

The Writers' Slate, published by The Writing Conference, Inc., features some of our nation's top quality writing by students, kindergarten through 12th grade. The national journal is published three times a year, including one issue filled with award-winning prose and poetry. The publication is available online.

The editor of **The Writers' Slate** invites original, creative and expository writing by students in kindergarten through 12th grade. The editor also invites submissions of book reviews of children's or young adult literature written by students. Educators are also encouraged to submit article ideas for feature article consideration.

The deadline for the fall issue each year is June 15. The deadline for the spring issue is December 15.

Send submissions to the following:

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Submissions, including electronic submissions, **should clearly indicate the writer's name, school, grade level, and home address. The teacher's name should be included if appropriate.** Due to the number of submissions and mailing costs involved, the editor will only respond to a student author's submission if a self-addressed stamped envelope is included. Submissions will not be returned.

The editor reserves the right to edit manuscripts for clarity, style, and according to space limitations.

This program is presented in part by the Kansas Arts Commission, a state agency, and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.

John H. Bushman
Director, The Writing Conference, Inc.

From the Director:

It is, indeed, a pleasure to present this special issue of *The Writers' Slate* because it contains the winning entries of those young people who entered the 2008-2009 writing contest. This is one way that teachers can support writing in the schools by encouraging students to enter contests. We at The Writing Conference, Inc., hope that we can contribute to that effort by publishing the winning entries.

These winners were chosen from a total of 239 entries -- 67 elementary school students, 91 junior high/middle school students, and 81 high school students. The elementary school entries included the following categories: 39 poetry, 10 narration, and 18 exposition; at the middle level we had 44 in poetry, 19 in narration and 28 in exposition; at the high school level we had 31 in poetry, 27 in narration, and 26 in exposition. We had entries from across the United States.

The Writing Conference, Inc. is very proud of those students who write and of those teachers who encourage their students to write.

Congratulations to the winners and to all who entered. May you continue to have success in writing!

We also want to thank the judges who gave of their time and talent to assess these entries: Amanda Witty, Leawood Middle School; Shelly Todd, Olathe, Kansas; Heather Reilly, Ruskin High School, Kansas City, Missouri; Jennifer Gooding, Mill Creek Elementary, Belton, Missouri; Megan Gearhart, Overland Park, Kansas; Becky Hart, Tomahawk Elementary, Shawnee Mission, Kansas; Shelly Mc Nerney, Leawood Middle School; Charlie Huette, Blue Valley North High School; April Hawkins, Wheatridge Middle School, Gardner, Kansas; Bob Sailer, Eudora Middle School, Kansas; Erin Foley, Basheor Linwood Middle School, Linwood, Kansas; and Kristen Worthington, Johnson County Community College.

Partial support for this publication comes from the Kansas Arts Commission, a state agency, and the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal Agency.

John H Bushman

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Spring 2009
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April 15, 2009

Greetings!

Welcome to this winter edition of The Writers' Slate. We start off this issue with some terrific ideas for summer reading. Ranging from Walter Dean Myers to Sherman Alexie, there is certainly something for everyone. I even put some of the books on my own reading list!

We then dive into the world of science fiction and discover tales such as the classic Ender's Game as well as newer titles like The Hunger Games. If you haven't given sci fi a chance before, you may be inspired to do so after reading this article.

We also celebrate the winners of The Writing Conference's annual writing contest in this edition. Make sure to check out all of these entries—they are a delight to read.

Enjoy reading this edition of The Writers' Slate and the variety of writing present in this issue.

Keep the submissions coming!

Jill Adams, Editor

*Lola Albino, Associate Editor
Colin Cooper, Associate Editor
William Daws, Associate Editor
Brenda Smith, Associate Editor*

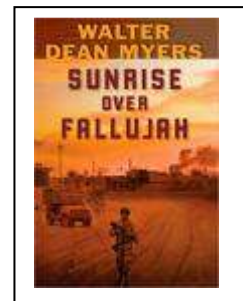
Summertime: The Perfect Time to Dive into Young Adult Literature

Karon Towns

Ah, summer: the perfect time to read what you want, when you want, where you want—no textbooks, no required reading, no deadlines. Although it is only April, and it is snowing here in Colorado, it is never too early to begin thinking about summer reading. If you, like me, look forward to uninterrupted reading time for the summer, allow me to make some suggestions for several new and exciting young adult literature novels. These books are engaging, exciting and fast paced. Some of them will keep you on the edge of your seat, others worm their way into your thoughts and a few can't be put down until the end. The books I have selected here are readily available at your local bookstore or library. Many are new so only available in hardback, in which case your local library may put less of a dent in your summer job money! (*Books marked with *** are great ones to share with your parents!*)

*****Sunrise Over Fallujah, Walter Dean Myers.**

The story of Robin, “Birdie,” and his fellow soldiers is compelling and realistic. It does not glorify war or violence and conveys the turmoil of a young soldier upon being thrust into a situation that no one can prepare for. Birdie and his unit arrive in Kuwait before the beginning of the war and are assigned to a unit that has been chosen to interact, as a liaison, with the locals. This unit, called “Civil Affairs,” is expected to smooth over the image problems that the United States military has with the locals;



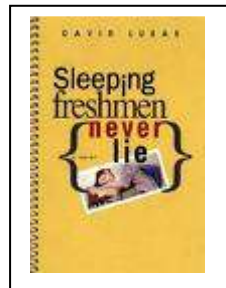
therefore, much of the book describes Birdie’s interactions with the Iraqi people. The author captures the heart of the soldier in his descriptions of the soccer games with young Iraqi children, contrasted with the IED explosion on the way back to base. The confusion of identifying the enemy is a central theme in the book. This book is full of action and

there is violence, however, the violence is situational and not as graphic as many war novels. Recommended for: 10th-12th grade. *If you enjoy this book, you may also enjoy The Things They Carried, Tim O’Brian and The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, M.T. Anderson.*

Sleeping Freshmen Never Lie, David Lubar.

This comical snapshot of high school is a must read! Scott begins his freshman year oblivious to the minefield he will navigate until he is able to learn the rules and procedures of High School. Add

pregnancy to the horror of recipe for Scott’s handbook for Year.” Scott is just a normal guy, his experiences are related in a schoolers, it inspires hope that they



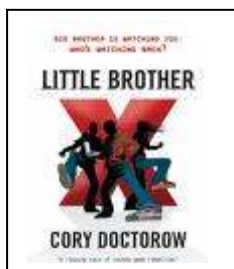
his mother’s unexpected freshman year and you have the surviving your “Freshman not a star athlete or scholar, and comical fashion. For middle will survive their freshman year,

for high schoolers, it is a comical look back at their own “Freshman Year.”

Recommended for 8th -12th grade. *If you enjoy this book, you may also enjoy The Perks of Being a Wallflower, Stephen Chbosky and Dunk, David Lubar.*

Little Brother, Cory Doctorow.

Conspiracy theorists, rejoice! This is the book for you! When Marcus and his friends cut out of school for the afternoon to take part in an online game, they never suspect that they will be caught in the aftermath of a terrorist attack on their city, San Francisco. Taken

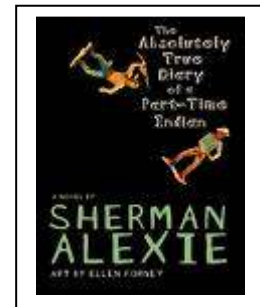


prisoner by Homeland Security and interrogated for 3 days, these high school student’s lives will never be the same. Identified as “people of interest” to the government, they are constantly watched by “Big Brother.” Marcus’s determination to fight against the government leads to an action packed-technology filled book that will keep you on the edge of your seat. Beware: you may think

twice before you ever cut another class! Recommended for 9th – 12th grade. *If you enjoy this book, you might also enjoy 1984, George Orwell and Nation, Terry Pratchett.*

*****The Absolutely True Story of a Part Time Indian, Sherman Alexie.**

Junior begins by telling you that he was born with water on his brain, and how this has been his identity for as long as he can remember. When Junior is offered the chance to attend High School off of the reservation, he chooses to go, hoping for a better education than the school on the reservation offers. His defection makes him an enemy at home and a stranger at school. But in the midst of it all, he has the chance to reinvent himself, into the person he most wants to be, a success.

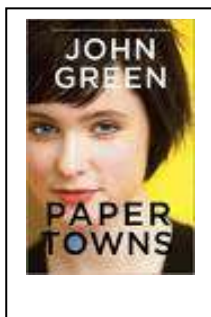


This book is hilariously funny as it deals with important issues, you will experience Junior's life and the reservation in unexpected and dramatic ways.

Language may be an issue as Junior has a colorful manner of communicating, and the themes may be more appropriate for an older YA audience, but Junior's experiences should not be missed. Recommended for 10th-12th grades. *If you enjoy this book, you may also enjoy Whale Talk, Chris Crutcher and The Boy in the Striped Pajamas, John Boyne.*

Paper Towns, John Green.

Meet Quinton Jacobsen and Margo Roth Spiegelman: neighbors and friends since childhood. Now in high school, they have drifted apart. Margo is beautiful and popular; "Q" is just a regular guy who loves her from afar. Just when Q believes he and Margo will never renew their childhood friendship, Margo sneaks into Q's room one night and takes him on an all night adventure: then mysteriously disappears. Q is determined to

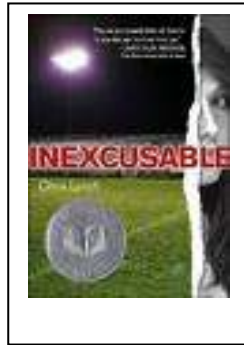


find Margo, solidify their bond and bring her home; however, it is not a simple as it sounds. Margo has left a puzzle to be sorted out in order to find her, and Q spends all his time trying to figure it out. This book will keep you on the edge of your seat and you won't be able to put it down until the conclusion. Recommended for 9th-12th grades. *If you enjoy this book, you might also like I Am The Messenger, Markus*

Zusak and The Life of Pi, Yann Martel.

Inexcusable, Chris Lynch.

Kier Sarafian is a good guy. He will tell you how just great a guy he is, many times, as you read his tale. There is just something that is Inexcusable. actions to understand how have happened. The topic of but it is not graphic. Kier is a identifiable; this is a short Recommended for 10th-12th

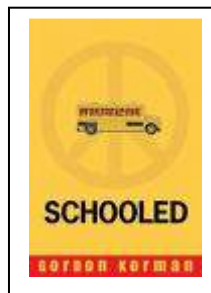


one problem; he has done Join Kier as he explores his own something so unforgivable could date rape is important in this novel, compelling protagonist and easily book, but very powerful.

grades. *If you enjoy this book, you may also enjoy Breathing Underwater, Alex Flynn and Twisted, Laurie Halse Anderson.*

***Schooled, Gordon Korman.

Capricorn, “Cap,” has been raised on a commune by his grandmother, Rain. The collective farm had long since only ones left who lived the injured, Cap must attend the grandmother can return to the homeschooled, and having no confused by the lives his



been deserted, Rain and Cap were the commune way of life. When Rain is local middle school until his commune. Having been exclusively interaction with other teens, Cap is fellow students lead, will he become

like them? Or, will they become more like him? Recommended for 6th-8th grades. *If you enjoy this book, you may also enjoy Stargirl, Jerry Spinelli and The Wednesday Wars, Gary D. Schmidt.*

The Big Field, Mike Lupica.

Hutch loves baseball; a lot. His life becomes confused as he loses his shortstop position to the new star, Darryl, and his more distant. His team, team captain and they are is a great sports book, the sports/baseball lover and the with his father is intense as he



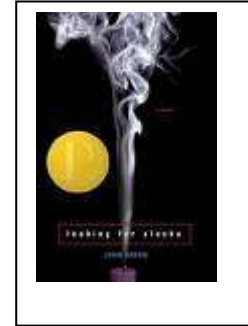
relationship with his father becomes however, is playing great; Hutch is headed down the winning path. This statistics are geared for the pace is quick. Hutch’s relationship attempts to navigate both his

relationship with his father and with his team. These two aspects of Hutch’s life clash in an unexpected way as the team heads toward the championships.

Recommended for 6th-9th grades. *If you enjoy this book, you might also enjoy Athletic Shorts, Chris Crutcher and Al Capone Does My Shirts, Gennifer Choldenko.*

*****Looking For Alaska, John Green.**

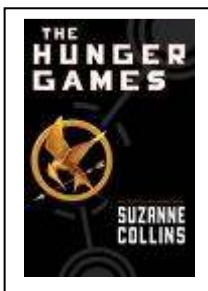
Miles “Pudge” Halter is going to boarding school, by choice. The adventures of boarding school and the friends Miles makes there create an intense, captivating story that is impossible to put down once started. His two best friends, the Colonel and Alaska keep the action fast paced. Miles’ transformation throughout the book is amazing to witness, and he is real enough that we can all relate to him. Divided into two parts, Before and After, you won’t be able to set this one down. Recommended for 11th-12th grades.



If you enjoy this book, you might also like The Catcher in the Rye, JD Salinger and Freaked, JT Dutton.

*****The Hunger Games, Suzanne Collins.**

Sometime in the future, the world is a very different place. The country is divided into Districts, all with one responsibility; supply the Capitol with whatever goods your district



can produce. For the citizens, hunger and fear pervade their lives. As punishment for previous uprisings, each district must send one boy and one girl to the Capitol every year to participate in the Hunger Games. Katniss volunteers to take the place of her younger sister and is sent to the Capitol – to fight for her life – on live television. This book is very fast-paced and almost impossible to put down; the first in a series that

promises to be exciting. Recommended for 8th-11th grades. *If you enjoy this book, you might also enjoy The Lottery (short story), Shirley Jackson, The Uglies, Scott Westerfield and The Book Thief, Marcus Zusak.*

I have done the math (sort of) and figured out that it is absolutely possible to read all 30 of these books this summer. (30 books divided by three months, divided by 30 days in the month, carry a few days here and there...oh well, it works out to something like 2 ½ books a week; easy, right?) So, whether you choose to spend your summer following the soldiers in Fallujah, discovering paper towns, playing baseball, or trying to stay alive in the Hunger Games, I know that your summer will be full of great books and exciting adventures. Read On!!

Karon Towns is an English education student at Metropolitan State College of Denver.

The Future Isn't What It Used to Be: A Look into Young Adult Literature Science Fiction

Jim Kroepfl

Our vision of the future is inevitably colored by our experience in the present. Young Adult (YA) science fiction novels offer conjectures on the type and use of technology, the function of authority, the values of society, and most importantly, the role of the young hero in a future world. On close inspection, these ideas expressed in fiction are as much reflections on society's current ideals as they are speculations on the future, and they develop over time in concert with our culture.

Just as our vision of the future evolves, so do our expectations for the fictional hero. But more than being just a reflection of present society, the hero's role has a profound effect on the mindset of the reader in either a positive or detrimental way. YA novels help shape the reader's concept of the individual's place in the world, his role in society, and his ability—and responsibility—to consider and influence the status quo. The science fiction protagonist in a YA novel can be a true hero who defeats a threat or causes positive change to an unsatisfactory condition, or he can be a victim of extraordinary circumstances—a passive player in a larger game. Perhaps it is time to ask how the depiction of this role will affect future generations? A look at significant young adult science fiction novels published over the past three decades exposes this link between the present and our view of the future, and offers a sobering look at the evolution of the role of the hero.

Ender's Game (1985)



Ender's Game, winner of both the HUGO and Nebula awards, was published in 1985. At the time, President Ronald Reagan was championing “Star Wars” and railing against the “evil empire” of the Soviet Union. Two years earlier, Tom Clancy published his first book,

The Hunt for Red October, fostering a new enthusiasm for military-related fiction.

Computers were making their first big push into society at large, and the space shuttle program, which was still a year away from the Challenger disaster, was having its most productive year ever with nine shuttle missions—more than any other year before or since.

Ender's Game perfectly encapsulates the mindset of the mid-1980s. America was embracing new technology, was positive about the future, and was reassured as to the role and capabilities of its military and governmental authorities. There was a belief that the systems of society were there to benefit and/or protect the population.

Authority in Ender's Game is depicted by a military culture with a clear goal of protecting the world from a specific external threat. The civilian culture is aware of the threat, but not significantly affected by it. The enemy of society is an alien race in distant space, which the humans know little about. There had been war years ago, but no current hostilities. Nonetheless, the earth's military culture maintains a war-time readiness, perfectly mirroring the cold war between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. going on during the 1980s.

The story revolves around a zero-gravity battle game used to train cadets in the art of space combat at a high-tech orbiting training center. This unique technology is neither overwhelming nor threatening to the population, and is easily mastered and manipulated by the main character. The hero, Ender, is a small, young military prodigy who winds up

Though he struggles with his inner demons, he accepts his role in a system created to protect the earth. He is being trained to save the world, and save the world he will.

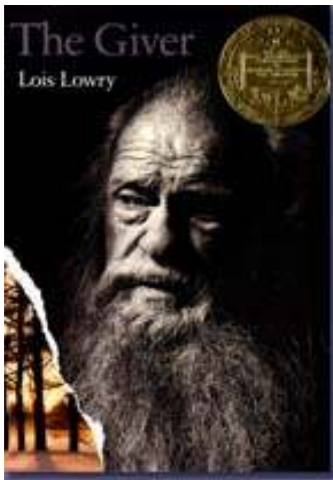
being more than capable of destroying an entire race, triggering his fascinating internal conflicts. He questions whether he is a monster by exercising his profound leadership and tactical

skills, particularly when people are hurt in the process. Yet, even while fighting these moral battles with himself, he does not shirk from meeting his perceived responsibilities and rises above all the challenges placed before him. Ender's Game presents us with a hero who is capable, effective and driven by purpose—an individual with a unique power and special responsibility who, literally, saves the human race.

The Giver (1993)

The Giver, a John Newberry Medal winner, was published in 1993, a time marked with notable scientific and social progress. The first human cells were cloned, and the FDA first approved the use of synthetic growth hormones to increase milk production. America had recently won a war using unprecedented technology and elected a young idealistic president. The great political battle of the time was over universal health care, exploring the idea of government playing a central role in running the country's health apparatus.

The Giver describes a completely communal society that is not facing any material crisis. Strict population control has eradicated poverty, inequality, and food shortages. Sexual urges are repressed with drugs. Even death is sanitized to the point of being an emotionless ill-defined transition. Society has successfully eliminated individuality, impoliteness, and just about all the general unpleasantness of life. Unfortunately, the citizens are unaware of what else they have lost in the development of this perfectly ordered world.



The Giver explores the idea of lost individuality and what we stand to lose by emotionally isolating ourselves from the risks and hard realities inherent in life. It touches on the ethical questions of the early 1990s caused by advances in biology and genetics. It also contemplates the potential results of using the community to spread risks but reduce responsibilities, perhaps tendering a nod to the then raging argument over a universal health program. No external enemy is suggested and a military presence makes only brief, insignificant appearances.

The hero, Jonas, serves as a sacrificial Christ-like figure, bearing the emotional burden of society's memories. He takes on the responsibility of having an individual experience in a culture of conformity. His role is not to save the people from an external threat, but to change the system and restore what has been lost in a moral and emotional sense. Jonas's quest is not necessarily to save the human race, but to save its humanity.

Jonas realizes that the system put in place to protect the people from difficult feelings is robbing them of their souls and the rich experience of life itself. He must leave in order to restore memories to the people, sacrificing his place in the community and risking his life in the process. Jonas is a hero who recognizes a problem with the status quo and assumes the duty of changing it, even when it leads to his banishment and possible death.

Feed (2002)

Feed, a National Book Award finalist, was published in 2002, an age of war and corporate corruption. Worldcom, Enron, and Arthur Anderson imploded after cooking the books and deceiving investors. The Department of Homeland Security was created to protect the country, in part by monitoring where everyone was going, who they were talking to, and what they were reading. The United States began the first of two costly wars in the Middle East, but simultaneously lowered taxes—no need to sacrifice, we have got it covered.



Meanwhile, things were going awry in distant corners of the world. Chechen rebels killed hundreds of children in a school, and Muslim terrorists killed scores at a Balinese night club. An oil tanker broke up off the coast of Spain, threatening environmental catastrophe. The United States government decided that world order was something best not left to the rest of the world and promptly pulled out of the ABM treaty, then declared that it would invade Iraq on its own if need be.

The future world in Feed is a place where America's consumer-driven economy has reached an inevitable horrible crisis. The planet is poisoned, and the rest of the world is on the edge of war. Huge conglomerates run everything, including the schools, the weather, and everyone's thoughts. One subtle and illuminating touch in the narrative is that three words are printed with the trademark sign, TM, accompanying them: schoolTM, cloudsTM, and factsTM.

Meanwhile, Americans go about their consumption-mad ways in a daze of continual consumption and e-connectedness, unconcerned about public health or what may be happening sociologically or environmentally in the outside world. Well-off teens take recreational trips to the moon, drive flying cars, and experiment with illicit, harmful bio-software—an effective analogy for drugs.

Although the feed, which is the computer information stream continually running through peoples' minds, is having deteriorating and probably fatal effects on the population's health, the commercial authorities reaction is not to assume any liability, but to make the visible sores a fashion trend, calling to mind the reaction of cigarette manufacturers over past decades—anything to keep the consumers buying. The corporate sell job is so effective that the skin lesions become a fashion statement, and wealthy teens actually have their bodies surgically enhanced with the sores.

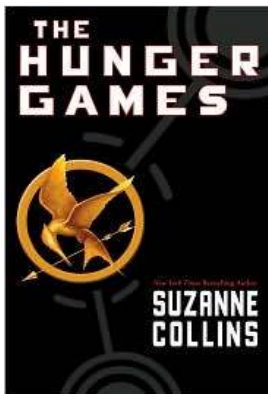
Feed is a bracing reflection of post-September 11th American culture when maintaining the pace of consumerism and corporate profits seemed paramount, and agents of authority were given a free hand to do as they saw fit. Environmental concerns, privacy, and favorable foreign relations were secondary.

The villain in Feed, as in The Giver, is the status quo, which is both harmful and unsustainable. But unlike Jonas, Feed's hero, Titus, plays no role in challenging this unacceptable state. Titus is a well-off teen with an abundance of advantage, but a real lack of insight into what is happening in the world, and a complete bankruptcy of ambition to change it. He is vaguely aware of riots and a looming war, but is too overwhelmed with the deluge of advertisements scrolling through his head to truly register them. Even after winning the affections of the heroine, he turns his back on her. The greatest gesture he makes against the status quo is to accompany his girlfriend, Violet, on a purposely uncategorizable shopping trip in an attempt to confuse the ever-monitoring shopping computers. Unfortunately, this seemingly benign act of defiance has the unintended consequence of disqualifying Violet for medical help because the computer no longer considers her a reliably predictable consumer. When the fate of the heroine is sealed, Titus makes no significant change in his behavior, and is unable to save, help, or even empathize with her.

In the end, Titus achieves a sort of uneasy realization about the way he has viewed the world—not the most admirable character arc. Feed's hero, despite his eventual musings about what is important in life, takes no action and comes to no great realization regarding the human condition – a true analogy for the passive, insular mindset of Americans of the period.

The Hunger Games (2008)

The Hunger Games came out in 2008, a year of economic upheaval, spiking oil prices, rising inflation, and declining asset values—a year eventually determined to have been in recession. People's job prospects and retirement accounts deteriorated as



executives walked away with multi-million dollar bonuses and golden parachutes. Auto executives flew to Washington D.C. in private jets to lobby for bail-out money from taxpayers. As a result, the terms “income inequality” and “redistribution of wealth” became viable topics of discussion during an election for the first time in decades. The world was enthralled by the Olympic Summer Games in China, watching athletes compete in gleaming new stadiums in modern Beijing, knowing all the while that millions upon millions of Chinese citizens lived in poverty and oppression.

In The Hunger Games, the future is a vast dichotomy between the haves and have-nots. America is split between a ruling capitol district and twelve other oppressed districts. The Capitol is rich and modern and benefits from very advanced technology, including hovercraft, advanced genetics, and the ability to control the weather. The repressed districts are economically backward, and in fact, are in a much less advanced state than America's poorest sectors today, with people working in crumbling coal mines and engaged in primitive labor-intensive forms of agriculture and industry. To psychologically reinforce its rule, the capital requires the other districts to send a boy and girl each year to fight to the death in the Hunger Games. These games are a major entertainment enterprise for the capital, a cross between the Roman gladiator games and the television show, *Survivor*.

The heroine is Katniss Everdeen, a young girl from a poor coal-mining district who volunteers to replace her sister in the Hunger Games. The stakes are high for Katniss – win or die. Beyond her own survival, however, a victory by the heroine does not provide much benefit to the people in her district, let alone the country or the planet. Her one act of defiance is to threaten suicide at the end of the games when the rules are unfairly changed. This act jeopardizes the show's big climax and causes the angered authorities to change the rules back. Katniss does not aspire to change the way the world is ordered or inspire anyone to action. She hopes to survive and go back to her poor district to take care of her mother and sister. There is little to suggest that her victory and survival will have any appreciable effect on her world at all.

The Hunger Games exhibits the growing state of economic inequity in the world today, and the growing obsession with reality television and entertainment in general. The role of the heroine is hardly commendable. She expresses no hope that the system will change, and has no concept that she could play a role in changing it. This may serve as an allegory for the frustrations felt in America today. Politicians are found guilty of felonies, but refuse to resign from their positions; executives get rich while their companies go bankrupt; and the economy continues to deteriorate. Such a world could use a proactive hero.

The Hero's Devolving Role

Our vision of the future has changed considerably over the past three decades. Society is increasingly depicted as being unfair, but inevitably so. Gone are the days of the reluctant hero who saves the world, or even changes the circumstances of his immediate world. Heroes in the most recent YA science fiction novels pose no real threat to the unacceptable status quo—at best, making themselves a slight nuisance to the powers that be.

Earlier young adult novels portrayed technology as a tool for the hero to employ in his greater task of saving or changing the world, but no longer. In more recent stories, technology is a tool of the authorities, to use and misuse, in their efforts to monitor and control the population.

We have gone from Ender and Jonas, the young world saviors—who might struggle in their quest to improve the world, but don't question their ability and duty to do so, to Titus and Katniss—who have no comprehension of a potential greater role for themselves in the grand scheme of life. All of these heroes are survivors, but only in the earlier novels does the struggle of the hero stand for something grander than the hero's achievement of actually making it through the story. Though Titus begins to doubt his value system, his world and his friends will continue in their consumption-mad, morally-bankrupt ways. Though Katniss won the Hunger Games, she will return to the same oppressed poverty-stricken district, and next year, two new teens will be chosen to fight in the death games to entertain the Capitol.

Conclusion

There is an important role for science fiction in YA literature: it is a potent source of inspiration for the young people who will shape our future. As is true with most literature, science fiction stories reflect the times in which they are written. But in their appeal to young adults, they also provide a framework for our dreams and ambitions for the future.

Why then have our heroes stopped believing they can play a substantive role in changing their world? Why should it be enough to just survive in an unsatisfactory and un-nurturing society? Perhaps it is time for a new science fiction hero. A hero who is willing and able to make a real difference in his world – a hero that can inspire young readers to dream of accomplishing greater things. Let us hope that in depicting the worlds and heroes of tomorrow, our writers can once again provide stories of initiative, inspiration, and hope for the young adults of today.

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Jim Kroepfl is an aspiring young adult literature author. His is currently putting the finishing touches on his first YA novel.

April 15, 2009

Hello, and a warm welcome to the spring edition of The Writers' Slate. The themes of the following poems, including friendships, family, and fathers are beautifully rendered and poignantly moving. A walk through the landscapes of memory and lasting solace in those things that matter most make this medley of "songs from the heart" unique and resonant - with the spirit of life.

The poetry section of the Writers' Slate for spring includes nine new thoughtfully crafted poems, with three winners in first, second and third place from each division of elementary, middle and high school.

Like the season itself, these fresh additions to the spring Writers' Slate are a true pleasure to revel in and share, and we hope you will enjoy reading these lively pieces as much as we did. It is with joy we present the poems of these fine writers here.

The future editions of The Writers' Slate are sure to continue to be filled with promise and delight as we receive more writing that inspires and delights.

Brenda Smith, Associate Editor
Poetry Section

Alec Harris
First Place High School Division

Deerfield, Illinois

Father's Day Reflection

We walk onto man-made land,
All made by corporate's hand.
Fake trees, fake grass, fake air, real friend,
Fake sounds, fake smell, real time I want to spend.
This isn't our home, but something feels right,
I walk in his shadow, ready for that mischievous bite.
The building looks at us, taken aback,
It hasn't seen people dressed like that.
Without perfect tie, perfect suit, perfect case,
Perfect hair, perfect shoes that are perfectly laced.
That walk in every day, same smile, same mold,
Same speeches, conferences, and meetings to hold.
No emotion, no heart
Just feelings ripped apart
Their eyes glazed, and face emotionless,
Nothing can break them, nothing can stress.
We are strangers posing a threat,
No perfection, just grass stains, sandals, and sweat.
We walk to the place that feels like home,
Its all glass, too blue, and no foam.
We cast in the air and the lures fly fast,
How fitting that the strangers break the glass.

Marie Schwarz
Second Place High School Division

Salt Lake City, Utah

My Father, My Friend

I remember my father reading to me before bed night after night. The stack of books at the foot of my bed steadily growing toward the ceiling. His soothing voice lulling me to sleep and casting me into dreams of pirates, wizards, and handsome princes.

I remember my father teaching me how to fish on the lake. Constantly reloading my line with new hooks to replace the ones I lost. Untangling the fishing line, helping me cast and taking the hook out of the mouth of the slimy, wet creature at the end of my Donald Duck fishing pole.

I remember my father taking me outside every summer morning to check on our strawberry patch. Walking through the rows of squatty plants examining each in turn. Sitting on the warm sidewalk and devouring our juicy treasures.

I remember my father coming home from the veterinary office, a collar in his right hand. Tears in his eyes as he set it gently on the kitchen table.

I remember my father strolling casually through the pet store. Looking at all the animals in cages. Walking next to me down the aisles after a soccer game one Saturday morning. Chasing after the sound of my cleats in the dog section. Agreeing with my choice of the small brown puppy with the big black eyes.

And I remember my father turning out the lights and kissing my forehead. Saying the same words night after night: "I love you."

Kara Curtis
Third Place High School Division

Worcester, Massachusetts

Memory

Years pass by,
Roads split,
Separate ways are taken
New things don't seem to fit.

Like a seesaw in the park,
Life tilts,
Left to right;
That's the way it's built.

Bumpy rides,
Highway lines,
On the way home;
Oh home, sweet home.

Familiar faces,
With some change,
However, it's not strange.
It all comes back,
Whoa, flash!

Loyalty, trust,
Living in the moment,
I can still feel the rush.

Laughing on the floor,
Who knows what for?
Weekends, Vacations,
In the car nonstop,
There's always a clumsy one
Who trips and drops.

Fights, tiffs,
Throwing fits,
His side, your side,
But it's always resolved.

Dancing, Singing horribly,

But we didn't care, you see?
Fun times, endless laughs,
Never did anybody get the shaft.

Loving, caring,
Oh, the swearing!
Sleepovers, walks,
Hobbies and talks.

...What a blast from the past.

Life goes on, here I am.
My friends are still here,
New memories,
Quite like the old,
There's so much left,
For us to behold.

Irreplaceable,
Apart or together,
My friends are there,
Always and forever.

Abby Bender
First Place Middle School Division

Poseyville, Indiana

Friendship

It feels like warmth on my skin
during a long cold winter
Expanding like a rainbow after a fierce storm
Whispering like a weeping willow in the wind
Dreaming like the sparkling stars at night
Scattering like leaves blown around on the ground
Turning like a winding road, good and bad
Yelling like the rain beating on the roof
Moving gently like the sand
Opening like a rose bud
Waiting to grow like a small tree
Streaming like the river, gentle and winding
Rolling like the hills in a green planted field
Dancing like butterflies making loops up and down

Yunshu Luo
Second Place Middle School Division

Ellisville, Missouri

The Third Person

People say it takes two
 To make a friendship
 But I say three
 What of that forgotten soul?
 The one between each whole
 Living, breathing, dreaming
 Like us, but invisible

Newborn
 Only hours old
 Needy and breakable
 One cut
 One slash
 One drop of blood
 Life lost, bond broken

Teen
 Rebellious age
 Emotions fluctuate
 Up, down...up, down...up, down...
 Few ties survive this
 Stock market of changes
 More lives lost, more bonds broken

Old
 Ancient in years
 Youthful in life
 Every second, hour, week
 New perspectives
 New experiences
 Nostalgia, and regained hope

People say it takes two
 To make a friendship
 But I say three
 What of that forgotten soul?
 The one between each whole
 Laughing, crying, singing
 An unseen shadow on the street

Tony Lim
Third Place Middle School Division

Lathrup Village, Michigan

Friendship

Friendship is a warm, toasty house after it's done raining
Friendship is a comforting blanket when you are sleepy
Friendship is the color yellow which is like the sun, once it gets covered by the clouds,
you will miss its warmth
Friendship is like a bed after a hard day's work
Friendship is like an umbrella on a rainy day always getting you out of water, hot or cold
Friendship can be a stuffed animal or comforting blanket; it journeys through your
hardships
Friendship is also like water or food; you depend on it a lot

Anjing Fou
First Place Elementary School Division

Thornton, Colorado

The Warmth of Friendship

Every year
when winter comes around
when the trees
turn white
and the grass
freezes along with me
the only warmth I have
is the warmth
of friendship.

This warmth
is not something you can buy
or ask for
it is something
you share
and give
to someone who stands up for you
when you
are being criticized.
Someone,
who makes your day
when you
have a fifty pound weight
on your shoulders.
Someone,
who doesn't care
if you are rich or poor
brilliant or brainless
tiny or huge.
Someone,
who likes you
for who you are.

This,
is the warmth of friendship,
only you and a special person share.

Brianna Hoffman
Second Place Elementary School Division

Wamego, Kansas

Friendship

Friendship is the moon when it is dark
It's the sun on a bright day.
Friendship is a light on a lonely path
That helps to guide the way.
Friendship is sitting under a shade tree
And saying nothing at all.
Friendship is being there through tough times
It's a cushion that soothes a fall.
Friendship is being different from each other
And seeing that as ok.
Friendship is giving the other freedom
Without fear they'll run away.
Friendship is a chain that locks together
Adding links as time goes by.
Friendship is a circle that will never end
It's a flame that will not die.

Courtney Alexander
Third Place Elementary School Division

Wamego, Kansas

Jigsaw

Friendship, O friendship is a wondrous thing pieced together like a puzzle by two, a few, or many people who may or may not be the same. The puzzle takes time and can't be put together overnight. Every person puts in a piece every day and soon that puzzle will be as big as day. But sometimes friendship doesn't work out, but don't even think about taking that puzzle apart. For in the future, you might meet that friend again and decide to start piecing that from where it was left off. And never give up friendship because if you try hard it will work out and be just fine. And if you do everything in your power to keep that friendship alive, it will do something magical and last forever. And then when you're old, just wait and see, your friendship will be the most complicated but perfect jigsaw puzzle you will ever put together in your life.

Exposition

The Writing Conference, Inc. Annual Writing Contest Winners

This year's theme was of course about Friendship— why friends are important, what elements are involved in an ideal friendship, the writers' thoughts on the concept in general. Friendship is a construct that is both universal and commonplace, while obversely experienced as something that is rare and remarkable; a detail that was not lost to our winning writers. They artfully examined the issue with keen insight, care and economy of words, and produced profound and admirable works on the subject. In the high school division Kyle Chevis contemplates the value “of good, hands-on life experiences” and true friendships, and their place and function within our modern society. Mason Liang discusses the importance of friendships in making life bearable, in helping to shape who we are as individuals, and as a motivator for success. In the middle level division, Maris Panjada examines the value of picking good friends— friends with diverse interests, intelligences, and backgrounds. She sees these differences as compliments to her own diverse beliefs and passions and as fundamental to a lasting friendship. Joshua Carter maintains that the foundation of a friendship is built of three elements—loyalty, common interests, and kindness. These elements “are to be valued and cannot be replaced”, or omitted, for that would undermine and weaken a strong friendship. In the elementary division, Kaitlyn Albertoli sees friendship as a “priceless treasure, friendship is the glue that binds people together.” Haley Messer exposes the ease at which friendships are created and maintained through communication, honesty, and respect. While Divya Rangavajjhala concludes that friendship involves opening your heart to new friends and opportunities, as well as making time to laugh and have fun. We hope you enjoy reading these entries.

-Associate Editor, Lola Albino

Kyle Chevis
Second Place High School Division

Covington, Louisiana

“Friendship”

Society functions as a series of interactions between all its members. This goes for any society, be it the common school campus, the world’s largest metropolis, or even a colony of ants. Social interaction is an essential part of the perpetuation of life, no doubt, but what can we get out of it any other way? Granted money and the things that come with social contact are nice, but what is the best possible consequence? The answer, albeit often overlooked, is the making of friends. A good friendship can afford many things: companionship, consolation, and a feeling of recognition, to name only a few. It has been said that in modern times, with the advancement of technology and the ability to be entertained while remaining alone, children are not developing strong friends as those of earlier generations had.

A trustworthy companion, someone that one can fully trust and talk to, a person who accepts and likes another because of who they are— all are example of an ideal friend. To go through childhood without any companionship is unfathomable. It is essential to any child’s development that he or she has a companion. This paring leads to development in not only language and problem-solving abilities, but perhaps most importantly in social behavior as well. Even into late childhood having friends is important. Kids begin to encounter situations that are new to them, which also bring new problems. It could be a budding relationship with another individual or a problem at school, but either way a peer is to whom the child is most likely to turn.

The growing trend in modern society is against these developments, however, with the creation of more easily-accessible personal computers and personal entertainment devices. The unfortunate keyword, though, is personal. These devices allow today’s youth to be entertained more easily without the interaction of others. In defense of these, one can say that they connect persons from around the world. Nevertheless, one must still ask oneself what the value is of good, hands-on life experiences.

Mason Liang
Third Place High School Division

Troy, Michigan

Friends. It can define a person's personality, social level, and popularity. It can be the powerful motivator that leads a person to success. Above all, however, it defines who a person is. People who have many friends tend to be in the more social and popular group, but will most likely lose these buddies in the future. On the other hand, people who only have a few, but very close, friends, are likely to create strong bonds between these friends forever. Whatever the case is, it is always extremely vital to establish a healthy foundation of friends.

In Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men, Lennie, a mentally retarded, but powerful fellow, is very close with George, an average-sized guy who is witty and intelligent. Together, this duo sets out to make a living working on the farm. However, since Lennie is dumb, many land owners turn their backs to him, afraid of the damage that he might cause. Fortunately, George is there to improve Lennie's image. George claims that Lennie is a hard worker who just needs someone to push him along in the right direction. Eventually, George and Lennie find a job and start earning some cash. Lennie is very fortunate to have George as his close friend. Without him, Lennie would have never been able to survive on his own, because no one would accept him for who he is.

Friends are there to help, not to harm. To elaborate, I will use myself as an example. In middle school, I was an outcast. I had just moved to a new home, so I did not have any friends on my own. People would constantly stare at me, and I would just silently slither away. During lunch, I would sit at my own table, slowly nibbling at the cafeteria food that the school district dished out. In class, I would be the person who sat in the far corner, where the teacher would not be able to see me. This went on, unbearably, for days, until one day, someone came up to me and asked if the seat next to me was available. Gladly, I accepted his gesture of friendship. Suddenly, the world around me lightened, and I could finally enjoy life in its pure form.

As one can see, it is crucial that people have other people to talk to. The human society is meant to be social. Life progresses only as long as there are strong relationships between people. The world can only exist so long as there are communications from one to another. People are meant to be together, and they need each other in order to live a fully functional life.

Maris Panjada
First Place Middle Level Division

Overland Park, Kansas

“Friendship”

“But friendship is precious, not only in the shade, but in the sunshine of life, and thanks to a benevolent arrangement, the greater part of life is sunshine. – Thomas Jefferson”

Many people in this ever-gloomy world have no friends. It’s quite understandable, actually. I, for one, am an amiable, easy-to-get-along-with person, and here I have very few close friends. When you’re smart like me, however, you have a lesser chance of making friends. Have you noticed how most dumb people have plenty of friends? I think this is probably because the “friends” want to feel smarter, and by hanging around someone who’s flunking their quizzes or whatnot all the time, the friends feel superior. I don’t have this problem, however. And coincidentally enough, my friends are all as smart as me, just in different ways.

See, I believe that everyone’s just as smart as the next person, just a different variation of smart. What if a wealthy scholar has studied genetic engineering all his career and some poor person knows just how to survive the cold, harsh winters? What if the poor person’s has six kids and she knows exactly how to raise them? The scholar’s never had kids and wouldn’t know what to do with one if he had one. Who’s smarter then, eh?

That’s my theory. So while I’m people-smart and life-smart and school-smart and writing-, reading-, and filmmaking-smart, my friends are other smarts. I’m more at ease speaking with adults than to my peers, and I know more about taxes and bills and checks and other adult things than any of my friends. I make perfect grades in school and I’m currently writing two novels. I’ve just finished my first film and I read at least three books a week.

My friend Elisabeth knows all about cooking and celebrities and pop culture. She can sing all the words to the old Disney songs and knows just how to decorate a house for all holidays, inside and out. I’m not too up-to-par on any of that stuff. Who’s smarter?

You turn on any oldies station and my friend Amy can tell you what the song is and who it’s by before the singing even commences. She’ll tell you all about global and environmental problems you’ve never even dreamed of. She can identify any popular war icon and is an active member of most anti-genocide and environmental groups. I can recognize global and environmental issues but not to a great extent. I really don’t know anything about war icons. Who’s smarter?

Are you catching my drift? We’re all smart in different ways. I think that’s what makes us the best of friends, besides other characteristics. What other characteristics, you ask? Ah...I’ll tell you.

First, you have to have *some* things in common. If you don’t, it’s hard to agree on things, and arguments spring up more frequently than you might’ve intended. However, it’s also good to come from different backgrounds and have different views, habits and opinions on subjects. This adds a little variety into your friendship, and it helps you explore your friend’s background and history a little bit more.

Second, it can't be awkward. If you're uncomfortable around a certain person, maybe you're not meant to be friends. When being around someone is awkward or uncomfortable, it's more difficult to share your opinions and be yourself. This barricades you from having a chance of being friends with them. If you can't be yourself in the first place, you can't grow and change within the friendship. Friends have to accept you for who you are, and if an acquaintance does not accept you, don't even consider changing. It's not worth altering who you are just to be friends with someone who doesn't love you the way you are.

Third, it's best if you frequently see or talk to the person. It's quite difficult to carry on a friendship if you only talk to your friend once a month. However, some people have made it possible. The less you see your friend, the more special it is when you do. Nonetheless, little or infrequent communication puts a deep strain on your relationship, and when you get caught up with school, sports, hobbies, and family, it's extremely difficult to remember your friend from all the way across the continent. Your relationship will dwindle and trickle until it's a mere acquaintance, and then... Here comes the sad part. When one loses a friend, whether it's through death, a fight, or distance, it's hard to cope. Everything you see reminds you of your friend. You feel lonely; there's a deep pit in your heart where your friend's soul fit so snugly before. They're gone, and there's nothing you can do. You're completely powerless.

Perhaps that's the hardest fact to accept: that no matter what, your friend isn't coming back. You'll wait for them at the bus stop, and then it will hit you: they're not coming to school today. They're never coming to school, ever again. When you have a question for homework, you'll ring your friend and then realize that they won't answer the phone. Their parents can't call them to the phone and they most certainly cannot help you with your homework. It's quite hard to adjust, and even later on you'll find yourself subconsciously thinking about your friend.

That's why you have to be thankful for your friends. Cherish the moments when you feel happier than anybody. Pick good friends; they shape who you are and who you will become. And remember this: no matter how deep in trouble you are, no matter how dire the consequences, no matter how impossible the situation, a best friend will stand by you, catching you when you fall and grinning proudly at your side when you succeed.

Joshua Carter

Second Place Middle Level Division

East Hartford, Connecticut

“FRIENDSHIP”

"A real friend is one who walks in when the rest of the world walks out." This quote, by Walter Winchell, is definitely true. Many people agree that the definitive qualities of a lasting friendship are like pillars of a bridge. First of all, loyalty is the one of the pillars that supports the bridge. Common interests represent the center pillar. Finally, the last yet most vital pillar is kindness. Without all three pillars, the bridge would become unstable and collapse. The same thing is true for a friendship; all three traits are needed to have a strong bond. They are the three fundamental personalities of a good friendship.

Without a doubt, loyalty is a significant factor in a lasting friendship. This is illustrated in Freak the Mighty, by Rodman Philbrick a novel about friendship. Max and Kevin, the main characters, are best friends. They are extremely loyal to one another. An illustration of this is when Kevin came back to rescue Max from his dangerous father, “Killer Kane”. Furthermore, Max and Kevin bonded together and created Freak the Mighty, with 3-foot Kevin on the shoulders of 6-and-half-foot Max. My friends are loyal to me, too. I remember the time when I was being made fun of and my friend stood up for me. After that, the people who made fun of me stopped. In J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter saga, Harry, the main character, definitely has some loyal friends. Hermione Granger went with Harry to the Ministry of Magic to help him duel with the Death Eaters. This is unquestionably a loyal act- Death Eaters are followers of the evil wizard Voldemort. They are foul as a terrible mythical creature, wicked as a hag, merciless as a hungry lion. Harry’s other peer, Ronald Weasley, stood guard on Professor Umbridge’s office, so Harry and Hermione wouldn’t be caught in it. Percy Jackson, a half-blood in Rick Riordan’s Percy Jackson and the Olympians series, has very loyal companions as well. Grover, a satyr, (half man, half goat) offered Percy a lucky chewed-up can of his for “good luck”. Annabeth, his other friend, gave him her magical Yankees cap. The cap makes its wearer invisible. They were always willing to fight alongside him, even if it endangered them. Similarly, Ancient Spartans and Romans both swore to put their city-state’s needs before their own. Loyalty is essential because it creates a trust between both people. Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, and the Ancient Spartans would all agree with Samuel Goldwyn; *“I’ll take fifty percent efficiency to get one hundred percent loyalty.”*

Common interests are a crucial ingredient to brew a friendship that is both strong and consistent. In Freak the Mighty, both Max and Kevin enjoy adventure. They are constantly going on imaginary “quests”, such as finding treasure or battling enemies. Additionally, they both feel the thrill of living life at its fullest; they together are Freak the Mighty. Previously, they had been teased for the way they looked- Max, a giant; Kevin, a robot. But as Freak the Mighty, they stood “high above the world”. Common interest is an ingredient in the friendship in my life, too. Almost all of my friends like chess, computers, and science. Common interests are an important element of the friendship of Roy Eberhart and Mullet Fingers in Carl Hiaasen’s novel, Hoot. Roy and Mullet Fingers both have an objective: to save the tiny burrowing owls from being killed

during the construction of a pancake house. They must sabotage the construction to ensure the owl's survival; wrecking bulldozers as expensive as a high-quality car, painting car windows ebony black, and starting a gigantic, earsplitting demonstration at the opening ceremony. As you can see, common interests undeniably spice up a friendship.

"Kindness glides about my house. Dame Kindness, she is so nice! The blue and red jewels of her rings smoke in the windows, the mirrors are filling with smiles."-verse one of "Kindness" by Sylvia Plath.

Certainly, kindness is the most essential quality of a lasting friendship. If you are not kind, the friendship is broken and the bridge weakens. Max from Freak the Mighty demonstrates an act of kindness while retrieving the orthinopter, a mechanical bird, from the tree when Kevin wasn't able to reach it. Also, Kevin and Max returned Loretta Lees purse to her, with every single penny remaining in it. My friends show kindness when they cheer me up if I'm troubled or gloomy. Furthermore, they help me in class, whether I need to make up math classwork, or need to get a material in a science lab; I know they'll be there for me. Another literary example that comes to mind is Troy. The two sisters, Xanthe and Marpessa, showed kindness to others. For instance, Marpessa comforted Helen when Hector was killed in battle by Achilles. One time, Xanthe healed Alastor when he was wounded from fighting the Greeks. Marpessa helped Xanthe; comforting her the terrifying night when the Greeks caught Troy. "Kindness is gold" to many people. Kindness is like glue; the component ties the friendship together and without it, the bond is not sealed.

Imagine a world without friendship. It's really difficult to do, isn't it? Then, why are these things important? Loyalty is a quality you need for a lasting friendship because without loyalty, the friendship is not worth it; you need to be able to trust the person in whom you confront secrets with. For an example, I know in Cornelia Funke's books, there are many betrayals because the "friends" are not 100% loyal. Common interests are a required personality because it certainly makes a friendship more exciting, you can truly understand them better if you both like something. In addition, it gives you something to do and enjoy. Lastly, kindness is vital; friendship revolves around kindness. Think of an equally kind friendship as a balance scale. If you tip the scale and aren't kind, then your friendship crumbles. This is true for all the qualities that are essential for a lasting friendship. A story with all these qualities is Stuart Little by E.B. White. Stuart is a mouse that is loyal as a knight, has many common interests, and is kind like a mother tiger is to her cubs; he is a true friend. This is why these qualities are necessary in the world. Like many other things, friendships are to be treated carefully, like an ancient painting, or a treasured ring, or a keepsake that has a special place in your heart.

To Stuart Little, friendship is as important as "a shaft of sunlight at the end of a dark afternoon, a note in music, the way a baby's neck smells if it's mother keeps it tidy, and ice cream with chocolate sauce on it". In my perspective, there are three essential qualities of a lasting friendship. Remember the bridge and the pillars? One is loyalty, which is the first pillar of the bridge. Without a doubt, a common interest is the second pillar. Finally, the most essential trait is kindness, the thing that bonds the whole friendship together. True friends are like gold; they are to be valued and cannot be replaced, and these three qualities are ingredients of a lasting friendship.

Kaitlyn Albertoli
First Place Elementary Division

San Clemente, California

“The Most Important Gift”

Without it, one lives in a dreary world surrounded by loneliness. Even all the money in the world cannot bring joy to one’s solitary existence. A priceless treasure, friendship is the glue that binds people together.

Even when times are tough, true friends continue to stand by each other. As once stated by Walter Winchell, “A friend is one who walks in when others walk out.” One can have numerous “fair-weather” friends, but the true friends are worth all of the gold in the world. When one is ill, a true friend may bring company to lift their spirits. Likewise, when one is lost and crying in dismay, a true friend will comfort them with open arms while guiding them through their obstacles.

During this technological era that we live in, a true friend is the best gift that one can receive. Today, instead of getting together with a friend, people communicate through phones or email. People scarcely have a face-to-face relationship due to the advanced technology available. Unfortunately, our world experiences a breakdown in communication during this era. Today, with the aid of automated machines, we can visit the grocery store, bank, gas station and then return home without ever interacting with anyone else. However, with so many people enthralled with technology, time spent with a true friend can bring joy and happiness in a way that machines cannot. Testing or emailing can never replace a special moment with a true friend.

Friendship is demonstrated in countless ways every day. One who is willing to put aside their disappointments and celebrate in others’ victories is a worthwhile friend. Similarly, one who is willing to drop what they are doing to help a friend in need is also a valuable friend. Like a “domino effect”, the wonderful trait of kindness shared between two good friends spreads rapidly to other people. For example, if one good friend shares a kind word or a nice meal with another, in turn, that person may share with another friend. The kindness of friendship continues to spread to the hearts of many. Friendship is truly the most important gift one can share.

Haley Messer
Second Place Elementary Division

Bellevue, Nebraska

“An Everlasting Treasure, Friendship”

Friendship is a treasure so valuable that only you and a person you know and care for can keep it from shattering to pieces.

Have you ever wondered what friendship really is? Friendship is a gift from God; He gave it to us so humans wouldn't be so lonely. It is a special bond between two or more people that is made to last forever. Most kids don't know where to find friendship but all you have to do is communicate with someone and there it begins.

How do you start friendship? Well that's easy; all you have to do is open your heart. When you open your heart people will come to you. Little by little friendship forms. If you want to start the voyage of being a friend try talking to them and get together on a luxurious day. These few steps will start your voyage.

Now of course you have the question of how it works so I will provide you with that information. Friendship works in a jigsaw-like way. You have to be extremely careful or else it won't cooperate. As a friend we need not to tell tall tales but always speak the truth no matter how much pain rides along with it. If you do this you will be able to work out the puzzle with the slightest of ease. If you don't speak the truth your friendship might sink to the bottom of the deep ocean. The friendship that was once a fairytale will no longer be one. The bridges you used to skip over with no worries because you knew everything was alright will be full of barricades and walls because everything's not alright. Don't let this happen because it doesn't have to. The fairytale friendship is one of the best gifts like has to offer so don't let it crumble; let it intensify.

Do you know why friendship is so special? Friendship is so special because it takes you down many different trails every day. You never know what might happen. It has many gifts too. For instance when you want to bake your granny's famous brownies, instead of baking by yourself bake them with a friend. Also friendship develops many lifelong relationships. If your friend is really your friend you will stay in touch with that person. Those are just a few reasons why friendship is so special.

Results of friendship vary, some crash and some rise. I believe that if it's the right person your friendship will be like no other. Whatever happens down your path of friendship no one knows, but every once in a while it will go the right direction.

Divya Rangavajjhala
Third Place Elementary Division

Fremont, California

The dictionary says friendship is, “A relationship with a person one knows, likes, and trusts.” To me friendship is all that and a lot more. It could be playing with someone, having fun, or something that makes you really happy. It often starts with a, “Hello,” or “Can we be friends?” There are three different friends I would like to talk about. Each friend has a different story and her, but all are dear friends to me.

Gabriella joined my second grade class a little later in the year. She didn’t have any friends and none of my friends wanted to play with her. I started to play with her because I thought she was lonely. I have felt lonely before and I wanted someone to come and play with me. My friends were not happy and threatened to stop playing with me if I continued to befriend Gabriella. But soon they realized that I was not going to stop playing with Gabriella. Before I knew, my friends accepted Gabriella and we were a happy bunch of girls. Including people is a very important part of being a good friend!

Aakanksha has been my friend since kindergarten. We always have a lot of fun together. One summer two years ago we went to Silliman Aquatic Center to play on the water slides. Both of us were very excited about it. Unfortunately, I was not tall enough to go on the slide, but Aakanksha was. I was really sad that I couldn’t go. I turned back just to see Aakanksha follow me. “Why didn’t you go Aakanksha?” I asked. “I’m not going if you’re not going,” she replied. I will never forget that. Being a good friend means giving up something fun because you can’t do it together.

I have known Maya since second grade but we have become very good friends since we have been in third grade. It is amazing how many things we share in common like monkey bars, san soo, and just giggling. We sometimes get into trouble in class for having too much fun. I laugh a lot when I’m with Maya, so much that my stomach hurts because of laughing too much. She is so fun!

I guess I’m very fortunate to have great friends. Friendship to me means including people, showing that you care, laughing a lot, and having so much fun. Time always seems very short when I’m having a lot of fun with my friends. Friendship is very important!

Narrative

The Writing Conference, Inc. Annual Writing Contest Winners

The fruits of fellowship taste both sweet and tart in a series of Writers' Slate narratives that plumb the depths and demands of friendship.

In the Senior High School Division, Sarah Lambert writes about a girl and her friend who meet at six and remain inseparable though and beyond the narrator's first heartbreak, marriage, birth of her children, and death of her husband. The tale begins with the narrator, now very old, watching her friend snoring in a rocking chair and recalling their dual passage "through all of life's amazing adventures." Lauren Grzybowski of Aurora, Colorado, describes a girl-boy friendship that becomes so much more. Straining through the rigors of the Denver Marathon, the narrator relives her romance and the heartbreak that follows her move from Michigan to Colorado. Tarin Smith of Columbia, Missouri, tells the tale of a young woman, a worn-out coat, and the realization that a neglected friend is at least as important as a threadbare piece of clothing.

Kristin Shim of San Diego opens the Junior High/Middle School Division with a story in which a student learns that her twin friends have cheated on a test. Should she turn them in and risk their friendship? Sarah Gabriel of Overland Park, Kansas, writes of a young woman grieving over her mother's death. After hurting silently and pushing comfort away, Saika shares her pain with a patient friend, and the healing begins. Maddie Douglas of Leawood, Kansas, describes the love of a grandmother that sustains an otherwise neglected girl. The narrator, twelve, is temporarily lost after her grandmother's death, but one day the smell of flowers makes her remember the lessons of her beloved, departed Rose.

In the Elementary School Division, Erin Roehr of Plains, Kansas, tells of an old farm and a new chicken. A practical joke misfires when a kindly horse and sheep help out the farm's newest member. Caitlin Martin of Bellevue, Nebraska, writes of a lonely frog named Franny who finds a best friend in a zucchini-loving ant named Annie. We hope you enjoy these outstanding narratives.

-William Daws, Associate Editor

Quotes

"She told me I was a good and beautiful person, and when I refused to believe her, she hugged me and wouldn't let go." — Sarah Lambert, 1st place high school

"I believed my heart was fully content, beating to the rhythm of a set of waves crashing on the shore, a spring shower's pitter patter, a runner's repetitive stride against the pavement..." — Lauren Grzybowski, Running Into Love, 2nd place high school

“I believe in the closet gremlins that steal things away in the middle of the night so you can never find what you want when you want it; I would have to assume friendships have to be like that too, if you don’t keep a watchful eye out for them, they disappear.” — Tarin Smith, “Coat of Friendship,” 3rd place high school

“My heart knew this was the right thing to do, but something almost prevented me from speaking that day. It was fear. Fear of losing two friends of which the like I had never met.” — Kristen Shim, “Friendship,” 1st place middle school

“Saika began to sob, and I gave her a great big hug as she cried, and then in that moment I knew things were going to go up from here. “It’s going to be okay,” I whispered quietly, and I believed it.” — “Danger, Crisis, Opportunity,” Sarah Gabriel, 2nd place middle school

“The last thing I remember was my crackling voice squeaking, ‘Help.’ Then my world went black.” — Maddie Douglas, “Garden of Stars,” 3rd place middle school

“Just then Amanda got back from her shopping and she saw everyone in the farm gathered around Neah. She dropped her bags and yelled ‘STOP HELPING HER!’ — Erin Roehr, 2nd place elementary

“They always went to the zucchini farm every Saturday to get their week’s supply. And, every Sunday they had their annual gardening meeting.” — Caitlyn Martin, 3rd place elementary

Sarah Lambert
First Place High School Division

Columbia, Missouri

It was dusk by the time I jolted awake. I had fallen asleep in my favorite rocking chair on the wrap-around porch overlooking a lake filled with shrill birds. The air was slightly crisp and chilly, and I wrapped my arms around my torso to keep warm. I glanced at the old woman snoring in the chair beside me, and I could feel my heart soften. As she snored, her breath blew a strand of her hair across her face, and I had to muffle a chuckle. She was such a heavy sleeper - she had always been that way. And with that, I was taken back to the past.

I vividly remember the first time I met her; I don't think I will ever forget it. We were six years old, and I had just moved to the neighborhood. I saw her as I was wandering around the block. She was nestled among the branches of an old tree on the side of the road, and she called out to me as I shuffled past with my eyes on the ground. "Are you the new kid?" she asked.

I simply nodded my head. It took every ounce of strength I had to restrain myself from running away. I would be known as "the new kid" for months after we moved in, and I hated it. "You wanna play with our dolls?" she asked, and that's all it took. We spent the rest of the afternoon dressing up our dolls and creating impossible and absurd stories for them. We spent our childhood only a few houses away from each other, and hardly a day passed that we didn't play and talk. She quickly became my best friend. I will never forget how she took me under her wing when I was in the most vulnerable state.

On a chilly November evening six years later, she sat with me and held my hand as we watched my father pack his things and leave. He had to "get away for awhile." We knew he wasn't coming back. She held me as I cried and we camped out in her living room in a tent made up of blankets and pillows, and she let me cry and talk until I finally fell asleep. I will never forget how she helped me pick up the pieces when everything seemed to be falling apart.

It was on a hot June day four years later that my first real boyfriend broke up with me. I thought he was perfect, until he told me he liked another girl more. But my best friend listened to

me cry over him, and then she told me that I deserved much more than him. She told me I was a good and beautiful person, and when I refused to believe her, she hugged me and wouldn't let go. She spent that entire weekend with me at my house, eating way too much junk food and talking about how terrible boys were. I will never forget how she made me feel like I was beautiful when I felt rejected and unwanted.

When my twenty-first birthday arrived, she took me out with some of our friends to a party. She was there when I had my first drink, and she was there to help me when I threw it all back up later that same evening. She was with me two weeks later when I first met the man I would eventually marry and have children with. When he tried to sweet-talk me at a local grocery store and asked for my number, it was my best friend that encouraged me to give him a chance. And it was my best friend that helped me slip on my beautiful wedding dress and cried tears of joy as I walked down the aisle to marry the man of my dreams. I will never forget how she made one of the most magical days of my life even more special just by being there.

Years later, she was by my side when I was pregnant with my first child. She accompanied me to many doctor's appointments and classes to help me prepare for the baby when my husband couldn't make it. She was by my side when I gave birth to my first child, a boy. And she was there when I gave birth to my second child, a girl. We raised our children together and dragged our husbands on double-dates. We called each other for advice and relief from the everyday stress of being a mother and a wife. I will never forget how she convinced me that when life beats you up, you've just got to beat it right back up.

Now, here we sit. We've watched our children begin lives of their own and we've seen our husbands laid in the ground. The only constant reassurance in our lives is each other and the fact that we will always be together. I turn to look again at my best friend and I know that I am the luckiest person in the world to have such an amazing person stick by my side. We've had arguments and fights; we've made each other cry and yell. But we've also been together for all of life's amazing adventures. We've stuck together through the good times and the bad, and we've learned from each other and our experiences. I haven't the faintest idea what I'd have done without her.

I will never forget my best friend and how much she means to me.

Lauren Grzybowski
Second Place High School Division

Aurora, Colorado

Running into Love

A raindrop fell from the grey October sky, spiraled down, and tapped me on my shoulder. Another fell to greet my dark blue, somewhat worn mizunos—my running shoes. I smiled down, flexing the left, and tilting to my head, only to admire the right. The twins may have out done their shine, but they had not been defeated. Their wears were charm, and their tares were bliss. But most importantly, they knew my unwritten tale. They were there when my stride boasted confidence and poise. They were there when my stride transformed into a stumble and then plummeted in descent. And they were here today, standing with me at the starting line of the Denver Marathon.

“Racers, take your mark...”. I looked straight ahead. Over the heads of thousands of fellow contenders, I could barely make out the banner that hung across the starting line through the drizzle. I closed my eyes and felt the rain on my skin, soaking in the moment I called my own.

“Get set...” My stomach flaunted its gymnast abilities, outrageously flipping and turning, only to tie itself into a huge knot. I took a deep breath, trying to settle those pre-race jitters. It wasn’t fear that riled my nerves. It was the excitement. Constantly, this immense sensation reminded me how this was the day—

“Go!”—the day I was going to make my dream come true.

To the bang of the starting gunshot, I was off, on a defining journey of 26.2 miles. The cold October chill shortened my stride at first. But with every step, it lengthened with ease as my pace improved. The first ten miles posed little adversity. They were a best friend, a favorite pair of jeans, an old song on the radio—so familiar, so like home...

“AH!” I screamed as my ten-year-old self collapsed into the cool waters of Lake Michigan. “Jason!” I hollered. He chuckled and cannon balled in awfully close, drenching me in a great wave of water. I rolled my eyes, but couldn’t help laughing

along. My best friend always had some amusing antic up his sleeve, like pushing me off our raft into the aqua blue waters on the Fourth of July.

“You’re ridiculous!” I sputtered through splashes of water while peddling to stay afloat.

“All in a day’s work,” he boastfully responded. I swam up to the floating ladder, grabbed onto the handlebars, and pulled myself up. Out in the distance, white tops crashed upon one another behind rolling lush hills near the horizon. The summer sun bathed my damp skin as I rolled onto the raft. Jason followed. I smiled over at my pale white, gangly-looking best friend. His wet hair was matted down upon his head and his glasses lay crooked across his face. His head was only proportional to his elephant ears, which were too large for such a lanky body. He grinned as he lay down next to me on the raft, only to reveal those goofy braces he had fastened to his teeth for as long as I could remember. We lay in silence basking in the sun for several minutes while the lake effect breeze cooled our bodies and dozens of seagulls sang the songs of summer to our ears.

The breeze brought the heavenly smell of the Fourth of July barbeque to our raft, prompting Jason to break the silence, “Do you smell that?” Instantly, I sat up. The aroma of Grandpa’s burgers electrified my senses, bringing me back to prized holiday memories. Past the lighthouse, I watched the small town of Charlevoix gather on my front porch once again for our annual celebration.

Slyly, I looked over at Jason. From the instigation in his eyes, I knew we had the same idea on our minds. “Race you!” I challenged first.

“Oh, you’re on,” he declared. The two of us dove in, sprinted across the white sandy beach, and up to my front porch to satisfy our empty stomachs. Although I would never admit it, I lost.

That night, a masterpiece of colored lights lit up the sky. The ruminants of firework reflected against the lake while the waters turned into a vibrant pallet of reds, blues, and whites. Jason and I lied on the bow of my Grandpa’s boat pointing up at our favorites.

“Oh, that one’s mine! That’s my favorite,” I called while the willowing firework let out a loud snap and then crackled in descent.

“I call that one,” Jason hollered, pointing up at a magenta firework that burst into several stars before releasing a deafening boom. Another firework fashioning an obscure but colorful shape shot off against the thick, dark backdrop. “Oh, wait, no! I want that one instead”.

Jason changed his mind at least twenty times. Counting his favorites instead of sheep, I slowly fell into a deep slumber, dreaming not of how life could be but of life itself. After all, this life was my fairy tale staged on the beautiful shores of Lake Michigan. Here, humbled by innocence and naivety, I felt like a royal princess and had no reason to wish upon a star for anything more. I believed my heart was fully content, beating to the rhythm of a set of waves crashing on the shore, a spring shower’s pitter patter, a runner’s repetitive stride against the pavement...

I squinted my eyes to make out a mile marker in the distance—mile thirteen. I checked my splits and smiled—two hours in a timely fashion. At the split mark, I veered off into the picturesque town of Cherry Creek and down into Washington Park. The fall colors of amber and gold drifted down from big oaks as the wind picked up. Wooden engraved benches that lined the park’s tiny lake seated spectators, all bundled up in warm attire with a Starbucks at hand. I scanned the crowd in search of a certain familiar face with no luck. Where was he?

A mile later, I happened upon a declining straight. At first, my pace improved as my strike became faster. I tilted my head towards the sky as my arms fell back outstretched. Inhaling a breath of inspiration, my mind entered a euphoric state; my visual senses blurred, and I understood my life as a jigsaw puzzle, and running as the missing piece. My legs were racing, faster and faster, as their turn over’s increased rapidly. At the same time, my mind was racing, faster and faster, yielding itself to the perceptually deceiving state of a running high. But neither my mind nor my strike was racing as fast as my heart, whose steady beat raged in hysteria as if to tell the world that this repetitive action of right foot left foot was God’s sole intention for my existence. With every throb against my chest, the interval between beats hastened dramatically, faster and faster, soon reaching full throttle as an excitation erupted inside of me, like waking up to white on a Christmas morning or falling for a summer love on the shores of Lake Michigan...

“She’s beautiful!” I exclaimed eyeing Jason’s birthday present, a wooden framed sailboat, stained dark and sporting pearly white sails that danced gracefully in the breeze. Jason’s father had made the purchase during their family’s two-year stay in Italy before having her shipped home to Lake Michigan.

“Isn’t she?” Jason smiled proudly, his hand moving smoothly against the Schmitt wooden rimmed steering wheel.

Between the mast and shrouds, the sun’s rays shined down from a clear blue sky warming my skin and partially blinding my vision. I looked towards Jason and smiled. Oh, what Italy can do for boy! Jason’s hair grew dark and curly and his Italian physique was both muscular and tan. He grew into those once elephant ears and replaced those silly glasses with contacts to expose those sea deep blue eyes. He flashed a to-die-for smile back at me, flaunting his perfectly aligned glimmering whites that had replaced years of braces.

As we entered Charlevoix’s harbor, the bow crashed up against waves, misting my rosy red manicured feet that sported my favorite dock shoes. A vintage black trim bikini lay under my yellow sundress while my brown locks took flight as the craft propelled forward. From the boat, I admired the fancy boutiques and outdoor cafes that lined the downtown harbor streets while luxurious yachts passed to and fro under the Ironton Bridge.

“Catch,” Jason hollered, pitching the bowline to me. I quickly knotted the line before allowing Jason to fasten it. From the dock, he extended his hand to me. I took it and leapt off his boat, stumbling into those broad shoulders and strong arms. He laughed, captivating me in his endearing embrace.

“Klutz,” he whispered in my ear.

“Oh, be quite!” I flirted, pushing him away with a teasing smile. Jason and I strolled the waterfront of the archetypal harbor town past the constantly buzzing amphitheatres and up to Mackinac’s Ice Cream Parlor.

“Afternoon Nina!” I chimed as we walked in.

“Hi Sunshine!” Nina called from the back room, not bothering to confirm whom she was addressing—she knew my voice. Nina came around to take our order.

“Oh, and aren’t we looking mighty fine today!” My cheeks flushed a light shade of pink as I smiled. Nina fashioned a strong Boston accent but had a personality of southern charm. Her elderly figure had absorbed too much sunshine after retirement, but her younger spirit was bustling with energy. She looked over at Jason and smiled. “Welcome home dear! It sure looks like Italy treated you well”.

“It did,” Jason laughed, “but I’m glad to be home”. Nina scooped us both a serving of blue moon, mine in a cup, his in a waffle cone, without even requesting our orders. She knew us since before we could even remember and never forgot her customers. She kissed us both on the cheek and told us to return soon. Who was she kidding? We’d be in everyday over our summer.

Jason and I exited through the parlor’s back door to Main Street where tourists flocked the busy town. I exchanged a smile with Jason and knew what he was thinking. Summer tourists would never appreciate the wonders Lake Michigan had to offer—its miraculous sun sets, refreshing swims, and adventurous opportunities—quite like we would as locals.

We ambled down the congested boulevard to the sandy boardwalk while devouring our tasty treat as Jason told stories of Italy. “We spent our weekends sailing the Mediterranean and visited Sicily on occasion. It’s like here, you know, villas lined by stone pathways, rich cuisine, and constant activity, except there’s this expressive cultural characteristic in...”. I lost track of the meaning of his words as I felt something brush up against my palm. He took my hand. His firm grasp began to wrap around my fingers and soon around my heart, which skipped a beat. Italy sounded spectacular—but not as spectacular as walking hand in hand across the beach towards the shoreline with Jason.

Past the Charlevoix train station, the South pier’s Hemingway Lighthouse stood against the mesmerizing sunset, just as it set beyond the horizon, painting a miraculous masterpiece up above with strokes of pink, maroon, and gold. I turned back towards Jason, the boy I once called a best friend but now called so much more, as his deep blue eyes looked into mine. In that instant, I swore they could see so much more, through my eyes and into my mind and heart, searing

through my soul, and unearthing a secret marked by innocence—I had never been kissed. Jason let go of my trembling hand, and brought it up to my cheek, caressing my neck as he tilted his head and leaned towards me. As his lips greeted mine in bewitching slow motion, Fourth of July came in early June, sparks flying and fireworks magnifying the sky. Our hips met as my left foot popped during our movie-scripted bliss. Lost in this moment, I sat on the throne as princess of my fairytale once again, but this time, Prince Charming accompanied me. However, my once upon a time with Jason wouldn't end happily ever after. All fairytales end, and ours would read its final page. As ignorance escaped me, pain and healing would become more than skinned knees and band-aids. Soon, the heart-throbbing, wide-eyed summer love I once knew would run with all its might, like a girl pursuing a marathon, out of time...

My watch beeped, signifying that another hour had passed by. Again, I checked my splits, and, again, rather surprisingly, I made time. I vocalized my accomplishment and a fellow contender running beside me nodded a congratulations. But my success came to a defeating halt as mile marker 19 faded into the distance. And then, so suddenly and without warning, I ran into the greatest fear of all runners—I hit the wall. Whiplash attacked my neck and lactic acid began to feast on my muscles while my mind became prone to hallucinations. Denver's 27-degree icebox chilled me to the bone while Mother nature's shotgun fired bullets down from the sky in the form of rain. My empty stomach growled, a plea to be fed, while my legs crashed against the pavement in a rhythmic fashion. With every stride forward a sensation of terrible pain traveled through my body—scientifically speaking, just lactic build up, but in reality, hell. I could see my legs, but I could no longer feel them. Sensory awareness escaped my abilities, prompting me to touch my shorts, just to make sure they were still on. Good, I'd hate to finish my first marathon naked. But as I continued on my quest through scorching pains, I began to doubt my capability of finishing. My stomach plummeted with every stride, breaking down my stamina and torturing my mental toughness. As I realized that my dream of finishing a

marathon may not come true, my heart broke in two, as if losing a golden lab to old age, a best friend to an enemy, a summer's love to the test of time...

I could barley breathe, because I knew this was it. This was the moment I had rehearsed in the mirror of my lake house bedroom for several days when I should have been enjoying the last week of August on my pink skidoo, tearing up Lake Michigan with Jason.

"So what did you have to tell me," Jason asked, his voice fashioning a somewhat apprehensive tone. I opened my mouth but no words came out. As my handsome, dark haired boyfriend embraced me in his securing arms, I knew I never wanted him to let go. Jason had always been there as a shoulder to cry on, a hand to hold on to, and someone I could always rely on. He was my best friend and so much more. But now our time had come. I knew that if I held on any longer, it would only be harder to say goodbye. I took a deep breath and looked deep into his warm blue eyes, only to get lost in their care, comfort, and love. And to think, he didn't even know my secret—I was moving. I buried my toes deep in the shore's sandy beach and inhaled my last breath as Jason's girlfriend. "Tomorrow, I'm not going to be here," I explained. Jason tilted his head, confused. I reckoned he had no idea where I was going with this. "And I won't be anywhere close. In fact, I'll be over 2000 miles away, somewhere on a lonely desolate mountain in Colorado with no cell phone service. I don't know when I'll be back or if I'll ever be back. But I do know that I'll always be your best friend". His firm grasp broke from my hands momentarily as my words rang in his head. For a moment in time, it seemed as if everything around us stood still, holding its breath, just to see what Jason would do next.

"Distance couldn't stop me from loving you," he murmured, kissing me softly on the forehead.

The next morning, the roar of the plane's jets reminded me that this was the final goodbye to a home I loved so dearly. Memories of Jason made my heart lurch up into my throat, while my stomach sank to a bottomless pit, like a Petoskey stone chucked into Lake Michigan. As the flight attendant gave

instructions, I paid little attention, too preoccupied with my pitiful circumstance. I felt as if a piece of my soul had been stolen, ripped from my flesh, and then thrown to the ground, shattering into a million microscopic fragments. Through the flight's duration, misery overwhelmed me. There was no use in hiding it, because everyone knew, but no use in explaining it, because no one would understand. A tear rolled down my cheek, and elegantly danced down to meet the tray table that lie open in front of me, only to form a small puddle of tragedy. Drip-drop, drip-drop, drip-drop...

I looked up to the sky, whose dark shades of grey grew somber and foreboding. Mother nature's once trickle dramatically transformed into a torrential downpour. God must have been crying for someone, somewhere as the skies opened up and cried with him. A hill appeared in the distance, and every stride prodded a nerve in my legs, releasing piercing pains throughout my body. I closed my eyes and wished for just a chair. I imagined that sitting down would alleviate the pain. I heard a drowning grunt behind me and turned to see my wish granted for another person. But it wasn't the sitting I had imagined. This man was in a race wheelchair, struggling to gain momentum against the hill. When I looked at that man, my catastrophes became so minuet—life imposes struggles to make us stronger, defeating us in battles but enabling us to win our wars to achieve our dreams. Struck by awe, I felt down to touch my legs. This time, not to make sure I still had my shorts on but to thank God for the legs I actually had.

Like a light at the end of the tunnel, I could see a black bold mile marker sporting the number 26 between the falling raindrops. As I ran through streets lined by cheering fans and tall glass buildings, a familiar voice shouted my name. "Go Lauren!" I looked ahead to see that certain face I had been in search of earlier cheering for my arrival. In the distance, I saw the marathon banner draped across the finish line. Sensations of throbbing pain continued to scorch my legs as I sprinted down the final chute.. "And here comes Lauren Grzybowski, the youngest person to ever finish the Denver Marathon!" the announcer exclaimed. As I crossed the finish line, a magnificent sensation overwhelmed my soul,

eventually catching up to my heart and mind. Happiness began to swell up in my throat and I couldn't help but tear up. I looked down at my dark blue mizunos once again and smiled. Today, I achieved my dream of finishing a marathon.

As I admired the accented engravings of blue and white on my finisher's medal, I heard that familiar voice holler my name, "Lauren!" I looked up to seek out the voice. When it called my name again, I struggled through the bustling crowd of runners and their supporters to find it. "Over here," the voice shouted. A feeling of excitement tingled within me as we battled against the mob to approach each other. The steady drizzle transformed into a heavier pour, enhancing the gloomy weather. But I didn't notice the gray skies anymore. The soothing tone of the voice was sunshine enough.

"Jason!" I squealed in excitement, encircling him in a welcoming embrace once he arrived. "I'm so glad you're here!"

"Of course," he responded over the noisy atmosphere, "It's not every day that you get to see your best friend finish a marathon." He grinned. I smiled back, brimming with satisfaction.

The rain continued to pour, matting his dark brown hair against his forehead and blinding his blue eyes. His faded jeans now fashioned a damp hue that almost matched his black North Face jacket. Under the brim of his baseball hat, his eyes met mine. Suddenly, my breath was taken away. It had nothing to do with my 26.2-mile journey, nothing to do with Denver's mile high elevation, nothing to do with achieving my most dreamt of goal, and everything to do with the boy in front of me. A step later, his hands greeted my chilled palms. Instantly, gusts of wind began to bluster causing the crowd to flock to nearby tents. But my heart, already swept away, refused to allow my body to budge. I was steadily affixed on the soothing gaze of the boy in front of me. His company was a rainbow on this overcast day, tranquility during a turbulent windstorm, and relief when my legs were fatigued beyond all means.

"So how does it feel," he asked, nodding towards the trophy I had earned.

“Amazing,” I answered, referring little to my accomplishment and more to his bewitching presence.

The wind continued to blow, and the rain continued to fall, but we stood still, enamored by the serene trance of the other’s gaze. He took my hand and we strolled towards a warm coffee house on Main Street. Over warm lattes, we’d tangle up near a fireplace, catching up on missed time. But in a day, his weekend visit to Denver would end, and he’d travel back to his home, 2000 miles away from mine. I loved my best friend as much as I understood that distance forbade us to be anything more. But, deep down, I knew that somewhere on this intertwining road of life, our paths would cross again. Maybe one day, my mizunos and I would go on a rhythmic stroll around one of Lake Michigan’s coves only to run into a ripped sailor with a tan physique and matching deep blue eyes, once again. And maybe one day my heart would catch up to my stride, racing faster than my strike, once again. And maybe one day I’ll get lost in a captivating, wide-eyed summer’s love on a white sandy shore under a mesmerizing Midwest sunset, once again.

Tarin Smith
Third Place High School Division

Columbia, Missouri

“The Coat of Friendship”

As I stood outside in the bitter January cold, I stuffed my hands in my pockets only to discover my favorite coat - which I had had for three years, 4 months and a few days - now had a gaping hole in the pocket. Sure I guess that would be great if I needed to readjust my shirt without taking off my coat, but other than that it was just letting in a draft, meaning it was officially time to go shopping. As the thought dawned on me that I would have to face yet *another* trip to the dreaded mall I walked to my car and quickly pulled my phone from my purse and desperately scrolled through the contacts looking for some other brave soul to help me on this quest.

A's... let's see, who's in the A's? I thought to myself.

Alex! He would do it! Wait, darn, he's out of town.

Continuing to scroll through the list I skipped all of the B's, and moved to the C's. There were a couple of possibilities that lied within the C's of my contacts; now to narrow it down. Reaching Chelsey's name I pressed the send button. *Ring. Ring. Ring. Hi, this is Chelsey, here's the beep, you know what to do.* Well darn, I figured she must be at work, considering that's the only place she wouldn't answer her phone. Without leaving a voice message I went back to my phone to move on to other possibilities. At the end of my C contacts I stumbled across Christina's name, I guiltily made a mental note to call her, seeing as how I haven't talked to her since I moved away, but I know I probably still won't. Passing all the D's - considering the fact they are all male and I personally refuse to put any of them, besides Alex, who genuinely wouldn't mind, through that - I moved through to the H's where I found Hannah's name. With a small smile spread across my face I gave her a call, as I sat into the semi-comfortable seat of my car.

Heya! You've got the voicemail of Hannah! Leave a message and I may or may not call you back! With the last sentence worded the way it was some might question if Hannah actually cared enough to call them back, but the cheerful tone told you she was a self-realized airhead, and would most definitely call back, if she remembered. For her I actually left a cheerful message back, inwardly chuckling at the fact that she might not even check her messages for two weeks. *Hey Hannah, It's Tee-Rain, I was just calling to see if you wanted to help me pick out a new coat. Seeing as how you're not with your phone at the moment - shocker- I'll just talk to you at school. Love you Boo! Bye.*

As I clicked back to the contacts I realized my options were very quickly dwindling down to the lower half of the girls. I by-passed the ones that I knew

were busy, or at work, or in a different states entirely. As I did this I noticed just how many numbers I never actually called, and had stored for “just in case” purposes. As I thought about using these numbers for a “just in case my coat gets a gaping hole in my pocket and I need someone to go to the mall with me so I don’t have to brave the crazies alone” purpose, I considered how that would be taking advantage of them, and quickly shot down the idea.

With no other options left for a companion for the evening I started the car and decided to do the “courageous” thing and go to the mall, alone. Driving through traffic I created a mental “To Do” list.

- 1.) *Get a coat. (Preferably one of better quality)*
- 2.) *Get gas.*
- 3.) *Buy more guitar picks for Eric.*
- 4.) *Check E-mail.*
- 5.) *Clip Coupons.*
- 6.) *Look for a full time job, or two more part-time ones.*
- 7.) *Buy Hair ties!!!!*
- 8.) *Pay Cell phone bill.*
- 9.) *Call Christina.*

I quickly reorganized the ones of greater importance or immediate need to the head of the list and left the lesser at the bottom half. With a flash of yellow light on my dash, getting gas moved directly to number one, getting the coat only moved to number two and calling Christina stayed at number nine. I turned into the next gas station and started pumping 87 Regular into my car for \$2.39 a gallon. I quickly added a number ten to the list; 10.) *Get Rich.* As I stood there with my drafty coat freezing as I watched my hard earned dollars fade away into nothing, I realized that I really *did* need a new coat...not only was the pocket useless, there were several holes and worn spots on the sleeves as well. With nothing else to do while Break Time filled up the other half of my car, I decided that it was indeed break time and tried to recall why they said spots of my coat were worn. It wasn’t until I looked down at my right sleeve at the missing button, and resulting tear, that it occurred to me just how much me and my coat had been through. That button disappeared forever into the vastness of my car on the day of my first and only accident, courtesy of airbag deployment. After remembering that back-story of my beloved coat and I, I searched its threads for more stories.

The gallon display reached the upper half of eleven gallons, and I started to watch the display a little bit more, but still glanced at my left shoulder where a patch of the wool and cotton blend was worn down to the lining from carrying around my school bag. As I placed the fuel nozzle back into its cradle I realized that not only has this coat been through everything with me, it’s also helped me carry my burdens. As I climbed back into my car and turned the engine over, a light bulb moment hit me; *Wow, this coat has really just acted as an inanimate friend.*

There through it all, and carrying all my burdens. I hate to see it go, but it's just not what it used to be.

I mulled the recent analogy around in my head as I walked into Dillard's heading for the outerwear section. I had thought about possibly going to another store, getting something cheaper, but figured it wasn't worth it. Yeah, coats are tricky like that, if you buy a cheap one, you have to buy three to last you as long as a coat that costs three times as much. You have to put in more, but it's well worth it. As I looked at the price tag to the perfect dreamy red pea coat sticker shock hit me... that was an entire paycheck!!! I wanted this coat though, it was fantastic! With an exaggerated sigh I flipped open my agenda and looked at when I got paid next and how much money I had saved in the clothing section of my budget. Well, I had enough, and semi-begrudgingly took the coat to the cashier, wishing along the way that my trusty coat could have held on for another year. It seemed that this was yet another thing I hadn't really appreciated until it was gone.

I walked out to the car, buckled in, put it in gear and continued home. The radio was on but I wasn't paying much attention to it, I was thinking more on the analogy of my coat being like a friend.

The coat had a slightly steep price with it; the actual cost, the effort it took to come get it, and the time I spent looking for it. A friendship had the same types of costs; maybe a sacrifice of pride to talk to the other person for the very first time, the effort it takes to stay in contact, the time it takes you to do those "little things" that really matter.

That wasn't where the likeness ended though.

How do you decide what coat you wear a particular day? Well, it depends on your outfit, the weather, your activities, and things like whether you need pockets or not. How do you decide which friend to be around any given day? It depends on your mood, whether or not you need someone to make you happy, or mellow you out, if you're going a particular place, who would like to join you and other similar reasons.

The thoughts kept coming as I pulled in the driveway.

How do you decide when to get a new coat? The one you're with is starting to become worn down, there are holes in the fabric, buttons are missing, the zipper is forever jammed at the half way up point, or maybe it's just not warm enough.

Well, when would you decide to get new friends? You've worn your friends' patience down a little thin, there's little holes in your relationship from fights that you never completely mended, special inside jokes have been forgotten, and maybe you just need someone to help you differently than this specific friend could.

As I walked into my bedroom and had been thinking over these things I couldn't bear to part with my old coat. I neatly folded it and placed it on the shelf way up high, hoping one day I'd be able to fix it, or maybe wear it as is. I came to

a realization in the moment the scratchy blend of fabric touched the wood; this is exactly what I had done with some of my friendships; placed them on a shelf until I had more time to “deal with it” and just prayed that it’d be there the day I went searching for it. Let’s face it though, I believe in the closet gremlins that steal things away in the middle of the night so you can never find what you want when you want it; I would have to assume friendships have to be like that too, if you don’t keep a watchful eye out for them, they disappear. Maybe if you’re lucky, a friend will come over and lay the coat out for you, acting as a catalyst to get you to fix it, and if you’re *really* lucky, maybe that will happen in regards to your friendships.

It was then that I had my second major light bulb moment of the day. I sat down on my bed, pulled out my phone, flipped through the contacts and hit send.

Ring. Ring .Ring. Ring.

Hello?

Christina? It's Tarin.

Kristen Shim
First Place Middle School Division

San Diego, California

Friendship

No! It's not possible! It must be a mistake! They are not capable of doing something like that!

My heart was torn by doubt and fear for my friends. I stared across the school campus, and I could see the two girls discussing their decision fiercely, their minds unaware of the surrounding crowd of people. They held a piece of paper. Around them, their friends swarmed like thirsty animals around a water hole.

"Kelly had math second period and Katie will have math sixth period," my friend Becky told me, still chewing her sandwich. "So, Katie will be able to cheat."

Cheat. They would never. This was Kelly and Katie we are talking about, the twins you could always find in the library, studying. They were the type of people who freaked out if they did not get a 100% on their tests. Cheating was more than unimaginable.

"Kelly copied the hardest questions on the test so Katie could see them," Becky continued indifferently, her eyes looking at them with a burning coldness. Becky was the

kind of girl who could not condone anything less than perfect.

Look at them, a voice inside me crowed. They were desperate. After all, they're identical twins. When one asks the other for help, how could she say no? Remember when you were so desperate that you almost cheated on a test? Besides, the voice continued, if you were in their place, you would have done the same.

No, I wouldn't have, I told myself defiantly. But inside, a seed of doubt had already taken root in my conscience. No, I told myself again, but nothing changed. I had lost confidence in my character. Maybe I would have cheated if I had been as desperate as Katie had been, a nagging voice whispered.

Suddenly, a quote came to mind, it having been hammered into my brain by my justice-obsessed English teacher. John D. MacDonald had once said, "Integrity is not a conditional word. It doesn't blow in the wind or change with the weather. It is your inner image of yourself, and if you look in there and see a man who won't cheat, then you know he never will."

No matter what the twins had gone through, no matter how desperate they had been at the time, nothing justifies what they will do. We, their friends, knew that. Someone had to turn them in.

Yet, as I stared at them, I recalled the sound of their voices as I had heard it so many times before. My mind reached deep into the chambers and crevices of my memory and retrieved the sound of their laughter. I remembered the time both Kelly and Katie had comforted me when I had been in my darkest despair. They had done so much for me. From making me laugh to keeping me from panicking, they had been busy all of last year.

Maybe it's not your place to tell on them, something in me said. What if it gets on their permanent record? Colleges will reject them after all of their hard work simply because they had cheated once on a math test. If you were their true friend, you would not do this.

No, my conscience spoke fiercely and with a stubbornness that shocked me. The voice was determined and unquestionable, a commanding forte among a throng of hesitant pianos. It needs to be stopped. You are the best person to do it, because you are a friend. A true, honest, unshakeable friend stops others when they do something wrong. They love their friend enough to risk the friendship all to save the person. If you do it, you are doing it for their good.

I began to walk slowly, almost dreamlike, toward the math teacher's classroom. Mentally, I prepared myself. The words formed in my mind and arrived on the tip of my

tongue, loaded with the gravity of what I was about to do.

Right before I opened the door, I paused, my hand on the handle. The memories rushed at me, attacking me and accusing me for doing this, for turning in my own friends. For a second, a sliver of doubt slipped into my heart, and then I opened the door.

Ms. Peters looked up as I entered the classroom. After all, very few people visited their teachers during lunch.

It was silent, a cold silence that defined a change in your life. It was the kind of moment where one could look back and say "that was then" and "this is now." There would be a "before" and "after," but what really mattered was what happened in between.

Before I could help myself I remembered that one day Kelly had asked me to keep a secret for her.

"Do you promise?" she had said, her eyes shining with the excitement that comes when two people become the closest of friends.

"Of course," I had responded slightly offended that she wouldn't trust me with her secret.

"I'm afraid...of not making it. Everyone expects so much of me all the time. I'm afraid I won't make it to that

college or to that graduate school. Most of all, I'm afraid for my sister. Sometimes, she would do anything to get what she wants, but it isn't always the right thing to do, you know what I mean?" Kelly started in a rush, her face flushed and her eyes cautious. "I want her to be successful and I am willing to help her for it, but I wish she understood that life isn't all about that "A+" or that scholarship. There's more to it," Kelly continued, almost whispering. "She deserves more than that."

"Yes?" Ms. Peters asked me, interrupting me from my thoughts. By then, my eyes were watering and my hands were shaking uncontrollably.

I can't do this! I can't do this to Kelly! She loves her sister so much! How could I break their trust in me? How could I look at them in the face after turning them in?

No. I must. They deserve better than that.

I closed my eyes, and stilled my hands until I could breathe calmly. My heart knew this was the right thing to do, but something almost prevented me from speaking that day. It was fear. Fear of losing two friends of which the like I had never met. Fear of suddenly finding myself losing the respect I had so laboriously earned. Most of all, I feared my own conscience. How could I live with myself knowing I had turned in my best friends? And at the same time, how could I live with myself if I didn't? It was

a gut-wrenching, terrifying fear. The same fear Susan B. Anthony felt when she spoke out for woman's rights. The fear that Martin Luther King Jr. must have felt when he stood up against segregation. It was the same fear that kept people from speaking out, from changing what they knew in their hearts, was wrong.

I readied myself for what I was about to do. Composed, I looked up at the math teacher and told her calmly, without hesitation.

As I left the room, I could see Kelly and Katie's faces clearly in my mind. I couldn't bear to imagine what they would think of me then.

After school I quickly ran to my locker to get my books before leaving.

There was a piece of paper there waiting for me, slipped in through the vents of the locker.

Staring, I unfolded it quickly to find words written in a barely readable scrawl.

Thanks so much.

-Kelly

Sarah Gabriel
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Crisis
Danger Opportunity

How did this happen. How did this happen.

Saika sat fumbling a lone pencil eraser in her hands, which were shaking uncontrollably. She couldn't hide her pain, no matter how hard she tried. She had never been like this before, for as long as I had known her, and that scared me.

The tiny office room seemed too silent to be real; this was a dream, all of it. The perfect quiet was shattered by the squeaking of a door hinge, and Mr. Chiba entered.

"Come on Saika, we need to be home, your Bachan and Ojichan will be at the house soon." Saika and I stood up quietly and I walked her to her dad, who had tears in his eyes.

"Thanks Mai," he said, as they left and Mrs. Hedrick entered.

"You should go back to class now," she said quietly with concern in her voice. I followed without saying anything. I didn't think I could speak just yet.

The house was quiet as it was every day, but something about this painful quiet hurt me. It broke up the few bits of sanity I had left and the shards threatened to tear me apart. The silence was going to rip me up from the inside. Suddenly panicky, I jumped up and tossed the first object I could find to the floor- anything to make some noise. A deafening crash filled the room.

I dropped my eyes to the floor to find a picture of my mom and I, the wood frame badly cracked, the glass scattered across the rug and the picture ripped right where my mom should be. I picked up the photograph carefully and dropped onto the couch as my eyes burned. This must be how Saika felt, I thought to myself through my tears, except the broken photo was coming true for her.

My mom opened the door to the flat as I finished my last math problem. My eyes were dry by now, but my mom could still see that something was amiss.

"H-How was work," I said louder than I probably should have. My mom looked at me with confusion and a hint of concern.

"Good," she replied warily and came and sat down on the couch next to me.

"Something wrong?" she said quietly.

"Yeah," I whispered as brand new tears welled up in my eyes. "Saika's mom..." my voice trailed off and I fell into my mom's arms.

"What happened," said my mom comfortingly as she rubbed my shoulder.

"Saika's mom died today!" I sobbed. It was very quiet for a long time, and I felt like I wanted to be far away and someone else. I didn't want to deal with any of this, I just wanted to be back to last summer, when everything was perfect and the sun was warm.

"Everything will be okay," my mom reassured me, "You'll get through this."

The phone rang and my mom went to get it as I pulled myself together. I knew who was calling.

“Yes, Mai told me. I’m so sorry,” my mom said quietly into the receiver. There was a pause as Mr. Chiba said something. “Okay, just let me know if there’s anything I can help you with.” Pause. “Alright...” Pause. “Okay, goodbye.” She hung up the phone and hugged me again as I cried. How could this happen?

I couldn’t even fake concentration the next day at school, and maybe that’s why none of the teachers called on me. I stared at Saika’s empty seat until the bell rang, and then thought about Mrs. Chiba through the rest of the day. I cried a lot in between classes, and didn’t know how I was going to be able to function.

Writing was no different from any of my other classes. I stared at the wall for the majority of the class, and only in the last minutes did I find the strength to look up. Mrs. Holiday had a new poster up on the wall.

The Japanese character for ‘crisis’, contains the character for ‘opportunity’. A crisis is an opportunity to change your life for the better. Think positive!

I stared at that poster and read it over and over. I couldn’t get over the irony that Mrs. Holiday had put up that particular poster the day after my personal crisis. I don’t believe in coincidences.

The bell rang and I rushed clumsily to gather all of my books and get out the door to beat the rush. I contemplated for the first time my role in this mess. I realized that I need to stop moping so selfishly. I needed to be helping Saika so that was what I was planning to do.

I walked the short San Francisco blocks up and down, and then left, right, left until I came to our street- Saika’s and mine. A couple of extra cars sat in the parking lot of our apartment building and I had a feeling they were those of Saika’s relatives come to comfort the Chiba family in their time of need.

I walked the stairs to the fifth floor and took a deep breath as I walked halfway down the hallway to room 5-21. I raised my fist to knock on the door when I heard voices from inside. I recognized the sound of Saika crying, and decided this probably wasn’t the best time for a visit.

Sadly, I dragged my feet to the end of the hallway and slowly took the staircase up one more floor and around the corner to room 6-01 for a night of pain and contemplation.

I needed to talk to Saika. She wasn’t at school the next day, but that was a given. After another boring day of monotony, I again stood before Saika’s door, but this time I knocked quietly. There was a long silence and I began to wonder if anyone was home.

Saika suddenly opened the door. She looked okay, not crying- a good thing- but something wasn’t quite back to normal with her. I’ve heard having your heart ripped out will do that to you.

“Hi, Mai,” she said quietly; her voice sounded wrong too.

“Hey, are you okay?” She looked at the floor.

“No,” she smiled and I couldn’t hide my surprise. How in the world could she bring herself to smile?

“Anything I can do to help?” I asked after I had recovered.

“Not right now, I think my dad and I just need some time, you know? Thanks for the offer though,” she said as she looked down at the floor again.

“Alright, just let me know, okay?”

“Sure.”

“Bye.”

“See you soon.”

As I walked back to my room, I analyzed each part of our brief conversation. We had been like complete strangers. What was going on?

My mom got home from work at the normal time.

“How is everything?” she said as she sat down and turned on the TV.

“Not great.” I talked to her about Saika and our strange little conversation.

“Just give her time, Sweetie. Her life is hard right now.”

Her life is hard right now. That played through my mind as I tried unsuccessfully to sleep that night. Her life is hard, so why won't she let me help her?

Saika was, surprisingly, at school the next day, but we didn't talk much. There were barely a few words shared between us. That stung me more than a little bit. Saika and I were the very best of friends. We talked everyday and shared everything with each other. The fact that Saika had seemingly deserted me made the world look cold.

I watched Saika from afar until I gathered the strength to talk to her. There were no accusations when I did.

“You haven't been talking at all. Are you okay?” I asked as I tried to get her to look me in the eyes, though she wouldn't. She just stared at the ground.

“Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks.” And she just walked away, leaving me with only my wet eyes and just me to wipe them away, which hurt even more than her silence had.

Mrs. Chiba's funeral was on a sunny day, though a fall chill dug itself deep into my skin, and the wind whipped the end of my skirt around my knees. I looked into the sky and felt like yelling at the clouds for looking so fluffy and nice on such a sad day.

The sermon was long and filled to the brink with the tears of us attending the ceremony. I looked hard at her beautiful casket, memorizing every detail before it would be sunk into the earth for no one to ever see again. The black wood seemed to match the dank aura that surrounded our little party.

I sat next to Saika, whose eyes were the only empty ones throughout the ceremony. It wasn't until her younger brother stood at the pedestal and spoke that tears came to her eyes.

“My mother was the best person ever,” Ryuu started. I stared at him with awe as he talked and talked. When he spoke this way it was hard to believe he was only seven.

“I loved my mommy very much. I'm very sad she's dead now.” His brief ending shook us all to the core. There is nothing like the voice of a child to break a façade to pieces.

Saika began to sob, and I gave her a great big hug as she cried, and then in that moment I knew things were going to go up from here. “It's going to be okay,” I whispered quietly, and I believed it. Saika sat up a little straighter, looked into my eyes and whispered,

“Thank you, Mai.”

Fall passed, and Spring passed, and Summer came. The roses bloomed in our school garden and Saika and I rode our bikes to the neighborhood pool and the park. We laughed in the sun as we had last summer. This was the place that I wanted to be- right here this summer until the end of time with my best friend in the entire world. This was the way things should be.

Maddie Douglas
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Leawood, Kansas

Garden of Stars

From the very first moment of my life, I knew who my best friend was. Not my workaholic mother, who immediately made a 3-hour conference call within minutes of my birth. Certainly not my coach potato father, who escaped from the hospital during the birthing process so he wouldn't miss the season finale of his favorite show, *Chuck*. Definitely not my older sister, Claire, who pitched a fit so unbearable that the doctors nearly damaged my brain shortly after I took my very first breath. My best friend and closest family member was the one who took my newborn body into her arms when my mom was making her phone call; the one who sang me to sleep when my sister rampaged the entire hospital. My Grandma Rose will always be my best friend, no matter what the stars of life have to say about it. They're just stars, after all.

Rose has witnessed every accomplishment I've made and every milestone I've survived. She heard me speak my first word, "Rose," while my parents were both carefully absorbed in other not-so-important activities. She helped me take my first steps and watched as I continued across the kitchen floor to fetch my binky without her hands for support. Rose was with me when I broke my first bone, courtesy of a grouchy 6-year-old Claire shoving my delicate 4-year-old body down the deep staircase. She even took me shopping for new clothes to match my green cast on the way home from the hospital. My Rose celebrated Christmas with me year after year, being especially generous whenever my sister received gifts from my parents and I did not. She did not leave my side for five whole years, except at night when she returned to her house three blocks away. I later calculated how many days were included in five years' time. For the first 1,826 nights of my life, I cried myself to sleep.

I specifically remember my first day of kindergarten at Peach Tree Elementary School in Chicago. The very name of the school made me queasy, and I practically begged my Rose to let me skip education. She'd already taught me how to read and write, two areas in which Claire struggled. Secretly, I took great pride in being smarter than Claire, but I wasn't going to let satisfaction sway me from my hatred of leaving Rose for school. We argued for a long time, until I finally gave into her judgment of what was best for me. After all, she was the only person whom I could trust to care what was best for me. (The only reason my parent even bought food anymore was so their "Darling Clair-Bear" didn't starve to death, though how they could image that I had no clue. Claire's idea of a three-meal day included six meals of donuts and Diet Coke, leaving me with nothing to eat but leftover Spaghettios and the unlikely chance of finding a pear. I often ate lunch at Rose's place.) I finally surrendered to Rose's verdict, and she kindly escorted my trembling body to the fiery pits of Peach Tree Elementary.

Naturally, I had enemies at school from the very first step I took into the kindergarten classroom. Rose embraced and encouraged me outside of the door before she betrayed me by turning in the other direction. Sulking, I had barely stepped through

the door when my shoelace got caught in the hinges and I was catapulted into the easel beside the doorframe, taking down two students with me as I fell onto the tiled floor. One of the kids, Jason, turned around and threw his fist neatly into the crevice underneath my jaw, leaving a throbbing bruise the size of a golf ball on the left side of my chin. The other child, Marisa, began wailing so noisily that I was warily reminded of Claire when she once dropped her favorite Barbie doll in the upstairs toilet. My teacher, Ms. Krandall, happened to turn around and witness the destruction just as I hastily jumped to my feet, accidentally breaking Jason's nose in the process. The rest of the day went more smoothly, probably because it was spent sitting on a stool staring at a crack in the wall in the "no-no" corner. I've never liked school.

Outside of purgatory, I spent most of my time reading books at Rose's apartment or curiously watching her sing to herself as she worked outside in the garden. When I was seven years old, she eventually began asking for my help. Although I always enjoyed any chance to be more like Rose, I was also vaguely aware of the fact that her energy was leaving her a little bit more every day. Her muscles seemed to become sorer every hour. She was getting old. I watched as she skillfully demonstrated how to neatly rake the soil, how to gently plant the seeds and how to water the flowers with care. One Friday night when I had the rare privilege of staying the night at Rose's place, she took my hand and pulled me down to sit on the swinging bench on her roomy front porch. We sat there for a while, enjoying the cool night air and gazing soundlessly at the bright stars. She eventually spoke, surprising me a bit as her soft voice broke through the silent evening atmosphere.

"Now Lydia," she began. "Look at how all of the flowers compliment the house so nicely." I looked. "What would those flowers look like if we hadn't cared for them so -- if we just worked all day without a thought, or sat inside while they withered and suffered? Would the house look as lovely as it does?"

She waited, so I softly answered, "No ma'am. But Rose, why do you care so much about the pretty flowers? Why do you love them?" She looked down at me thoughtfully and smiled.

"I love those flowers for the same reason I love you, Lydia. Those flowers don't hurt anyone; they do their best to make the world a better place. Just having them around makes people happier, though they are so neglected around the world."

Her smile had been replaced by a grimace, her tone more serious. "Everything in this world needs to be cared for, Lyd -- whether or not it's alive. The horrible truth is, not everything is loved and taken care of. Everything needs nourishment and attention, though some things never receive either."

I sat still, bewildered and impressed. She didn't speak for quite some time, so I stared up at the stars once more. As I watched the sky, a shooting star flickered by, and a thought occurred to me. "Rose?" I asked tentatively. She gazed down at me in response. "Rose, who takes care of the stars?"

My question seemed to take her off guard, though her gentle, calm expression did not alter. "You do, baby," she murmured tenderly. "You care for the stars because you take care of the world. You care for the people around you, even if they don't feel the same." She tilted her chin down knowingly. "You understand?"

I nodded wordlessly. She sighed and explained.

“Lydia, in my eyes, stars aren’t just balls of light and gas. I believe each star is its own constellation. A constellation is a picture the stars make, baby. I believe when people die, their souls become pictures in the stars. When you look at the stars, you can see people for what they truly are.”

At this point, I had already begun searching the sky, looking for people’s souls. My vision was becoming blurry, though, as tears obscured my view. “Rose?” I asked again. “Someday, will you be a con-ster-lu-tion?” The idea had just dawned on me, and it overwhelmed me completely. Slowly, she turned around and stared deep into my eyes. I could see her eyes beginning to prick as well, as a tear trickled down my cheek.

“Constellation, Lydia,” she corrected me carefully. “And yes,” she continued, “I will be my own star.” Then, with a halfhearted grin, she added, “I suppose you’ll have to take care of my someday.”

I leaned into her, and for an endless time, I silently contemplated the concept of “someday.” Someday came far too soon.

I was twelve years old when it happened. I had just begun attending junior high, a place that made Peach Tree Elementary School seem like heaven and angels in comparison. Despite my apparent dislike of school, my grades never faltered from an A average. Rose was always proud of me, even when I missed an assignment or two. She was seventy-five, not especially old for being a grandmother of a seventh grader. It was her heart that did it.

I woke up one morning and skipped to Rose’s house in an abnormally cheerful mood. I was so excited to tell her about my graded tests, and I assumed we could talk about it over my favorite breakfast, blueberry muffins. Usually, I could smell her cooking all the way down the street from her house. Galloping down her road, I sniffed the air to check the breakfast menu. Nothing. I stopped when I got to her front yard and took another whiff. Nothing. It wasn’t the lack of smell that made my stomach do a flip, but the lack of personality outside of her house. Her entire land normally emanated life and cheer. Not today.

The feeling of emptiness finally took me over, and I was running. I sprinted to her front door, harshly throwing it open in my attempt to see her as soon as possible. I found her, sitting in a rocking chair, her book fallen on the floor behind her. Aside from the book, she looked exactly how I had left her the night before.

I walked swiftly to her side, shaking her softly. “Rose...wake up.” Her eyes stayed closed. I shook her again, harder now. “Rose, please. Rose! *Wake up!*”

My hand dropped lifelessly to my side. My brain deflated, and all at once my body went numb. Subconsciously, I’d already known she wasn’t waking up. Helplessly, I stepped stiffly away from her cold form. I automatically picked up the phone to call for help, but stopped abruptly. Who could I call? I thought back to a time when Rose informed me about safety, and my frozen fingers slowly dialed the three digits. A kind of voice picked up, exuding authority and calm at the same time. I vaguely remember her asking for the emergency, though it barely registered in my friend brain. The last thing I remember was my crackling voice squeaking, “Help.” Then my world went black.

I woke up in the hospital, momentarily forgetting the situation. Too soon, though, the memories flooded in. The doctor once again explained to me the horrible news I already knew. Although the information was clear, I don’t think it had made an impact

on my brain yet. My soul was still numb, and every kind word spoken to me simply went in one ear and out the other. Everything I did was mechanical, every action automatic.

The funeral took place the next day; I didn't cry. The tears I longed to shed were locked up inside me, surrounded by emptiness and what now felt like an anesthetic in my heart. The only feeling I felt the whole ceremony was an anger that brutally flared inside me at my family. My mom left during the funeral service to take a phone call. When we reached the reception restaurant, my sister practically swallowed the entire buffet table. As for my dad, he didn't even *show up*. Apparently, there were some important reruns to attend to at home. Finally, mercy arrived, and the longest day of my existence came to its bitter end.

About a week later, my parents received the will. My mom accepted it inattentively, not even reading the important print. Claire's greed took hold of her and she snatched the will from my mom to read her inheritance, excitement blazing on her face. I painfully fought the urge to either throw up on her new blouse or sock her so hard she'd be colorblind. Her enthusiasm faded and her face took on an expression similar to that of a pit bull. Her flat gray eyes bored into my own eyes, glaring repulsively. She then proceeded to throw the paper to the ground, stomp on it, and run in the opposite direction. I rolled my eyes at her dramatic exit, carefully, picking up the paper and smoothing out the new creases. My eyes, taking in the content of the page, suddenly bulged wide. Rose had given me *everything*. The paper slipped from my icy fingers, gracefully drifting to a halt on the kitchen floor. My mind was overwhelmed, abruptly plagued with confusion and disorientation. Her jewelry, her house, her garden...all of it belonged to me. I couldn't bear it.

I looked out the window to distract myself from my deteriorating life and I saw the stars. They were winking at me, encouraging me to take hold of my life and turn things around for the better. I looked away harshly, disgusted. What did they know? They were just stars, after all.

Though my tragic life continued, the feeling of numbness didn't fade. My behavior changed, as well as my grade point average. I no longer tried to do well in school and lost all motivation. I ditched classes regularly and took drugs on occasion. Naturally, my parent didn't notice, nor would they have cared if they did. I had no friends, and certainly no love interests. My life was wrong, a flaw in the happy chain of society. At that point, I really didn't care.

It wasn't until tenth grade that my life changed. We were going on a surprise field trip, one I was miraculously allowed to attend. I sat alone on the bus while the rest of my chirpy biology classmates tittered about field trip locations. The place didn't matter to me, I just wanted to escape town for awhile.

I drowned in my negative thoughts for a bit until the bus finally came to a stop. I strolled out into the fresh air, a sensation I hadn't felt in months. A certain fragrance was perfuming the air, one that tickled my nose and played with my memory. I started walking again, hoping to find the source of the smell and cure my curiosity. After about ten more feet, I stopped abruptly. *Oh*. Now I understood the smell and the reason for my abnormally fast heart rate. The aroma was flowers, an odor filled with traces of lilac, tiger lily, lavender, orange blossom, roses...I had smelled them before.

I walked through a large iron gate between two long concrete walls and confirmed my suspicions. This place was a garden, I now had no doubt. The first hints of feeling

were beginning to leak through my long-dormant heart. I restrained them callously, not willing to show any signs of emotion in public. I knew what I had to do.

I ran from the bus, but not to my normal destination. I sprinted for three blocks until I stood at the front door of her house. I pulled the familiar key from my jacket pocket, and bravely marched into my empty home. I cherished the familiarity, feeling the hope and happiness finally saturate my veins once more. It was then that I noticed the small envelope sitting on the very rocking chair that had ruined my entire life. I opened it carefully, not sure what to expect. It read:

Dearest Lydia,

The state in which you are reading this must not be positive, considering the time this note was to be delivered to you. For that I apologize, because I have known my time was coming for quite awhile now. I didn't want to waste any of my time with you, so I kept my health conditions a secret. Your life is in your hands, Lydia, and I know you can turn it around without my help. Remember that I love you forever. If you need me, I'll be in the stars. Take care of me there, and take care of yourself.

*Love,
Grandma Rose*

The tears I had worked so hard to conceal spilled freely now. All of the numbness surrounding me was gone, replaced by an overwhelming amount of emotion. I sat in her chair for hours on end, drowning in the tears that consumed me at last. The memories flooded my mind, finally awakening my brain from its endless reverie. After awhile, I dried my weary eyes and composed myself enough to check the damage outside.

There was no trace of life ever existing in the bare wasteland the garden had become. My heart sank in despair as I realized this monstrosity was my fault, my burden. A burst of intuition suddenly enveloped me, and I knew what I would do. I would gain control over my sorrowful life, and I would turn it around. I would replant the garden that made life a better place to be. I would take care of the stars. With a smile, I realized that by caring for it myself, I was caring for the stars.

I began to walk away when a flicker of color caught my eye from the desert garden. I bent down and examined the bright red rose; it was bursting with life and exuding personality from every angle. I grinned and looked up at the starry sky, wondering how one could possibly doubt the power of love when it came right down to it. I walked home in the dark, smiling grandly the entire way. I gazed at the garden of stars in admiration, and I knew why I felt so protected that night. After all, they're more than just stars. They're life.

Erin Roehr
Second Place Elementary School Division

Plains, Kansas

Once a long time ago there was an old farm. The farm had dry, dusty equipment. It had cats, dogs, horses, cows, and chickens. One day there was a new white, feathery chicken named Neah in town, but she wouldn't be staying long because she always had to move because of her job. There was no place to stay in that little town but the farm. It was so torn down that she just moaned when she had to move in. When she stepped into the barn where her new home was she felt a little itchy. "Why do I feel so itchy?" said a very freaked out Neah. "It's probably the chicken pox," said another chicken in the corner. "What is the chicken pox?" wondered Neah. "Why, don't you know, that when you get red spots all over your body and you itch a lot they are called chicken pox," Amanda said sarcastically. "Just in case you don't know me, my name is Amanda," she said in a sneaky voice. "Well hello," said Neah shivering a little bit. "Oh and I think you have the chicken pox," said Amanda happily, as if she knows everything. "WHAT! OH NO! CALL 911! CALL 911!" screamed Neah. "Calm down," said Amanda, "you just have to lie in bed and stay there. Ok. While you are doing that, I am going shopping." "Ok" said Neah. "Ha Ha...and the trap is set," Amanda thought quietly. Just then Horse walked in to get a drink and he saw Neah lying in bed. "Why, are you already sick?" wondered Horse. "Yes,

and I cannot believe it,” said Neah. “Why let me make some of my famous, wonderful hay soup to make you feel better,” suggested Horse. Out the door he went before anybody could say anything. Soon he was back with some more friends. “I hope you don’t mind but I told all of them that you got sick and they decided that they wanted to make you something,” explained Horse. “Here is your hay soup,” said Horse. “And I made you some apple-cider water,” said Sheep. Soon all the animals that came gave Neah something. “Wow! This looks great, but I cannot accept this,” Neah sighed. “Go ahead and try it,” said Horse. “Wow, this taste very good and thank you for making this for me. You really did a good job,” said Neah. Just then Amanda got back from her shopping and she saw everyone in the farm gathered around Neah. She dropped her bags and yelled “STOP HELPING HER!” Everyone turned around and looked at her curiously and said “why.” “Because you all should be laughing at her right now,” exclaimed Amanda. “Now why would we do that?” asked Horse. “Because it is a tradition, don’t you see the sign carved into the wall over there. It says... You must laugh at the people who get sick because of the people who laughed at me! written by Willy the Cow,” said Amanda. “I have been here ever since this farm was built so don’t you see I put red dust on the ground to pretend she had the chicken pox so all of you would laugh at her,” Amanda shouted. “Well you don’t see us laughing at her,” said Horse. Amanda was so mad that she ran out of the barn and ran into a stack of hay and it fell on her.

Everybody just laughed. “So I guess I don’t have the chicken pox after all. But that doesn’t matter, what matters is you guys helped me get better,” said Neah. “Yes, we sure did. And by the way, get a hammer and nails everybody. We are going to cover the sign with wood,” said Horse. So they did and the farm was just the way it should be from now on.

Caitlin Martin
Third Place Elementary School Division

Bellevue, Nebraska

Franny the Frog

Once upon a time, there was a frog named Franny. Franny lived in a forest that was located in Montana. Franny did not have any friends. She was very lonely. One day she was searching for dinner when she spotted an ant on a leaf. She leaned forward and was ready to eat it.

Then the ant shouted "STOP!"

Franny leaned back and was confused. She never knew ants could talk.

Then the ant said "Please don't eat me. I have to bring food home to my family. If I don't they will starve!"

Franny said, "I am sorry. But I need some food, too."

"Have you ever tried a zucchini?" asked the ant.

Franny felt sick by the thought then said, "I could try it. By the way I would like to use your name before I go on a journey with you."

"My name is Annie. Yours?"

"Franny, Franny the frog."

They traveled far and wide searching for the zucchini. They finally got there and huffed and puffed, they were really tired. They enjoyed the juicy zucchini for a long time.

Then Annie said "Do you have any friends?"

Franny looked up and said "No sadly I do not. I am just a lonely old frog."

Annie said "Well neither do I, I don't even have a family. You are the first person I have ever talked to. I moved away from my colony because I felt left out."

Franny excitedly said, "That is why I moved away from home. We are so much alike."

"Will you be my BFF, Franny?"

"Yes I will, Annie! I am so excited to finally have a friend!"

Franny and Annie ate the rest of their zucchini and were off. Annie packed up her stuff and she lived with Franny in the old hallowed out tree. They had spitting contests, snail races, and bark eating contests. They did that every day and never got bored because they were doing it as friends. They always went to the zucchini farm every Saturday to get their week's supply. And, every Sunday they had their annual gardening meeting. The whole neighborhood joined in the club and the whole neighborhood became friends. They lived together forever.