows gait toward their mark.

Guns drawn,

Billy the kid flashes his revolver.

Garret two rifles,

They fire, one falls.

Garrett is left standing,

doning his badge.

Watching day and night,

trying to find him.

Billy’s still alive somewhere,

He’s wanted, dead or alive.

## “Cowboy” by Ella Shields

*Photo - Cowboy*

The one guy in town who wore ripped overalls, and wore a cowboy hat every day, Kenny, rode into his fresh, green farm in Western Kentucky. He walked right into the red, shiny, giant barn. He loved the smell of animals and missed it. He misses the whole state of Kentucky.

Everyday he woke up, got into his overalls, fed all of the animals and then continued on with his wonderful animal life. First, he would feed the pigs, then horses, then bunnies, and then, the cows. Once the horses are done eating, he gets them settled up and ready for a galloping adventure. People would come and visit the animals. The older ones would ride the bigger horses, while Kenny rides the biggest. The kids ride the smallest. The babies hold and play with the bunnies and the baby pigs.

His first customer arrived in the bright early sunshine air, with the birds singing and dancing. There was the tallest in the family, the dad, the mom, and the shortest, the baby. They wanted to hold the bunnies and maybe even use some cash.

“Hello y’all, welcome to The West Side Farm! What can I do for y’all today?” says Kenny. “Want to hold any of my animals?” continues Kenny.

“We would love to and maybe me and my wife could do some horseback riding, too?” says the father. “Do you have anything that we can put the baby on so he can ride with us too?” advances the father.

“I think we do sir, let me check!” replies Kenny.

Kenny comes back a couple minutes later holding a carseat to hook onto the saddle. It was perfect for the little two year-old boy.

“Here, I will get all of the horses set up with everything, make sure that seattle is hooked up securely and everything is ready to go.” says Kenny

Kenny comes back a couple minutes later holding a carseat to hook onto the saddle. It was perfect for the little two year-old boy.

“Here, I will get all of the horses set up with everything, make sure that seattle is hooked up securely and everything is ready to go.” says Kenny

Kenny goes and gets all of the horses set up, hooks on the carseat and they are ready to go. Now, the family is getting on the horses and ready for an amazing adventure.

“This is so pretty especially feeling the morning cold breeze. It is just amazing, I love it. This was the best adventure ever!” said the mother happily. “I wish I could do this everyday like you, Kenny,” continues the mother.

Kenny was riding the biggest horse, the father was riding the bigger horse, and the mom had the smaller horse. The baby was so happy and screaming with tears of joy. The whole family loved this amazing adventure, and the experience was coming to an end.

“That was like we were in Africa or something. It was that beautiful. My horse was as big as an elephant. We could almost hear the lion’s roar,” said the father.

“Now, let’s get you guys off of the horses and let’s go to the bunny cages. You guys have to be very careful] with these bunnies. Try not to scratch them when you are petting or holding them. They are very fluffy and soft. They feel like blankets,” says Kenny

The cowboy went in and unlocked the bunny cages. He waved his hand so the Marey family could come in and feed them, hold them, and pet them.

“The black one in the way back of the cage is the fluffiest,” yells out Kenny, the cowboy.

They spent almost an hour petting the bunnies and holding them. The baby, Mark, loved them and wanted to take one home.

“Are we allowed to use some money on these animals? Because I really want to,” mentions the father.

“Yes, the dwarf ones, the smaller ones, are thirty dollars and the bigger ones are fifty dollars. The dwarf stay small so they look like baby bunnies their whole life. The other ones get pretty huge. So what are you guys thinking?” asks the cowboy.

“I think we will want to get the brown, black and white dwarf bunny, the smallest out of the seven, please,” responds the father. “Mark, what one do you want?” on goes the father.

Mark gets up and starts walking around and thinking, he does not really know what one to pick because he is pointing at many others, but then he finally comes to a decision to pick the black and white, dwarf bunny.

“Great choice, that bunny is so cute and I bet it will fit perfectly with your family. Thirty dollars please, credit or cash?” says Kenny.

“Cash, one second, let me get my wallet out.” says the mother.

She gets out the smooth, straightened, money and hands it over to Kenny. And they all say goodbye and have a nice day, and that is when Kenny got a phone call.

## “Cowboy” by Ella Shields

*Photo - Cowboy*

“Hello cowboy of town, how would you like to open a tent at the Kentucky state fair? You can bring all the animals you want and people can ride horses and play or look at the others? And it is free because we are asking you?” “Do you want to do it, it is next week on Saturday and Sunday?” says the state fair owner.

“Yes! I would love to do that I will probably just bring bunnies and horses of all different sizes so adults and children can ride. Is that okay y’all?” responds Kenny.

Later that day, he was jumping around because he was so excited but then, he had a question, so he called the guy back again.

“Hello, this is Kenny, the cowboy of town, I have two questions for you. The first one is what is your name?” asks Kenny.

“Good question, I should have told you earlier but my name is John.” says the man.

“Now my other question, can people buy the bunnies?” asks Kenny. “If they can, great, if they can’t that’s okay.” proceeds Kenny.

“They can buy the animals if you want. But it is up to you.” says John.

“Alright, thanks, bye!” says Kenny and hangs up the phone.

Kenny then gives a call to his friend James and tells him the news and asks if he wants to come to the fair or just come over now and start to get things set up. James comes over that day and begins to help Kenny do chores on the farm.

A few days pass and tomorrow is the state fair. Kenny and James starts to pack up all of Kenny’s belongings and gets all of the animals in the trucks and sends the trucks off to the fair. James and Kenny get in the car and are on their way to the fair.

“So what are we gonna be doing with these animals?” asks James with weird facial expressions.

“People can buy, play, hold, and pet the bunnies, while older guests can ride horses,” responds Kenny.

Once they get to the fair, they smelled the fresh smell of fried food and get all checked in and start to unpack all of their belongings. There are so many bunnies and only 5 horses.

First, they set up the horse barn and area for the guests to ride them in. The wood was rough and prickly like a porcupine. They had to build and mostly put things together. It took a lot of work and it is starting to get dark and they still have the bunny exhibit.

Then, they just put stuff together and let out all of the bunnies from their cages. The bunnies were shy at first then started to get used to it.

Finally, they set up their tents and lock all of the gray smooth animals cages and then they go to sleep. They set their alarm clock for nine o’clock and next thing you know, you hear snoring.

The next morning, they woke up and unlock all of the animals cages and then, they saw their first customer.

“Can I please ride the horses and pet the bunnies please?” mentions the little boy.

“Sure, what one would you like to do first? Bunnies or horses?” Responds the farmer, Kenny.

“I would like to ride the horse first, do I get to pick which one I can ride first?” continued the little boy.

“Sure, which one would you like to ride?” says Kenny.

The little boy picks his horse and he goes for a little ride. He picked the biggest one there. The ride was for about ten minutes. After that was over, he started to play with the bunnies. Right when he started to play with the bunnies, he called his parents over.

“I really like these bunnies, do you, because I want to get one and it will be all mine?” says the little boy. “Please?” continues the boy.

“I don’t think so. But the thing is, will it get along with the dog? So I do not think so. Sorry Liam,” says the mom.

Liam and the family started to leave and Liam whispered to his mom and then ran over to Kenny. Kenny wondered what or why he was running to him.

“I want to be like you some day because you are nice and you love animals!” says Liam happily.

“Just put your mind to it!” responds the cowboy.

## **“The Fourth of July” by Rachel Lee**

*Photo - Flags*

I love the Fourth of July.

I love the cannons that breathe fire,  
exploding, sending little sparks all over the sky,  
like sprinkles on a chocolate cupcake

Seeing relatives,  
all spread out on the shore of the lake

I love the flags that wave to me from up in the sky.

Mothers calming their sleep deprived infants:

“Hush now, don’t cry...”

Once the show is over, I go inside

The quietness is disturbing.

Nobody says anything and goes to hide  
in their beds.

Safe and sound.

There, I dread,  
that rain will come tomorrow.

I love the Fourth of July.

On the fifth of July  
the rain pounds against the window.  
I long for the fireworks in the sky.  
I long for the chance to wave back  
at the flags that waved to me  
on the Fourth of July.

## “Unwavering Reminder” by Maggie Kuban – Awarded First Place

*Photo - Flags*

“For the land of the free, and the home of the brave,” sang the speaker at Liberty Park in Peterson, New Jersey. Once the last word was blasted out and everyone had stopped clapping, Dad reached down to grab our hats. Dad always took his hat off when a song like that played. So I always did too, never giving it a second thought. There hasn’t been a day in my life when our flag wasn’t hung outside, swaying gloriously in the wind. Mom called it patriotism. Dad called it respect.

“Today is my favorite day of the whole year. You know that bud,” Dad said looking down at me with his big brown eyes. Me and Sadie had Mom’s green eyes. But Harper had the same eyes as Dad. I looked back up into Dad’s eyes. Those eyes looked so happy and content right now, but I knew they had witnessed things in Iraq that only happened in nightmares. Mom said Dad was lucky because he could block out the nightmares, that he could lock them away in the deepest part of his mind. But blocking memories out and forgetting them are two different things. Every once in awhile those memories would break the lock and surface at the front of Dad’s mind. Those were the days Dad went to bed at seven in the evening. Those were the days none of us, not even Mom, who could always make Dad feel better, or Harper, who sometimes seemed like she couldn’t shut up, would say a word to Dad. We all knew that Dad would be back to normal the next day. He just needed some time alone to face his demons.

Dad’s arm brushed against mine, pulling me out of my thoughts, as he raised his hand to call Sadie over. Sadie had disappeared with a group of girls from her school for the last half an hour. Her cheeks were red from running around and her eyes, much like Dad’s, shown bright. No doubt from laughing and exchanging secrets with every ten year old girl in the park. She came walking back with our golden retriever Benny, who too looked as though he was out of breath. He came right over to Dad and laid his head down in his lap. Dad chuckled and rubbed Benny’s head.

Mom and Dad both loved Benny. Mom had gotten him when Dad was overseas. She always jokes Benny was her and Dad’s first baby. But Benny was old now and after darting from cemetery to cemetery all day long he looked like he had aged five years. I noticed Sadie had also taken it upon herself to be three flowers on Benny’s collar. Yesterday, Mom, Sadie, and Harper had spent all day in our backyard picking flowers, to lay on headstones today. We’d used almost all the flowers today, as we visited cemeteries like we did every Fourth of July. We’ve seen headstones that dated back to the revolutionary war right up to now. Dad always talked about how soldiers under the dirt didn’t get the continuous respect that soldiers above ground did. So to give those soldiers some respect we devote this important holiday to visiting their graves. We also all knew that we weren’t only paying homage to the soldier whose grave we were standing in front of, but to every soldier who didn’t have a grave, who never made it home, and every soldier whose soul had been left on the battlefield. Even though we are tired, Dad makes sure we always arrive in time see our local firework show at the end of the day.

“Sadie,” I said, “where’s Mom and Harper? The fireworks are starting soon.”

“Your brother is right, Sade,” Dad continued. “They’ll start any minute now.”

“We’re here, we’re here!” I heard a voice shout from behind us. Mom and Harper were walking up to us from the concession stand with an armload of snacks. Popcorn and licorice, soft pretzels and cookies, and all colored red, white, and blue. It looked so yummy that I wanted to devour it all in one bite!

“That was the longest line I’ve ever been in,” Mom blurted out to Dad, sounding annoyed. Harper sat down and put the treats on the blanket. The three of us, four if you count Benny, dove into all the deliciousness.

“Aww,” Mom said petting Benny on the head “poor Benny Boy is wore out.”

“How many cemeteries do you think we visited today?” Mom asked Dad as she sat down.

“Maybe six or seven,” Dad replied.

“I lost count after two,” Harper chimed in.

“Harper that’s not respectful,” Mom commented.

“Not at all,” Dad persisted, “I refuse to spend my Fourth of July eating barbecue chicken and drinking beer. Your mother and I promised we are going to teach you kids what this holiday is really about. Especially with what has been going on in our country, it seems like everyone has forgotten the true meaning of today,” Dad finished, a little upset. Dad didn’t get upset a lot but stuff like this made him mad.

“Daddy,” Sadie said assuredly, “you know that the three of us all know the true meaning of the Fourth of July.” “We know, that all of you know,” Mom replied, putting her hand on Dad’s shoulder. “Myself, and Dad especially, never want you kids to forget the real meaning of this holiday.” Mom was the best at calming Dad down.

The girls and I kept eating our snacks, Mom and Dad sat next to each other. Dad’s arm around Mom. Benny had fallen asleep on the blanket behind me. The sun had just tipped over the horizon, signaling that fireworks were a few moments away. This was my absolute favorite part of today. The fireworks were Dad’s favorite part too. I looked back at Dad and straightened my hat. He winked back at me and straightened his hat as well.

In front of us it was now completely dark and four spotlights were turned on, shining on the four American flags. The flags waved back and forth in the warm summer breeze. Slowly, that summer breeze carried the smell of fireworks until everyone in the crowd caught a whiff of gunpowder floating through the air.

Then like every Fourth of July, the first firework shot off. No announcement was made and the crowd began to ooh and ahh. The light show went off in an unexpected rhythm knowing people like me and Dad would want all night to see them. I would want all night because I could lose myself in the endless show of color. Just when the last firework had exploded and disappeared into the dark sky, the next one already took its place. Standing up at the sky I felt like I couldn’t blink because if I did, I might miss something. When the biggest fireworks began to fill the sky I knew they were the last few. It was the grand finale. I liked to think that every fallen soldier was watching the fireworks with us. I liked to hope that they were proud of the country they fought or died for. I was proud of the country I lived in, the country my father fought for, and the country whom I would spend my life upholding its’ honor. Making sure everyday citizens who made the ultimate sacrifice would not be forgotten.

## **“The Climb” by Jake Martin**

*Photo – Both Sides Now*

The blue beautiful sky.

The clouds’ different shapes.

The mountains fascinate me

with their heights, ridges, and looks.

Each mountain different from the next.

To inhale the cool air at the top of the mountain.

To feel the exhilaration climbing up.

To feel the rigid earth under my feet,

And the bright sun, against my face.

The challenge to make it to the top

Parts of the mountain are more difficult,

but then it gets easy.

And finally at the top,

I look down and see the sight I have been waiting to see.

Majestic.

I am the mountain.

## “What A Night, To Be Alive” by Parker Kara

*Photo - Flags*

**Independence Day through Jack’s eyes (present day) ...** As I stood there, watching bright, red fireworks light up the sky, the Grand Old Flag soaring strong like an eagle in the sky, I remember in school, the time I learned what our flag stood for. A sign of freedom. A sign of victory. All these descriptions, I have heard. That one day of school was the day my view of freedom changed.

**That one day (years ago) ...** I was in fourth grade, reading from my history book, about the American Revolution. I had learned that the war was fought for our freedom. I had learned that if we hadn’t won that war, our world, as we know it, would be very different. I remember George Washington. He was the man of the revolution.

**The man of the revolution (years ago continued) ...** In fifth grade, I read a book on George Washington. I thought it was the greatest book, one of my favorites. After I read it, I talked to my brother, Jerry who was older than me at the time. I liked to call him Big-J, and he called me Lil-J.

“I think he was one of the greatest men alive,” said Jerry. “Seeing that he fought the good fight, and won the war for our freedom!” I wholeheartedly agreed with Big-J, and we talked much more after that about George Washington.

“He was truly a great man,” Jerry said, bringing the conversation to life again.

**Independence Day through Jerry’s eyes (present day) ...** “What a night, to be alive!” I exclaimed to Jack.

“Indeed it is,” replied Lil-J. I always remember calling my little brother the nickname “Lil-J,” and he liked it. He gave me the nickname “Big-J,” and I thought he is my brother. Ah my brother, he was a gift. I will always remember him as “Lil-J” or “The Young Patriot” since his birthday is today, Independence Day. We sat there watching the fireworks, red, blue, yellow, orange, and many more colors of the rainbow, light up the darkened sky, as if they were colorful flares going into the air. Well, I sat, he stood up to see them better.

“Those fireworks seem dangerous near the tallest buildings...” I said in a loud voice so he could hear me.

“I’m sure they’re safe as seatbelts.” replied Jack in a loud voice.

“I also hope the flags don’t catch the flames from the sky,” I finished, but I don’t think he heard me. Oh well, I guess I’ll have to tell him after the festivities, when the party starts.

**After the festivities (Jack) ...** Ah the afterparty, always a crowd pleaser, but always crowded! My brother and I go to it anyway. We make it a goal, at the beginning of the year, to go to the alter-party of the Fourth of July. We always find old friends and meet up with them. It is nice to catch up. I remember 5 years ago, I met with my oldest friend, Mark. He always was a funny guy. I saw him this year, and he spooked Jerry and I. He came and said,

“Well, if it isn’t Jack and his brother Jerry.” “Hello Mark,” I said to him.

“Wonderful to see you again, man.” “Indeed.” replied Mark. It was good to see him again. I missed our long conversations about Star Wars, Legos, Indiana Jones, or whatever the current thing we liked.

“Good ol’ Mark,” said Jerry.

“In the flesh,” replied Mark. Ah Mark, what a funny guy. I remember he was basically my best friend. I missed him all these years. He was the best friend one could ask for.

**The end of our night(Jerry) ...** It was a good night tonight. Lil-J and I said our goodbyes, and decided it was getting late. I looked down at my watch. It read “10:58,” So we finished our goodbyes, and we called mom and dad. We wanted to wish them “Happy Fourth of July,” so I called them, and we did. We decided to go get some ice-cream since it was a hot summer day. We decided on Dairy Queen. Before we left, we went to go sit down near the dark street, now littered with cars. We sat where our seats were and talked a bit.

“Independence Day, might be my favorite holiday.” said Lil-J.

“It sure is mine.” I replied.

“Do you think they celebrated Independence Day, when we won our independence, those many years ago?” asked Jack.

“They might’ve,” I said.

“Seeing that it could’ve been a very outstanding day for colonial America.”

“Definitely.” replied Jack. We hopped in my now cold car, and drove to Dairy Queen. We stopped at a stop sign on the way there and waited for some pedestrians to scurry by, so they didn’t have to wait a long time to cross. We then continued on. Before we got to the next street, I noticed Jack peering out the window. He was looking at the flags. I knew he was thinking about his idea, and I said to him,

“I’m sure they did celebrate, not like we do today, but in their own way of celebrating.”

“Thanks, you got it off my mind.” replied Jack. We got on the street and finished our drive to DQ. As we ate our ice-cream, I thought to myself,

“What a night, to be alive.”

## “Escape” by Brigid Barron

*Photo - Cowboy*

She didn't need the popularity or the attention. She didn't need a sea of friends around her or a boyfriend to feel fulfilled. Sarah was different than the rest, unique. She was beautiful, brilliant, funny and by no means introverted. All she needed was her Sketchpad, a pint of Ben&Jerry's "Tonight Dough" ice cream, and her Spotify playlist. She always desired to go to her secret place to escape the noise, the adversity, the pain. The pain and grief she felt every night was unbearable while she lay awake, staring at the ceiling. The pain of losing her grandfather, her only true companion, tore her apart. He taught her the importance of kindness and courage- the only person who helped her to truly escape this life.

Her Grandfather always told her of the adventures he had experienced in his life, his favorite being the day he met the stunning cheerleader, Mary, whose beautiful hazel eyes and brown hair took his breath away and changed his life forever. They had become acquainted during their junior year of high school, her grandfather, William Bishop, being the starting quarterback of the football team, and Mary being the cute cheerleader who caught his eye the day the Panthers played the Wolverines. William played with his whole heart that day, hoping to impress Mary, who watched attentively from the sidelines. That night, William scored the winning touchdown, allowing the Wolverines to advance to the next game of the Catholic League Championship. Swarmed by a sea of teammates and fans lifting him off the ground chanting his name, William paid no attention to the people surrounding him; the only person he cared about was standing across the football field with a big smile on her face.

William and Mary courted for their last two years of high school, graduating in 1949. William, who struggled in school due to his Dyslexia, attended Jackson Community College, while Mary attended the University of Michigan. William studied at JCC for only two years trying to get his grades up, in hopes of one day joining Mary at U of M. William, after attending JCC for two years, enlisted in the army as a mechanical engineer, but being deployed late, worked as a sergeant, writing discharge letters. Deeply missing his girlfriend, he wrote his own discharge letter and traveled home to Mary, who soon after became his wife. Once married, William applied to U of M and was accepted, and William and Mary began their journey together. William and Mary had seven beautiful children, two boys and five girls. William, who had received a great job and many promotions, easily supported their family. Time went on and William and Mary became grandparents to forty-seven grandchildren and four great- grandchildren. They loved their family more than anything in the world.

Sarah longed to have every bit of happiness that her grandparents had. Every morning, on the first of the month, Sarah would get into her old, rusty, sea blue, convertible Jeep and hit the road. Its smell of stale chicken wings, her favorite food of choice, reminded her of all the nights during college when she had picked up a late night snack of them to satisfy her cravings. She loved to feel the wind rush through her hair, hear the engine rumble, and let go of everything weighing her down. Every month, she would travel to Jackson to pick up her grandfather, and they would just drive. These annual adventures were their escape—the secret getaway that belonged to them and only them. They never shared their secret with anyone because it was only meant to be shared with each other. Sarah and her grandfather would never have a specific destination or a path to follow. They simply loved the adventure, the mystery, and the way it allowed them to clear their heads of worries and fears.

After traveling for some time, they would find a perfect spot to watch the sun rise above the beautiful landscape of the place to which the road had led them. Sarah always taking it all in- the breathtaking view, the calming songs of the birds, who sang of the beautiful July sun, and the refreshing Michigan gusts of wind. She would sit quietly staring at the clouds, listening to her grandfather identify each bird as it sang its unique song. She longed to be like the clouds that floated above; she took in every passing moment as each cloud traveled lazily across sky. These days were always Sarah's favorite. This was her escape, her getaway that no one imagined.

Hours passed as Sarah reminisced about the time spent with her grandfather until reality finally struck, and Sarah realized she was late. She had been volunteering at Little Traverse Bay Humane Society, a nonprofit that relied on donations and volunteers, because it helped her to feel closer to her grandfather. He had always loved animals. Recently, she had been feeling like she was losing more and more of her grandfather every day- what he smelled like, the sound of his voice. When Sarah realized that she was once again getting caught up in her thoughts, she turned on the car, with engine rumbling and radio playing, and set off.

When Sarah arrived at the animal shelter, she got out of her car and headed toward the front door of the brown brick building, which looked more like a welcoming home than the old, worn down animal shelter most would expect. Sarah walked up the steps of the porch and opened the door, which groaned of its old age. When she entered, Sarah was welcomed by a beautiful, spirited young girl, with beautiful, rich brown hair and big hazel eyes. She must have been about eleven-years-old. "Hi, Sarah," the little girl excitedly greeted Sarah. "Hey, Emma." Emma, the daughter of the man who ran the shelter, led Sarah to the old, sun-baked, red barn in the back of the property while she explained what Sarah would be doing for the day. "You'll probably just be taking dogs on walks and cleaning enclosures for today, like usual," Emma explained. "Oh, I almost forgot. There's a big delivery of dog food coming in later today, so if you could help get the food inside the barn and into the metal cans up in the loft that would be great, too," Emma continued. She walked off and left Sarah to her work.

After a few hours of walking dogs, cleaning kennels, and filling food bowls, Sarah was getting tired. She was relieved to hear the sound of a big truck approaching from the driveway. It pulled up to the door at the back of the barn, and an old man hopped out

of the truck and unloaded the heavy bags of food. Sarah wondered how she was going to carry the huge bags up to the loft, but without complaining she began her task. She struggled for a while until she was finally able to pick up the large bag, cradling it like a baby with both hands, for fear of dropping it. Sarah took only a few steps when the bag began to slip out of her sweaty hands, yet just before it fell to the ground someone caught it. Sarah quickly covered her face with her hands- she was mortified, "Oh my goodness, this is so embarrassing." When Sarah uncovered her face, she did not see what she had expected. There in front of her, was a tall, handsome young man with captivating brown eyes. He wore a beige cowboy hat, a blue plaid shirt, and old blue jeans. "It's no problem, really. I'm glad I could help," he said. "Hey, I never caught your name," Sarah remarked. "Trevor," he replied as he threw the bag over his left shoulder and reached out his hand. "I'm Sarah. It's nice to meet you, Trevor. Thanks for your help," she awkwardly commented as she shook his hand. He continued to help her carry the bags of food until there was no more to carry. Trevor then walked her down the long, winding driveway to her car. When they arrived, Sarah turned to him and asked, "Hey, are you hungry? I was going to go grab a bite to eat in town before I headed home." She blushed as she eagerly awaited his response. "I'd hate to intrude on your night," he replied. "No really, I would love some company. I owe you for all your help," Sarah insisted.

Sarah and Trevor began to get to know each other and started to court. That evening while she was sitting across from Trevor at dinner, Sarah thought to herself, "This is it. This is what my grandfather always spoke of - the ability to share your thoughts, your feelings, your heart with someone. This is the person I will share my adventures with, my quiet, happy places, my safe haven with; he is my William and Mary story."

## “Perfectly Painted” by Kayla Duneske

*Photo – Painted Lady*

“Hey”

“Hay is for horses,” I say as I continue looking down at my phone.

“You look like someone I know.”

“I get that a lot.”

“I think I know you”

“I get that a lot”

“You’re funny.”

“No i’m not.”

You think you know me. You don’t. You think you see me every day. You don’t. That is not me. I am not her. I am Alicia. You say that you sat next to me on the subway. You say we talked about many things. You say that you shook my hand. You have never. You have never known me, and you never will. You don’t know Alicia. You know the paint. You know the lady, the Painted Lady.

The Painted Lady, she is perfect in every way possible. Even perfect is an understatement. She is foolproof, pure, splendid, superb, she is inexplicably amazing. Her figure, so tall, so lean so perfectly shaped. Her walk, it is so powerful. She shows so much pride and confidence. She has painted flowers all down her arms, painted in with purple orange and glorious colors. The rest of her body is a powder blue. Her makeup, oh her makeup is a work of art by itself. Her makeup is so perfect that it is only a work of the gods. With her perfectly painted on tear, that could only be fake for her life is nothing to cry about. Her lips, so smooth, and so perfectly filled in with the shade of a coral pink. Her eyes. Her eyes, like an ocean, so deep, and if you dive in you may never come back. Her hair, so smooth, each and every strand is so perfectly waved. Everything about her is, indescribably perfect. Envy reigns to be her. I am not her though. I am a different person, far from perfect.

I am a normal person. I am more like you than you think. I sleep through my alarm. I dread the cold and windy, New York mornings. I go to work day after day. The breaks I get during the day are kept to such a minimum that I get such small portions of food. I am athirst all day and fantasize the awaiting hours when I will be able to go home. I drive home, but I continually get stuck in rush hour traffic, and I wait till I get closer and closer to home. I am just like anyone else. I make immense efforts to have time to watch my favorite shows on television. I try to follow trends and be “the coolest”. I try to inform myself on what is going on with the world, but day by day, I get closer and closer to falling apart while trying to do it all. I am not a superhero like you think I am. I cannot do it all.

I didn’t just appear here. I worked to get here. I have spent nights upon nights without sleep to get here. I have missed out on amazing opportunities to get here. I have shut out people to get here. I have been made fun of to get here. It wasn’t easy. Now you may ask if it was worth it. My life right now is hard and I am working non-stop. I am unhappy most days because of how microscopic my social life is. I have given up the luxurious life to do what I thought i loved, but things have changed. Now my life is a big game of jenga and each moment is a moment away from it tumbling down. As a child whenever I would be asked what I want to do when I grow up I would instantaneously respond that I want to be on the stage. That I wanted to be famous, wealthy, renowned, notorious, and honored with walls of trophies. Now all I want is to be happy, pleased, perky, and have a fulfilling life. I had always wanted to have a family, but I cannot handle dealing with my own emotions, so how would I ever deal with a child’s? If i was able to give my younger self advice, I sure would have a lot to say. I would tell my younger self the truth, not a sugar coated story, and not white lies about “how easy the real world is.” No, I would tell my younger self that I need to get ready for the real world, because if you are going to be stuck in your own little rainbow and sunshine world with a perfect future ahead of you and a perfect little house with a smile on your face every day because your life is going to be perfect, you’re going to be in for a humongous reality check. I would say this because I wish that I would have been told this because all I was told is sugarcoated stories about how great people’s life are, but you know what? The world isn’t a big movie, it’s a warfield and you’ll have to survive.

The makeup wears off. The hair flows down in a knotted mess. The walk turns into a slump. The painted tear turns into real tears, because sometimes I cannot hold it in. Everytime I take something off i become more unrecognizable, but more real. The confidence breaks down. Nobody yearns to be me now. Nobody wants to be me anymore. You see the truth and it is ugly. Makeup is a genie. The makeup is an object. I am not made up of makeup. Makeup doesn’t define me, nor does it anyone, but we get fooled every single day. I cover up my insecurities with objects that make me beautiful for a few hours. You think you know this beautiful, confident, perfect woman. The makeup is gone now. I am not the prettiest or the best. Do you think the same?

## “Freedom Rings” by Alex Wagner – Awarded Judges Choice

*Photo – Flags*

In the ears of boys like me,  
freedom rings like a fractured bell  
and splits through the open air like  
the empty space between an M and D,  
crackles through stalks of wheat like  
lightning through Philadelphia  
as shrapnel Passes through the Book of Leviticus  
Stowed away in his jacket pocket.  
The toll of a funeral tells us  
that freedom rings.

In the racing pulse of 56 traitors  
and the scrape of plumage against paper,  
freedom rings like a faceless bullet  
screaming across some fold of the world  
hidden between Lexington and Concord,  
breaking the sound barrier, circling the globe  
in some imaginary direction  
and returning to tax away human life  
from those who were once voiceless.

In the sporadic clang of a loose buckle  
swinging against a frigid metal pole,  
freedom rings like the shriek of a firework  
cutting through the humid night,  
plunging into black silence,  
and expelling the darkness  
from behind a row of flags  
with a concussive *pop*.

They only stream in the wind,  
only glow in the red glare of rockets,  
and they are trying to tell us that the sky  
is filled with predators  
humming like moths above our heads,  
their lowered muzzles grazing  
the white bottoms of stars.  
We pump fire into the air,  
pulverize the night with pride  
and they flutter away,  
leaving a faint outline of smoke  
and the smell of sulfur.  
In the profound silence that follows,  
freedom rings.

## “A Cowboy’s Secret” by Mary Shah

*Photo – Cowboy*

It’s weird to think that last year, I was walking down this very same road as just an ordinary cowboy, but today I am not that same man. Hello, my name is Sam and I live in Dallas, Texas with my lovely wife Martha and my three precious children Daniel, Robert, and Amanda. I work as a cowboy at my very own twenty-seven acre ranch and I love it! This is my story of how one day I changed from an ordinary man to someone unique.

Every day, I would wake up when the rooster crowed at the crack of dawn to round up the animals, collect eggs, and cook breakfast for my family. After my kids left for school and my wife left for work, I got to work at the ranch. I groomed animals, broomed their rooms, and did lots of other enjoyable activities. Once my family got home we would eat dinner together and play games. That was the normal day in my life until one day, my life changed forever.

The day was May 20, 2015. The day even started off a bit strange. At 6:15 am. the rooster had not yet crowed to wake me up. That had never happened before. Luckily, by waking up at the same time for the past sixteen years, my body woke itself up out of habit. I climbed out of bed and followed my usual morning routine. Everything was going normal except for the fact that the chickens had laid only 29 eggs instead of their usual 31 eggs, but who doesn’t have an off day. I went inside and began to cook breakfast. Just as the sizzling smell of smoked breakfast sausage began to fill the small space, my wife Martha came down the stairs with a frazzled expression on her face.

“Good morning honey,” I told to her. “What’s wrong? You seem awfully startled.”

“I heard a noise coming from outside. It sounded like someone was walking over a pile of leaves,” she replied concerned.

“Oh, I’m sure it was just an animal or something walking over the leaves. Breakfast?” I asked her.

As my wife sat down at the kitchen counter and I was pouring myself a cup of fresh brewed coffee, our three kids marched down the stairs. I told them good morning, served them a delicious smelling breakfast, and then they left for school.

After my family left for the day, I decided to begin my work day by going down to the horse stable. I love visiting the horses. Every one of my horses have a heart of gold and when I spend time with them I feel a sense of relaxation and peace. As I approached the stables, the sounds of rustling engulfed the air around me. It remind me of what my wife said she heard earlier. As I turned the knob on the barn door, something jumped out in front of me like a jack-in-the-box. I tumbled back in surprise. Suddenly, a tall, boxy man attired in all black came into view. He acted like he owned the place. He greeted me like any normal person would and asked if he could go on a horse ride with me. Too scared of what would happen if I replied no, I said yes, and then I showed him my horses and I told him that he could ride Rosie. Rosie is one of my older horses, she is beautiful and has fur as white as snow. Strangely, he rejected Rosie, and told me that she was too old and wanted a younger horse. Without anytime to respond he saddled up Tyler, a young brown horse and climbed up on top of him. Since the strange man didn’t want to ride Rosie, I decided that I would ride her. I carefully saddled her up and led the strange man out of the stables and into the woods. During the first ten minutes of the ride, the man did not say a single word.

“Samuel, I come here today to deliver you a special message. My name is Jim and I am a secret agent sent here today from the government,” he suddenly spoke. However, I highly doubted his name was Jim. He seemed like more of a Roberto to me.

“Okay,” I murmured. “What’s the message?”

“Jeez, I’m getting to it,” responded Jim. “Meet at this address at five p.m. sharp tonight. We need you to help us with a special task.” Then Jim rode off on my horse. I sat in silence and shock as the clapping sound of hooves became so faint that I could no longer hear it.

Once the man was no longer in clear view, I rode my horse back to the stable and put her safely away in her stall. Then I walked back to my house, wrote a letter, and left it on the kitchen counter for my family to let them know I would be home later. Then I hopped in my truck and drove to the classified location. It took me a good 45 minutes to find the place because it wasn’t on my G.P.S. and a large train blocked the main lane of the terrain that I needed to cross. Once I arrived, I walked into a new, state-of-the-art building. The inside was so quiet you could hear a pin drop and strangely smelled like smoke. The lobby sat empty with people except for an older lady who directed me to go to eighth floor and the third door on the left. I found it a bit unusual that there was no elevator, but I decided not to question it. After my grueling trudge up eight flights of stairs, I found the third door on the left and knocked on it. Slowly and silently, the door opened to a fairly large room, with a long conference table in the middle, and at least twenty people stood inside. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the President of the United States surrounded by the Secret Service. A tall lady directed me to sit down in the chair at the end of the table and so I did. Then a short, stubby man with a mustache spoke.

“I see you made it. Welcome Samuel,” he said. “We are all part of the Secret Agents of the United States, and we believe you are the right man to help us. That man that came to your ranch today, Jim, I believe he calls himself, is a phony. He does not belong to the Secret Agent Service.”

“But he told me to come here. If he was a criminal, why would he lead me to you?” I asked confused.

“Aha, you’re a smart one,” the man responded. “Jim has been going to different ranches and saying he needs them, giving them this address to go to and then stealing their most valuable horse. We call him the horse hustler. He is a very dangerous man. After tracking down the address that he was giving people, we detected there was no such location. Hoping to recruit person like you, we built this building hoping to attract a victim of the horse hustler to help us,” he said.

“Okay,” I said, “but I still don’t understand, why you need me?” I asked.

The man responded, “you are an excellent cowboy, one of the best in the country. We want you to go undercover to stop the horse hustler and anyone else with a similar business from stealing animals.” I felt honored and said yes. They gave me a black uniform, a case full of weapons, a secret identity card, and even a new car. They told me I would start the next day.

I left that night with a new identity. I was no longer just Cowboy Sam, but also undercover Secret Agent Samuel. I told my family that I got a new job traveling across the country to recruit cowboys and that I would take care of the ranch whenever I am home.

To this day I have saved over 400 animals from being stolen and stopped over 200 criminals. I love my job and will never quit!

## **“The Climb” by Elizabeth Lilley**

*Photo – Both Sides Now*

Rise, Ascend, Clamber up  
To the crisp, clear mountain tops,  
Where fluffy white flakes fall,  
and disappear at the touch.

A dream of mine for so long,  
And now so close to me.  
It seems to be impossible,  
yet possible does it seem.

And as this conflict travels,  
Through the deepest parts of my mind,  
I think of all the other dreams inspired by mine.

And so, I begin,  
The Climb.

## “Cowboy” by Ella Janz

*Photo – Cowboy*

“Quinn, hurry, call 911!” screamed my mother. I could hear her heavy footsteps clawing against the hardwood floor in our kitchen.

“Why?” I cried.

“Your father, is on the floor...not breathing!” she yelled.

I quickly ran down the sot, carpet stairs to the kitchen where I found my father, lying there, on the verge of death, taking each breath that he can take as if it was going to be his last.

“Oh my goodness mom, what happened?” I said. This is where I began to panic. In these situations, panicking is the last thing you want to do, but I could not handle it. What would you do if you saw your best friend, trying to survive, on your kitchen floor.

“Hurry Quinn,” my mother panted. I could tell she didn’t know if he was going to make it, and that made me worry more than anything. From that moment on, my life as a thirteen year-old, with a father that meant the world to me, came to a complete halt.

My relationship with my father was not strong when I was a child. He, for some reason, did not care about me, and was never around. In my father’s absence, during my childhood, my mother was alone in raising me. She had to do all the work around the house, and also had to deal with me. It was a challenge to balance out work and other responsibilities of being a mother. Along with all this, she had a heart of gold, and never left my side.

Three years before my life came crashing down, my dad and I finally became like two peas in a pod. We did everything together; including, watching the bull riders, to riding our horses around the four acres of farmland, and even playing golf.

Where I live, spending time with your family is the most important thing to do. Your family should always be your first priority because you are surrounded by nothing but animals full of unknown odors, and various crops that stretch for miles.

My father never noticed how his life would transform if he would give me a chance to show him what a wonderful kid I was. He always ignored everything I said, and paid no attention to me. Suddenly, out of nowhere, he realized that I could make a difference in his life.

My dad was a fantastic guy. I could not have asked for anyone better. It is hard to lose someone you love that much. My dad was the most valuable thing that I had, and now he is gone. A piece of me is now missing, and I don’t think I will ever be able to put myself back together.

Ever since the day my dad had his stroke, I have felt miserable, and downhearted. I have not talked to my mom, and I can’t imagine the way she is feeling. Every time I get the chance to look at her she has bags under her eyes from no sleep, and wet, salty tears running down her beet red cheeks. I begin to feel it is my fault more than anyone’s that my mother is in an empty trance.

After a while, I found the courage to talk to my mother. At first, I did not know what to say. I knew not to talk about dad. I sat in my room trying to figure out what the best thing to comment was. Finally, out of the many thoughts, I knew what to announce. I fastly ran down the twisted stairs. I found my mother in her usual spot and froze. I do not know why, but I was afraid. Why? Why am I afraid to talk to my own mother?

Then, the most unpredictable thing happened. My mother spoke to me.

“I am sorry Quinn,” she spoke slowly. I could tell that she felt bad.

“Sorry for what?” I asked in confusion. I knew what she was talking about, but I did not want her to be hurt even more.

“For not being there for you,” she said, “I knew your dad dying would change me as a person, but I did not know that it would ruin me as a mother.”

“Mom, dad dying is not your fault, you are the least to blame. You being hurt because your husband died is not your fault. None of this is your fault. You are the least to blame,” I told her. I do not think that my mom understood that she could have done nothing about the situation with my dad. Now, I kind of felt bad.

She began to say, “Thank you honey but-”

“Mom, I am going to take you somewhere dad and me used to go. I do not know if you will like it, but I just think you need something to distract you from your misery,” I interrupted.

We hopped into the car, and I told my mom exactly where to go. I had been there so many times with my dad, but my mom never went. I think that it will be interesting to see how my mom reacts to where I am taking her.

Finally, we arrived. I was smart, and blindfolded my mom. I helped her step out of the car onto the dusty, brown dirt. My mom stepped tiny little steps very softly onto the dust. She was so clueless. She had no idea where she was. As we inched closer and closer to the door, the more and more excited I got. I have not been to my suprise place since my father died. It felt different being there with my mother.

“Okay mom, we are at the door,” I exclaimed anxiously.

“Can I take off my blindfold, I do not think I can wait much longer than I already have!” she responded back.

“Okay!” I said. Slowly, I unfolded the red blindfold. I could not wait to see my mother’s reaction. My excitement could not withhold. I yanked off the blindfold.

“Oh my gosh, I have always wanted to see bull riding! Thank you so much Quinn. You did not have to do this for me after the way I have been treating you,” she said. “Stop it mom. You have deserved something like this for a long me,” I told her. After that my mom and I went to bull riding every Sunday.

Bull riding made me think of my dad. I miss him more than anything, and his happy spirit. Without him, my life has not been as fun. I wish he could just come back home and our life as a family would be perfect. Maybe one day I will be able to see him again.

## **“Beauty” by Lucas De Almeida**

*Photo – Both Sides Now*

Mountain.

Clouds.

Sky.

Black.

White.

Blue.

Together,

a masterpiece.

A divine sight.

Natural,

and man-made.

God made us,

and the natural beauties of Earth,

and everything else in existence.

This is God’s Earth.

Along with his.

Mountain.

Clouds.

And Sky.

## “Torch Lake” by Rachel Thornton

Photo – Flags

Suddenly, I am jolted awake, as if we just hit a speed bump. I open my eyes slowly to be greeted by sun shining through my car window. I let out a moan and shift my position.

“Honey, are you awake?” I hear my mother’s voice coo. I can’t find my voice, so I simply nod. “We’re here,” she mumbles. For a minute I forget where “here” is. Then I remember- it’s the 3rd of July- one day before my favorite holiday of the year. It’s the same every summer, the day before the 4th of July, my family and all of my relatives head “up north” to our little cottage on Torch Lake. We stay there for three weeks and enjoy sharing hilarious family stories, eating S’mores, and playing dress up with the younger cousins.

When we pull onto the gravel driveway, I already have one foot out the door before the car even stops. I take a deep breath and smell the familiar lakefront air. The smell of musty pine trees and burnt wood bring back old memories from when I was younger. The air is humid, and the sun is beginning to wane on the horizon. I pull out my cell phone- it’s 8:00 pm. I turn back to the car to help my parents unpack. As I’m about to grab the last few bags, I hear the sound of tires churning up the gravel drive. I whip my head around and see my uncle’s trusty old Ford pickup coming straight toward me. I let out a yelp and jump out of the way because it appears he may not stop. I stumble and fall on the rough grass, but I am rescued by a big, bulky hand that reaches out to help me up.

“Need help?” my Uncle Bob asks. I nod and grab his hand. It’s worn from all the carpentry work that he does in his shed back in Kentucky.

“Where are Aunt Cindy, Louis, and Ally?” I ask while trying to rub the grass stains off of my knees.

“They’re visiting their grandmother. Hopefully, they will be here tomorrow. If not, they will probably pass on this year’s trip. Here, let me help you with that.” Uncle Bob grabs the big blue duffel bag from my hand. My stomach drops. I was waiting all summer to see my little cousins, and now they would not be here until tomorrow... maybe not even at all. I walk past my parents in the small kitchen and head to my bedroom. I turn the old brass doorknob, push the door open, and take a look around. It is the same as it has been for the past 15 years. Piles of stuffed animals are still in the back corner next to the trunk filled with old costumes that are way too small for me to wear anymore. I plop down onto my hand-knitted quilt, made by my grandma before she passed, and reach over to my nightstand to grab one of the three books I have read over and over again every summer. I open to a random page and start to skim it, when I hear a knock at my door.

“Come in,” I say. My mom enters dragging my orange suitcase. She sets it down with a loud thump and sits down on the bed next to me. “I thought you might want to put something warmer on since the fireworks are tonight.”

Right... the fireworks! I kneel down next to my suitcase and grab a worn out sweatshirt that I have had for longer than I can remember and a can of bug spray.

“I’ll meet you out on the dock,” I say. My mom smiles and leaves. I shut my book and put my sweatshirt on. The soft fuzzy lining rubs against my dry, sunbaked skin, as I think, I love fireworks! The sounds they make elevates my body pulse, and I vibrate. The fireworks have always had gorgeous colors and create breathtaking patterns in the night sky as they dance above the lake. I spray on the cure to the evil known as bugs and head out to the water’s edge. By now, most of my family has arrived. I look around for Louis and Ally, but they are nowhere to be seen. I let out a heavy sigh and trudge to the dock. We all pile into my family’s boat and set off, heading into the middle of the lake.

Something very unique about the 4th of July on Torch Lake is that all the families on the lake raise American flags to form a continuous ring. There are at least three big flags in each yard. They flap in the wind as if they are waving at me, so I wave back. The blue in the left hand corner of the flags is as blue as the lake itself. I lower my hand outside the boat and touch the cool, crystal clear water. I shiver and pull a blanket around me. I check my phone. It’s almost 9:00.

“The fireworks should be starting any time now!” Aunt Marissa shouts as she looks in her purse for her camera. Boom! I jump. I crane my neck to see the burst from one of the most magnificent fireworks I have ever seen. The golden sparkles stream down toward Earth and reflect upon the perfectly calm water. My family oobs and aabs as the fireworks explode and fill the darkening sky with light. I smile and look around at my happy family. Suddenly, Uncle Bob picks up his phone. My heart starts pounding in hopes that it is Aunt Cindy calling. After what seemed like a decade, Uncle Bob puts the phone down.

“Cindy and the kids are on their way! They will be here around mid afternoon tomorrow!” Uncle Bob tries to shout over the roaring explosions that echo in my eardrums. I look back at the flags and smile. Even though it’s getting darker, the colors of the flags look somehow brighter now. Maybe this vacation will be a good one after all.

## “United and Free” by Taylor Sinawi

*Photo - Flags*

The sky is dark, the fireworks bright,  
But it is not the fireworks that light up this night.  
It is the joy; the freedom, spread throughout the air,  
The bombs have concluded, God has answered the prayers.  
The flag stands tall, as do we,  
For we have won our victory.  
We are Americans, and we are a team,  
We have earned the right to dream.  
We are together, together as one.  
When one of us fights we fight for everyone.  
Courageous and brave, resilient and strong,  
We are united, where we belong.  
Our hope has survived, we were never weak;  
We fought till the end, never accepting defeat.  
It is the love we share, through the arms we bare.  
It is the bonds we hold, when the nights get cold,  
It is the strength we take, pride not sin;  
It is our endurance within.  
I am an American, proud to be,  
A member of this nation, this noble country.  
We are Americans, proud to be.  
In a nation where our freedom is a top priority.  
You are an American, proud to be.  
Someone who can speak his mind, when he is not at peace.  
She is an American, proud to be.  
A girl who can believe in her religion, and still be free.  
We are all Americans, proud to be,  
People of a nation where we can stand up for what we believe.  
People of a nation where we are free.

## “Finding Home” by Carter Schmidt

*Photo – Cowboy*

“Barry please come visit your family, I know you’d love the city. Just a week, get away from that vineyard and be with your Ma and Pa.” Mommas’ perfect cursive implored and made my heart swell. She sends me these letters nearly every day, just can’t give up the old-fashioned paper and stamp. But Momma knows I won’t come, I’m keeping grandpas vineyard going, something they refused to do. Once grandpa died, everyone moved to the city, but I couldn’t let go, I couldn’t leave this old vineyard, our whole family grew up here. That was ten years ago, I was only 18.

“There’s more to life than those lonely old grapes” momma concluded. Just as I always do, I folded up the paper, slipped it back in its envelope, filed it into my box of these letters, and picked up the phone to call my parents.

“You know I’m not going to be able to come, momma.” We have the same conversation every time we talk; every time I feel more guilty.

Though Pa doesn’t have much input, the phone is always on speaker, but this time he had something to say. “Barry, Son,” Pa interjected with his slow, well enunciated way of speaking, “your grandpa knew what life was really about and that’s why he had that vineyard, it was about family, not the grapes. The family is here now. You should be with us.” With that I heard Pa get up and walk away from the phone.

Our conversation ended. The box of Mommas letters pulled at my thoughts and the words Pa said were all I could think about. I turned my glance out the window at those “lonely old grapes,” this place wasn’t about them, but Family. The fields were full but since they left, the meaning was empty.

Quickly I picked up the phone and dialed. Waiting for an answer, I already started going through my closet. I plopped my bag out on the bed just as I heard momma’s sweet voice, “Hello?” She was confused, I don’t usually call twice.

“Momma, I’m coming to visit.”

The plane ride was short, uneventful. The Ambiance was set by screaming children and roaring turbines. It’s been a while since my last use of public transportation. New York City...weird to think my family ended up with the yuppies.

I barely even recognized Ma and Pa, It’s been quite a long time since I’d seen Mamma in a dress, and even longer since I’d seen Pa without his Stetson. Momma was crying while dad held his stern face steady and shook my hand around Momma’s hug she refused to end.

My initial welcoming had ended and we went from the airport to the loft complex in which they all now lived. I never realized that all of my family stayed that close, except for me.

The elevator buzzed and the doors opened. Ma led me down the hallway and opened the door to her loft. I had no idea what I was in for. When the door opened I was surprised by the sight and clamor of the entire family squeezed into the loft to surprise me. Everyone yelled and embraced me. The work I was missing in the vineyard pulled at me but seeing my family again outweighed the work and I was glad I came to visit.

Everyone was there; uncle Joey, his wife, Jess. their sons, my sister and two brothers who all were now married with kids of their own, they were all there. Everyone had their questions to ask and they were all welcoming and excited to see me, only making me more guilty I’d stayed away for so long. This wonderful moment went by in a flash and ended with Momma announcing that everyone was going shopping now that I was here, and so we went.

The streets of New York me much different than my fields. The sky line was trees on the vineyard, not buildings; the ground, grass not cement: and when I looked around me there was nothing to see, but here I see my brothers still pushing each other around but claiming to now be mature at the same time, my little nieces laughing and skipping around the legs of my siblings, and Ma, Pa, and Uncle Joey leading the pack; here I see love and family.

"You like coffee don't you. Barry?" My brother inquired of me.

"Yeah, black" I knew this would start an uproar. Interjections came from all sides. "Black!" "What kind is that?" from the younger ones. My brother explained that no one here drinks black coffee.

"How about a girl?" My sister, Jan, asked over her kids' yelling.

"What do you mean?" I knew what she meant, I just didn't want to answer.

"I mean. does my baby brother gave a girlfriend?" Everyone was now paying attention to my answer.

"Uh... no." I answered and I surprisingly got a sense of relief from my audience. Ma and Jan exchanged looks of satisfaction. Ma turned the corner and led the group through a door to a coffee shop.

We walked in and I instantly knew what they were doing. The whole family clearly knew her. hugged her, and once they were finished, all seemed to shuffle behind her to set their eyes on me to see what I would do. She had straight blonde hair which fell over her shoulders and down her t-shirt. hazel eyes. and a perfect white smile. I guess I wasn't too upset about what they were doing.

“April,” she smiled. introducing herself, holding out her hand. Everyone watching waited anxiously for me to say something.

I accepted her hand. “Barry.” I replied, though I had to think twice.

## “Finding Home” by Carter Schmidt

*Photo – Cowboy*

“So I’ve been told,” she laughed and made a gesture toward the family. “They made sure that you all were in here on my break. They’re pretty excited about us meeting.”

“I see. . .” I replied and we both looked over our shoulders to see my family staring into our conversation.

Ma walked over and continued to direct what she’d started here. “Why don’t you two find a table and uh... talk for a while! And Barry.” her voice softened, “I think you can let go of her hand now.” I looked down and noticed I had never let go from shaking her hand. I let go as I could feel my face turning beat red. I wasn’t used to this sort of thing.

“Sorry about that,” I nervously attempted to laugh it off but she didn’t seem to mind.

April led me over to a table. We ordered a couple of coffees and began to talk about life and what comes with it, casual and friendly and I got lost in our conversation, forgetting everything else. Just like that. This was one of the first times I’d actually socialized in quite a long while. I got so lost, in fact, that it wasn’t until my family snuck up to our table to tell us the shop was closing that I realized they had left... and that it had been 4 hours!

“You never went back to work!” I exclaimed.

“No worries,” she smiled. “I never even worked today anyway.” She winked and promised we would talk more before leaving me with my family as the day was coming to an end.

“Sweet girl isn’t she?” Momma asked me.

“She really is.” I answered as I watched her walk out the door of the shop and into the crowded sidewalk.

That night I barely slept. One day and I already had so much to think about. Once we got home momma talked to me constantly about staying and coming to live in town with the family. In bed, all I thought about was the vineyard, everything that filled my life at my own home. but I guess all that really was were those lonely old grapes. The thought of horsing around with my brothers again, to the hilarious displeasure of their wives, might I add, stained my mind. I thought about my sister and getting to talk with her again, all those little kids running around. the city, the people, my first friend, April. Most of all I couldn’t forget what dad had said, “Your grandpa knew what life was really about and that’s why he had that Vineyard, it was about family, not the grapes. The family is here now. You should be with us.”

Momma got up the next morning to find a note on the counter and read it aloud to Pa “I had to get back to the vineyard. See you soon. Love, Barry.” She began to cry and Pa wrapped her up until they heard a knock at the door. Mommas mood changed instantly as she opened the door to see me with all my luggage lying around me.

“Oh, Honey! I thought you went home!”

“Just to get my stuff, Ma. I am home.”

## “Both Sides Now” by Anna Merucci

*Photo – Both Sides Now*

“How are you doing?” Dad yells up to me, with fog coming out of his mouth. I look down at him and answer, “I’m doing great!” We are climbing the huge Mt. Katshepa. I am above dad and below Conner, my older brother. It is father-son week so we decided to go to our favorite cave on Mt. Katshepa. We have all kinds of stuff there: Food, clothes, and we even have rooms, with heaters, because it is as cold as the North Pole up here.

“We’re here!” exclaims Conner. We have finally arrived. We rest for a few minutes because our legs are rubber from climbing this whole way. My dad is especially tired because he is a couch potato.

From the outside the cave looks just like the rest of the mountain, but from the inside it is so much more.

“Can I open it, please?” I plead. “Fine,” Conner mutters. We all love opening the cave.

“Hey Dad, it’s 5 steps forward and 3 steps to the right, right?” I question.

“Yeah,” Dad answers. Then at the rock, I move 5 steps forward and 3 steps right and jump. I hear a rusty sound and see snow moving. The side of our cave slowly lifts.

“Cool,” I mumble, wowed. I am in awe everytime. “I am so sore. Oh,” I remember, “I’m going in the hot tub “Me too!” yells Conner. I exclaim.

“Me three,” mumbles dad grogily.

I go to my room and change into my bathing suit. I love our pool. It is huge. The water is warm, and it is as blue as the sky. As I walk in I see my dad sitting in the hot tub. Conner is getting ready to jump in, but I beat him to it. “Woohoo!” I scream. I am almost as happy as I am on Christmas Day.

“Remember our first time alone here with dad?” Conner asks me, with water dripping down his face.

“Yeah,” I answer, “I wouldn’t go in the pool because I was afraid that you would pull me under, but then you pushed me in anyways!” I laugh. The water feels cool on my skin because I haven’t gone swimming in a really long time.

“Watch out!” my dad yells, flying through the air. I quickly swim away- I don’t want to become a pancake. When I come up, I am majorly splashed in the face.

“Oh Dad nice!” Conner exclaims, giving him a high five.

“I’m going in the hot tub,” I call out, walking up the steps of the pool. When I get to the hot tub, I get in very slowly so I can feel how warm it is, and savor that feeling. I sit down and then my dad and brother come over, both getting in the same way I did.

After about 10 minutes I get out and go back to my room and change. I’m on my bed when I get a call. “Hello?” I answer.

“Hi honey,” bubbles Mom.

“Oh hi Mom,” I say back.

“I was just calling to see how you’re doing sweetie,” She explains.

“Oh, well I’m doing good. We just went swimming and it was so much fun! I miss you though.” I admit.

“Oh honey I miss you too. I hope that you have a nice time though. Oh,” she exclaims, “I have to go. My brownies are ready. Bye, I love you.”

“I love you too, bye!” I say. I almost wish I was at home. Mom’s brownies are the best! The fudge melts in your mouth and you can taste the chocolate on your lips. My stomach growles. I’m going to go get some food.

I walk into our kitchen and smell something purely amazing. “What is that smell?” I say to myself.

“That’s popcorn,” Conner blurts almost scaring me. I didn’t see him there. “Yum,” I say, “wait... are we watching The Gladiators?”

“Yeah,” Conner affirms.

“Awesome!” I exclaim. The Gladiators is the movie that we watched the very first time we came up here, just Dad, Conner, and me. Now, we watch it everytime we come. It is kind of a tradition.

“Who’s ready to watch Gladiators?” Dad yells running into the room.

“Me!” I yell. “Me!” Conner roars, jumping onto the couch.

The microwave starts beeping and Dad says, “Hey, can you get that son?”

“Sure,” I say, “can I put the butter on?” I ask.

“Yeah sure,” Dad answers, sitting on the couch next to Conner.

“Okay,” I say, taking the popcorn out. I put it in a bowl and then melt the butter quickly. I pour it on and then taste it. It is amazing. I go and sit down on the couch next to Dad. I give him the bowl, because he is in between Conner and I.

Dad presses play and we all hum along to the epic beginning music. I love staying here. All my memories of this place are joyfilled. I especially love having family adventures here. I don’t know what my life would be like without this place. It is a part of me.

## “Both Sides Now” by Katie Howard – Awarded Judges Choice

*Photo – Both Sides Now*

“Hello, how was your day?” I’ve always wished I could ask you that. On the contrary, I will never, nor have ever, been able to do that. I’ve never been like you. Why? I have never walked, talked, looked, acted, or been treated like any of your kind. You see, I’m a mountain. If one were to ask you to describe a mountain, you would picture a heaping pile of rock. That’s what I am. I remember the day when I realized I could not be like you and your kind, no matter how hard I tried.

The air swirling around me felt warm and the sun shone brightly, accenting all my rocky features. Many people had shown up to walk about the small-scale city I looked upon. I looked over at the town and saw hundreds of people admiring it. People were talking loudly due to all the humans inhabiting the town. Many people stopped to look at me, then soon went back to walking around the town. I noticed one couple, the woman had short locks of auburn hair and big hazel eyes, while the man had black hair with dark blue eyes. They seemed to be young, and adventurous. They were like young deer exploring the forest together. The woman’s head turned towards me in a flash. Her eyes lit up as she tugged her husband’s sleeve.

She waved at me and yelled with her high voice, “Hi, mountain!” No one had ever noticed me before. Sure, people had seen me, and admired my features as if I was an exceptional feat of nature, but no one ever thought I could be like them. I felt as if one thousand fireworks were going to explode inside me. I heard a deep voice chuckle at the woman’s call.

“Dear, the mountain can’t respond to you. It’s just a big rock,” Any joy residing inside me now depleted to nothing. It vanished into thin air, nothing remaining except the cold feeling inside me. The woman raised her voice then half-shouted at her husband, “I’m just trying to have some fun. We came here to do that, so I’m doing that.” She was defending herself, not me. The coldness increased, even though the day was so warm. The husband spoke up again, his voice calmer than his wife’s.

“I’m not saying you’re not having fun. I’m just telling you so people don’t think you’re crazy,” the woman put her hand up to make another argument then lowered it, having nothing left to say. The taller man laughed at his wife’s defeat. His laugh sounded hearty and earnest, as if he was actually enjoying his time in this tiny old town. The woman flinched at her husband’s laugh then lightly punched him in the upper arm.

“Don’t laugh!” she exclaimed. This, however, did not stop the man’s laughter. It only increased. The man held his stomach as he tried to stop laughing. Soon the woman laughed too, her laugh was light and airy. After a few seconds, they both stopped laughing. They intertwined their hands together and walked away as if nothing had happened at all. Even though they went about their day with smiles on their faces, I felt the opposite. Their laughter made me want to turn away, but I couldn’t. I was still a mountain, and mountains can’t move.

Their words pierced the coldness that took the place of a heart inside me. The wind turned cold and howled deeply as I mourned to myself, but no one would know what pain I was going through. I could not show it to anyone because I was cursed with a cold outside that showed no emotions whatsoever. The outside of me that was strong contrasted with the hopelessness I felt at that time on the inside. This was one of the events that triggered the hate towards myself.

I could not tell anyone my problems. No one would sit down and listen to me talk for hours and understand what I was going through. On the contrary to what your kind believed, I did have feelings. When people talked, I listened to every syllable that came out of their mouths. Whether their voice was raspy, or friendly. Whether their voice spoke quietly or exclaimed everything they said. I still listened. Over the years, I heard many stories from many different people. Some came from fancy men with odd accents, to legends told by red-skinned warriors.

I longed for the day when I could tell the world my stories. The day when I could walk, talk, act and be treated like the people I watched go about their lives everyday. I wanted to talk and wanted people to listen to me. People looked at me, but they didn’t *see* me. For centuries I wanted to be seen by someone. Someone to take in every single feature of my cold, rocky exterior and appreciate all of me.

Who would want to admire a stupid rock like me anyway? I had no outstanding features to be admired. I was just a big rock as the man with the deep voice said that day. At times, I wished I could disappear, go somewhere new, be someone else, meet new people, and tell their stories.

It was a cool autumn day, just like any other. I sat alone watching people walk by. A girl with short brown hair and bright green eyes holding a sketchbook close to her chest paused and stared at me. She looked around frantically to see a light brown bench. She sat down on it, took a picture of me with her large camera and started sketching in her tiny book. She occasionally looked up from her sketch to notice every one of my features. *Notice* my features, not just see them. There was something sprouting from my cold interior that I had not felt in a long time. Happiness. I was an eagle chick that had just learned to fly.

When the girl finished, she stood up, dusted herself off and looked at me. She smiled. Not to someone around her. Her face turned from a look of industriousness to one of joy towards me. Her green eyes sparkled as she smiled. The smile lit up the entire town I looked down on. Everything seemed so more vibrant now. I swear I almost saw a halo sitting above her head and wings sprouting from her back. She was an angel. I had never been treated like more than just a pile of rocks and dirt.

So this was what being human felt like.

## “Cowboy” by Lauren Corriveau

*Photo – Cowboy*

The six foot, handsome, crazy, rugged cowboy rode into town on his beautiful brown, neatly brushed horse, named charlotte. He had soft, clear skin and a perfect smile. This cowboy, by the name of Matthew, is the shining star of the city, everybody loved him. He always wore navy blue jeans, a tan dusty cowboy hat, a blue and white checkered plaid shirt, and neatly polished cowboy boots. He was the coolest, the most handsome, the most enthusiastic, funniest, person in the town. People always went crazy around him jumping on him, screaming, crying, and doing a ton of crazy things. Sometimes he just wished he could just be himself, and perform as himself, an average ordinary boy.

Matthew really did go to a normal school and he really did have a normal life. Matthew also had normal friends, but could never hang out with them because none of them knew about his double life. His dream was always to be a famous cowboy, and have the best of both worlds but, he didn't really want to be bombarded everywhere he went. Then, Matthew decided he would be a cowboy but, also a normal teenage boy.

Every show he did in his hometown of Nashville, Tennessee all of the fans went crazy, crazier than a crazy bull. Once in awhile the fans would even carry him through the audience. Matthew always got super scared when they did that.

Every time he did a show he could always smell the loving aroma of all of his fans. It smelled like his destiny, his future. He would high five all of the kids soft, cold hands and hear them laugh, and hearing all the fans laugh brightened up his day which made it even harder to let go.

Then one day during the a show he decided he couldn't do it anymore he had to let go. He knew there was more to him than a cowboy.

Before he could make the final decision of his career being over he had to talk to his manager, who was his dad.

“Hey Dad,” said Matthew.

“Yes Son,” he replied.

“I have been thinking being a famous cowboy is too stressful for as guy like me, I'm just a kid, I do not want to do this anymore,” said Matthew.

“Wow,” said Father, “ You really don't want to hear your screaming loving fans everyday, all I have to say is follow your heart, and it will lead you in the right place.”

“Thanks.” said Matthew.

Matthew was about to do his final show he put on his, blue jeans, his checkered shirt, his neatly brown polished cowboy boots, and his special cowboy hat. This show was not going to be the last of the last but, it would hold a very special place in his heart, and that is what Matthew wanted. It was time for Matthew to reveal to the world who he really was.

Matthew was about to show the world who he really was, it was so hard to take it all in. As he stepped on stage he heard the beautiful creaking noise that he hears all the time. Matthew thought to himself wow, this stage is my whole world. it is my world. He thought I have spent so much time here it is so hard to let go. At that moment Matthew also thought to himself this is going to be one of the hardest, toughest, and one of the most roughest things he has ever done, but he had to do it.

He walked on stage and said, “ Come on everybody I have a surprise for you, I'm not just this famous cowboy who lives a life of luxury, I'm really like all of you a lazy, crazy, insane kid, and tonight I thought I would perform as myself.”

Matthew took his wig off, his mustache, and his hat. The look on the audience's face was shocking, there eyes were wider than ever, and there mouths made the shape of an “O”. Matthew felt this feeling of relief for the first time in his career. The audience faces were frozen, they were so surprised, the fans were more surprised than they have ever been.

Matthew said, “ I really am like all of you as you can see lazy, crazy, insane kid.”

“Would it be okay if I performed as myself tonight for you,” questioned Matthew.

“YAAAA,” screamed the audience.

“Alright,” he replied, “here we go”.

Matthew did his normal show, but he did it as himself, and it was the best show he had ever done. Though, Matthew wasn't a famous cowboy anymore everybody still loved him for who he was. Though it would be the last show for now it would not be the last show that he would ever do.

Matthew did get a lot of attention at school for the first month or so, but then it finally started to settle down, and he would get a little bit of attention here and there which he didn't really mind, in fact he kind of liked it. Finally, Matthew was a normal kid who had the best time in the world going crazy, and being a normal kid. Matthew loved his new life and knew there was more things in this world to come for him.

## “How The Rain Falls” by Caleb Holm – Awarded Second Place

*Photo – Painted Lady*

I hate this. I absolutely hate the feeling of paint on my skin. It feels as if I am being trapped, slowly encased in clay that will harden at any second. Petrified. I cannot even move until the stupid ‘artists’ have finished with all the paint and the stage crew refuses to dim the lights even though it shines directly into my face and eyes. I am not even allowed to move my head! I feel so exposed. Every single time the brush strokes against my skin it feels as if hundreds of thousands of insects are crawling up and down my back. These people poke and prod and smear and scrub me as if I am a prize or some sort of artifact about to be put on display in a museum. That is probably all I am to them, just another canvas that they govern. The idea that these idiotic artists are making good money for their ridiculous “modern art” pains me to no end. This looks like something my three year old could have done. Zale, he is the reason I do this and the reason I will keep on doing this. I breathe out and I count to ten, then I start over. Anyone can do or withstand anything for ten seconds, so I take it ten seconds at a time. I will do anything for Zale and if it hurts me, so be it. I will grit my teeth, and wait for it to be over.

Finally, they are done with their painting. Huh, they decided to add tears this time, how fitting. But they will never see a single tear fall from my eyes. I am strong. They’re starting on my hair now, I don’t absolutely hate this part. It takes me back to when I was just a little girl with no worries. During those times every night my mother would run her fingers through my long, dark hair and sing to me about the ocean and all her secrets, she would sing of its power and grace. This is where I came up with Zale’s name, Zale means “power of the sea” in Greek. Every morning my father would make breakfast and my mother would dress me up in my school uniform and put blue ribbons in my hair. I would dash out the door, kiss my mother, and then my father would drive me to school. That is how it was every day, until the accident.

I was put into the foster care system along with my little brother, Dylan. I never saw him after the day they separated us. I was only seven years old but I can still remember his little two year old voice screaming, “Rain! Don’t leave!” I remember that was the first time I broke. Wells of sorrow burst forth as rage. I went at the social workers with teeth and nails and I felt like an animal. They had to get three men to hold me back and I believe that one of the social workers ended up in the hospital. I haven’t seen or heard of Dylan since. He still haunts me in my dreams.

I was placed with some woman who only took me in for the check she got from the state. She was an alcoholic. Every night she would come home drunk and she would smack me and the other girl, Sylvia, around for a little bit. I was there for nearly two years and I made sure to stay at the top of my class. My parents always said that to succeed you had to stay smart. I helped Sylvia keep her grades up as well. One night the woman came back and grabbed Sylvia and started to choke her. This was the second time I broke; it was worse. I flew at her and I hurt her so bad; she was dying. My mind came back and I called for an ambulance. I had to run and tried to bring Sylvia with me, but she was too scared to move. I had terrified her. I had terrified myself. I couldn’t stay so I told her, “Cunning wins, and you are cunning. Stay that way.” I then let vowing to control my rage.

They’re calling me onto stage now. I look at my hair and notice the small blue ribbon and smile to myself. I’m pushed out on to the catwalk and it’s time for my job. I walk and glare fiercely at everyone that dares to meet my eyes. This is the only part I like, scaring the people who sponsor these stupid events. After that initial fear in their eyes fades however I hate it. I lose control. But I never let it show. After walking up and down the catwalk, I take my place next to the other models and stand still.

I managed to avoid being found for about a year but, of course, it wasn’t going to stay like that. At ten years old it’s hard to stay of the grid. I was caught breaking into a store for food and immediately was put back into the system. I was a minor and Sylvia testified that the woman was abusive so I got off without trouble, but because they found me I was sent to a new guardian.

She was an old woman. She didn’t treat me horribly but she didn’t really care for me either. Indifference was still much better than any of the other situations I was in since the accident. I was a year behind in school but I caught up quickly and managed to reclaim my spot as the top in the class. I stayed with this woman for seven years and even managed to skip a grade. I was bullied by the popular kids because I was from the poor side of town and yet I was smarter. I was determined to make a way, a name for myself. Then I let my walls down. One person was all it took for my life to completely derail. He was Blake. He was my boyfriend from junior year and we decided that we weren’t going to college, so that we could be together. I was stupid enough to go through with it

The contest is over so I go backstage and shower after they take some more pictures. It feels so nice to have the paint come off. I feel free and clean, but vulnerable. I change and head out the door to my second job as a bartender while the rest of those airhead models go to the after party. Although, I can’t really judge, not after what I gave up for a boy. I thought it was love. Now, I know for sure that it wasn’t. It was just my broken self, clinging to someone who promised they’d always love me and wouldn’t leave me.

I’m at the bar serving drinks and thinking about Blake. We were living our lives and had even got our own apartment. I thought we were happy. Then I became pregnant with Zale and as soon as he found out he left. He never gave me a hint he was leaving. I went to bed one night and when I woke up he was gone. I’m about to cry so I ask my coworker Elena to cover for me because I need to go home early. Elena and I don’t know much about each other but we both know neither one of us has it easy, so we help each other out when we can.

I’m leaving for home and walking through the cold November in the Bronx. As I’m getting closer to home the tears are getting harder to hold back, but I can do it because I am strong. I run up the stairs that lead to my apartment; the elevator hardly ever works during the winter. I reach the apartment and thank Mrs. Mortellini for watching Zale, who is now sleeping. As soon as I close the door I break down and sob. I can let go now because I am alone, and I cry. Suddenly I hear a noise, a small voice says, “Mommy?” I was too loud, I’ve woken up Zale. He sees me but he doesn’t say anything. He runs over to me and just hugs me, and I hold him. He is my world and I do everything for him.

Pain doesn’t leave us. Tragedy and difficulties are a part of life that don’t go away. But as long as we can push through it and as long as we have something or someone to endure it for, we can make it. We will find the strength because love can motivate us and drive us to do anything. I, Rain Eärendil do everything I can, no matter the pain or cost, for Zale.

## “Stars In The Night” by Maggie Newell

*Photo – Cowboy*

I tipped my hat up and looked at the sky. It was a pure black endless abyss like my dark roast coffee. It was filled with twinkly stars, dancing in the night. I stopped and stared for a minute at the beauty of it all. Nothing was better than these cool, crisp, early summer nights.

I slowly kept walking down the well-worn dirt trail, taking in the beautiful scenery. I walked until I had reached my favorite old willow tree. I used to come here when I was a little kid and sleep out under the stars on warm summer nights. Tonight, I didn't want to stay that long, but I wanted to sit for a little while. I walked over to the tree, my tree, and laid down, with its, long, flowy branches dancing in the wind. This tree was probably older than any other tree in this forest. The stump was narrow, but you could tell it had been here for a long time. I laid my head down on the ground next to the tree. The ground was hard but cool, and the misted grass acted like a pillow. It wasn't the most comfortable position, but I liked it. An earthy smell filled my nostrils as I took a deep breath. I just sat there in silence, staring at the stars in a trance. Here is where I felt the calmest and the world drifted away from me.

The sky above me is the biggest and most beautiful thing I have ever seen. It never ceases to amaze me. And those stars are just, breathtaking. Some are bigger than other, some are brighter than most, but in my eyes, they are all the same amount of magnificent. Some of those stars are billions of miles away. They are absolutely ginormous when you get up next to them but they show up in our sky as tiny dots. In reality, we are the tiny ones. It is probably a little known fact that some of the stars run out of gas before their light reaches Earth.

Sometimes, I look around me and say, “Maybe one of these people have a light to shine and we don't see it. Maybe some of these people could be geniuses and change the world but we may not get to see how bright their light is before it is gone.” It would be a shame. If something was gone before it was ever really there.

I've been around this town for a while. Seen different types of people come and go. Who knows? Maybe one of them could be the next Einstein or Gandhi. But we will never know, or maybe we will know. Maybe just after it is too late.

Just then, my best friend Jason came running down the trail, waking me up from my trance.

“Hey dude. Where have you been?” He asked.

“Just sitting out here, thinking,” I replied. “Clearing my head.”

“Right. You ok, dude?” Jason inquired.

“Ya, I'm fine.” I answered.

“Good. Come on man. You're missing one of the biggest parties of the year!” He shouted. Jason reached down, grabbed my hand, and pulled my up to standing.

“Let's go!” He exclaimed, beginning to run down the trail again. I took off, running down the path after him. My footsteps were hitting the ground in a steady pace. Thump, Thump, Thump. I soon caught up to Jason, just as we were running out of the forest and mm the clearing. The field was filled with people, all waiting for the Fourth of July fireworks. The Fourth of July was always a huge celebration, one of the biggest and loudest in my town, and everyone came out watch the fireworks and picnic.

Just as we reached the group of people, a loud boom filled the sky. People cheered and whooped. Everyone knew what this meant. It was time for fireworks.

Suddenly, rockets flew up mm the sky and filled the darkness with light, color, and sound. A dazzling display entertained everyone in the field. “Oohs” and “Ahhs” arose from the crowd.

Then it hit me. The answer to what I was sitting and thinking about earlier popped into my head, just as I was sitting there with my family and friends.

Not everyone can get their moment in the sun or get recognized for what they can do. Few people do in their lifetime. Maybe you will be one of those people. If you are, be thankful for being recognized. If you are not, just keep doing what you're doing. Eventually, you will be noticed, and then you will be able to burst your light and gifts into this great, big world.

## “Flags” by Luke Martin

*Photo – Flags*

I stroll onto the field. The deafening sounds of screaming, laughing, and talking fill my ears. I notice the many thrilling activities that have been set up. I smell the warm, juicy, sizzling hamburgers and the buttery popcorn. Then I look at the field itself. The lush, bright green grass that is as bright as a candle. I can tell that the host, whoever they are, tried very hard to make the field look its best. There has to be at least sixty or seventy people here. I roam around, playing the occasional bean bag toss or football.

I spot a kid looking even more alone than I do toss a frisbee to himself. The frisbee is a bright neon orange and has black stripes across it. I decide to cheer him up and saunter towards him.

“Do you want to play catch with the frisbee?” I ask shyly, nervous about what his response will be.

“Sure,” he responds.

I let out a sigh of relief, relieved that he quickly agreed. We toss the frisbee back and forth. His throws are much more accurate. They also go farther. Sometimes we do not even make their way back to him.

We talk to each other while we are playing. I learn that his name is Max. I tell him that my name is Luke. I also discover that Max lives closer to the field than me. As the minutes pass by, we grow more comfortable talking to each other. Max eventually tells me a heartbreaking story about him finding out that his dad died in the army last year.

“How did you become so good with a frisbee?” I end up asking, trying to stay a little more positive.

“Practice,” Max says. “I used to practice a lot with my dad.”

“Oh. Well, you know what they say, practice makes perfect,” I mumble. My plan to stay positive is already failing. I really am not good at comforting people.

“I’m not perfect, I just have more experience with it.”

“Either way, I know you are way better at it.”

After about half of an hour, we say goodbye to each other and part. I continue my walk around the perimeter of the field.

I finally decide to stop at an old bench for a rest because I have grown very tired and have not seen Max or anyone else that I know. Since I was playing frisbee with my newly made friend. I can tell that the bench has been in that spot for a long time. I take a closer look at it. It is wooden and a rusty mahogany except for the middle of the back rest, which is an olive green. Behind the bench is a flower bed filled with bright red roses, flourishing pink tulips, and stunning purple petunias. They smell better than fresh baked cookies. I see a shiny metallic pole in the center of the fragrant flower bed.

I look up. Towering above me I see a roughly twenty-foot tall flagpole with the United States flag attached to it. I then imagine the thrilling day when Americans earned the right and the freedom to hoist that flag into the vast sky. Everyone must have been incredibly relieved and excited. Suddenly, I hear a loud, thunderous noise.

I am so distracted by my reverie that I jump backwards and lose my balance, so I collapse to the ground. A mouthful of coarse grass arrives in my mouth. I shakily stand up and out the grass, still startled by the sudden sound. I observe that there is now dense, gray smoke. It had already been darker and harder to see with the sun setting. Now, the smoke is making the visibility worse. Terrifying thoughts race through my head. *Is a war starting? Is my family okay?* Then I am startled again, but this time, by laughter.

*Why is someone laughing?* I try to discover the source of the laughter by glancing around. The smoke starts to clear, so visibility is already almost back to how it had just been moments ago. Instead of finding out who it was, I start to notice more people are laughing. The laughing grows louder as well. I am incredibly confused. People are now strolling around the field I am standing in, talking and chuckling. People look at me and laugh harder, so I figure something is wrong about my situation. *What is going on here?* A figure I finally recognize wanders towards me. It is Max.

He notices my dazed and confused expression. Max grins, giving me a look that tells me he knows something I do not.

“Did the fireworks startle you too, Luke?” He asks, still smirking.

As if on cue, more sparkles and brilliant colors light up the dark sky, quickly followed by another ear-popping boom.

“What? No,” I protest “I was just admiring the flags.” Even as I say this, I know Max is right. I can not believe that I forgot that it is the Fourth of July! I also can not believe that the first explanation I could come up with was war. I wonder if I came up with that explanation because of the war story about Max’s dad. At first I had thought this grassland was a war zone. Really, though, it is just a normal field.

Max puts his hand on my shoulder and sighs. His expression is still more positive than mine.

“Sure you were,” He says slowly. “Sure you were.”

“Even if I was startled,” I continue. “You have no proof!”

“Besides the fact that I saw you jump two feet high after the first firework?” Max chuckles. “Anyway, are you up for another game of frisbee?” “Sure,” I say quietly, although I had barely just comprehended what he said. I am still thinking about how I still do not understand how I got so distracted by the flag.

## “Side Effects” by Abby Rutila – Awarded Honorable Mention

*Photo – Painted Lady*

Tears, tears, running down her face. The packed on makeup covering emotional scars left by all the ridicule and bullies who tormented her throughout her life. Scars of emptiness and worthlessness blanketing the natural beauty of the freckles dancing across her cheeks and her glowing blue eyes now dimmed with thoughts of uneasiness and worries from the past. She walks down the street, alert and watchful of men who seem to have pleasure in bringing down one’s self-assurance. An enormous guard greets her as she trudges through the heavy door into the large tower of a building. She doesn’t respond back; of course she doesn’t respond back — she’s too concerned about how he will perceive her.

As she enters the vacant elevator smothered in lifeless mirrors reflecting the reality no one wants to see, she spots her reflection as the ticking elevator climbs the floors. The once attractive woman, full of vivacious spirit, finds the image repulsive, as if an appalling troll was staring back at her. She departs from the elevator and walks into her empty office overlooking the gloomy city of Seattle. The lethargic laptop, sitting on her coffee-stained white desk, lights up with a new email. She never opens her emails — the lively celebrations and relatives checking to see if she is “okay” fills her with a sense of loneliness and withdrawal, but the new email sticks out to her. It was from an old art professor from college. Originally, she was enrolled in the finest art academy in Washington, but she dropped out after a tragic event changed her life forever. Her hands hadn’t grasped a cold, wooden, dirty paintbrush, motivated by the dynamic thoughts and ideas of young inspiring artists, for years. The email invites her to an art contest, where your body is the canvas on which you paint whatever you feel. However, that’s the problem, she doesn’t feel anything anymore. The inner fire in her heart was once burning for her passion of the arts, was now a single flame muted by the world. Yet, the flame is still there, burning from the little fuel left inside her. It is that little flame which compels her to enter the contest and try to find the enthusiasm that left her many years ago.

As she stands on the stage, face full of vivid and radiant colors whirling across her skin, she feels a sense of panic in the pit of her empty stomach. She was a contestant in the final two, but still has a cloud of defeat hovering over her head. She blames herself for her pathetic life full of dull thoughts and actions created by a machine inside her head. She wants to have fun, she wants to have friends, but trust isn’t a privilege she gives to all. Her chance at winning is as good as the beady-eyed, fedora-wearing man standing next to her. The judges announce her name; she is the winner, the winner of the entire contest. For the first time in a very long time, she feels confident and thrilled. A great weight of failure that had been slowly suffocating her for years suddenly lifts off her chest. A judge asks her what her story was behind her masterpiece. She grabs the microphone proudly, and for the first time in three years she can finally say it, finally admit what happened to her...

“No one talks about it, but the pain on a victim’s face should say it all. You would never think your own lover would ever hurt you. I was never aware of the fact that what was going on was wrong. Toxic love will slowly destroy you before it kills you.”

## “The Letter” by Anne Dark

Photo – Flags

I remember the long days, lying on the warm floor next to the crackling fire in the Claggetts brewery.

*The flag being so very large, mother was obliged to obtain permission from the proprietors of Claggetts brewery which was in our neighborhood, to spread it out in their malt house; and I remember seeing my mother down on the floor, placing the stars: after the completion of the flag, she superintended the topping of it, having it fastened in the most secure manner to prevent its being torn away by (cannon) balls: the wisdom of her precaution was shown during the engagement: many shots piercing it, but it still remained firm to the staff. Your father (Col. Armistead) declared that no one but the maker of the flag should mend it, and requested that the rents should merely be bound around.*

-Caroline Pickersgill Purdy, 1876, Baltimore. Letter to Georgiana Armistead Appleton.

My mother was always seated near me in her rocking chair, her spectacles sitting daintily on the edge of her upturned nose as her lively eyes darted from stitch to stitch. My fingers moved stiffly across the grain of the material and sharply pulled back when the needle punctured them. Wincing from the familiar pain, I was slightly angry at myself. However, I always looked up to my mother at these most “desperate” times. My mother, Mary Pickersgill, was a strong-willed character, who felt the need to indicate her pride in participation with the efforts against England. She always sat, laboring away at her needle, showing me that great feats can come by humble things like sewing.

She was the best seamstress out of all of us, including my cousins Eliza and Margaret, and our slave girl, Grace. We all, however, shared in the patriotism that my mother radiated throughout her life.

“Eye the needle, Caroline, and you won’t have to put as much blood into your work.” Sighing, I replied, “I know mother, but my fingers ache, and I can’t seem to get the needle in the right spot.”

“Your needle is on the opposite fabric face of your hand, Caroline,” she said without looking up from her work. Her fingers still moved nimbly, though her age may have told otherwise.

“No wonder you made me work on the red dye fabric,” I added sarcastically.

We seemed to both be distracted from our work, subconsciously stitching while our minds wandered off as we listened to the crackling fire. Finally breaking the silence, I dropped my work to my lap and looked at my mother, still stitching away at the stary blue fabric. She looked above her glasses at me, noticing I had not finished, yet had quit, and she said,

“We patriots never quit. Take pride in who you can be, and don’t regret what you cannot. Remember the soldiers who are fighting for our liberty, and you should be grateful that you can do this if it can bring them any more strength.”

I specifically remember these words because of the levity in her voice, yet the pride she had in our colonies. She basted the beautiful fifteen white stars on the blue fabric, her stitching strong. She would always remind me, “It must wave with strength, to bring courage to the hearts of our patriot soldiers.” Her strong flag did convey this message, as it inspired Francis Scott Key to write a beautiful poem about it.

Recalling these times, I felt compelled to write to Georgiana Armistead Appleton, on account of my mother, who had always been a good American, showing true pride for the colonies and her country.

## “Both Sides Now” by Megan Mallie

*Photo – Both Sides Now*

“It’ll be exciting!” my mom had told me. I highly doubted it. New York City is exciting, not some tiny cabin on the mountainside distanced from civilization. What’s more exciting than window shopping and sipping lattes with your best friends in the Big Apple? Absolutely nothing measures up.

My mom was a geologist who had a crazy love for rocks. “Why not live on a huge rock, Brie?” she had asked me. *Why not? Because I hate rocks. I hate that your job moves us all over the United States, especially now that I have finally settled in. I have actually made a life for myself and have had friends for over a year now!* I wanted to scream at her. But of course I don’t, because why would she ever listen to me? She never has.

*Life on both sides!* the ad proclaimed cheerily. I have torn up so many of those pamphlets. I crumpled another one in my hands, my head as turbulent as a stormy sea. I hated moving!

I awoke the next morning, the sun shining harshly in my eyes. When the orange spots had cleared from behind my eyelids, I sat up, as groggy and confused as if I had just gotten off a rollercoaster. I heard the gravelly voices of men, and the piercing *beep beep* of a truck backing up. Something was off. . . I stepped out of bed and my feet felt the frigid floor where my rug used to be. Where was my rug? I walked to my door and noticed six or seven brown cardboard boxes full of my belongings. Almost everything had been packed up! I saw my neatly folded tees and dresses arranged just so in the box. Not wanting to ruin the neatness by digging through it, I headed downstairs in my pajamas. As I reached the bottom of the staircase I noticed my mom speaking to a couple of guys who were almost twice the size of her.

“Yes, yes,” she was saying, “but we should speed this along. We’re supposed to leave tomorrow, and the truck should be a day ahead of us, at least.”

“Tomorrow?!” I shrieked. The moving guys turned and stared at me. “But mom,” I continued, trying to keep the indignation out of my voice, “you said we had a whole week left.”

“Yes, honey,” she replied with an infuriatingly calm smile, “but we have been given premium lodging, so we can leave even earlier.”

“But...” I tried to interrupt.

She talked over me. “I packed most of your belongings last night,” she added. “This is the trip of a lifetime.” A dreamy smile crossed her face. “Imagine the rare experiences we’ll have, all the varieties of rocks! This is a once in a lifetime opportunity!”

I turned away, fighting tears. “I’m gonna have some cereal,” I mumbled, walking away. The cereal along with all the food had probably been packed up anyway. I couldn’t conceive or believe that we would leave so soon. I doubled back to race up the staircase. I collapsed on my bed, as trembling tears traced tracks down my cheeks. *She couldn’t do this to me!* I silently vowed. Nevertheless, the next day I watched our apartment building disappear behind us forever.

“You sure you don’t want to ride shotgun? It’s a long way to the airport!” my mom asked. “No, I’m fine!” I snapped. I hated her right now.

“This experience will be so fantastic!” she exclaimed, oblivious to my feelings, or maybe just uncaring. “Fresh air and a fresh start!” she added, quoting the pamphlet. Fantastic was an overused word in her vocabulary.

I sighed, pressing my forehead against the cool window. *Goodbye life, I thought. Goodbye tiny apartment with a creaky staircase. Goodbye Cherry Blossom High. Goodbye Heather, Marie, and Emily, my best friends. Goodbye...*

After a long flight, we arrived at Pine Mountain, called so because of the massive pines dotting the snow-covered caps. The mountain was a hulking beast, and I a drifting snowflake, always fluttering from place to place, never truly settling anywhere. Maybe this time would be different. I have to admit I gasped when Pine came into view out of the plane’s window. Luckily, my mom didn’t hear me. I had seen this place in the pamphlets a thousand times, but seeing it in person was completely different. It made this whole move real and I didn’t know how I felt about it. Excited? Nervous? Probably a combination of both. Our cabin was modest and cozy, with a fireplace and several lounge chairs. Starting over again would be a challenge, but I knew that I could make it work...

### One Year Later

“Just a second!” I call. I close the window, and the clean, chilly, crisp air fades away. I bundle up in my hat, scarf, gloves, and snow boots. Finally I throw on my heavy winter jacket. I race outside, the bitter air stinging and numbing my face, to the house next door, where my best friend, Chloe lives. I open the door, take off my winter gear and step inside. “Hey, Chloe,” I call.

“Hi,” she replies, walking to greet me with a hug. “Let’s go.”

We head into her cozy kitchen. She hands me an apron dusted with flour, and we mix ingredients to create a batter while singing our favorite songs, talking, and laughing. We pour batter onto the sizzling, popping griddle, adding blue-berries, chocolate chips, and sprinkles on top. A delicious aroma of sweet batter and melting chocolate fills the air, making my mouth water. When the tops bubble, we flip them over and serve them on plates once they have browned. I drizzle maple syrup over mine and Chloe sprinkles powdered sugar on hers. I take a steaming bite, closing my eyes with delight as the flavors explode on my tongue. “These might be the best crazy pancakes we’ve ever made!” I exclaim to Chloe. She smiles, her mouth full of pancake.

When I arrive back home, my mom greets me and gives me a tight hug. “Today is special, hon,” she whispers. “Exactly one year ago today we moved into this cabin.”

I remember that day of sadness, hatred, and finally, happiness, like it was yesterday. I don’t regret moving here, although it was challenging at first. I made a new best friend, Chloe, and we have an awesome time together. It’s more fun than window shopping and sipping lattes in New York. I love the open space, the wind on my face, and the calm in this place. I love the silence of snow falling, and the comfort of a wood fire. And most of all, I love the mountain, Pine, which has life on both sides.

## “She, The Flag” by Sophia Miller – Awarded Judges Choice

*Photo – Flags*

There, Betsy, sitting in her small, quaint cottage, pulls the vibrant red thread through her needle. She knows she is going to make something great, just not something astoundingly amazing for the rest of America’s lifetime. There, she helps birth the American flag.

Betsy Ross was a woman with a tremendous American work ethic. She was commissioned to weave a banner for the thirteen colonies of America by George Washington, Robert Morris, and a relative named George Ross. The original version of the flag crafted by her hands had thirteen stars for the thirteen colonies configured in a circle representing equality- not one was higher or better than another. The stars were on a blue panel for vigilance, perseverance, and justice. There were seven red stripes for valor and hardiness, and there were six white stripes for purity and innocence. Today, we see a similar figure. We now see a banner with fifty stars for the fifty United States of America, and the thirteen red and white stripes still stand for the original thirteen colonies we expanded from.

Soon after her birth, the Star-Spangled Banner flew at the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Old Glory was there when newcomers to America gained citizenship traditionally at Ellis Island. She waved proudly during both traumatic World Wars. Stars and Bars blew wildly in the wind during the Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr. in the late ‘50s and ‘60s. She soared through the terror and sadness of 9/11. She has been with our country for nearly 250 years, even before it was even a country. She waves today, but clings to her flagpole wondering how much time she has left to fly.

She flies every day far and wide across the nation. Yet, some days now, her citizens won’t even hold their hand over their heart and pledge their allegiance to her. Some citizens (or non-citizens) won’t even stand to sing her national anthem. She’s heartbroken. She has stood by her citizens through centuries; she stood for all that our forefathers had wrought for. Now, citizens of her own nation won’t stand by her. She still flaps high though she tattered and torn, downcast and betrayed. She wishes that patriotism and nationalism would strike up again in her land of the free and the home of the brave. She wishes that her citizens had the same faith in America as they did when they had the courage to move to the New World during the Age of Discovery. She wants them to have the same faith in America as they did when they bound together to become a national superpower. Without true patriotism, she feels as if America isn’t what it was originally so special for being- remarkably strong and indomitable. She embraces that flagpole as if it were her final time to fly for the vigilance, perseverance, justice, purity and innocence, valor and hardiness she once lived for. She asks herself, “How long do I have before people of this land don’t need me anymore? Will I be forgotten? Will my country be gone?” Her heart races and races...but then she is awoken from these thoughts by the sounds of crashing fireworks and cheers. She remembers, here, she shamelessly flutters on the Fourth of July. She hears the laughs and cries of the citizens- this is what she lives for. Fireworks explode all around here with bursting colors. She remembers that she is glorified. She is historic. She is loved. She is loved by her valiant and hardy citizens. The citizens who work hard; the ones that worked hard for the land she banters for today. These are the citizens who respect her. These are the citizens who are truly Americans. The ones that struggle, but make it out alive. The ones that are living the American dream. The ones that are trying to make America great again- they respect her. These are the citizens who are proud to be who they are and are proud to raise their precious banner in the air. These are the citizens who fight for our freedom’s everywhere, from in their cubicles all the way out to battlefields overseas. They will fight for the freedom she represents, and they will not allow her to be disrespected.

The flag of the United States of America will fly. Yet, not only will she fly, she will continuously ascend higher than ever before. She will rise in the wind for all she stands for- vigilance, perseverance, justice, purity and innocence, valor and hardiness. She will hold strong to those Virtues forever, regardless of her persecution. And I, a young American, will always defend her.

## **“1997” by Kate Dewan – Awarded Honorable Mention**

*Photo – Flags*

Imagine the sunniest day, a gentle rocking of waves against an old pontoon boat. Enjoying the simple bliss of really, truly just living in the moment. I can still remember the summer of 1997. Every year my family would pack into our rusty station wagon and drive upstate for my favorite vacation, visiting Grandpa. He had a cottage on Michigan’s seventh largest inland lake; here we would spend a week filled with pancakes, sunburns, and campfires under the stars.

Everything seemed so simple then, splashing around in cold water and mint-chip ice cream dripping down my chin. Yet, as I grew up I began to notice the little things. Fake smiles, late night arguments, and empty beer cans led me to realize the true meaning of ignorance is bliss. Dad didn’t seem to see Grandpa as the superhero he was to me.

On July 4th, 1997, Grandpa let me help throw candy out of his silver-blue, 1966 Ford Mustang during the parade. The small town could have melted it was so hot, and only one window could be rolled down in the backseat. Even smushed against the left side of the car I felt on top of the world. Onaway’s annual Fourth-of-July parade seemed the equivalent of a royal procession all because of the smile on Grandpa’s face, which seemed a rare sight that year.

As the day progressed we dirtied our feet playing baseball, which was Grandpa and my favorite game. Although catching pop-flies was his specialty, he always let me slide into first base. After the game, just before the sun melted into the lake, Grandpa took me fishing, where I caught more weeds than gills.

I can still feel the itchy, dry grass poking my toes as we laid in Grandpa’s “secret spot”. Our baseball diamond had transformed into the perfect look out for, as Grandpa called them, “freedom lights”. Grandpa was smiling again, and this time I could see it reach his eyes. As the remainder of the colors boomed across the sky, dripping beneath the stars, I lay beside Grandpa blissfully unaware of the misfortunes to come.

The summer of 1997 was my favorite, consequently it was also Grandpa’s last. Liver cancer claimed his life and along with him went the old pontoon boat, and euphoric car rides. His “secret spot” became just an abandoned, dried-out field, and the spark fizzled from our freedom lights. But sometimes on a blindingly bright day, if I close my eyes, I can still hear the scraping of plastic candy wrappers against a rough asphalt in a blistering heat, as a small town parades their pride for the red, white, and blue. I can feel the damp leather of a clammy baseball glove and the thump of the last out. I can even imagine Grandpa’s wide grin and feel the love he had for me deep in my chest. Although I can no longer live out the bliss of my youth, the memories of what every child imagines as “the perfect day” rest close to my heart, right beside a perfect Grandpa.

## “Freedom Isn’t Free” by Lauren Jasinski

*Photo – Flags*

Puddles of sunshine collected on the street while elderly Mr. Kemp entered the Anderson’s house. It was Sunday evening, the only evening the Andersons shared dinner with their neighbor. Once all were seated around the table, jolly Mr. Kemp broke the silence and directed his words toward 15-year-old Rocco, whose eyes were fixed upon his phone.

“Now boy,” he started with a smile and a twinkle in his eye, “Tell me what tomorrow is!”

“Tomorrow?” Rocco repeated slowly while raising his distracted eyes. “I don’t know. I just don’t have school. . .” Mr. Kemp, shocked, slapped the table,

“By George! What do you mean you don’t know what tomorrow is? Surely you are joking!” Mr. Kemp responded, mouth hanging open. Rocco’s only response was an empty stare accompanied by careless shrug.

“Don’t you know anything boy? Why, it’s Memorial Day tomorrow!” yelled Mr. Kemp, arms raised in the air.

“Whatever that means,” Rocco rolled his eyes.

“Wha...what? Is the boy stupid? Memorial Day is the day we celebrate our country’s freedom, which is obtained and maintained by the soldiers who have fought in the wars; soldiers who have died, been shot and . . .” Mrs. Anderson cleared her throat, interrupting Mr. Kemp’s passionate speech.

“We don’t talk about violence to our boys very much,” she said with a nervous laugh, attempting to lighten the mood.

“Don’t talk about violence? No wonder the boy is dumb! His parents keep him ignorant. He doesn’t even know what our soldiers do for our great country!” Mr. Kemp roared, jolting his wheelchair back a few inches.

“What do you know? You’re just an old man who works at an antique shop, selling blankets all day.” Rocco snidely replied, pointing at the yellow blanket resting on Mr. Kemp’s lap. Now, the old man’s eyes were as wide as saucers, and his face red and stem.

“I have had enough. Thank you for dinner Mrs. Anderson.” He wheeled himself out the door, leaving the room dark with suspense.

Around eleven o’clock, Rocco was finally dozing.

“Soldiers sacrificed everything for us.” Mr. Kemp’s words were washing over Rocco’s rarely used conscience.

“Soldiers were killed, shot. . .” The words kept on repeating.

Rocco’s mind ached. He couldn’t possibly know or prepare for the visions of the past, present, and future of America he was about to receive in his dreams.

Rocco was finally lost in sleep when the clock struck one. Suddenly, Rocco found himself blinking due to the heavy rain that was falling. He was outside...it was day, and he was... Where was he? Rocco looked in every direction, finding himself in the middle of a battlefield, surrounded by men in camouflage, dodging bullets. Fear gripped Rocco’s heart as he heard cries of men, some falling to the earth with blood smeared on their faces. One man approached Rocco whispering,

“Help me brother,” as he staggered and fell to the muddy ground. Rocco stared into the young man’s face, trembling and holding back tears of confusion and pain. The fallen soldier uttered, with a smile,

“I have fought till the end, I have received my prize: sweet, sweet freedom!” Closing his eyes, the soldier died. Unable to contain himself, Rocco fell to his knees and wept for the man beside him. Rocco felt something new: he felt compassion, he felt brotherhood, he felt purpose.

“This is the American soldier Mr. Kemp was talking about!” Rocco glanced around through his glassy tears, “These men are dying...for what? For America? For me? Yet when they die, they are not mad, they are satisfied. Why am I so selfish? I never realized.” Suddenly, a large hand weighed down on Rocco’s feeble shoulder. He was dressed in camouflage, an American soldier, standing behind the teenager. Rocco’s tear glazed eyes locked onto the confident eyes of the soldier. “I will fight for you. Will you fight for me?” The soldier’s booming voice overcame the wailing and gunshots in the distance. “America is a country worth fighting for,” his voice boomed again. The soldier’s eyes rested in Rocco’s, then lowered, revealing a fatal wound he had borne. The once, strength-filled soldier fell to his knees.

“NO!” Rocco shouted. “Not you, too!”

“Will you fight for me?” the soldier repeated in a hoarse voice. *POW!* another gun shot. Rocco woke up.

The clock struck two. Rocco was asleep. Chatter was heard from every direction. Slowly, Rocco’s eyes opened, exposing them to harsh sunlight. He was in a park teeming with people, and sitting next to him on the bench was an old lady.

“Mmm yes, Memorial Day! A wonderful day!” she said to herself.

“Memorial Day! I haven’t missed it!” Rocco said aloud, surprised by his own words. Suddenly, the young boy felt the urge to proclaim what he had seen on the battlefield. With a determined expression, Rocco bounced to his feet and walked over to a group of teenagers, staring into their phones.

## “Freedom Isn’t Free” by Lauren Jasinski

*Photo – Flags*

Before he could stop himself, Rocco blurted, "American soldiers have died for you, What are you doing for them today?" Each teenager looked at him as though he were an alien. "I saw them! They died so that we could be free! It's true!" One boy looked at him and laughed, "What a dork!" and sauntered away. Searching more deeply into the boy's eyes, Rocco realized something horrific. Nearly falling backwards, Rocco whispered,

"That was me. . .". Sure enough, the boy who had just called him a 'dork' resembled no other than Rocco himself. Looking into the sky, Rocco felt an overwhelming sorrow, a sincere hate for his ungratefulness. Trying to swallow the knot in his throat, Rocco awoke.

The clock struck three. Rocco was consumed by sleep. Dong, dong, dong! a huge bell was ringing. Rocco opened his eyes, finding himself in a grey, drafty street. He was with his family, heading to church, for it was Sunday. As they approached the church, Rocco felt uneasy, because standing before them were two sour-faced soldiers.

"This church has been shut down due to the repeal of the freedom of religion."

"What?!" Rocco questioned. "It's America. . .land of the free!"

"Not anymore," chuckled one guard, invoking the other to laugh mockingly as well. Questions ran through Rocco's brain as his heart ached and raced. Church had always been a safe place for Rocco, even though he did not realize it in until now...now that it was gone. Next, Rocco found himself at school, yet something was different, something was uncomfortable. Each corner was occupied by a dark-suited man. Rocco's thoughts were then directed to the teacher at the front of the classroom:

"Everyone is always right; no one is wrong. Whatever you think is true, is true, whatever you think is false, is false. . ."

"What are you talking about?!" Rocco blurted. "If I punch someone, am I not wrong? If I. . ." Rocco was stopped abruptly as he found four soldiers surrounding his desk.

"You cannot disagree. You have no right to speak. The freedom of speech has been repealed," the suited men said in unison, robotically.

"But she is wrong!" Rocco began.

"You cannot speak!" said the men, and immediately, Rocco was dragged from the classroom. Rocco was left outside, shaking and panting in the damp air, holding back tears caused by injustice.

"This is not America! This is not my home! I have never realized the impact of freedom in my life! I will always be grateful for freedom, for as long as I live!" he shouted.

Rolling over, Rocco woke up.

The clock struck eight. It was morning. Rocco jumped out of bed, and whispered aloud, "May 28, Memorial Day!" Dressing at full speed, Rocco hurried to get to Mr. Kemp. Out of breath, Rocco showed up at his neighbor's door.

Upon entering the room, Rocco let out every emotion while he described his nighttime revelation to the old man.

"I want you to see something," the old man declared. Removing the blanket from his lap, Mr. Kemp revealed only one leg. The teenage boy backed away, eyes wide with utter shock.

"I never even knew! You were an American soldier? How self-centered I was! My own neighbor, a veteran, and I never even knew it! I am so sorry for insulting you yesterday!" The old man smiled and the two embraced.

Night fell, yet the Memorial Day ceremony was just beginning. After several moving speeches, the fireworks began, along with the national anthem. Boom! Crack! Fireworks melted the night sky, illuminating the row of American flags. Pride filled Rocco's heart as he gazed at the waving flags. A triumphant song penetrated his soul, his heart pounded with pride, and his Spirit soared! Everything in the boy's body sang out,

"... o'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave!" On that day was born a patriot, a believer, a soldier. Looking down at his elderly friend, Rocco declared, with his whole heart,

"America is a country worth fighting for!"

## “Time To Tell” by Jessica Jasinski – Awarded Honorable Mention

Photo – Cowboy

Cool breezes raced across the fields, whizzing through the cornstalks and tickling my ankles. The wind was excited. . .why? For the coming of night? The sun was descending his throne in the sky and was surrendering his glory to the moon. “C’mon, Eddy. .Time ta.” I immediately swallowed the rest of my words. A rush of aching regret, anger and confusion seized me, and I dropped to my knees. Pressing my forehead to the cold, damp dirt, I inhaled the fresh, ‘rooty’ scent of the soil.

“Why did you leave me, Eddy!” I screamed, throwing my head back. Overbearing confusion flooded my veins as I clawed at the black dirt. I tore at the prickly weeds calling, “Eddy! Why? Whyyyy?” My eyes boiled with tears; my breathing became heavy. It had been five months since my 17-year-old son, Eddy, ran away from the only home he knew, our home. I witnessed him leave. His eyes that day were permanently burned into my brain. They were searching for something in me. They were so afflicted, so hurt. I tried to read the message he wore on his face, but I could not understand! He never said a word but turned his back to me and walked away, as if he preferred the empty darkness over me, his dad.

I rose off my knees and saw the pink sky melt into purple and intensify into a royal, starry blue. I attempted to swallow the knot tied in my throat. Navigating my way through the sea of stalks, I gradually came to a stop and unconsciously began to grind the soil underneath my heel. Glancing around, I rested my eyes on the warm, buttery glow shining from the windows of my farmhouse, and a symphony of sheep bleats and crickets tickled my ears. My mind, however, was far from what I saw and heard.

I began to organize my doubts and confusions by speaking to myself aloud. “I was rough on Ed about his chores at home and on the farm, but--” Suddenly I was mysteriously interrupted.

“I’m sorry,” a confident voice rang from a few yards away. The voice was so familiar. it was probably my neighbor’s nineteen-year-old son, Mark. However, because night had fallen, I was unable to see his face.

Blushed by humiliation, I muttered to the young man,

"So ya heard me bellowin’ all o’ my problems on the top o’ my lungs, huh?"

He breathed a laugh through his nose admitting, "Yea,".

I kicked the dirt and attempted to explain my circumstance, “Eddy, he just, he looked so hurt... by me...I don’t know, he never said a word, he just walked away,”

“He never had the courage to love you,” the voice boomed causing the breeze to tremble.

My eyebrows immediately pinched together and lowered. This didn’t make any sense... wasn’t it the other way around? This young neighbor was wrong. He obviously didn’t understand. Eddy ran away from home because *I* didn’t love *him* the way I should have.

“..... What?” I snapped.

I could hear the breathing of this boy, but all I could see was an outline of a figure with a cowboy hat, appearing black against the agate sky. Suddenly, I heard his footsteps quickening toward me. I, panicked slightly, was moved by instinct to flee to the woods. “What is he chasing me for? Who in the world is that? This can’t be Mark! Got a problem with me, boy? What is his *problem*?” My mind swarmed a tornado of questions. The fury of footsteps abruptly stopped. The young man was now nearly visible. He was standing firm with knees bent and apart, holding his fists at his chest. His hat cast a black shadow over his face, concealing the boy’s identity.

Silence.

“Dad you hurt me! I was a coward! I never told you when you were wrong! I thought that by telling you the truth, I would be hurting you! But really, I was protecting myself from this very moment! I wasn’t brave enough to love you the way you deserved to be loved! To love you is to save you from believing you were right to hurt me! Because I care about you, I’m not going to let you destroy yourself!” It was my son screaming those words to me. The mysterious young man had been my son all along.

My soul stung. My heart and mind pounded. Words never ripped at my heart the way those did in that moment. Screams had never moved me to blubbering tears as they did that night. Have you ever physically felt your heart break within you? I did. Have you ever been slapped in the face with truth after so many lies, after so much confusion? I have. Love is truth, and truth stings, like alcohol on a wound, but you know it’s healing you. My mind screamed within me, “My son, my boy! What have I done?!” yet my mouth remained speechless.

The boy seized a stick and swung it like a bat, striking the trunk of a tall evergreen, yelling with tears streaming down his cheeks, “I worked hard on the farm, Dad! I planted 30 rows of corn, but it wasn’t ‘good enough’. I could’ve ‘done it this way’ or ‘finished it faster’ if I did whatever.” *SNAP!* He struck the trunk a second time with even more passion. He choked, “I picked the weeds, I cleaned the barn, I tried so hard to make you proud! But it was never good enough for you! There was never, ‘Wow, Eddy! That’s awesome!’ There was always something wrong you just *had* to point out.” *CRACK!* The stick pounded the bark one last time, then Ed tossed it aside and stared at me in a way I’ve never seen him look at me before. “But, I forgive you, Daddy.” He smiled through his tears. “It is so difficult to have to tell your dad that he hurt you, that he was wrong...but I wouldn’t be doing it if I didn’t love you! You’re my dad, and I wanna have a great relationship with you! I love you! I’m sorry I never told you the truth like this before, ‘cause that’s how I hurt you.”

I hastened toward my son and caught him up in my arms. “I was wrong,” I whispered into his ear. “And I am sorry with my whole heart and soul. You are and were always more than good enough. I was just too selfish, ignorant, and stupid to acknowledge it.” I held his shoulders in my hands and looked straight into his searching eyes. “What I said to you was absolutely wrong! I promise to never say those words again, I have no reason to. I love you, Eddy!!!”

His eyes finally found what they had been searching for and, looking directly into my soul, the boy laughed sincerely, “I love you too, Dad!

The hurt built up in Ed’s eyes all spilled out onto my shoulder, and my own tears soaked my boy’s shoulder. Now, our salty tears of hurt had turned to fresh drops of joy. We walked back to the farmhouse in the windy night with arms wrapped ‘round each other. I glanced back at the gashes bashed into the truck of the evergreen. A knife of sorrow cut me deeply as I realized that the torn-away bark resembled my son’s heart, ripped apart by my own words. My eyes blurred with tears of repentance as I prayed, “How could God bless a terrible father like me with a magnificent son like Eddy?”

## “The Revenge Of Aaron Jones” by Richard Tuttle

Photo – Cowboy

Today was the perfect day in Dallas, Texas. The sky was a beautiful baby blue. The sun was shining at its fullest, and there was not a cloud in the sky. A refreshing cool breeze blew across the city bringing relief to the local residents. The weather was so amazing that many tourists came to enjoy its warm embrace. The Jones family had just arrived from Cincinnati, Ohio and were excited for their long awaited vacation with their Uncle Thomas. Before checking into their hotel, they quickly made a trip to the bank to make a withdrawal. However, at the same time, several robbers also wanted to make a million dollar withdrawal illegally. They stormed into the bank, immediately holding everyone at gunpoint, including the Jones parents and their two sons, 18-year-old athlete John Jones and 15-year-old, computer genius Aaron Jones. Trembling in fear, Aaron didn't know what to do, but John did; he stood to confront the men. Aaron watched in fear as the scene unfolded and the fight for survival began. John was soon overpowered and Aaron saw, as if in slow motion, one of the robbers pull the trigger on their gun and shoot John, killing him instantly. Aaron choked back the rush of tears at the sight of his dead brother and saw the robbers escaping freely without a scratch. “Why!”, screamed Aaron as he looked up to the sky in sorrow. Anger, pain, and grief simultaneously swirled inside the young 15-year-old. Though the police soon apprehended the men, Aaron didn't want their arrest, but their lives. He swore from that point on to avenge his brother's death by hunting down his brother's killer.

After this tragic scene, Aaron's life changed forever. Seeking justice, he embarked on a journey of vengeance to completely obliterate his brother's killer. Instead of returning home with his parents, he remained with his Uncle Thomas in Dallas. At age 15, he began to hack the police's database and attempt to locate the several masked thugs who took his brother's life. “You can't be serious,” Aaron said in disbelief and fear as he discovered that there were not just a couple criminals, but several major crime rings controlled by crime lords under which worked hundreds of criminals and henchmen each. With this classified information, Aaron Jones knew he had to go through as many criminals as needed until he found the ones who killed his brother. “I can't do this with my own strength,” he said to himself, “So I need to gain the upper hand over hundreds of criminals.”

Overtime, Aaron began to work out in his basement and at the same time, research and hopefully find some sort of genetic enhancement or mutation that would give him an advantage. Almost a year later, a rumor leaked out that Xavier Technologies, also known as X-Tech, had created serum in their Houston facility that would cause genetic mutation in the human body. To Aaron, this was the answer to all his problems. “Yes!” yelled Aaron in excitement as he had finally successfully hacked this technological kingdom and began searching their database for this serum. “Well, I can't stop now,” Aaron said to himself. After several sleepless nights, Aaron had found the rumor to be true and read about the classified research of the Double S Serum, also known as the Shape Shifter Serum. This serum, after being taken, would allow its subject to reconstruct, reconfigure, and alter their anatomy and molecules into the size, shape, and color of any object they choose. “I know this is the answer, but how am I going to get it?” Aaron said as he studied the layout of the facility and its classified information.

Determination, passion and love for his dead brother now spurred the now 17-year-old Aaron Jones to infiltrate the heavily guarded X-Tech and steal the Double S Serum to enhance and mutate himself. At midnight, Aaron sneaked out of his uncle's house and with his uncle's car, quickly drove to Houston. “There's no turning back now,” Aaron thought as he stood before the facility. Disguised as a security guard, Aaron approached the guard station. “John Smith here for my midnight shift, sir,” Aaron said to the captain guard. “Come on in,” said the captain guard. Allowing his entrance, Aaron quickly entered and darted around the corner of a hallway. “For such a state-of-the-art technological company, they have the worst security,” Aaron thought to himself. After roaming the empty hallways, Aaron came unto a steel-door enforced laboratory in which was the the only concoction of the Double S Serum ever made. Without an access card, Aaron couldn't get in, so out of his utility belt he pulled a password recovery pad which he plugged into the access pad input and quickly hacked the encryptions, giving him allowed entrance to the laboratory. Aaron could smell the chemicals in the air as he stalked into the room. There were butterflies in his stomach as he grabbed the serum and dashed out of the room, not knowing he had set off the silent alarm, Security guards rushed to the scene and Aaron heard them coming. “Oh no, oh no. What am I going to do!?” Aaron thought. His panic having blocked out his reasonable senses, Aaron, despite the unknown risks, quickly drank the serum and by instinct, shape shifted into computer. The security guards tumbled in and saw the room to be empty, so they returned to their posts. Amazed with his new ability, Aaron shape shifted into a bird and flew out a nearby window. Now he finally had the upper hand.

Aaron, with his earlier police research, began to single handedly locate, interrogate, and arrest each criminal he came upon in all of Dallas, Texas. After weeks of subduing thugs, Aaron earned a reputation among the criminals as the ruthless “Metamorph.” When cleaning up these streets of crime, Aaron encountered several weak criminals. “So do we have to do this the easy way or the hard way? All you have to do is tell me who your boss is,” Aaron said. Trembling in fear, the thugs replied, “The easy way. Our boss is known as the “Cowboy of Crime”. Now please let us go. Oh, you're not getting off that easily. Take me to your leader!” Aaron strictly said. The criminals complied and soon they arrived in what seemed the middle of nowhere. Anger surged through his veins, for he thought he had been tricked. “Please calm down! Wait and see,” the delinquents pleaded. Aaron watched as the criminals placed their hands on a rock, which, unknowingly to Aaron, had pads on it that read their coded handprints. This touch on the rock revealed a large arena with a red lining on the top of it which produced a holographic shield around it, keeping it hidden to the naked eye.

Entering the arena, Aaron shape shifted into a cowboy, like many others there. was met with swarms of thugs and criminals of all various kinds. In this crowd, Aaron knew that he could search the arena for the man who shot his brother without being noticed as suspicious. As he roamed the building, he recognized his brother's killer among the thugs. “Oh, I wish I could strangle him so bad,” Aaron thought, “but not with all these people around.” “Who is that guy?” Aaron asked a nearby criminal. He replied, “ Why that's the “Cowboy of Crime”!”. Aaron ingeniously devised a plan, for this man had just entered a room that was guarded by two muscular men. Taking the form of an ant, Aaron scurried past the guards and crawled under the door. Inside the room, he took the form of a cowboy again and at the sight of this man, couldn't control the anger he had harbored inside of him any longer. He picked up a nearby pistol and pointed it at his brother's killer. “Please don't shoot!” the “Cowboy of Crime” pleaded. Driven by anger and hate, Aaron made his choice, and as he pulled the trigger, he immediately regretted it. He saw the man's expression of fear and body go limp as the “Cowboy of Crime” fell dead to the ground. Shock and fear mixed on Aaron's face as he realized that his anger had made him a murderer. This revelation gave Aaron a new perspective of life. After this confrontation with his brother's killer, Aaron escaped the crime arena and tried to escape his mistakes by leaving Texas and starting a new life in the small town of Lecompton, Kansas. Finally, after that one vacation changed his life and caused years of anger against the “Cowboy of Crime,” Aaron lived in moderation and in control of emotions after experiencing the devastation caused by unbridled emotions and learned of the importance of not allowing your emotions to control you.

## “Painted Lady” by Kiersten Hein

*Photo – Painted Lady*

I woke up bright and early. The warmth of the bright yellow sun, shining through the window, hit my skin. Today, I was going to the art museum. I walked up the street towards the museum. The pavement was warm and soil from the heat. I pushed open the cold, heavy metal doors to the museum. A rush of cool air hit me as I walked in. The museum was much colder than outside. Today was the day that I would buy my new piece of art.

“Good morning, Mr. Jackson. Will you be buying a piece of art today?” boomed the man at the door.

I replied With an excited “Yes!,” and went on my way down the halls that were filled with masterpieces. I walked around “oohing” and “ahing?” pieces of artwork. At one point, I passed the most beautiful and amazing piece of artwork I had ever seen. Her eyes were painted bright blue, she was extremely colorful, and she had the most detailed face I had ever seen. I knew at that point that this was the statue I wanted. I went to talk to the seller. He was much taller than me. He was a giant. He said in a loud booming voice that he wanted to give me the statue for free. “Free? He wanted to give me that statue for free?” That thought rushed through my head. I began to feel giddy. What a steal! That amazing piece of artwork for free! Before he could change his mind, I quickly bought it. They took her to my house that night. I placed her by the fireplace and named her Painted Lady. Then, I went to bed, smiling because of my new artwork.

That night, I woke up to a strange noise. It kind of sounded like whistling. I looked over next to me and saw my dog shaking. Clearly, she had heard it too and I wasn’t crazy. I argued with myself for about a half hour on whether I should go down stairs or not. Finally, my curiosity got the best of me and I got up to go down stairs. I grabbed a candle so I could see. Somehow the candle soothed me. Its warm, soft wax calmed me. I slowly crept down stairs. I was alert of every move that was made. As I took more and more steps, the noise grew louder and louder until saw her. The statue was not where I put her. She was by the window. She looked like she was mourning a death, as if she lost someone dear to her. She no longer looked as beautiful as she did at the museum. Suddenly, she turned her head in the blink of an eye. The statue darted towards me. Shock filled my body. I was too scared to move. How could a statue move let alone whistle? These thoughts rushed through my head, and before I knew it she was jolting at me. For a stone woman she was fast! She was much faster than I. I tried to duck down, but I hit my head and fell behind the brown leather couch She lost track of me and walked away, but I knew she was still looking. I put my hand over my head. The pain throbbed. I sat there and tried my best not make any noise. That’s when I heard It. The painted lady was now singing. The melody was bone-chilling. She kept repeating and repeating the same words. “...Painted lady. Painted lady...” The words rushed through my head. It was like a horror movie. Then I heard her footsteps. “Thud, Thud, Thud.” They kept getting louder. “THUD, THUD, THUD.” It sounded as if they were coming closer and closer towards me until it sounded like she was behind me. I didn’t know what to do. Run? I knew she would catch me though. If I stayed here she would probably kill me. Before I had time to decide, she jolted around the couch, and jumped on me. I felt an immense pain as her stoney body crushed me like an avalanche. I couldn’t breath. I was desperately gasping for air. I heard a faint whisper, “painted lady as everything went to black.

I woke up in a standing position. What had had happened to me? I couldn’t move. Panic filled my body. Then I saw him, the guy who had sold me the statue. He was standing right in front of me. The painted lady was now more human-like and she was now taller than me. The two were conversing, so I began to listen to them.

“What an amazing statue! How did you get so much detail? It’s like looking at a real person I bet the museum would love this statue! You are a true artist.” exclaimed the seller. “Why thank you! You are so kind. I found inspiration at the museum It took all night but I finally finished It.” said’ the painted lady.

She looked at me with a devilish smile. She knew I remembered last night. The two kept talking. Each sentence made me even more sick. Oh how I hated that putrid painted lady. They finally stopped talking, and the seller began to walk towards me. I wanted to run, but I couldn’t. He reached out his hands to grab me. His hands were colder than ice. It was unbearable. He picked me up, and began to carry me. He pushed the warm wood door to my house open Whenever I went through that door I always felt welcome to the outside world, but something about today made me unwanted. I was thrown into a dusty old truck. The seller slammed the door. The sound pierced through my ears. Suddenly, it was pitch black in the truck. The darkness was lonelier than it usually was for me. The rusty truck jolted forward. The jerking motions of the truck gave me a nasty headache. This was miserable. We finally arrived and the seller picked me up again. We walked the same route to the museum as I did the previous morning, but something about it seemed darker. It was almost like there was no happiness in me life anymore. We entered the museum and he set me down where the painted lady was before I bought her. He began to talk to me.

“There you go. I hope people will like you. The last statue we had... She was...uhh But who am I kidding? You’re amazing!” said the seller.

I could see the deep worry in his eyes. When he entered the museum it was like his whole mood changed from happy to skittish. It was like he was waiting for me to end him. The man left to go open the museum. All day people were “oohing” and “ahhing” pieces of art, but when they got to me they just looked down and kept walking. The man came back to close the museum He shut of the lights and locked the doors then left. The darkness made me feel trapped.

I was at the museum for years just collecting dust. Then one cold winter day the seller came in and announced they were closing. People were about to come in and buy us. People walked around, and one by one each piece of art was sold. I watched as every piece of art was sold, but me. At the very end of the day a blond woman much taller that me asked to buy me. She had the most radiant smile ever. The seller gave her the price and I was brought to her house. The woman set me by the fireplace.

“What a beautiful statue. I am surprised no one bought you. You will look amazing in my house. It is getting late I better get to bed,” said the blond woman.

The lady walked up the stairs and I felt happier than usual. When I knew she was asleep I began to whistle.

## “As Brave As A Lion” by Grace Denno

*Photo – Cowboy*

The dark rain lashed at his motorcycle as Ricardo Valentina flashed by the familiar Puerto Rican shops and marketplace in a blur. Colorful Spanish colonial buildings lined the cobblestone road before him as the warm street lanterns cast an eerie glow on the villas. Flashbacks of his mother drowning raced back across his eyes and blurred his vision like the wild rain raging before him and flooding the streets. Balconies hung above as he bumped into the dim, dusky alley way lined with weeds and narrow back entrances into buildings and restaurants. As the chilly night air clutched at his weathered jacket, Ricardo rounded a dark narrow corner, and the cobblestone suddenly changed into rough gravel mixed with shards of glass and bullets. This was definitely the place. He was here. The strong teen leaned his motorcycle against the cold stone and pushed open the familiar hidden creaking door in the wall behind a large shrub and overturned table. Immediately the stench of sweat filled his nostrils as he looked in awe around the dark room teeming with twenty men, human weapons, his brother's elite special combat gang. Boxing bags hung from the damp ceiling, knife marks remained in the wooden planks on the walls, massive weights and pull-up bars leaned from the far wall, and combat gear hung on racks to the right of the door leading to the armory. A tall, muscular man confidently strode towards him with a grin and dripping with grime and sweat, “Hey, bro, you are later than usual. We're just wrap-ping up for tonight. Give me a minute to put away the gear and tear down,” the man said casually. Ricardo tossed the keys on the concrete ground near the boots lining the stained wall, “Ya, the Coast Guard let us out late today because we went on a special ops mission. Listen, Marcos, we gotta talk...” A clash in the armory interrupted the silence. Marcos ran in that direction and shouted, “I'll be out in a few minutes! Wait outside!”

Ricardo rode in a daze on the way home, feeling his brother's heavy, exhausted breath on his back and watching everything in a blind fog. The rain, still pounding hard on the cobblestone streets, blinded him, but more than ever the horrific memories from the past of his mother, drained the life from him. Foaming crests of angry waves shooting high above the rails of the ship and crashing on the slippery deck. Mariana Valentina hurled into the angry sea in a supernatural tsunami- a death that no Coast Guard deserves. Just a few weeks before, over eighty Coast Guards left on a special ops mission and only one man returned alive. That fresh memory of his commander, Lorenzo Juan Martinez, describing what he remembered from the excursion left the Valentina family crumpled in ashes. But Ricardo knew something was missing. . . something just wasn't adding up in Lorenzo's story. How could over eighty experienced, well trained, and intelligent Coast Guards die in a sudden, unforeseeable tsunami with only one survivor? “Watch where you're going!” Marcos shouted, and expertly jumped over Ricardo from the back seat clutching the brakes on the handlebars. “Where's your head? We almost jumped the rail on the bridge! Get in the back. I'm driving the rest of the way home,” screamed Marcos over the pounding rain. “Look, you've gotta stop thinking about her. Mom wouldn't want you to waste your life 'cause she died doing the same thing you do. It wasn't your fault she was on duty that day instead of you. You're nineteen, I'm twenty- two, and Sophia is eighteen. Our life still has to go on!”

Marcos maneuvered the motorcycle around the last bend in the road and shot out towards the sea port glowing in the dark night. The warm glow from the street lamps reflected off the water, and the fishing boats, lined in rows in the harbor, loomed up ahead. Ricardo whispered, “Don't you realize how impossible it is that only one man made it out of the tsunami alive and the sky was clear just minutes before the disaster? The evidence just doesn't match up...” Marcos suddenly spun around in his seat. It seemed as if flames leapt out of his eyes masking the tint of sadness and pain under his tough exterior. “I'm not sad that she died attempting to save her fellow Coast Guards in a tsunami... I am angry that she was targeted on the boat that day and everyone else died as a result. Doesn't it make sense to you? She...” “She had meta human abilities in martial arts and flexibility,” Ricardo broke in. “I know...” Marcos faced the front once again as they pulled up in front of their small blue Puerto Rican villa. The rain had stopped and the warm lanterns swung in the evening breeze as they sat in silence. Marcos leaned back. “I specialize in combat and martial arts... but you,” he jabbed his rough finger into his brother's strong chest. “You have the ability to shoot lasers out of your eyes and transform it into anything you need in the moment of crisis. You have x-ray eyes, and your meta human abilities allow you to transport anything and transform yourself into anyone you set eyes on... but you never do. You haven't used your gift since mom died... It's time to step up and be who you were meant to be... Its time for you to follow in Dad's footsteps and live up to his name, Leonardo. Be as brave as a lion... like Dad.”

Ricardo climbed the familiar stairs up to his room as he heard the sharp ping of his sister's arrows hitting the target fastened to the back of her door. Sophia never missed a bullseye in her life. Working for the CSI she was just like her mother- strong, intelligent, brave, and clever. Ricardo ducked into her room just missing an arrow and dodging to avoid the next. “I could have hit you you know,” Sophia smirked and strung another arrow into the bow. Ping. She was what the family called the “Arrowess”, shooting over ten arrows per second and never missing her mark. Ricardo and Sophia had always been close and the effect of their mother's recent death left a crushing impact on her as well. Since the night when Mariana Valentina never returned from the excursion, and Lorenzo Juan Martinez, the commander of the San Juan Coast Guard, informed them of what happened, Sophia had investigated the ship every day for evidence to tell what really happened that day: something that would prove to be the cause of her mother's death. “You know I never trusted Lorenzo, your commander,” she started. “I found something a couple of days after the disaster on the same ship that Mom was on the day she died in the tsunami...” She set her bow down and traced her hands over the far side of the wall until she suddenly stopped just below the quiver of arrows hanging above her bed. As she peeled away the wall paper and took out a box. Ricardo saw the familiar words inscribed on the lid: of Mars. “That's what a Mariana, Mom's name, means in Spanish doesn't it?” “Yes,” Sophia barely whispered, “She was a woman from another planet. . . and that's why she was targeted that night, by the sole survivor: Lorenzo Juan Martinez.” As she spoke she uncovered a cruel dagger from the chest and lifted it in the light. “Thanks to my crime scene investigation skills, I found this dagger under a small storage compartment hidden on the side of the ship.” “Wait, that's one of Marco's knives,” Ricardo burst out. Sophia nodded in silence, “And the blood on the tip is mom's, the DNA from the finger prints on the handle is Lorenzo's, and Dad's finger prints and blood were all over the right side of the ship!” Ricardo reached over and inspected the sharp dagger. “What? No! The evening that the Mom left on the excursion with the Coast Guards, Dad said that he was going to the CIA agency headquarters, where he works, to track down a criminal acquainted with water or something... and that he wouldn't be back for a week.” Sophia interrupted his train of thought, “But it's been two weeks since Mom died and he is still missing! I'm calling CIA headquarters to know the truth!”

The phone stalled for what seemed like minutes while the assistant on the other end asked for her to wait as he got their father's boss. “Hello?” The weary voice of a man came across from the other end. “Excuse me, do you know the location where Leonardo Valentina was sent on his last mission, or when he will be returning?” Sophia questioned and pressed her ear against the phone's surface awaiting the man's answer. There came a long pause on the other end, and after several brief moments the voice whispered, “I'm sorry, Leonardo went missing in action days ago... we have a search and rescue

## “As Brave As A Lion” by Grace Denno

Photo – Cowboy

mission searching around the clock right now, but the last we heard of him was somewhere around the Castillo de San Cristobal fort...” Ricardo heard every word echoing through his ears as Sophia dropped the phone. “He couldn’t have been there on the ship that day... that’s impossible,” Ricardo mused. “Impossible,” Sophia added, “Unless the criminal that Dad was chasing was Lorenzo, your commander, and Dad snuck on the ship that day to protect Mom! We have to find him

The three siblings whizzed by the colorful villas, painted shops, sea port, and familiar marketplace where they had grown up in San Juan. Sophia, sitting on the back of Ricardo’s motorcycle, quickly filled Marcos in on the details and phone call while he speeded beside them on the cobblestone road leading to the Spanish fort. Just minutes before, Marcos was cleaning his gear in the garage when Ricardo and Sophia nearly dragged him out the door, yelling something about their dad, Lorenzo, and the old fort. Now, as the three pulled up to the old stone colonial fort, it shone in an eerie glow while Marcos leaned the motorcycles against a side wall and led the way inside, through the gateway. They cautiously weaved their way through the dark tunnels illuminated by dim lanterns hanging on the grimy walls. When they reached the staircase leading to underground chambers and dungeons, Sophia, seeing two guards by the stairwell, shot one with an arrow and forced the other to lead them to their father’s dungeon. “This is it,” the angry guard muttered pointing vaguely in the darkness under his deep cloak, and reaching for a knife. As he thrashed away from Marcos’s loose grip, he slashed at Sophia’s arm and back stabbed Ricardo grazing his neck. The next thing Ricardo saw before being knocked out were the words engraved on his father’s cowboy hat as he reached for it dangling from Marcos’ belt loop: *Brave as a lion...* his father’s name... Leonardo.

Ricardo sputtered and coughed up sand and salt water on the beach outside the Castillo de San Cristobal as the guard, now unclipped roughly dragged him towards the dock where his father and sister were bound hand and foot. Lorenzo! Now the familiar figure of his commander, his captor, and his mother’s murderer shone in the dusky light tall, dark, and proud. Ricardo looked around in panic and caught a glimpse of Marcos passively standing by the shore. As Lorenzo hurled him into the dark cold water, the shock of pain and the frigid waves sent a chill down his spine, now cut and bruised. Lorenzo lifted his mighty arm and the foamy crests of angry waves shot up out of the sea and engulfed Ricardo in a massive tsunami. The Aqua Man! Lorenzo jumped into the tsunami and rode the waves slashing at Ricardo with his dagger. “You killed my mother and turned my brother into a traitor! You bargained with him, taking one of his special knives in return for strengthening and enhancing his combat skills!” Ricardo screamed over the sound and wind of the waves and wind. “But I will not let you kill anyone else! This is over!” Then in a flash Ricardo disappeared, swallowed by the monstrous wave. The next instant he found himself walking behind a crowd, wearing his father’s invisibility cowboy hat, and transported a mile from the beach. Then using his laser powers once again he transported himself back to the beach in time to free his sister and release his father giving him his hat. Instantly Leonardo disappeared with the hat, invisibly attacking the Aqua Man, his sister fired her arrows, and Ricardo shot lasers at Lorenzo, transporting himself from place to place as the Aqua Man’s waves crashed angrily at him. In a flurry, Sophia shot one of her arrows at Marcos, her brother...the traitor that betrayed them and led them to their deaths. Ricardo jumped out in front of the arrow and destroyed it with his laser. “You were right, Marcos!” he shouted above the rolling waves. “It’s time for me to be as brave as a lion!”

## **“The Steadfast Mountain” by Emily Rumbuc**

*Photo – Both Sides Now*

Morn breaks at the peak of my sky.

With beauty to be sought and stillness to be found.

He stands in awe of my steadfast majesty and grace,

Yearning for strength, longing for peace.

To his knees I may bring him, with hands lifted high,

Surrendering all to the power of my glory.

His heart grows weary, body weakened by flesh,

He cries out my Name, seeking my refuge.

At this sight of humility, my spirit draws near

Have faith my child. I am always here.

## “The Climb” by Liam Ferrell

*Photo – Both Sides Now*

The day was July 25, 2005, and John Walker who just turned 30 had just landed in Hawaii. He was already missing his two sons and wife at home, but he was very excited to climb mount Ka’ala in the island of Oahu. He was also nervous because this mountain is 4,025 feet above sea level; nevertheless, he didn’t let that bother him. Little did he know that the next eight days would test his endurance, hope, and strength.

Day one. John had just left his hotel and was about to go get a rental car so he could drive to the bottom of mount Ka’ala. But before he did that he called his wife so he could talk to her and his kids before he began climbing, little did he know that was the last time he would talk to them for a while as he planned to call the every day if the reception was good enough. Once he reached the mountain he double checked his backpack and everything just to make sure he had all the stuff he needed to be able to climb the mountain successively and safely. He then said a prayer asking God to help him reach the summit and return home safely. John then began to climb, the climb to the top and back down was only supposed to take about 6 days and 5 nights. It was now 8:30 am in Oahu and that is when he began to climb. As he would climb he would take pictures for a keep sake as what he did for every mountain he climbed, 5 others in total. He had covered a good amount of ground and decided to make camp. It was now 9:30 pm and was dark out. He created a fire to cook some canned tomatoes he brought up with him. Once he had cooked the soup and ate it he was tired and ready for bed.

Day 2. John awoke and the first thing he did was call his wife, but sadly for him she did not answer as he had forgotten about the time change between New York and Hawaii. it was now 8:00 am and he had just finished eating a protein bar or the breakfast of champions as he called it, just before he began to climb he noticed the sheer beauty of mount Ka’ala and how God was a magnificent creator. That is when he began to climb the mountain again. The day was about half way over and his canteen was just about empty. He was going to refill it with a jug of water he had brought with him, but noticed a small river and decided to fill his canteen with the water from the river. When he reached the river to fill his canteen he noticed that the water level of the river was very high. He thought to himself, “Huh, must of just rained or something.” He shrugged it off and didn’t think twice about it. He filled his canteen and went on with the climb. He was now just a little bit more then half way up the mountain and that is when he decided to make camp and call it a day.

Day 3. John awoke and again he tried to call his wife but this time there was no cellular service available. Once again he was disappointed. As the day went on he noticed that the temperature was dropping a little lower than usual. He was concerned at first, but later he forgot about it. It was about 8:00pm and knew he had to start thinking about some place to stop. Then all of a sudden, BOOM! John jumped in shock, and then a few moments later he heard it again, BOOM! He looked up in the sky and saw that the sky had darkened. It was only about a 45 minute walk from the top but he knew he had to stop and hurry up to set his tent up before it started to rain really hard. Luckily, he had just finished hammering the last steak in the ground. Just as he finished it started to rain really heavy. He tried to go to sleep, but the loud noise of the thunder and the rain hitting the ground prevented any rest. After about 30 minutes of rainfall, the storm final died down and eventually stopped.

Day 4. John, once again rose bright and early from bed so he could get a head start on the day. He reached the top of the mountain within 45 minutes, he felt so excited that he had finally reached the summit. He took some pictures and then started to head back down the mountain. It was now 4:00 pm, the middle of the day, and he noticed that the temperature started to drop again. He knew that he had to keep going as long as he could. If the rain started again he would fall behind on his planned schedule. At 6:00pm it had started to rain again. John mustered through the rain for about an hour and a half, then he decided to pitch camp and call it a day. Again he was kept awake by the thunder and rain and the storm seemed to last longer than the day before.

Day 5. John awoke and with a great big yawn started his day. John had woken up early to get a head start. He ate another protein bar and went on descending the mountain. Then suddenly, out of nowhere, it began to rain cats and dogs and the thunder was so loud that he couldn’t even hear himself think. Through sheer determination, he pushed himself to just keep going. After about three hours it finally stopped raining and he felt relieved, But not for long. It was about 7:00pm John and everything was quiet, a little to quiet for his liking. Then all of a sudden John started to hear a rumble. The rumble started to get louder and louder until he finally turned around and froze in terror. He then screamed, “MUD SLIDE!!!” John began to run for his life. As he was running he twisted his ankle which slowed him down tremendously. He was tripped up from behind by the mudslide and hit in the head with a rock, John was swept up in the slide and he was knocked out, alone on the mountain.

Day 7. John regained consciousness, frantically trying to remember what happened. He soon remembered that he had been struck by a mud slide and he was very surprised he was still alive. He had one big problem he had no clue where all his stuff went. He searched for years what seemed like years and the only things he found were his canteen and an empty can of tomato soup. He had no clue where he was and the only thing he could think to do was to head toward downward. Walking was very hard for him because he was covered in mud and his ankle was still hurting from the day before. He hiked for the whole day and he was extremely exhausted. Luckily he found a small cave in which he could stay in. it took him a while but eventually he fell asleep.

Day 8. John jolted up from his deep sleep. He was having a terrifying dream of the mudslide. Once again, John began to descend the mountain. He had lost all hope, his left ankle throbbbed with pain. Just as he was about to give up, John noticed something in the corner of his eye. “A house!” he yelled. He began to make his way toward the structure, and that is where he found a monk living in a temple. He was overcome with joy knowing that he would be safe and that he would be able to see his family again. The monk helped him to the bottom of the mountain and back to his hotel. John was finally safe again. He took the next plane back to New York. When he finally got to his house he broke down in tears of joy as he was finally reunited with his family.

## **“The Mountain” by Kevin Lueckeman**

*Photo – Both Sides Now*

The mountain is a place of peace.

The top of the mountain does not come without pain.

It may seem like our journey will never cease,  
but you can't appreciate the sunshine without a little rain.

You will find others on the same journey along the way.

Some will keep you sane and some will drive you insane.

Some will leave and some will stay,  
but remember this alone; it is you and you alone at the end of the day.

Only you know how much you've grown.

Only you know the reasons you climb.

Only you know what is to be shown.

To make our journey up, you have your ways and I have mine.

The top may seem like it will never come,  
but you will reach the summit when it is your time.

## “The Beckoning” by Robert Crawford – Awarded Judges Choice

*Photo – Painted Lady*

Up smooth legs, down slender arms, she covers

In paint every inch of her figure,

Wanting to conceal, wanting to reveal

Some new portrayal of a better her.

Recalling her pains, she exposes a few,

And assigns to each a different hue.

A Broken Heart she pushes far below blue

In green she buries long-harbored Anger

Pervasive Despair entrenched under black

While violet conceals her loneliness.

Deeper and deeper she pushes her shame

As she works up the chest and past the neck,

Where she crafts the *pièce de résistance*,

A mask to hide a face plagued by regret.

Two turquoise earrings placed delicately,

She runs the colorful strands through her hair,

Then in alarm jerks away from the mirror.

Of the deep blue pools beneath her eyes

She thinks, “It wasn’t I who painted those,”

But she knows all too well what has happened.

## “Canadians Unleashed” by Declan Lee

Photo – Flags

### Chapter One

“Run! Run! Scramble!” The obviously startled policeman screamed to all at the massive 4th of July party. Ajax looked up from his DS, and saw fireworks. At least he thought they were fireworks.

*What’s happening?* Ajax wondered. The fireworks seemed normal, except they were unnaturally close. One of the four waving flags was on fire. He stood up, looking for his friend Errol, who was in the bathroom. *Come on Errol, where are you?* Ajax began to wander about, looking for his lost friend. “Errol! There you are!” He ran up to the man he believed was his friend. Turns out, that man was not Errol, but a meaty, middle-aged man, ugly as a dying blobfish.

“Where do you think you’re going? I’m walkin’ here!” The man yelled, spraying spit that was like glue all over Ajax’s face.

“Sorry, sorry...” Ajax muttered, slowly backing away.

“Oh, no you don’t. You’re coming with me!” The man howled, raising his flabby fist into the warm summer air. “Um. I don’t think-” Ajax quickly tried to reply before the man’s fist collided with his face. The last thing Ajax saw before he lost consciousness was the Canadian flag being raised on the four flagpoles that had once held American flags.

### Chapter Two

“Wha...what, where am I?” Ajax knew he sounded like a blubbering fool, but he didn’t care.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. All of us are only on a truck to a prison camp in Northern Canada where we will probably end up dying from frostbite, lack of food, or exhaustion,” a voice in the dark plainly declared.

“What!?!?” Ajax screamed in a voice that was two octaves too high. He began to struggle on the ropes that bound him, trying to escape that terrible fate. The ropes were chains, binding him to that fate.

“Nah, man I’m just kidding,” the voice said. Ajax settled down, relieved.

“It’s all true,” another, gruff voice affirmed. Ajax began to wiggle again.

“Awww, come on! Why did you have to spoil my fun?” The first voice inquired.

“Wait. Before I forget, do any of you know Errol, my friend?” Ajax asked the darkness.

“Errol? Never heard of him,” the first voice stated. The sound of silence filled Ajax’s imagination. “No, just kidding. I’m Errol. You’re pretty gullible, like a cat chasing a laser pointer.” Ajax was filled with hope-until the back of the truck opened.

Light spilled inside the truck, revealing to Errol and Ajax just how many prisoners there were. “Holy crap, there are a lot of people here.” Ajax stated. There were men, women, children, and tweens in the truck.

“No kidding, Sherlock, ” Errol retorted. Everyone hushed when a large man stepped into the truck, covered in tattoos ranging from hearts with “Mom” on them, to attractive women, to maple leaves.

“All right whippersnappers, let’s get down to business,” he boomed, the vibrations of his deep, gruff voice pervading throughout the truck. “You shall address me as ‘Commander’ or “Commander Maple”. A few snickers were heard from around the truck because of the idiotic name of their “Commander.” In response to this, he yelled, “SILENCE!” Everyone hushed. “I will be respected by all or you will face the consequences. Now file out and you will be led to your respective cabins, where you will be staying until this bloody war is over.” The men filed out of the truck quickly and quietly in an attempt to escape from the psycho maniac who addressed himself as “Commander Maple.”

They were led to the cabins by several women, a few of which Ajax recognized from Commander’s tattoos. They were told to go to bed immediately, for it would be the most sleep they would get in a long time. “Now what do we do?” Ajax asked the darkness.

“We do the only thing we can do. We make a plan, stick to the plan, and get out of this crummy old place.” Errol responded, leaning over the bed. (He was on the top bunk).

“Well, okay then. Let’s do it,” Ajax mumbled, avoiding detection quite nicely. There were a few muffled cheers from other prisoners who had overheard the two boys’ conversation.

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Photo – Flags

### Chapter Three

The day had finally come. It was the day to execute the prisoner’s (second) master plan. Ajax woke up bright and early, ready to conquer the intense day that was ahead of him. His back hurt, having been pushed to the limit for three months, digging and panning for gold in the Alaskan frontier. (Canada had annexed Alaska in the time he had been prisoner.) He pulled some tacky syrup out of his hair and stood up. He immediately regretted it. Yellow spots filled his eyes. He tried to signal to Errol that he couldn’t do it, but he first had to run over to the side of the cabin to puke. Their last master plan hadn’t been a good one. It had involved hijacking the truck that took them to their jobs each morning. How were the prisoners supposed to know the driver kept a .45 caliber gun in the glovebox just in case something like that happened? Ajax had been repeatedly dunked in a large vat of sticky, gooey, maple syrup as a consequence for his actions. He had ingested too much of it, which was the cause of his apparent sickness.

But this plan was a new plan. Ajax couldn’t wait to see the looks on the guard’s faces when the prisoners revolted for the second day in a row. Ajax led his small band of “freedom fighters” to where the large house stood that was a home to the Canadian officials. The group cut the house’s electricity, and hoped the next phase of the plan would work. It did.

The angry Canadians stormed out of the house, so angry they would snap a reindeer’s spine if it was the one who cut off the electricity. Ajax gave Errol the signal. Errol was on the other side of the camp, waiting for the Canadians. He had hooked a hose up to one of the sizable vats filled with maple syrup. When he received the signal from Ajax, he opened fire. Syrup surged forward, and doused the stunned officials. In their state of shock, the prisoners made a run for it, using the truck for escape.

Unfortunately, the Canadians reacted quicker than had been anticipated. Gunshots rang throughout the almost deserted camp, shattering the front windshield of the truck. Ajax began to panic that he wouldn’t make it to the truck. They only had about one hundred yards to go. Ajax looked over to see Errol’s reassuring face running beside him. It wasn’t there. Errol was lying on the ground about 10 feet behind Ajax. Ajax screamed and ran to his friend. *Don’t be dead don’t be dead, don’t be dead...* Ajax mumbled as he ran to Errol. The snow around Errol’s left foot was a deep red. Errol looked up at Ajax and smiled.

“Man, you should’ve seen the look on your face! It was like a pufferfish with constipation issues!” Errol continued to laugh as Ajax helped him up and the two of them started to hobble towards the truck, where all the other prisoners were waiting.

But the Canadians hadn’t given up yet. The passenger’s seat window had shattered, and bullets still traversed across the small battlefield. A smart prisoner had grabbed the .45 gun and was shooting at the guards, but he had hideous aim. Only one of the guards was wounded, but he had his hand bandaged and was already back in the fray. A spare car, also loaded with prisoners exploded. The combustion chamber was shot by one of the two bazooka shells that were at the camp. The next one was aimed at the other truck. Ajax’s truck.

Ajax and Errol reached the truck. Ajax grabbed the open door and tried to hoist Errol in, but Ajax felt the urge and was forced to lean over and puke. Errol winced, and Ajax noticed a small, red hole in Errol’s chest. Ajax froze, and ended up falling out of the truck onto Errol. The prisoners stopped the truck, but Ajax told them to go. He grabbed Errol’s shoulders and looked into his eyes. They were blank. Ajax began to cry. He looked at the truck driving away and wondered how he would ever get away from this place. Then what seemed to be some sort of firework zoomed over his head, and the truck exploded.

### Chapter Four

Ajax cried even harder. He felt enormous hands on his shoulders. He sniffed and looked up. It was Commander Maple. There appeared to be sympathy in his eyes, but Ajax still wasn’t one hundred percent sure, until Commander gave him a big hug. Ajax was shocked, and his arms hung out of the hug. “I’m sorry. I hated this bloody war too, but I wanted to be a patriot, so I joined the militia.” The commander uttered sadly. “I’m going to write to the prime minister to ask to end this whole thing, but first, I’m taking you home.”

**The End**