



**St. Louis Symphony
Orchestra**

Stéphane Denève : Music Director

We are the squeak
of the clarinet,
Hidden by the
drums loud thud

express the music 2023

A place around silence
Exploded with noise
In a moment,
The only hope
The only safety
The only life
Was destroyed

inspire *creativity*

2023 COMPETITION WINNERS

Poetry and Prose

inspired by "The Great Gate of Kiev"
from Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*
(orchestrated by Maurice Ravel)

SLSO education programs are presented by



Presented by

**St. Louis Symphony
Volunteer Association**



Proud Corporate Member





Express the Music 2023

Express the Music has sparked students' creativity and ignited their imaginations since the program was established by the St. Louis Symphony Volunteer Association (SVA) in 1998. In its 26th season, Express the Music invited students in grades 6-12 to discover "The Great Gate of Kiev" from Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (orchestrated by Maurice Ravel) and respond with poetry and prose influenced by the music. More than 7,000 students from 45 schools in Missouri, Illinois, and Arizona participated, resulting in the submission of 585 works of creative writing.

Poetry and prose entries were reviewed separately using a multi-judge blind process: no school or student identifiers appeared on the documents seen by the judges. Volunteers from the SVA served as preliminary judges, reviewing entries according to standard rubrics in prose and poetry. 31 finalists from the Junior Division (grades 6-8) and 19 finalists from the Senior Division (grades 9-12) advanced to the next round. Two panels of experts, one in poetry and another in prose, judged the finalists' compositions on creativity and excellence in writing in response to the musical selection. Their scores determined the first, second, and third place winners in each division. Finalists were celebrated at the Express the Music awards ceremony at Powell Hall on Sunday, March 19, 2023, during a St. Louis Symphony Youth Orchestra performance and are posted in a digital book at slo.org/express.

In 2002, Express the Music was awarded the Sally B. Parker Gold Ribbon Award for Education from the Volunteer Council of the League of American Orchestras. This cross-curricular writing competition has made the vibrant colors of orchestral music accessible to tens of thousands of students. The St. Louis Symphony Orchestra provides educational programming like Express the Music for teachers and students as part of its long-standing commitment to supporting music in our schools and educators doing this important work. Together we can inspire students to become and remain involved in music.

Congratulations to all the finalists whose compositions are included in this book. May you always keep music in your life!

Symphony Volunteer Association

Kent McNeil

President

Symphony Volunteer Association

Debbie Dillon

Vice President, Education

Symphony Volunteer Association

Lynda Lieberman

Chair, Express the Music

Connie Wepfer

Vice Chair, Express the Music

Laura Dwyer

Associate Director, SLSO Volunteer Programs

EXPRESS THE MUSIC COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Diane Ashburner	Susan Hoffman	Glenna Schindler
Elizabeth Auffenberg	Jeff Kaplan	Sam Scriba
Becky Brown	Patty Kaplan	Frankie Skinner
Cathleen Callahan	Margaret Lahrman	Kathryn Snodgrass
Cathy Converse	Laura Sienaski Lancia	Linda Solla
Kimberly Cooper	Karen Levine	Jamie Spencer
Abigail Coursey	Lynda Lieberman	Barbara Sprick
Bev Cox	Meghan Mathison	Odile Tompkins
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Eileen Gmerek	Mary Parks	Sharon Voss
Liz Halpin	Janet Preston	Cecelia Webber
Beth Herreid	Dave Propper	Connie Wepfer
Norman Hertel	Sue Propper	Marcia Whitson
Paula Hertel	David Quigley	Denise Wilson
	Jean Saunders	

Founded in 1923, the Symphony Volunteer Association supports the SLSO through philanthropic projects and educational programs.

Get involved! Visit slo.org/volunteer

Acknowledgments

Our Sponsor We wish to express sincere gratitude to the Employees Community Fund of Boeing St. Louis (ECF) for continued sponsorship of Express the Music. The ECF of Boeing is a unique employee giving program that allows employees to support their local communities.

Our Inspiration Founded in 1880, the SLSO is the second oldest professional orchestra in the country. Year after year, the orchestra's dedicated musicians embody excellence in their delivery of beautiful music, award-winning recordings, and educational programs in the St. Louis region. Our sincere gratitude goes out to the musicians of the SLSO; your music inspires us.

Our Teachers Great teachers go beyond the classroom to integrate area resources that give their students opportunities to discover and grow. For 26 years, the teachers of Express the Music have done just that and more. They inspire their students, through great orchestral music, to tap into their imaginations and discover where the music and their creativity will take them. We appreciate our inspiring teachers.

Teachers who have participated in Express the Music for at least five years are noted in this year's list of participating schools and teachers. Over the years, these teachers have introduced thousands of students to orchestral music as a source of inspiration for creating more musical lives.

Our Preliminary Judges There are many well-read, experienced members of the Symphony Volunteer Association who share their time with Express the Music. In addition, the St. Louis Literary Awards recruited undergraduate and graduate students from St. Louis University to serve as preliminary judges alongside SVA members. A special note of gratitude goes to the volunteers who read and scored all the entries to select this year's finalists.

Sharon Avila	Liz Halpin	Ariana Magafas	Jamie Spencer
Nicole Bean	Paula Hertel	Meghan Mathison	Cay Sullivan
Theresa Brisko	Susan Hoffman	Laverne R. Moseley	Karissa Sywulka Mitchell
Louise Cheli	Rose Ingraham	Mary Parks	Phyllis Traub
Bev Cox	Jeff Kaplan	Janet Preston	Karen Trinkle
Thomas Crouch	Patty Kaplan	Dave Propper	Kirti Veeramachaneni
Sue Darcy	Laura Kasanofsky	Sue Propper	Sharon Voss
Martha Duchild	Paula Katz	Jean Saunders	Karen Weaver
Kate Essig	Emmy La	Sam Scriba	Connie Wepfer
Eileen Gmerek	Gracie LaBlance	Karen Silsby	Denise Wilson
Caren Goldstein	Kelly Leavitt	Kathryn Snodgrass	
	Lynda Lieberman	Linda Solla	

Our Final Judges Contributing both their time and their expertise, two panels of accomplished writers judged the finalists' entries in the prose and poetry divisions. The compositions were assessed on creativity and writing excellence in response to the musical selection, with these scores determining the winners. These judges provided invaluable service to Express the Music 2023. Thank you for sharing your keen insights, experience, and expertise.

Prose composition judges:

Diane Bleyer is author of *The Second Chance*, a suspense thriller set in the near future. Passionately concerned about climate change, Bleyer's novel is a "call for action" to create awareness of the devastating effects of not taking immediate action to address the issue. Bleyer was honored to participate in the 2022 St. Louis Jewish Book Festival. She is a legal proofreader and the leader of the *Works in Progress* writing critique group, a group that encourages aspiring writers. Bleyer served as the president of Hadassah's St. Louis Chapter, a 300,000-member women's organization. After graduating from Emory University with a B.B.A. in Finance and Management, she worked as a Management Consultant for Andersen Consulting and continued her career at Ernst & Young in its Management Consulting Practice, specializing in strategic planning and implementation in the healthcare industry. Bleyer enjoys playing tennis and is the captain of her USTA team.

Dr. J. Terry Gates retired from full-time university teaching in 2001 from the State University of New York at Buffalo. He taught elementary, secondary, and higher education students in Illinois, Ohio, Alabama, Kentucky, New York, and Missouri. He was part of the group that wrote New York's Frameworks for Arts Education and was a leading figure in developing the Goals 2000 grant for New York State arts assessments. His contributions to the research literature in music teaching and learning include history and criticism, edited books, speeches, workshops, and articles on arts education policy. He was a member of the International Advisory Committee of the British Journal of Music Education, the Journal of Music Teacher Education editorial board, and the Executive Committee of the Music Education Research Council. He lives in St. Louis, where he writes historical fiction, fiction for young people, and contributes to various SVA committees.

Edward Ibur is the executive director of the St. Louis Literary Award programs at Saint Louis University. The SLLA was created in 1967 and is now one of the oldest and most prestigious literary awards in the country. Over the years, SLU has honored more than 50 writers, including Neil Gaiman (April 2023), Margaret Atwood, Zadie Smith, Chinua Achebe, Stephen Sondheim, Arthur Miller, Seamus Heaney, Salman Rushdie, and many others. The Literary Award programs run throughout the academic year. Most are free and open to the public with registration. Ibur is the founder and director of Gifted Writers Academy now in its 25th year. GWA is an online and in-person writing program focusing on fiction, poetry, drama, creative nonfiction, and essay writing courses for middle school, high school, and adult writers. Ibur's novel, *Teacher of the Year*, was published by Third Degree Press in 2012. He is currently working on a collection of short stories.

David Rush is a nationally produced award-winning playwright who recently retired as chair of the playwriting program at Southern Illinois University–Carbondale.

Dr. Benjamin Torbert is the English Graduate Program Director and Associate English Department Chair for the University of Missouri in St. Louis. His formal education includes a Ph.D. in English, with a linguistics concentration, from Duke University, an M.A. in English from North Carolina State University, and a B.A. in Classical Languages from Duke University. As a sociolinguist, Dr. Torbert studies English language variety in North America and the Caribbean, particularly regional and socioethnic dimensions of language variation. He has authored and co-authored publications on language variety in *American Speech*, *Southern Journal of Linguistics*, the *de Gruyter World Atlas of Varieties of English*, among other venues. Dr. Torbert's classes have included discussions on opera literature and leitmotifs (short, recurring themes in a musical or literary composition associated with a particular person, place, or idea).

Poetry composition judges:

Walter Bargan was born at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, farther back than he wants to admit. As a result of his father's military career, he has lived in many places including Germany, Switzerland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Missouri. He wrote his first poem when he was a senior in high school. He taught himself how to write by two simple processes, reading and writing. He reads not only to enjoy what others write but to learn how others write, and he firmly believes that reading and writing teach writing. He has lived outside Ashland, Missouri, since he graduated from University of Missouri-Columbia with a B.A. in philosophy. He later earned an M.Ed. in English Education from the same institution and then became distracted—again. He has published 26 books of poetry. Recent books include: *My Other Mother's Red Mercedes* (Lamar University Press, 2018), *Until Next Time* (Singing Bone Press, 2019), *You Wounded Miracle* (Liliom, 2021), and *Too Late to Turn Back* (Singing Bone Press 2023). His awards include a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, Chester H. Jones Foundation Award, the Stanley Hanks prize, and the William Rockhill Nelson Award. In 2008, he was appointed the first Poet Laureate of Missouri.

Jane Ellen Ibur, Poet Laureate of St. Louis, Missouri, is the author of *Both Wings Flappin', Still Not Flyin'* and *The Little Mrs./Misses* both published by PenUltimate Press. She has garnered much recognition as an Arts Educator teaching in underserved communities. She received a Visionary Award for Outstanding Arts Educator; recognition as a Warrior Poet from Word in Motion; two awards from the Missouri Scholar's Academy; and A World of Difference Award from the AntiDefamation League. She's been honored with an Author Recognition Award by the Missouri Center for the Book. She also received the Loretto Award for Service to Humanity and Social Justice and Distinguished Alumni from her alma mater, Webster University. She is published in literary journals and anthologies.

Kim Lozano is a developmental editor and writing coach. She helps writers complete and edit their books and she leads private writing workshops in St. Louis and online. She has taught classes for the St. Louis County Library and she is a mentor for the Women's Fiction Writers Association. Her own work has been published in *The Iowa Review*, *North American Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *American Life in Poetry*, and many other publications. She offers resources for writers on her website.

Marcia Moskowitz retired as an English teacher from Parkway West High School, where she taught for twenty-five years. Moskowitz taught her students to write both analytical and creative essays and served as the English Department Chairperson for her last ten years. During her teaching career, Moskowitz also had the opportunity to co-chair an evaluation process for Parkway West conducted by the North Central Association. In 1995, Moskowitz received the "Pillar of Parkway Award" and was named by the National Honor Society as "Teacher of the Year" in 1988. In addition to teaching English, Moskowitz graded advanced placement essays for the "Advanced Placement English and Literature Examination" and taught teacher education courses on how to grade and build an advanced placement English curriculum. Since 2005, Moskowitz has been teaching adult literature. Because she creates a new curriculum each year, she has adult students who have continued to study with her since 2005. Moskowitz received a B.A. from Beaver College (now Arcadia University) in Pennsylvania and an M.A. from Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey. She and her husband have been regular attendees at the St. Louis Symphony for 45 years.

Maryfrances Wagner's nine books of poetry include *Salvatore's Daughter*, *Light Subtracts Itself*, *Red Silk*, *Dioramas*, *Pouf*, *The Silence of Red Glass*, *The Immigrants' New Camera*, and *Solving for X*. Poems have appeared in many literary magazines and anthologies including *New Letters*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Birmingham Review*, *Louisville Review*, *Laurel Review*, *Rattle*, *Main Street Rag*, *American Journal of Poetry*, *Voices in Italian Americana*, *Unsettling America: An Anthology of Contemporary Multicultural Poetry* (Penguin Books), *Literature Across Cultures* (Pearson/Longman), *Bearing Witness*, and *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women*. She has served as co-president and interim president of The Writers Place in Kansas City, through which she helps sponsor and promote emerging and established writers. She co-edits *I-70 Review* and served on the American Poets Series board as well as on the Kansas City Creates board where she brought together music, poetry, and dance. The Missouri Arts Council selected her as Individual Artist of 2020, and she is currently serving as Missouri Poet Laureate 2021-23. Wagner has taught writing and conducted writing workshops at all academic levels. She trained and mentored writing teachers for many years through the University of Missouri–Kansas City High School College Program. She received local and state recognition for Excellence in Teaching and was a Missouri Teacher of the Year finalist. A lifelong Missouri resident, she is the daughter of four Italian immigrant grandparents. She and her husband and co-editor, Greg Field, live with their rescued dogs Annie Sexton and Lucille Clifton.

Participating Schools and Teachers

Junior Division

Assumption Parish School	St. Louis, MO	Margaret Doty
Christ Community Lutheran	Kirkwood, MO	Bethany Albers*
Desert Ridge Junior High School	Mesa, AZ	David Larkins
Gateway Science Academy	St. Louis, MO	Cathy Van Winkle*
Holy Trinity Catholic School	Fairview Heights, MO	Sue Wright
LaSalle Springs Middle School	Wildwood, MO	Julie Adams
LaSalle Springs Middle School	Wildwood, MO	Amber Choate
LaSalle Springs Middle School	Wildwood, MO	Lori Kitrel*
LaSalle Springs Middle School	Wildwood, MO	Isabel Lackman
North Kirkwood Middle School	Kirkwood, MO	Stephanie Lancaster
Okawville Jr/Sr High School	Okawville, IL	Sarah Stine
Parkway Central Middle School	Chesterfield, MO	Teresea Gassel
Parkway Central Middle School	Chesterfield, MO	Lindsey Katz
Parkway Central Middle School	Chesterfield, MO	Melanie Lundt
Parkway Central Middle School	Chesterfield, MO	Courtney Varner
Parkway West Middle School	Chesterfield, MO	Emma Davis
Parkway West Middle School	Chesterfield, MO	Suzan Wilson
Ritenour Middle School	St. Louis, MO	Abigail Knoche
Sinclair Homeschool	Clayton, MO	Betsy Sinclair
Sperreng Middle School	St. Louis, MO	Shaylynn Morgan
St. Ambrose Catholic School	Godfrey, IL	Karie Preston**
St. Boniface Catholic School	Edwardsville, IL	Susannah Arana
St. Clare Catholic School	O'Fallon, IL	Natalie Schultz*
St. Francis of Assisi School	St. Louis, MO	Emily Schmitz
St. Margaret of Scotland	St. Louis, MO	Kara Manley
St. Peter School	Kirkwood, MO	Mary Donald*
Ste. Genevieve du Bois	St. Louis, MO	Hannah Rettig*
STEAM Academy Middle School	Hazelwood, MO	Hilary Clay*
Truman Middle School	St. Louis, MO	Stephen Ahrens
Truman Middle School	St. Louis, MO	Michelle Howard**
Twin Oaks Christian School	Ballwin, MO	Janna Hickel
Villa Duchesne	St. Louis, MO	Danielle Thurm*
Westminster Christian Academy	Town and Country, MO	Taylor Orr
Whitfield School	St. Louis, MO	Tom Herman
Zion Lutheran School	St. Charles, MO	Kathryn Crumrine

*Teacher who has participated in Express the Music five years or more.

**Teacher who has participated in Express the Music ten years or more.

Senior Division

Clayton High School
Edwardsville High School
First Baptist Academy O'Fallon
Fort Zumwalt East High School
Fort Zumwalt West High School
Fortitude School
Gateway STEM High School
John Burroughs School
Kirkwood Senior High School
Kirkwood Senior High School
Lindbergh High School
Litchfield High School
Mehlville Senior High School
Nerinx Hall
Parkway North High School
Parkway South High School
Parkway West High School
Villa Duchesne
Villa Duchesne
Villa Duchesne
Villa Duchesne
Webster Groves High School
Webster Groves High School
Wesclin High School

Clayton, MO
Edwardsville, IL
O'Fallon, IL
St. Peters, MO
O'Fallon, MO
Alton, IL
St. Louis, MO
St. Louis, MO
Kirkwood, MO
Kirkwood, MO
St. Louis, MO
Litchfield, IL
St. Louis, MO
Webster Groves, MO
Creve Coeur, MO
Manchester, MO
Ballwin, MO
St. Louis, MO
St. Louis, MO
St. Louis, MO
St. Louis, MO
Webster Groves, MO
Webster Groves, MO
Trenton, IL

Kathryn Cooper
Deanne Voegelé
Melanie Jenkins
Sarah Hanlon
Amy Chamberlain
Christy Schaper
Michelle Haberberger
Katarina Fernandez
Katie Meyers
Adam Rowland
Alec Patton
Paige Farnworth
Emily Ball
Jennifer Staed*
Allison Reed
Melissa Gebhard**
Andria Benmuvhar
Louise Gabriel*
Pamela Harris-Marcus*
Gigi Rager
Anne Traeger
Rita Chapman
Jeffrey Facchin
Jessica Pilgreen

*Teacher who has participated in Express the Music five years or more.

**Teacher who has participated in Express the Music ten years or more.

Table of Contents

Junior Division

Prose Winners		<i>Grade</i>	<i>Page</i>
1st Prize			
Lila Lowery	Villa Duchesne	8	12
2nd Prize			
Ellie Borage	Westminster Christian Academy	8	14
3rd Prize			
Daniel Liang	Parkway Central Middle School	8	16
Prose Finalists			
Eva Caruso	St. Peter School	7	18
Trinity Green	Sperrang Middle School	7	20
Emma Hendrickson	LaSalle Springs Middle School	8	22
Hana Inazu	Westminster Christian Academy	8	24
Maya Kumar	Parkway Central Middle School	7	26
Yangfan Liu	Parkway Central Middle School	7	28
Jessica Ma	Westminster Christian Academy	8	30
Amelia Mangan	Westminster Christian Academy	8	32
Aryanna Martinez	Desert Ridge Junior High School	8	34
Allie Nicholas	Villa Duchesne	8	36
Abbey Pera	St. Margaret of Scotland	8	38
Poppy Varley	Villa Duchesne	8	39
CeCe Wasson	Villa Duchesne	8	41
Poetry Winners			
1st Prize			
Marlee Cooper	Parkway Central Middle School	8	43
2nd Prize			
Annie Koboldt	Parkway Central Middle School	7	45
3rd Prize			
Ellie Feldman	Desert Ridge Junior High School	7	49
Poetry Finalists			
Courtney Dunlap	St. Peter School	7	51
Aubrey Emily	Assumption Parish School	7	54
Julia Enz	Parkway Central Middle School	8	55
Isaac Fernandez	Assumption Parish School	7	59
Tori Gallen	Parkway Central Middle School	8	61
Gabby Jackson	St. Margaret of Scotland	8	62

*Junior Division, continued**Grade**Page*

Claire Jones	Parkway Central Middle School	7	64
Elise Luedeka	Parkway Central Middle School	7	66
Rylie Lynch	LaSalle Springs Middle School	8	71
Lily Mulhall	Truman Middle School	8	72
Alice Petty	Parkway Central Middle School	8	73
Maci Wissel	Sperreng Middle School	7	78

Senior Division**Prose Winners****1st Prize**

Alexander Gaj	Parkway South High School	10	82
---------------	---------------------------	----	----

2nd Prize (tie)

Claire Myers	Villa Duchesne	11	84
Alex Tyrrell	Villa Duchesne	11	86

Prose Finalists

Anna Bub	Villa Duchesne	9	88
Josephine Bussen	Villa Duchesne	9	89
Eleanor DiPasco	Villa Duchesne	9	91
Jacob Poole	Kirkwood High School	10	93
Graysen Sturdy	Kirkwood High School	10	95
Julia von der Lancken	Villa Duchesne	10	97
Lucy Zschoche	Villa Duchesne	10	99

Poetry Winners**1st Prize**

Talie Kubicek	Parkway North High School	12	101
---------------	---------------------------	----	-----

2nd Prize

Kathryn Schwaneke	Villa Duchesne	11	103
-------------------	----------------	----	-----

3rd Prize

Isaiah Burdell	Litchfield High School	9	105
----------------	------------------------	---	-----

Poetry Finalists

Ella Bruner	Parkway West High School	9	108
Kalyan Krish	Parkway North High School	12	113
Julius Peel	Webster Groves High School	10	114
Elisabeth Preston	Edwardsville High School	9	115
Sara Rogers	Parkway North High School	12	116
Allison Schneithorst	Villa Duchesne	10	117

Junior Division

The essays, poems and stories in this book have been printed without edits as they were submitted to the writing competition Express the Music 2023.

Live in the Light

I can feel it. Feel it surfacing. Feel it stirring. Feel it waiting to attack. The Darkness always attacks. It starts with a negative thought. A simple sentence. But the Darkness doesn't leave anything simple. The Darkness manipulates and twists everything in its path into morphed, messy madness. When I'm lying in bed, I can hear it whispering. Taunting me, waiting to get a reaction.

"All of your friends are fake." it says. I breathe deeply and try to push the Darkness away but it returns instantly. "They don't care about you. Nobody does. Not even your parents." I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping, wishing, praying that the Darkness would disappear. Instead, it leads my mind into a deep, winding spiral. As I spin down the endless twists, I relive the moments. The moments I felt lost, worthless, and broken. The moments I thought would never end. But they did. Just like the Darkness, it has to end.

I stop turning, and I feel the radiant glow of sunshine. The Light has come. When it comes, the Darkness clears. Storm clouds become sun rays and anxiety becomes a stillness, a mere thought. A feeling of calm and serenity washes my fears away. But not for long. I can hear the hum of Darkness. Quiet and faint, but still there. It's regrouping to come back stronger.

The Light starts to dim and fade. The Darkness and all of its cruel phrases come back like needles. They prick, prick, prick until a wound forms. "Who will save me now?" I wonder. The Light has vanished, leaving me stranded. "Nobody's here." I think to myself. "Nobody cares, nobody cares."

The tears come in like a flood, my traces of hope getting lost in the current. But what do I see? Beyond the endless ocean of dark? I feel my friends hugging me. I smell the birthday cake my mom baked for me. I hear my dad laughing, saying my humor lights up a room. I see a

glimmer of Light. Like the flame of a candle, wavering but still there. Then it swells up and takes out the Darkness with one sweep of bright, glorious Light. A soft smile appears on my face. As my eyes start to close, I know I can feel the Light.

Breathe

Breathe. For some, darkness is something to be feared. But to him, it was a refuge as he flew through the night. His heart thundered as he finally slowed his pace to a steady walk. He had torn down alley after alley until he was satisfied that the evils of his past were no longer nipping at his heels. Now, as he attempted to reacquaint his body with the luxury of adequate breathing, he felt his chest expand—not only with the precious night air he greedily gulped down, but also with the triumph that painted a wide grin across his young features.

His steps faltered. Slowly, excruciatingly slowly, the reality of his situation raked its claws down the thin veil of his temporary victory. His successful escape suddenly seemed so insignificant, so irreparably momentary when compared to his next task: starting over. Terror tapped at the back of his mind, threatening to overwhelm him. He felt its icy fingers wrap around his throat, stealing the breath from his lungs. *Breathe.* He stumbled against the side of a cold, dark building. Panic swelled beneath his skin, screaming at him to succumb. His eyes darted down to his wrists. Even peering through the foggy haze of his hysteria, he could make out the scars branded on his wrists from years of being chained and abused. A lifetime of desperate hoping, and yet his long-awaited freedom terrified him as much as it liberated him.

Breathe. He leaned against the wall, letting its uncompromising strength steady him. Then, little more than a whisper on the wind, he heard it. The call that lit the match to reignite his suffocated hope. With an air of desperation, he scaled the stone building. Moments later, atop the slanted roof, he gazed out toward the bay at a docked sea

vessel being tossed by the rolling waves. The boat issued piercing cries into the gradually brightening sky, the sounds a promise and a warning of the approaching departure. The soft reverberations sang in his ears, and he envisioned stowing away on that cargo ship and abandoning this city where he'd known only cruelty. One last, very final escape. Dawn broke over the rooftops, streaking the endless sky with layers of pale yellows and pinks. As he closed his eyes at the caress of the new morning breeze, he thought of what awaited him. And he finally breathed.

Crash!!! You are awoken by the waves splashing around, roaring like lions as if to welcome you to a beautiful morning. You are overjoyed to see the storm has passed, and the sun is up high in the sky, beaming its golden rays of light as you sprint across the deck, shouting in delight.

After a week of raging storms and winds constantly throwing your ship off course, it is over. The sky has been cleared of its gloominess, and you cry out to your crew to wake up. Having the same reaction as you had, everyone dances wildly as if there were no tomorrow.

Having this moment of delight, you can't help but reflect on your losses on this relentlessly brutal expedition. Suddenly, the tears well up. They stream down your face, washing away your happiness and leaving the stains of regret and sorrow. But you must move on, and not let your past barricade you from your future.

And then you see it. Out of nowhere, a seagull! Your crew roars out in exhilaration as it soars across the clear blue ocean, showing off its graceful wings. You erupt in laughter, more than you have ever had in your life. You know your objective, and you know there's no stopping now. You can almost feel it in your blood, just waiting for it to appear.

And suddenly, your heart stops. In the distance, you can see clouds forming. You are brought back to the thoughts of your fallen companions. Your best friend who had been

lost to the storm. Had it all been for nothing? This question eats at you as your ship trudges along the waves, cautiously.

But behind the fog of ugliness, there is always beauty.

You see it, the most beautiful thing you have ever seen. It grows brighter and brighter, a joyful sight to behold.

In the distance, land flourishing in life and greenery, singing out with pride of its beautiful colors. Resembling peace and prosperity, away from war and cruelty, you know this is the freedom you seek. You take one last thought of your fallen, thanking them for their service, promising a new future for your people before leaving the ship. You feel the warmth and comfort of the sand on your feet, and you can't help but smile, in everlasting happiness. A new life.

A home for the valiant.

“From a Mind of Darkness To a Mind of Light”

I made it. I'm here. This bag, heavy, broken down, and despondent, filled to the brim with burdens and regrets, dissipating, and vanishing from my present, but never my past. They've shaped me. Atop this mountain I rejoice, chucking and flinging my woeful freight distantly away, deep down into this pond at which I peacefully twirl upon beds of vivid emerald lily pads.

From my locale, I gaze at the distant city below: beautiful and serene. Body senses tell me, *there's work to be done, go and thank them*. So, I do, deep in thought on my journey down the summit.

Alas, I arrive, becoming overshadowed with waves of dejection; my past swallowing me up whole, instantly. In my mind, these streets sit engulfed with gloom and murk, shapeshifting and conducting my yore into my present.

Soon, a gleam of luster ignites itself at the end of this ruinous road. This seemingly random blaze isn't so random after all. *It's them! They're here!* Every one of those who rescued me from my time of disconsolateness and hardship. They've arrived and saved me once again!

Within seconds, my words, brimming with appreciation, remorse, gratitude and merriment, flip onto my tongue, flowing out of my mouth like a waterfall that just won't stop. Like steam of a natural spring, my worries and despair seem to float away, turning into silence so powerful it speaks for itself. Together, tight hugs, wide smiles, and joyous tears softly fill the atmosphere, leaving no room for negativity.

Up, up, and up, jointly, we all ascend the lusciously moss enveloped alp, but this time my journey is light. I have no burdens to weigh me down. I have not one second alone, but thousands filled with elation due to those surrounding me.

“From a Mind of Darkness To a Mind of Light”

Beautiful it really is. The town we see below is even more magnificent when the appreciation is shared with those I cherish. And while as magical dancing on bright-colored water lilies alone can be, when it's done together, emotion is shown, creating an even greater experience, elegantly making us appear as the ripples the lake creates; ripples of passion and devotion spreading to those around us who need it, like I did.

Adversity taught me that even when it seems like all hope is lost, I can always look for the bigger picture to see what I'm truly missing: others overshadowed grace, meant for me.

Mind Wars

You collapse into the grass, irate. An argument with your family has just occurred and the only calm place you could think of was this empty field, seeming to go on forever. The grass is up to your calves, and you can't see any buildings anywhere near. The only thing you can do right now is lie back and let the soft grass brush across your skin. You absorb the dying rays of sun, a frown still distorting your face.

Your brain is overcrowded with negative thoughts, and you only get more upset as you frantically try to turn them off. It seems impossible to relax, and trying only makes things worse.

There's no point in being here, you decide internally, but as you're about to get up, you realize you can't remember the last time you relaxed. Plus, home is not the best place to be right now. It never had been. So you give relaxation a try.

It's hard at first. The war continues, a bloody battle between positive and negative emotions.

Everything will be fine.

But your family is dysfunctional.

I'm sure we can work things out.

They won't listen.

They hate you.

They hate you.

You order your brain to shut off. Unwelcome thoughts intrude your mind and soon there are multiple voices talking at once, some yelling, some just barely whispering.

I will be calm. You tell yourself. The battle continues, and the voices seem to dwindle just a bit. You are suddenly overwhelmed with the feeling that everything will turn out fine. A serene, floaty feeling washes over you, and you are almost asleep. What used to be the grass is now what feels like the soft, airy surface of a cloud. What used to be the orange and yellow sky is now a galactic void, filled with shimmering stars and constellations. You are dreaming, and there is a faint, lovely tune playing that seems to float through the air.

You are in a state of intense tranquility. Nothing from the waking world can bother you.

A little while later, you sense it is time to leave. You mentally say goodbye to your peaceful environment, and soon you start to feel the blades of grass under your legs and the bright moon shining down on your face. Rising from your spot, you feel something has changed about you. You feel... at peace.

And before you can react, your feet are carrying you back home.

Express The Music

Snowflakes dot the chilly air, falling silently. The only sound is the howling wind, which bites at my face. I look out to the horizon, admiring the blinding white landscape. It's a frozen dessert, with long hills stretching into the distance. With no trees, there is only the white of fallen snow and the light gray sky. I exhale my breath in frosty puffs. I scan the tundra, searching for my target. I lay down in the snow, steadying my breaths.

Finally, I see movement out of the corner of my eye. I try to find it, and then I see a streak of white moving. I zoom in on my camera until I see it in great detail. A white fox is on the prowl. I admire it, and as soon as it turns its head towards me, I snap a photograph. I take more photos as it lightly treads in the snow, its head lowered as it scans for any sound. As I watch, I see it begin to run forward, its tail swaying back and forth. Suddenly, it pounces head first into the snow. I heard my laugh against the silence, and to be honest, it startled me. I take more photos, clicking as much as my frosted fingers can. Once the fox got out of the little hole it pounced into, I saw it holding a rodent of some kind. I take more pictures, and watch closely as it throws the rodent on the ground, and begins eating it. It's not a pleasant sight as it tears apart the mouse.

Out here, where it's hardly ever daytime, I can't blame the fox for wanting to live. It didn't have a choice, and neither did the mouse. To humans, we might laugh at the way a fox pounces into the snow. To the fox, it's a mere way of survival. Life and death out here isn't decided by money, or social status. Here, the only skill you need to survive is to be as silent as a mouse, and as impulsive as a fox.

My focus shifts back to the scavenger, who seems triumphant. It scampers away, with some of its fur dyed crimson. It leaves behind a splotch of red, but if no one captured this moment, more snow would have fallen and covered it up. That is, until another rodent meets a similar fate.

With Light Comes Shadows

Metal clashes against metal as the sun climbs higher and higher, having long since chased away the moon—and the peace that came with it. Sweat glistens on foreheads and drips off the tips of noses, for there is no time to wipe it away. The battle rages on, swords flashing as they briefly catch the light before slicing into new targets. One of these targets happens to be a young man, barely old enough to fight. His eyes, once bright emeralds, fade to a dull moss color as his knees give out and he drops to the ground, dark hair landing askew over his pale, lifeless face. The fighting continues around him, his comrades pushing back the enemy and finally gaining the advantage.

Across the grassy plain, the opposing army calls for retreat, signaling the end of the bloodbath for today. Tomorrow, another battle is inevitable— but a victory like this calls for celebration. Trumpets and shouts fill the air as soldiers scour the field for weapons to take from the bodies of the fallen, for it would be a shame to waste their sacrifice. The sun reaches its peak, its rays glinting off bronze armor and enhancing the gleam in the eyes of the victors.

However, with light comes shadows.

Her armor is stained with thick red blood. Her hair, black as obsidian, spills around her shoulders in a tangled heap. Though she won, her emerald eyes carry no gleam. Instead, they scan the body-littered field, searching for their match—for the eyes that opened for the first time the same moment hers did. The eyes that looked into hers before the battle with the same silent promise they always had: *We'll make it through*. The eyes that should have met hers in relief the second the fight ended.

Around her, the trumpets continue blasting their victory song. Soldiers whoop and raise their swords in the air, chanting.

When she finds his body, everything fades.

She sinks to the grass, her dark curtain of hair shielding her from the rest of the world. In front of her, a shorter version of the same hair covers a face she's terrified to look at. Breath rattling, hands shaking, she pushes it back. A mirror stares back at her, eyes glassy and unblinking.

The trumpets play. The soldiers sing. The celebration continues.

Running Away

I slipped out the back door, looking around to make sure the guard had finished his rounds for the night. I turned to my right to see where the camera was positioned. I slowly started moving in the opposite direction of my hiding spot. Everything was calm, except a mild breeze weaving through my hair as I walked past the camera that was now positioned right at my hiding place. I crept over the fence and slowly started running.

I could feel the blood pulsing through my entire body; my lungs felt like they were about to burst. I took a few deep breaths and sunk onto a tree stump nearby. I looked up and saw the bright, glowing moon. The gentle breeze swept past my body as I listened to the sound of owls hooting and crickets chirping. I closed my tired eyes. Suddenly, it struck me. Somehow, I'd escaped without anybody noticing. I can't remember the last time I felt so much joy. It's like when your team is losing in the final round, but you somehow find a way to win. While I was all wrapped up in my thoughts, I heard some leaves rustling. Wait...did somebody actually find me? Oh, no! What was I to do? I held my breath, trying to avoid being captured. My heart was pounding against my chest and I felt like it would explode.

I frantically looked at my surroundings and dashed to a small opening between two large trees. My legs shaking as I sprinted through the crisp leaves. It was hard to hear anything other than my heavy breathing but I could hear footsteps behind me.

That's when I saw the fence; if I could just get over it, I'd be fine. I ran over and hurled myself onto the fence. The footsteps were so close now, only a few yards away. My hands were starting to slip as I lifted myself on the fence. I fell over the fence, the footsteps only a couple feet away now.

My hands clung to my chest as I heard the footsteps pass by me,

"Looks like she's not here," I heard someone mutter under their breath. A few minutes later I heard the footsteps tread away; the sound of leaves cracking had softened. A large tear rolled down my cheek as I smiled.

I was safe.

The Trophy Case

As she stood in front of her shelf, she felt this deep feeling of pride. All of it, in its beautiful glory. As she bent down to start from the beginning, she saw them all. Starting with her first trophy, gold, shining, and gorgeous. She put her finger on the glass, moving it across to each medal, trophy, and prize. Passing each one, she felt her heart jump, pleased at each achievement.

Then a thought struck her. *What did I do to get this? Did I really achieve something? Maybe I'm not smart after all and it was luck...* She stood there, frustrated with herself. She calmed down and took deep breaths in and out. Then continued on. She looked at each one carefully, remembering all the memories.

Suddenly, she stopped abruptly. Staring right at the only silver trophy. Everything rushed back to her. Handing her the 2nd place trophy with her name on it. The disappointment dripped down their faces. She was such a failure. She opened the latch, reached inside, and gently put it face down, refusing to look at it. *No, she did well. She did great. She tried her best and had fun. But she didn't get 1st place. She didn't get the best. She let herself down.* She fiercely shook her head. The thoughts were invading. *I did do good. I did it to the best of my ability. I have done exactly what I expected of myself. I am proud of myself.* She sighed, half smiled to herself, and put the trophy back up, and it seemed to stand taller than before. She kept going, reminiscing at the memories, good or bad.

And she reached her last one. Her greatest accomplishment. She fell back into the past, watching. The joy, excitement, and pride of being there. Waiting backstage, and hearing your name get called out. Taking a breath, as you take a step onto the

stage. Someone hands you this beautiful piece of art, but everything is a blur as your feelings explode out and you stand there, beaming, with roars of applause, yells, and hollers. Tears forming at the corner of your eyes, you can't help but let them roll down, your heart bursting with the most unexplainable feeling of pure ecstasy. She beams once more, feeling just as much as she did that day. Because she succeeded.

Lightning crackled at the storm's mighty fingertips. His power of the ferocious gales and never-ending floods of rainfall unstoppable to where even the proudest buildings would buckle and collapse against his onslaught.

The tempest traveled determinedly across continents and oceans, striving to finish his task. Triumph was so close at hand, victory so near the storm could not think of anything outside of winning.

He finally came across his last step. A small, sleeping city was stuck in the path of the storm, the last obstacle stopping him from his well deserved victory. The storm furrowed his brow and frowned. No. This would not do. The city must go. It was in the way of his victory. He was so close.

As the beast drew back his arm and prepared to strike, a small bulb of light appeared near his head.

Don't do this, it begged.

Think about the children, it implored.

The lives, the unfulfilled dreams and promises.

The families, the civilians who had no idea their lives were at such a stake.

The people who have beautiful future's in front of them, just like you.

The people who live, laugh, and cry, just like you.

Leave them out of this, it said.

They aren't part of this, it said.

A seed of doubt crept into the monster's head as he considered what the spot of light was pleading. His emotions simmered for a moment. Just one.

The storm sat and thought in a strained moment of pause.

So. Close.

The thought of victory sparked into the monster's head and snapped him out of the little compassion he had felt moments before as he made up his mind. This was the only way.

So close to triumph.

With a thunderous roar that shook the buildings, he swatted the poor spot of light out of the sky and lifted his massive arms to bash against the city. Places where people fell in love, where people would laugh until they gasped for breath, where people would cry and sob until they had no more left in them, all gone.

The storm cackled with delight as the feeling of triumph washed over him in waves and waves, soaked in his long awaited victory.

But once the feeling passed, the adrenaline wore off, and the skies slowly cleared eventually the storm moved on.

The year was 1945. The city was called Hiroshima.

The Old Oak

Towering above the foliage, the majestic, tired oak rested upon his hulking and monumental throne. The throne was garnished with the marks of time, yet the posture of this bygone king was still as regal as the scintillating stars.

With a feeling of pride, the weary oak gazed upon the sprawling kingdom that sat before him, illuminated by beams of light. The sun arose, leading the droll daffodils and jubilant tulips in a melody. The serenade gently breezed through the forest, finally reaching the ancient monarch's heart. The circumambient trees swayed slightly to the rhythm of the breeze, lifting their heads and chanting without a quaver in their pulchritudinous voices.

The debilitated oak endeavored to participate, but realized that his limbs were crippled from years of dancing and merriment.

A thought as cold and sharp as a knife, plunged deep into him. He was old and eroding away, like the proud mountains. Eventually, he would become nothing more than a distant memory, lost in a wave of time. "No...no, surely, I have left an impression on my people," he cried.

A cluster of carmine orchids acknowledged his sorrow and beamed up at him. Thanking the imposing oak, for his small act of kindness of letting them hide among his roots from the scorching sun. Many other grateful and loving plants showed their admiration. From the radiant roses clothed in robes of delicate dew, to the imbecilic daisy who laughed at the peril of the future, they came telling the stupendous oak of how he had blessed them. A flood of hope engulfed him and surged through his soul. "Maybe, my life isn't meaningless," thought the encouraged oak.

Quickly, billowy, gloomy clouds rushed upon the exposed oak, slashing and tearing his bark and leaves until he was nothing less than a pile of gnarled twigs. The dying oak sank into himself, he knew it was pointless to fight a losing battle.

“No!” Screamed a voice from behind him. Surprised, the restless oak turned towards the voice. There before him, sat a young oak. “ You shielded me from harsh winds, let me flourish under your branches, and showed me how to live to the fullest by sacrificing for others,” exclaimed the jovial youth. As twilight cascaded around him, the satisfied oak looked upon the youth with pure bliss, knowing that he could now live among the stars in peace.

Endless Hallways

"These pieces are beautiful," a young woman says beside me. She's correct about that. The paintings were stunning. The one we were currently looking at was a painting of a mountain range. It was done with a monochromatic color scheme in which the artist chose to use blue. The mountains' shadows were done with a color almost like purple, and the highlights looked practically white. For the lack of color in the painting, it was fascinating how much was told through it. I walked over to the next piece. This one was different; it had been done digitally. At first, it looked like just a picture of random nonsense, but when you looked more in-depth, you saw magical worlds living inside each color splotch. As I passed each picture, it was like walking through an enchanted world. Each image had a little something else to offer.

At the end of the line of artwork, I came across a door that led into a new hallway. Inside there was a group of people already looking at the new pieces. This hallway was dimly lit and seemed eerie despite the happy feeling of these paintings. In one, there was a field of sunflowers that seemed to go on forever. Each flower was turned toward the viewer, and you could see the intricate detail the artist put into each one. The image after showed the silhouette of two girls dancing in front of a sunset. Pink and orange hues blended seamlessly, almost as if it had been an actual photograph. There were dozens of other artworks lining the walls. At the end, there was yet another door. This door opened to another hallway with more artwork.

I realized with time; that when I opened a new door, the one I closed disappeared. I ran as fast as I could to the next door, paintings streaming past me. I flung it open. Another hallway. I realized that I was stuck now. What I thought was going to be a peaceful art show, turned out to be an endless trap of hallways.

I sank to the floor, defeated. I closed my eyes. Slowed my breath. And when I opened my eyes again, I was back home, where I started. Was it a dream? Couldn't have been; I never went to sleep.

A Bird's First Flight

"This is it! I feel it! This time has to be the one. The time I soar."

Images of a brave seagull riding the wind effortlessly shoot into my mind. I take a deep breath. 3... 2... 1.. ONWARDS! My feet lead the way as they thump against the rugged branch, rattling the wood below me. Feeling as though they could snap off at any second, I force my tiny legs to dart back and forth continuously. Faster! Faster! FASTER! I try to concentrate on my timing even with the lightning of pain striking every tiny bone in my over-exhausted legs.

"I can do it! I can do it!" I repeat, attempting to deter any negative thoughts slowly creeping their way to my conscience. The edge begins to approach, and the thoughts are getting louder. My head is pounding. I begin to have doubts and....

WOOOSH! Out of nowhere, I get whisked away as a colossal gust of wind launches me into the sky. Spreading my petite blue wings, I begin to feel the cool autumn breeze softly brush against each individual feather.

"Have I done it? Am I flying?"

Reluctantly, I slowly shift my head downwards, finding that my feet are no longer acquainted with the harsh wooden branch like they had been before, and each leaf curled upon the ground appears hazier than usual.

Then, realization strikes. "I-I'm doing it! I'm flying!"

Here I am, soaring through the sky. I'm dancing with the stars and swimming in the endless wonders of that deep blue sky. I feel pride begin to dawn on me. Almost as though the wind swept away all the negativity and doubts from before and carried them somewhere to be tucked away never to be seen again.

Overwhelmed with joy, I dive forward into the never-ending abyss, allowing my stubby wings to carry me as the breeze smashing my feathers against my face speeds up.

I am free. No longer caged with my siblings' screeching chirps constantly piercing my ears. No longer forced to lay in an uncomfortable nest constantly jabbing me in the side, waiting for mother to return with the food I have been craving all day. A whole new chapter of my life has been unlocked, and I'm dying to know what happens next.

The Quest's End

She had felled the stone golems, outwitted the mages, ridden a bear, and overcome countless trials. All she felt was triumph, standing atop a stone castle surrounded by a shallow, magical pond. She had finally made it to the legendary prison of the Forgotten Sorceress, who had saved countless lives, enchanted the farms never to have a bad harvest, and been cursed by a wayward mage to be trapped forever.

The champion thought about this, peaceful atop the rocky structure. She had traveled many moons to free this poor soul from the legend, and she had finally made it. She was overwhelmed by pride. She relished in the peace and happiness that filled her.

She had not nearly finished this thought when the ground beneath the stone palace started to shake. She ran down from the roof, through the halls of the castle and out the door. The ground shook furiously, and out from the pond came a reptilian tail that seized her and dragged her down into the tunnel it had just created. Down she went until finally she landed in a chamber sealed off from the water.

The champion quickly regained her footing and unsheathed her sword. What she saw before her shook her to her core. A dragon, bigger than the palace it was buried beneath, eyes wide. One look and our hero was ready to strike. A second look, and she realized this was the sorceress, trapped for thousands of years. She was majestic, glorious, and more beautiful than one could ever imagine. The sorceress saw the realization in the champion's eyes, and made a joyous sound almost like the purring of a cat.

The dragon lifted her front claw, showing the chain binding her to this stony prison. The champion's eyes lit up, and she took her sword and sliced through the first shackle. The cave started to rumble and shake, rocks started to fall. She sliced through a second. Walls crumbling around her, she sliced through the third. And just as the floor gave out, our champion cut the final shackle. She fell down into the cavern below.

Bracing herself, she closed her eyes, expecting to land on stony ground, but landed instead on the leathery hide of the Forgotten Sorceress. They flew together out of the mountain, soaring through the sky and bursting through the clouds, a trail of magic flowing behind them.

As the World Caves In

“Breaking News!” The blaring alert abruptly surfaces, interrupting the show I had been watching. ‘Asteroid to hit Earth in approximately one hour. Take shelter,’ I read, my eyes scanning the text again and again in disbelief. My mind scrambles trying to process the information, but nothing provides aid in this impossible situation. Only one thing comes to mind. One person. Facing impending doom, all I think about is her.

I leap from the couch, disregarding the mess that I had neglected to clean. She had scolded me, saying “Jack, how do you live like this! It would drive me crazy.” It didn't matter now. Nothing would, except finding her. Rushing out the door, sprinting down the stairs, and breathing heavily, I plot the best route to her office. I wonder if she’s already heard. I wonder if she’s looking for me. I wonder if I’ll ever find her.

The sky turns a menacing red, reminding me of incoming disaster. I desperately need to get out of my head and stop getting distracted. There’s no time for slip-up mistakes. Towering, taunting buildings surround me. This city was once a freeing adventure, yet now is a cruel trap. Everywhere I turn, she isn't there. With each step, my heart sinks. Beat. Beat. Beat. Each second delivering a personal death sentence. Running faster and faster, I scream her name. Finally, I see her.

The world halts, as if it has already ended. I run towards her, but my body can’t get there fast enough. Dust hangs in the air. People pause in my peripheral vision, an unimportant ensemble next to the lead role. I can’t help but notice how the apocalyptic tint of the ruby red sky compliments her auburn hair, as if Earth itself needed to showcase her beauty one final time.

She moves towards me, and time begins to move again. As she runs, I feel whole. As I run, everything is right. As the world caves in, I reach her. Our arms grip each other like a

lifeline. Final whispers of “I love you” tumble forth, eager to say the words we have no time for and patch up forgotten promises. Debris falls down like rain on a hot summer day. Buildings shake and crash, the ground splits with sickening cracks, but we don’t notice. All I notice is her eyes, and the smile she gives me. One final time.

June 6, 1944

June 6, 1944. My heart races. My palm sweats. My fingers grasp my dog tag. At least I'm not doing this alone. Noah and I have always been close. We've done everything together: playing on the same soccer team, attending the same high school, and even enlisting in the military together. I couldn't ask for a better brother.

June 6, 6:30 AM. We've longed for this moment, for this opportunity to fight for freedom, for battle. I use all of my courage to leap off the boat into the cool water with a strong current. *We can do this.* Tears form in my eyes as a new fear dawns upon me, will I leave this battle alone? Without my best friend? There's no time for this. I have to fight for freedom. I swim as fast as I can and spot a giant cliff. As I scale the bluff, bullets nearly hit me. Fear invades my thoughts.

June 6, 7:48 AM. When I reach the top, all of my strength is gone. My arms are numb, and my brain refuses to fathom that I'm in battle. *Keep going.*

June 6, 7:51 AM. I sprint to a bunker that others have taken over. A deep breath prevents me from having a panic attack.

June 6, 9:32 AM. The horrifying smell of blood makes me gag. I glance over to Omaha Beach and notice the once pure, blue water has transformed into an appalling red. Soon, I notice that Noah is nowhere in sight. Is he in the titanic bomb craters? No. *I'm alone. Where's Noah?* Bullets continue taking the innocent lives of others, like a plague spreading to innocent souls. *Who's their next victim? Me?* Out of nowhere, I spot Noah bleeding in the grass with glassy, fear-filled eyes. Noticing the maroon blood coming from a wound in his arm, I try treating it with

resources around me. I wrap his arm with cloth; he screams in pain. Tears slowly fall from my eyes and meet the blood on his wound.

June 6, 9:41 AM. We make our way to the medic tent where a nurse sits Noah down by other wounded soldiers. She says he'll survive. I'm thankful we both survived another day, but how many more days of war can we endure?

June 6, 1944, a day I will never forget.

“To Find Peace With You”

The world is as loud and annoying as a trumpet, confidently falling flat.

Life buzzes by, sweeping you into a disorganized symphony.

Loud and proud with beaming energy.

But what if we used the energy to boost?

Up and up with serenity

peace.

Loud without sounds,

weighted with plush clouds breathing in and out,

Light like the flutter of a feather.

But the clouds soon falter, the symphony of life!

The beat of its drums beckon the sky, quaking like claps of thunder

And like of rainfall we

d d

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P p

And

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s p l a t t e r!

.

We're stuck, not just in the shallow puddle from the worn pavement of life,
But lost, lost in the cool, sweeping, depths of the oceans that is our minds.

Drowning in thoughts of nothing, and stranded from you.

The symphony of life swarms and surrounds me.

All I wanted, all *we* yearned *for was silence*.

Peace.

Life buzzes, I shake following the buzz, but its blasphemy, untruthful, because

I found you.

You, playing in this symphony of laughter, tears, wailing,

life.

Shining brightly just as you were

With heavy breaths and jolting legs, my shaking finds its rhythm in the buzz

We join as a duet dancing through laughter, pain,

Peace.

But a new peace, the one you don't escape

Life in its loudest, proudest moments

Our duet in everyone's symphony blending and spinning just as the world goes,

we go and go and go and go, until our duet stops and we can't have a second act.

Maybe we'll meet again for another symphony, but for right now, we have true quiet.

True peace.

Flight of the Bird

The bird is a small thing
Fluttering against the wind
Navigating through the clouds
Flapping through the air
Focused on what's ahead
Carefully flying

Swoosh
It plummets toward the ground
Specs of the trees below
Faster
Straight down like a missile
It is just below the ground
Inches away from impact

It steadies
The wind slows
The bird flies over the river
Droplets floating into the air
It rests along the riverbank
The journey still in mind

However it is not alone

From the bushes, yellow eyes watch the prey

Ready for attack

Patiently waiting

A thirst for a chase on its mind

The Eagle

Lurches toward the feathered creature

The bird springs into action

Through the air

Up and down

Zigzagging

Away from the predator

In and out of the clouds

Far, Far away now

Escaped

The route is not yet finished

Over the mountains, it flies

Down into the valley

Through the meadow

Crossing through the field of lilies

Into the forest

All the trees seem to look the same

But the bird knows
It twists and turns through the bush
Until it reaches the end

The nest is perched at the top of the branches
Fluttering up, the bird rests along the edge of the sticks
Looking down, it is filled with wonder
There lie three eggs
All a beautiful blue color
Dotted with specs of brown and black
The shells crack open and 3 chicks spring out.
The bird knows It was worth it
This is home.

A Flawless Flight

It all began with the click of a sound file,
Majestic notes of brass ringing in my ears.

How beautiful it all was,
And later, to bring me to the verge of tears.

I imagined myself soaring through the sky with angelic wings,

As the notes would soften.

Below, a vast gorgeous land was absorbed through my eyes,
with trees arranged similar to a garden.

Music. Intensity. Powerful.

I flapped my wings, perhaps heroically,

Above a kingdom,

Who cheered me on unknowingly.

The image suddenly dissipated,

Replaced by nearly nothingness. Emptiness.

But, that was until the shock and intensity of musical notes,

Made me reenter consciousness

I sat up in my bed, partially confused,

But then remembered my fantasy.

Now excited to return, I closed my eyes and laid down,

And I breathed so very softly,

The woodwinds played, nearly silent,

But with such beauty.

My wings would relax as I glided over the land,

Oh! How lovely!

The notes would go up and down,

A glorious scale that seemed never-ending,

And then the song escalated,

And the melody returned splendidly.

This would continue on and on,

Wonderful it was.

Brass and woodwind would interchange,

To one another as if in response.

I clung on to the music,

But the finale was upon me,

So I made one last dive,

Never feeling so free.

A small droplet was on my cheek,
As my imagination drifted away,
And I opened my eyes to the ceiling fan above me,
Pondering why I felt so astray.

Music fulfills me.

As dark thunderous clouds begin to roll in,
two armies form at the forest's rim

The drummer boy starts to beat at his drum,
while the rain from above hails down on some

The British hearts are all full of fear,
as the heartbroken Patriots start to tear

The rain goes on to pour harder and stronger,
at the time, the war becomes longer and longer

The soldiers form in a perfect line,
while some in despair, try not to whine

The British commander yells "Ready, Aim, Fire!",
They hope their plan is one to aspire

Each and every soldier protect one another,
Fighting together like brother to brother

Spears and arrows are thrown in the air,
as many still thinking survival is rare

Soldiers slipping and falling in mud,
while other soldiers begin to shed blood

Commands and formations are constantly yelled,
while guns and ammo are tightly held

Cannonballs are catapulted into the night,
while soldiers continue to rally and fight

The pocket knives are the items that the troops are throwing,
one could barely see each country's flag blowing

The farther they went, first south then north,
as they continued the fighting back and forth

Cries burst out from the British now,
bombarded with the guns that go "Pow pow!"

Then soldiers barrage the land with bombs,
as this war reminds them they have blood on their palms

This Battle of Lexington and Concord has started the Revolutionary
War,

but it has already caused much appalling gore

British soldiers dead on the cold, wet ground,
as the Patriots are defeating them all around

The sky begins to clear and shine,
while the terrain below is still far from fine

The British become tired of being defenders,
so General Cornwallis finally surrenders

That night the Patriots celebrate their sweet victory,
though the future of the war remains a mystery

The Patriots enjoy their well-fought winning,
but they remember this battle is just the beginning

Aubrey Emily

A Song of Triumph

Like a Christmas song, full of joy

A feeling of expectancy fills me

Like a sound of victory, full of glee.

Organized chaos that keeps growing

A joyful march of triumph

A song of success throughout the streets, glowing with delight

Growing larger with every beat

A note of joy, dispersing itself throughout

Organized chaos that keeps growing larger and larger

Beauty and grace and heightening strength

Flourishing with anticipation as it carries on

Louder

Greater

Grander

Growing.

Wind of Freedom

Clouds uncover the soaring birds

Drifting through the winds

Reaching for the big, bright star

Oh, how free they are

Gliding through the wind

Flying through the silky clouds

Hearing the bird chorus

Beautiful harmony lighting the day

Oh, how free they are

Inspired to join them

One wing at a time

Speeding to lift off like a paper airplane

Oh, how free they are

Picking up speed

Picking up breeze

Lifting off in

Three

Two

One

Keeping body airborne
Flapping wings continuously
Heart pacing.

Up, Up, Up
Heart sinks into the deep ocean
Longing for an escape back to the surface
Up, Up, Up

Wind slides against my feathers
Pushing them behind, making way
for my sunken eyes to get a glimpse
of the
endless
horizon.

A blow of wind pulls me away from the sight
Sparring against the wind
Wind that was once tranquil
Wind that peacefully took the flock,
took the flock on their prolonged journey

Below, the Earth grinned
Desirous for the wings to stop flapping
Longing for a bird-shower

Down, down, down
Tumbling from struggling
Falling while calling
Heart in the mouth
Down, down, down

Caught a glimpse of the flock
Effortlessly hovering over the clouds
Oh how free they are

Wings tight against the sides
Force shivering against the body
Like a stretched-out rubber band
No longer sloppy
Picking up speed from the wind
Wind that was once tranquil
Wind that peacefully took the flock
Up, Up, Up

Clouds closed the gate to the sun
Speeding towards them
Longing for impact

Awaiting to get locked out of the cloud
Full speed..full mind..full determination

Piercing a hole in the cloud
Fighting the urge to abandon
Waiting to be free like the flock
Feeling the water droplets from the cloud
Up, Up, Up
As if gravity didn't exist

Finally over the clouds
Smooth mountains below
Stomach drops down to Earth again
The sun shone relentlessly on the shiny beak

Joining the flock's journey
Feeling the wind blowing against the feathers
I am now a bird someone recognizes from below.
I am now gliding through the sky as someone wishes to be.
Oh, how free I am.

The River

So beautiful

The green grass around it

The fish that swim through the inside,

A world that we will never see

The mud underneath

Older than the river itself

The rivers that cut through the land like a knife cuts

butter The water calm on top

but the things that could be hidden in the

depths Stowed away in the attic that is the

river

Things that try not to be washed away

Thrown out into the rapids

Their life at the mercy

Of the river

Humans will never conquer the river

By boat,

plane,

or by dam,

we will never gain control

We may be able dive in the river

Or ride a boat across

but we can never destroy the immense power that is
the river

We will never

know The river

relief

starting as a mist,
oblivious
to the magnitude of the moment

growing to a drizzle,
beginning
to acknowledge the instant

rising into rain
realizing the reaction
is undermining
the circumstance

showers pelting,
awakening the senses
once lost

deluges barrage
like knots loosening,
letting the air flow in

ascending,
from reassurance
of the flood

all of this like
the torrential downpour
of relief.

The Sparrow & The Shadows

It's ere, like baby birds birthed in the springtime
That began to fly, and float across the clouds as smoothly as leaves
Until it lost the wind, WOOSH, and slowly fell to the hills
But!
It catches yet another current, surfing a waterless sea, and steadily flies
Flies
Serenely through the hours of darkness
Oh! Harsh night that disallows the poor sparrow the gift of sight
If only these stars could allow these fledglings nightly sight
Maybe if we had it it could be alright
However!
No sense of darkness shall dishearten the fowl
For it slowly ascends and glides the wind which warily howls
The blanket of dusk safely covers instead of shuns
Welcoming, welcoming the frail fowl into its clutch
Allowing it to soar, soar, soar over the shadows
A darkness being greeted by this fair sparrow
The sparrow! Like a fresh breath of springtime, it meets it
These shadows are not harsh, but misunderstood
And the bird understands
They talk for a while, nothing said sounding vile

But knowing their encounter will be as short as a Snap!

The sparrow like grace, shoots up at an astounding rate and

Reaches, reaches, reaches the clouds

The shadow is shouting and slowly becoming loud and seen

Seen, it expands across, from the bird to the heavens, wrapping the

Humble sparrow in its arms, lifting it up as a gesture of kindness

Appreciation

The sparrow can graze and touch those perilous stars

Stars? This bird might be looking at Saturn,

even extraterrestrial belts, red moons that turn and shift

Slowly but surely

But never those wretched hills again

It shall fall

For these dark times and this spring can

Collide

and

be

All

right.

Claire Jones

Just Fine

Everything is just fine.

I am the proud ruler of this forest.

The one that towers over its subjects.

The noise of rain droplets gracefully landing in the puddles of mud woke my citizens.

We began to sway and rustle our leaves back to life as the rain trickled down our trunks.

The refreshing feeling of cool water felt wonderful against my dry bark.

The rain hadn't said hello in what felt like years.

My happiness instantly went away when I saw gloomy clouds rolling in and I knew it meant bad news.

Vivid flashes of lightning blinded me and I wanted to run and hide but my roots and my dignity kept me planted in the ground.

The bolt struck me and my body burst into flames and I felt my insides ablaze.

Every part of me was just disintegrating.

Disintegrating like a pathetic wet piece of paper.

The opposite of what I should've been.

I was supposed to be the lion, the king of the forest!

I was the tallest one after all but that was my downfall.

All of my peers watched in horror as their old monarch crumbled into pieces.

That was where it ended.

At least where I thought it would.

To my left I saw a tiny sapling sprouting from the damp soil and my heart skipped a beat.

Now there would be an heir.

A child to take my place.

I then knew everything would be okay.

Even if the lightning cracks made the world explode around me,

Everything would be just fine.

The Mystical, Magical Woods

There was once a place

where axolotls play,

And the unicorns they say:

“Isn’t it a lovely day?”

And the pixies and the fairies,

above the ground they fly.

Fluttering their little wings

to stay high up in the sky.

And the pegasi fly with the dragons.

Watching from the air.

While the griffins guard their nests.

Trespassers they detest.

Centaur walk the ground,

and Mermaids swim in the lakes.

There's magic all around,

in the mystical, magical, woods.

One fateful day,

a little ember came.
Through the wind
it carried its flame.
Fire like the rain,
but instead of going to the ground.
It came up to reign.
The fire took the magic
from the
mystical, magical woods.
And if you go there all you'll find,
are some scorched shrubs,
and a little treehouse of mine.
There was once a place
where axolotls play,
And the unicorns they say:
"Isn't it a lovely day?"
And the pixies and the fairies,
Above the ground they fly.
Fluttering their little wings

to stay high up in the sky.
And the pegasi fly with the dragons.
Watching from the air.
While the griffins guard their nests.
Trespassers they detest.
Centaur walk the ground.
Mermaids swim in the lakes.
There's magic all around.
But now there's no more
axolotls.
No more unicorns.
The pixies and the fairies,
now spend their lives in bottles.
Dragons and pegasi,
in the sky they flew.
But now they've left
and no one ever knew.
Griffins have no nest to guard.
Centaur their job they disregard.

A Mermaid can no longer swim like a swan.

And the magic,

its now gone

from the mystical, magical woods.

But now

I must go,

to take my crown,

to take my throne,

to restore the power in the wood.

Or at least as much

as a queen ever could.

But let me speak

one more little tale,

And then I'll let

your adventure unroll.

The mystical, magical woods aren't gone,

they fly above us, each day a new dawn.

Water dripping,

Drop, Drop, Drop,

from from the sky,

just like a hawk.

The mystical, magical woods.

The magic's in your heart.

The magic's in your art.

The magic's in your songs.

The magic, it's not gone,

from the mystical, musical, magical woods.

Pride, courage, and tenacity.

They create a feeling that sends an unknown force pulsating throughout your body.

When present,

they can make a difference.

One who laughs in the face of danger.

One who completes impossible tasks,

A force so bright,

that nothing can dim its glow.

Shame, fear, and irresolution.

They create a spine-chilling sensation that can terrorize even courage itself.

A feeling that every creature knows too well.

It forms the hesitation that clouds judgment.

The wave of discomfort crashing over you.

One who runs at the first hint of danger.

One who gives up when it's hard.

Pride, shame, courage, fear, tenacity, and irresolution.

They do have something in common.

They are just words.

And, yet they unpack so much.

Too much even.

Lily Mulhall

Determined.

A soldier fights on a battlefield,

Hungry, tired, determined.

She dodges bullets left and right,

Controlled, courageous, determined.

She will not give up, no matter what,

Strong, honorable, determined.

Friends and foes fall all around her,

Unstoppable, bulletproof, determined.

Faded.

A bang with pain,

Blurry, blinding, faded.

She falls down,

Beat-up, battered, faded.

With the rest of her soldiers, on the hard dirt,

Shaky, worn-out, faded.

She lies still,

Tired, dilapidated, faded.

Resilient.

She can recover,

Resolved, steadfast, resilient.

She *will* come around,

Strong, decided, resilient.

She *can* and *will* stand and fight with the rest of the soldiers,

Hardy, tough, resilient.

She rises.

Strong, determined, resilient.

She fights.

Ferocious, resilient, determined.

Lost and Found

A young prince, destined to rule.

A Fae child, seen as a monster.

A chance meeting within the woods.

Two lives intertwined by friendship,

Casting aside previous prejudices,

For years to come.

Laughter among the trees,

Warm, even as the seasons grow cold.

Royalty and Monster, two halves of a whole.

Young boys, now almost of age.

But duties call for the prince,

A promise is made.

I'll return.

Months pass in the blink of an eye,

And the forest is graced by a presence again.

But his other half is gone.

The only trace that remains is a note,
Carved into their tree.
I'm sorry.

Rage

Grief

Madness

Too many emotions for one to feel.
Too much for one to drown out.
Too much for one to forget.

The world moves on.
A prince becomes a king,
And the land doesn't grieve for those it doesn't know.

The full moon shines at night,
Reflecting light of a dagger,
A dagger meant for the king.

A strike is blocked,
Metal clanging in the silver glow.
A hooded figure on a windowsill.

An Assassin and a King exchanging blows.
A silent fight,
None willing to shatter the silence.

A hood slips to reveal a face.
Familiar as sunsoaked laughter in the leaves,
A face holding memories from the Forest.

Angry words of questioning thrown around,
Each from a place pushed deep down,
Hidden within a heart.

Glazed over eyes,
Unhearing ears,
The stench of magick in the air.

A realization,
A revelation
Of the truth.

Two figures dancing in the night,
One a pawn in a chess game,
One a King desperate to break a spell.

A dagger infused with light,
Stabbed into a shoulder,
A last attempt to break a curse.

Time stops
Eyes become seeing,
Ears become hearing.

A Fae collapses
Into the arms of their King,
Tears pouring from both.

Whispered apologies,
Hushed pleas for forgiveness,
Broken off with a kiss.

Two halves

One whole again

Intertwined by love.

Dancing In London

The clouds wept while the sky boomed
The ground stunk of soot and mud
The air was cold, and the moon was bright, full of frustration and anger
Puddles filled the city producing big splashes when someone walked past

Anna, in her soaked gown, danced away elegantly while holding James tight
They gracefully posed, their feet in rhythm
Together trapped in an alternate universe
Everything unsettling turned into flowers and rainbows inside their minds
James smiled as the rain poured down, and together kept dancing
They danced all through the stormy evening, together like two chains desperate to link

When the air was clear, the sky white
James began to grieve
Anna had turned cold and cruel
The girl he once loved washed away in the storm
Slowly Anna slipped away from James
With feelings of anger and sadness, James sat alone.
The blood rushed to his cheeks in a red flurry as he began to cry.

James knew that she did not love him anymore
His heart sank to grief
He knew the day would once come when they tumble off their path together
He deserved better, someone who could sing to his heart
He just wanted to be happy.

James began to subdue his sensations of sorrow

Instead of continuing to weep or torture his heart further, he escaped outside

In the rain once more, when the air was dark and groggy

He joyfully waltzed by himself.

The dark clouds turned into sunbeams as he happily marched along

Singing and humming, he tried to block Anna out of his mind

He turned all his anger and sadness into movements

His feet splashed in the puddles as he rapidly moved them so elegantly

He turned the bad into good once again.

The anger that had bottled up inside James turned into joy

He began to love his life by himself and accepted it,

He was happy.

He spent the rest of his fulfilling life with a positive outlook

And did not get fed up with vexation or misery but unearthed joy.

Senior Division

The essays, poems and stories in this book have been printed without edits as they were submitted to the writing competition Express the Music 2023.

I fell in. The water grabbed me and held me down. Water shoved into my nose and foul tasting water flooded my mouth, I jammed my eyes shut as they burned with the dirty water. I was slammed and flung, my limbs failed and jerked as I bounced off rocks and rolled through uneven currents. White water cascaded in rivers through thick layers of eroded smooth rock. The day's brutal sun pierced the thick brown water, making it hard to see as it pierced my eyes.

Then, just as quickly, it stopped. I broke the surface and smelled the wondrous smell of pines, spitting out water to rid myself of the taste. Gentle currents tickled my skin and the scampering of deer silhouetted against the sea of green filled my ears. Water shined and flared in my eyes as I blinked away the dirt.

Then, the current quickened, tugging me along as the water churning stopped being so gentle. Quickly, I began to dip through gaps as the river descended into a rocky trench, the green falling out of reach. The water chilled and bit at my skin, shadows fell across the water, turning it to a dark, ominous black. Then ahead, I saw a cloud of mist, slowly rising and catching the sun. It was beautiful, then I heard the roar, unlike anything I had heard before. *A waterfall!* I began to swim with all my might, slamming my hands into the water as I continued to slide backwards. Then, I felt the water fall away from underneath me. For a second I felt weightless. Then the wind began to buffet my face as a second stretched like silly putty. Bang! I was in the water again, swirling and twisting in a sea of dirt and debris. I grabbed and felt rock, then I pushed up launching myself out of water.

I was again in a gentle stream, encompassed by a tunnel of thick evergreen trees swaying softly in the wind. Water bubbled as I struggled to again remove the taste of course dirt and brown water from my mouth. My nose was running viscously as I moved gently, but rapidly

down the river. *I've got to get out of this river.* I began to swim towards the shore, then, the shore dropped away, hidden behind steep dirt cliffs as the river sped up. *No! This is what happened last time. I have to get the edge and try to climb.* I began to swim violently churning water. I grabbed at the cliffs digging my hands into the mud clawing at roots sticking out. But the river pulled me off as my fingers left channels in the wall. Then I began to hear it, the roar. I closed my eyes and pushed away. *Here we go again.* Again, I flew for only a second before falling below into the churning storm of water. Raging currents threw me and dragged me down, holding me like weights on my ankles. My lungs struggled as water shot like jets through my nose and filled my mouth.

Again, however, it just stopped and I surfaced again in a calm, tranquil river. My eyes adjusted to the bright sun as I quickly searched downstream for what was next and, to my horror, saw yet another cloud. I began to push to the shore with all my strength, my arms feeling like lead weights and my legs burning like someone had lit them on fire, even as I was barely moving them. Each inch was a mile. It was no use. *Here it comes again!*

Dust In The Wind

Peter, like many of his high school classmates, was setting out from his small, rural Kansas town into the gaping jaws of a Big 10 college. The trip down went quickly. He was listening to what his dad always called “degenerate music” through his partially blown out speakers. The unsavory lyrics and heavy bass made his heart beat faster. Of course, the song was very sexually explicit with aggressive misogyny, and the boy could only grin as he thought of what college parties must be like. He did not notice he had just driven past his old elementary school.

University was glorious, and everything back home seemed so small, but Peter didn't mind. The enormous campus and the loud cheering that college football provided drowned out all of his memories of home. He let it take him over, and as he began feeling more and more alive, the weekly calls home became less frequent. The opportunity for freedoms he had never experienced swept him away as quickly as the time it took for him to drive there. After letting his impulses rule for the first few months, he realized he had never been so happy.

“Fort Scott, Kansas is really only dust in the wind,” he would joke. He didn't even feel guilty.

One Tuesday, he found himself in the back of his chemistry class wondering how his little sister was handling her freshman year of high school. The memories they shared growing up together ended so abruptly that it just now dawned on him that they no longer slept with only a wall between them, but now with rivers and roads and cities in the way. He would never wake her up for school again, share bored glances at the dinner table, or be there to scare off her future boyfriends. As the realities of fall settled in on the bustling campus, he soon realized he could no longer smell his mom's cooking after church on Sundays. His small, undecorated dorm felt like a

shell of the bright blue painted room back home that reflected his phases of boyhood. As the barren walls began to feel as though they may be closing in around him, Peter only denied the thought that he may be homesick. No amount of school spirit, sweaty fraternity parties, or even scantily clad fake blondes could take his mind off of home. Everything slowly went silent. Peter had become bored. He continued to navigate the nuances of college courses and Greek life, but in his mind, he was just 12 years old, playing cards and sitting on the familiar wooden porch above the family of rabbits living in the steps.

When the comforts of Christmas break arrived and freed him of his now tedious routine, Peter traveled back to his modest childhood home in the middle-of-nowhere Kansas. As he drove the familiar route, he began to experience a sensation larger than life. A rush of nostalgia, longing, and thrill all at once almost caused him to pull over. Everything around him seemed so different, but it was just the same. The elementary school stared at him this time. He imagined the scraped up boy with an ugly bowl-cut walking out of the front doors, beckoning him back inside. The familiar church bells near his house only caused an uncomfortable lump in his throat. It sounded foreign, like a song he had never heard. Tears welled as he pulled into the driveway of his parents two-story farmhouse. In the window, he could see the new golden retriever puppy his family had just welcomed home. He wondered if his inner child had been reincarnated in the form of a yellow dog, not wanting to accept its absence.

Peter pulled the key out of the ignition, causing his dad's favorite song, "Dust in the Wind" by Kansas, to abruptly cut off. He sat, eyes wide, with his hands gripping the wheel of the same truck he started driving when he was just 14.

Peter, a man now, allowed the jarring epiphany that he had grown up to wash over him one last time.

On The Edge

The woman shook out her hands. She smoothed them on her outfit. Breathe in. Breathe out. Her ribs ached with the effort. She looked back, and her partner smiled encouragingly at her. But, if she were to reach out, she thought she might be able to trace the anxiety etched on his face with her fingertips. She turned back around, facing the formidable frozen stage. The woman exhaled once more before pushing off.

Her skates cut the ice as she slid into view. The music began with her skating figure eights, quickly building speed. Faster, until her heart stuck in her throat. The triumphant music sounded, and the woman's face filled with glee. The woman bent her knees, lowering herself to the ground, as her skates drew spirals in the ice. Her partner slid after her. They joined hands, but instead of holding her close, he threw her off. In her mind's eye, the betrayal burned her as harshly as a raging fire might, and her stomach dropped.

She fell into a slump before gliding away, following the even terrain of the ice. The music swelled, reverberating in the woman's chest. Her imagination brought forth a scene, showing a group of royals congratulating her for her dancing. She slowly straightened, watching as her partner skated circles around her. Her attention turned back to the scene in her head before he arrived next to her.

Tears streamed down her face as she thanked them profusely. But, as the woman watched, she began to choke back screams. They silently closed in around her. Their smiles grew twisted and evil. They whispered praise, telling her she was loved, that she might be the one to save them, but the pressure had grown too strong.

She ran out of the grand double doors, and into the night. Sleet battered at her bare arms and she shivered. The bitterly cold snow numbed her feet, but she did not care. She ran, pushing her legs, despite her heaving chest. As she sprinted, the woman began to notice a sleigh keeping pace with her. Lit by a single lantern, she saw a man reaching out for her. Her brain told her no, but her heart screamed yes.

She leapt, and he met her halfway, catching her in his arms. The horse-drawn sleigh carried them away into the trees, as they embraced. The flickering light of the lantern made the forest and its shadows seem almost inviting. The horses began to slow, whinnying and neighing, and the man and woman were forced into reality.

Lowering the woman from her position above his head, the man gasped for breath. At first, it seemed there was no noise, only movement. Everything felt like it was slow motion. The audience sat, captivated. Then, all at once, they stood, clapping in earnest. The crowd cheered passionately for the man and the woman who told a story with skates.

The pair clasped arms and bowed deeply on their skates. The noise became frenzied as they straightened. Their eyes shot to the judges, who seemed to be scribbling intensely. They watched. Everyone, figure skaters and the audience alike, waited. The scores went up, revealing—

All tens in bold letters. The woman collapsed as sobs ripped from her throat and her husband caught her, kissing her head. They held each other close and blinked away the lingering adrenaline, choosing to laugh, instead. The dancers laughed for no emotion filled them but pride and overwhelming relief. They skated off, crying and smiling the whole way.

A Dream Come True

Today is the day I will burst into the air on the Luna. Which is the only spacecraft ever to have the abilities to surpass the known universe. I sit back in bed thinking about what I am about to experience and I am just completely flooded with emotions and thoughts. This has been my dream since I was just a little girl. I used to look out my bedroom window every night observing each star, noticing how they gleamed back at me inviting me to join them. I can't even begin to imagine I could get this far in my life, grasping onto that dream. Here I am now going to fulfill my long-awaited goal in life. My heart is racing faster than a cheetah pursuing its prey, just knowing what I'm about to experience. There are so many thoughts tucked in the back of my head. What could happen if my oxygen tank brakes? What if the spacecraft loses power? What if we run out of fuel? "Wooh ooo" I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself. I don't let these thoughts consume me. I just bring myself to the thought of the planets, stars, solar systems, passing by the ship shining brighter than a brand new light bulb. Just imagining this long awaited accomplishment is about to become a reality for me. This is what I have been waiting for my whole life. I get to make history. Who knows what could be put there, maybe I will make a new discovery, or maybe even see an alien. The possibilities are endless. After that reflection I now decide it is time to get ready for my excursion. I get up, make my morning coffee blacker than the depths of the oceans. I drive up to the station, more nervous than ever. I see my two other pilots and feel a weight lifted off my shoulders. We all suit up, putting on all of this heavy gear that feels like bricks getting stacked on my back. Once all of us are ready we make our way to the platform to get on to the Luna. As I walk on to the platform, I see hundreds of people in a crowd. All cheering louder than fan girls at a boy band concert. I find myself wandering to the bad thoughts again and I shut them out. I am about 10 steps away from the spacecraft and it is just beautiful. The very tip of it is bright silver and the sun is just beaming off it creating a gorgeous illusion of just complete brightness. I take my last deep breath and step inside. The doors shut and I put my helmet on and I immediately know this is what I am meant to do. The countdown starts. Five, four, three, two, one, lift off!

Sun. Rain.

A seed dropped on the sidewalk. A small piece; a living thing that has a chance to live. It can flourish into a beautiful blossom or die forever, forgotten. A small battle in the eyes of others, but most literally one of a lifetime for the poor seedling. The final outcome is not in its power but more in others around it and the environment in which it is placed. It can try all it can to win but end up short, wishing it had tried harder.

It dreams of a place suitable to grow. The concrete poisons the seed. It gets stepped on and ignored by hundreds. Finally, one person kicks it into a crack in the ground. A lucky chance to survive. Sun. Rain. A sprout grows. Sun. Rain. A small flower erupts from the brown soil. It is hanging on for its life. It dreams to live in a suitable place where its simple needs are being met. The flower known for its beauty is being crushed by its environment. It has very little given to it from the ground and even more taken from it.

A seed dropped in the garden. With nourishment from the ground and space to grow it is effortless for it to flourish. It is watered daily in its first few days of development and growth. In perfect conditions. Sun. Rain. A sprout forms. Sun. Rain. A flower begins to grow. It shimmers in the morning light. A small plant with tiny sharp thorns on its stem. Protecting the fragile flower above it. Not only providing protection but support. With dazzling color, a sweet scent, and rows of delicate petals, it is the image of beauty.

Then all at once a weed appears. Hungry for blood. A naturally occurring killer. Taking from both the healthy and the weak. Attacking others to keep itself alive.

The weed reduces the limited space from the flower in the concrete crack even more. The flower struggles. It endures this conflict for many days and then strikes. It regains the land that was once theirs. It prevails. After its many battles before this was just one more hurdle in its way.

The flower in the garden is attacked. The weed takes up space that the rose took for granted. The flower struggles. It had been coddled since its conception. Never having to worry about its demise, this small flower did not know what to do. How to fight back and protect itself. The flower had been coddled to its ultimate demise. The once-happy landscape, now dying from the inside out.

Months later the remaining flower, with its roots in the concrete, is stepped on, crushing all living parts. It dies. A bare wasteland is reverting back. Sun. Rain.

A Battle Frozen in Time

I gaze at Tom, his golden hair dull from being inside, watching silently as I plan our attack. Tom acknowledges the gravity; the kingdom's fate rests on my shoulders. "Are you gonna eat that apple or wait until it grows into a tree?", he chuckles. I throw the apple, laughing as it hits him square in the face.

I stare at my brother. His childish mind thrilled to fight, while mine is frantic. I keep calm for the army's sake, while the war cries from the enemy lines resound with ear-shattering echoes. The war has begun. I turn, expecting to see charging soldiers, but they appear frozen. The enemy, the leaves, the wind, the river: all frozen in time. Tom's armor shines in the sun, his face glows with excitement, already running towards the enemy. Throwing the quiver over my shoulder, picking up my bow, and raising my shield, time unpauses as if someone resumes an untold story. My arrows fire one by one, felling enemies in Tom's blind spots. Alex, my most trusted warrior, cuts through enemy lines as if they're an apple. An apple! I scan the armies for Tom. There! Five soldiers surround him. I sprint, tackling Tom into the bushes. Once Tom and I are out of sight, the fighting resumes. The soldiers are stunned, for the child that stood in front of them is gone. He assures me, "Will, I'm fine!" Is he telling the truth or being stubborn? "Are you sure?" I ask. "Yes," he says begrudgingly. "You?" "I'm the big brother. Don't worry about me," I say, slightly shaking. Tom notices but doesn't speak. "Listen, the last thing we must do to finish this war," I pause, "is kill King Stefan. His army will collapse." He nods and I continue, "When I say, 'run', you run!" I turn to the chaos in the deep river valley, waiting for the perfect opening. Three...two...one...

"RUN!"

We jump from the bushes, pulling swords from sheaths, charging at Stephan, cutting down all in our path. I lead, Tom hidden behind. Weaving between soldiers, we leap over rocks and fallen comrades. It's heart wrenching to look down and see the faces of friends but we must carry on. Stefan approaches closer and closer, but he never turns to face us. At ten paces, Stefan spies me. Waiting for me to make the first move, not knowing that there are two of us. Tom jumps out to the right; Stefan's expression pales for a second, then returns to stone. We charge, swords colliding, sparks flying. Tom closes in on Stefan's horse with ease, nicking its leg and throwing him from the horse. His foot catches in the stirrups, the horse rears its head. Stephan lands flat on his back with a loud thump. Then silence. He staggers up, his sword drawn but clearly dazed, his vision blurry. Tom and I stand in front of him, ready to finish this fight. Stefan swings his sword and falls face-first. Passed out cold. "Well, that was disappointing," says Tom, hiding his smile. I laugh, thankful that it's over! The enemy spun on their heels, running toward the hills, away from our army. Our kingdom. Our families. We cheer triumphantly!

Marching home, our spirited hearts sing ballads of our heroism. Our success will be chronicled by scholars, forever remembered by history. Tom and I sit on the hill, his golden hair reflecting the sun's rays. Silent, we know exactly what the other wants to say: Thank you for fighting by my side. Instead, Tom laughs, "Thank God you didn't die, you're a terrible swordsman!"

The Journey to the Eternal Flower

Johan was a 19-year-old Swedish boy who lived in the modest town of Soglio. It was a village with mountains in all directions. He grew up here. After his homeschooling, Johan would explore the area. His favorite spot was a waterfall that created a beautiful river. He named it Rainbow Falls. No words would ever be able to describe it.

One day after camping, he went home to his family of 5 where his younger sister Alice met him on the edge of town in tears. After asking what was wrong, Alice said, "Father got sick." They both run back to their cottage and upon entering their father's room, a doctor stands up to greet them and tell them the unfortunate news. "Peter has a stomach infection. A very rare one where only an estimated 1 in 500,000 people survive. I give him another week to live." The doctor leaves and Johan refuses to believe this. After talking with his father and planning goodbyes, he goes to crazy old Eric who went insane years ago talking about eternal life. The village shut him out and Johan too wished for his downfall. But with no hope left, he went to talk to him to see if eternal life was really true. Eric claimed there was an Eternal Flower that brought endless amounts of life to the world. It was rumored that whoever ate its petals would receive immortality. No one knew its location as it was hidden deep in the mountains.

With the mountains being Johan's home he figured if anyone could find it, it would be him. So he set out on a journey to find it. He figured it would be located where the most luscious areas were as it gave endless amounts of life to the world. So he set out to the prettiest location he knew, Rainbow Falls. As he arrived he realized that from here on out he wouldn't have a familiar understanding of his location, but growing up he knew to leave trackers so he could find his way back. On his second day of journeying, he followed the area that seemed to grow in size, feeling more alive than the rest of the mountains. Four more days followed. Johan was losing

hope knowing that even if he did find, he wouldn't make it back in time. But as he hiked over the peak of a mountain he saw it: a meadow of flowers and in the heart of it, the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, the Eternal Flower. With his spirit returning he regained his energy and ran to the flower.

No more than a foot away, he began to grab his shovel to dig it up, but paused. He realized this flower was giving life across many mountain peaks. Taking it would most likely mean this meadow would disappear, Rainbow Falls would disappear, and the luscious mountains he grew up in would soon become dull boring rocks. As tough as it was, he knew he could do no such thing. He hoped one day another young kid would grow up like him, adventurous and living their life in the mountains. With mixed emotions, he hiked back to Soglio. The week passed and he expected to return to grief and sorrow, but walking into his cottage he saw his dad smile and realized that the Eternal Flower had reached out and touched him.

Well Played

The first thing that came to my mind when I was listening to “The Great Gate of Kiev”, was the feeling that I get when I play a baseball game. You may think that the only thing you need to focus on is making the play, hitting the ball and winning the game, but there is so much more and this musical selection takes me through all of it.

The smooth quiet tone of the music in the beginning reminds me of the preparations that start even before I take the field. The honor and excitement of putting on my jersey, mentally preparing for the game, thinking through all the different plays and what we need to do as a team to play our best. The music captures all these feelings right from the start.

As the music begins to build for the first time, the feeling of taking the field with my team and putting all of our hard work to use is captured in that moment. We know we have skill and determination to win, but the other team also feels the same way. As the music gets louder and faster it makes me think of the battle that is ahead of us. The excitement of the music continues just as we do when the umpire shouts “play ball” and the first pitch is thrown.

The music begins to transition back to a more quiet sound and this makes me think of how serious the game really is. How all of our coaching and practice will be put to the test, but then out of nowhere the music changes to something loud and forceful. It is at this point that it makes me feel as though a struggle happens and then a victory. Which is how a baseball game feels as well. The quiet, smooth sound gives you the sense of hope and confidence that victory is yours, but then with one big crack of the bat everything changes. You find yourselves fighting to get back what you lost. During this small section of the music I am reminded that you can't be too confident while playing this game because it has a way of taking it all away with one pitch or

swing of the bat. So many emotions come through at this point in the piece that it makes me realize how special this game really is.

You must give everything that you have to the game and even then that may not be enough. But the game must go on like the music. As the music continues my thought goes to the fact one person can not play this game on their own, you have to work together as a team, just like an orchestra. You have to work together to accomplish not only the possibility of winning the game or finishing the piece, but you must trust that everyone else wants the same thing. If not the game and piece will fall apart.

Yes the game of baseball is played on a dirt field and the idea of winning is the goal, but the other side of the game is friendship and trust. You have to know that you can trust your teammates to be there for you and as the music continues to the end it gives you that sense of comfort. I have won and lost many games, but the real win for me is playing the game and being a part of a team with some of my best friends on it. This musical piece really made me realize how lucky I am to be able to play the game I love and make lifelong friends. Well played!

The Sword and the Hill

The hill before me was so colossal that I couldn't see over the top. But I was brimming with triumph. I knew that the flawless feeling would carry me as far as I desired. So I began my ascent slowly, taking care not to trip over the dozens of fallen soldiers. I almost felt sorry for the thousands of poor souls who would never return to their families. However, it was difficult to feel sympathy for those who had spent their entire lives looking for a way to rip my town and everyone in it apart. I viewed them as roadblocks in my path. If I spent too much time pondering over what was lost, I would lose sight of what I had gained.

My first struggle occurred when my foot became caught beneath the torso of a rather large soldier. When I collapsed to the ground, the extent of my exhaustion became clear. As I struggled to regain my footing, my muscles ached with every minute movement. I groaned in agony, wanting nothing more than to lie down on the soft grass among the bodies. Nobody would take the time to determine who was hot and who was cold. I would finally be able to drift off into the blissful stupor of sleep.

No, I turned my head upward to glance at the hill's summit. Compared to when I was at the bottom, it felt a great deal farther away. But as I surveyed the hilltop, I was overcome by a familiar sense of victory. I was impossibly close to the finish line. I was the last alive. If I ceased now, the glory would be lost in the sea of fallen soldiers. I stabilized myself, set the bulky metal armor in place, and wiped the blood from my cheeks. I continued upward, focusing on putting one foot in front of the other.

My knees shook from hours of clashing swords. My brain was fuzzy. My chest heaved with every labored breath. Yet, none of these sensations ever grew strong enough to drag me to my knees in defeat. Despite every limb and organ begging me to stop, I pursued the summit.

The peak of the hill was directly in front of me. The perilous ascent had finally paid off. I came to a clearing; there were no bodies at this altitude. The lack of fallen enemies contributed to the preservation of the wonderful scene.

I was unable to breathe as I gazed upon the town I had fought so hard to save. I could feel hot blood dripping down my face from the numerous cuts I'd endured. Despite this, I did little to stem the tide. I was enthralled, and the breathtaking scenery made my heart race. The sunset cast a stunning array of warm colors across the simple wooden houses. Spring had arrived. The delicate scent of pollinated flowers wafted freely through the soft breeze.

I had never seen a more beautiful sight.

The fallen souls beneath me were, in a way, poetic. I was above them, both literally and metaphorically. The feeling of triumph multiplied tenfold. My chest grew warm with pride.

I had won.

Well, we had won.

I must give credit to those who contributed to this victory.

I drew my sword from its sheath. The metal reflected a gorgeous spectrum of warm tones. I grinned, satisfied with what I had accomplished.

“So long, old friend.”

In the hopes that I wouldn't ever need to draw the sword again, I threw it to the ground.

Farmland

Martha Brauer dashed out the front door of her family's farmhouse, her leather suitcases and spare pieces of clothing in hand. She had finally done it. After months of debating and planning, she had mustered enough courage to leave for good. Martha's feet carried her faster than they had ever gone before. She ran through her family's cornfield, past the rusted farm equipment, and towards the all-too-familiar woods. All she had to do now was make it through the trees to the road on the other side; that road would take her to the train station.

Tears of joy rolled down her cheeks. No longer would she be a simple farm girl: overlooked by everybody, and cherished by none. Up until now, her only purpose in life was to have children, milk the cows, and ensure that the beds were made. Martha Brauer did not want that life and she certainly did not want it for her future children.

"Marty!" she heard her father's familiar voice shout from their run-down, white farmhouse, "Marty, come back here right this instant!"

Martha did not dare to look back. She had decided to leave, and she refused to waiver from that decision for one moment.

Her father was part of the reason she resolved to run away. Lately, her dad's drinking habits had returned and, with it, his temper. Martha loved him as only a daughter could, but she was finished. She knew the reason he had started drinking again was that he believed his life had never amounted to anything. She couldn't let that happen to herself.

The trees blurred together as Martha sprinted through the woods. She trekked over each stone and fallen log agilely as she had spent almost every day as a child in the forest. Her hand-me-down tennis shoes made soft thumping noises in the grass as she ran. The birds sang

their familiar tune and, for the first time since she could remember, the weight of her burdens was lifted off of her shoulders.

Martha's yellow bicycle, which she had stashed the night prior, stood at attention against a rotting tree stump. She swiftly attached her bags to the rack and started her journey to the train station. Her hand occasionally dug around in her pocket in fear that her ticket had fallen out somewhere along the road. It was there each time. It was rooting for her, she thought, rooting for her to make something of herself.

The rote hum and jangle of the bicycle chain told her otherwise. Martha Brauer had spent her entire life within a five-mile radius of her family's home. She had no experience in any world outside of her town's grocery store and church. Her days consisted of tucking tattered covers around smaller Brauers and kneeling to kiss them goodnight. As the oldest child, she was the one responsible for her siblings; she was the one who had been pre-destined to stay.

Martha took deep breaths in and out, in and out, in and out. The train station slowly came into view behind a mound of hay bales. Steam peacefully billowed out from a train arriving from a distant city. People exiting the train rushed around, their smiles turning to grimaces as their eyes first laid upon the colorless, flat fields spread out before them. Martha Brauer inhaled again and placed her hand in her pocket to grasp the ticket one last time.

War Torn Organ

Wholly ironic
Bells.
Gleaming, chiming,
Golden crying,
Singing of a
ghost city.

Perhaps those horn players are dead.

Fingers that once danced upon the brass
Aching, holding, clutching unto
A melted,
twisted trumpet.
Original purpose little more than a memory,
The instrument of war, buried in the chest,
Akin to the notes,
Far more physical now.

The hand that balances the mallet-

Lowers without an order,
Separated from its owner,
No longer able to hold anything.
Pale white, empty,
As arm, and body, and soul
Evaporate.

The organ player who pours himself into his music-

Flees,
Leaving behind his instrument, half of himself,
With not a sound of protest.
For he understands, this conflict is greater than he.
Why mourn?

"Shh." A child holds a hand to their mouth,
Eyes- glassy, wide-
At attention.

Tracks crest the horizon, a beat in time,
A setting sun,
A bell,

The church bell?
Or the war bell?

What's it matter?

It is the last bell.

The organ,
With its silent, beautiful pipes,
Looks to the sky,

As if asking God,
On behalf of those who can't,
Why?

And as its pipes twist and curl,
Overtaken by heat,
Torn apart by shrapnel,
Painted by blood,
At mercy to the brush of ego,

It cries, on behalf of those who can't.

The Epitome of a Woman

The desert is a dry place where life is scarce.

Some might consider the desert lonely and desolate.

Not many life forms can withstand the harsh and sweltering weather that hovers over the dunes of sand.

Lonely beings live in the desert and fight to survive, including a tall cactus.

Her whole life depends on her rough and spiky outer appearance which protects her lifeblood.

She stands tall day and night, she endures the blazing heat and the blowing sand.

Her arms reach out towards the sun, both cursing and praising its scorching light.

She scares away enemies and friends with her outer toughness, but she lives a lonely life inside.

She provides refuge for many; her shadow graces many plants and animals who have been baked by the sun.

On the inside the cactus is vulnerable, easily harmed, and soft, but still she stands tall.

After months of stretching her arms to the bright sun, the sky turns dark, as black clouds roll over the dry and rocky hills.

Loud thunder roars in the distance and lightning strikes.

Her enemies run and scamper in fear, for a greater predator has begun to plague the desert.

The sky opens up with a hammering torrent.

She is pelted with rain, hard like rocks, thunder rolls, and lightning surrounds her being, but still she stands tall like a ship in the night.

She perseveres through the downpour and protects herself from harm.

The water wipes away the grime, and seeps into the ground.

It washes through the roots of the cactus and she is refreshed.

In the morning after the darkness, the orange sun lights up the sky with a palette of colors and paints the rolling hills rusty red as life returns to the desert.

The sun sets the desert on fire with vibrant reds and oranges.

After the long awaited shower, the water-deprived plants' flowers bloom and grow.

Her long shadow is once again cast across many budding plants and crawling animals.

She stands tall as the hot sun again is cast upon her back.

She looks over the desert, now in full bloom and full of life, and is satisfied.

Her strong and powerful arms reach towards the sky with thanks and the sun warms her body.

As she resumes her position as protector, loner, and survivor, she mightily stands tall and continues her days in the desert.

Glory On High

The sun cascaded its rays of glory over the rolling hills
The great forests, the broad grasslands, and arid deserts
all were basked in the beauty of heavenly light
And all the creatures of the Earth,
from the tiny warblers of the woods
To the grand elephants that wander the plains,
looked toward the vast expanse of still sky
whose soft and shimmering blue stretched further than the horizon could
carry it
and wisps of clouds fluttered through it like the wings of a butterfly
A glorious sight to behold

And the Earth was still
In the majestic day that surged forth with the angelic illumination from the
sun
One could hear nothing but the clement winds die down,
a flow of soft notes that faded away,
only to spring forth with new life until they roared again
The beauty of the gentle silence persisted as if the universe itself had gifted it
upon creation

A wondrous sound indeed

But as the day marched onward, the beauty began to fade

Like the erosion of rock, the light began to be chipped away

The sun was setting, and a darkness approached

It devoured the land that was once surrounded by splendid light

Slowly consumed like the snake does a mouse

Soon the sky was no longer the great range of grandiose oceanic blue
but a void of black nothingness that hid away the proud and shining sun

However, ever so slowly

small lights appeared

One by one they came

Distant stars of galaxies unknown

And with them came the moon

Gliding through the pit of darkness like an eagle surfing the currents of the
wind

And soon the whole sky, once devoid of light

Was rekindled by the help of the twinkling of shimmering stars

So countless were they that it was as if the sea itself had erupted all its salt
into the sky

And once they had all emerged from the backdrop of darkness
The sky was transformed into a mosaic of unfathomable amounts of sparkling
lights
Led into glory by the glowing moon
they claimed the sky from the abyssal darkness
Victorious in their battle
They rested, presenting their light for all on the Earth to see

And the gleaming beauty of the stars and moon gave rise to a new hope
No matter the darkness ahead, there is always a light in the void,
always a beacon in the chaos,
Always a light that is stronger than any darkness that tries to conquer it

Ella Bruner

Darkness

The utter lack of light

Darkness

It surrounds me

It surrounds everyone

Darkness

It expands, because who are we to tell it to stop?

Darkness

Some days it seems as though the dark is a lighter hue than the day before

And others it seems like there are figures of light dancing around us.

But despite that,

Everyday the darkness gets darker,

It gets blacker,

It gets angrier,

I,

I get angrier

Everyday I get closer and closer to the finish line,

My finish line,

Waiting just for me

It waits and waits,

until finally I ran past it,
I didn't expect it to hit me like it did,
The darkness dimmed,
and holes of light began to peek through,
Until suddenly,
all I could see was light.

It burned,
I had never seen a brighter light before this,
It was fascinating

I knew the day would come where the darkness came back,
I was ready,
The light just hurt,
It reminded me of the pain I would have to go back to,
It was cruel,
It was unearthly,
It ended everything that I thought I knew

The darkness comforted me,
If the world was dark,
nobody could find me,
Nobody could hurt me,

I found peace in MY darkness.

My father once said,

“Don’t let yourself be alone,

that's the worst punishment of them all”

But I think his logic is flawed,

Being alone is the greatest feeling,

So what if nobody talked to me, I have myself

Everything was so okay,

Here,

Here in the dark,

Until the light came back

I don’t understand who is doing this to me

I don’t understand who would wish this on themselves

I don't even understand what this feeling is

It’s hot

It’s different

It's scary

But I supposed,

what change isn’t scary

Months and months go by and this feeling doesn't go away,
Suddenly, it doesn't feel like my skin is burning anymore,
The sun is bright,
And warm,
But it reminds me of home,
I don't understand this feeling.. happiness?

Is that the difference between dark and light?
Happiness?

I pray that I never go back to my comforting dark
The light may be scary,
But at the same time,
its not

It's a wonderful sensation
My once mind who had the opportunity to be beautiful could now fully take advantage of..
Life

Life was a gorgeous concept,
The thought of it made me feel whole

I talk to people now

It turns out people might want to talk to me for reasons other than hurting me

It's marvelous

I wish I had known then what I know now

But if it was up to me,

I wouldn't change a thing

If this is what it takes to achieve happiness,

Maybe the world full of dark was worth it

The Gate to the Heart and Soul

The Great Gate of Kiev,
A majestic, grand design,
It stands tall and proud,
A masterpiece of art divine.

As the orchestra begins to play,
The music fills the air,
A sense of wonder and awe,
Envelops those who are there.

The strings are played with skill,
The brass and woodwinds join in,
A crescendo of sound,
That fills the heart and soul within.

A feeling of grandeur and pride,
As the music swells and grows,
The Great Gate of Kiev,
An enduring monument that knows

A feeling of tranquility,
As the music softly flows,
The Great Gate of Kiev,
A beacon of peace that glows.

No bounds, no limits to its might,
A symbol of a nation's soul,
It towers high and strong,
A beacon to the world it knows.

As the music reaches its peak,
The Great Gate of Kiev,
Is brought to life,
And in its presence, we feel

A sense of awe and wonder,
A feeling of pride and joy,
The Great Gate of Kiev,
A masterpiece of musical art,

That stirs the heart, That soothes the soul,
And leaves us feeling whole,
A treasure to be cherished,
Forever in our hearts, it is ingrained.

Julius Peel

A victorious parade under the guise of glory
The people's ignorance so bliss
the truth of the story
the mass's minds miss

even through triumph, there is still loss
through our fallen friends and foes
we now know the cost
and exchange woes

through the dead we realize life
and the second chance
we have been given
mercy...

The Dawn of Spring.

While I watch the sun rising in all its glory,
I sit and ponder over the time that has passed and the end of winters story.
No more shall the harsh winter winds blow past the once joyful woods,
And soon the forest will be filled with livelihood.
For winter has taken its toll on all those who live around.
Never more will the grass be a golden-brown hue coloring the ground.
The trees and their months of baren limbs,
Will soon bear leaves and twigs for the birds to trim.
Flowers will soon sprout and bloom
And no longer shall there be gloom.
Animals gather awaking from their slumber
For no longer shall winter be their tormentor.
The grass will grow evergreen,
And frozen lakes will turn to aquamarine.
As the new dawn starts to break
The life of the forest will no longer ache.
For winters time is up and done
And spring is here for everyone.

Sara Rogers

The Parade:

I open my door to watch the parade.
People in my city now dress in color and march by choice.
Clomping feet and crashing symbols cheer out their pride
In my now beautiful nation.

I hear my son stir as he wakes,
Eyes pressed firmly shut as I
Quickly close the door and
Sweep him into my arms.

I bring him to the window and he is greeted by
Green, red, yellow, blue, marching.
His eyes crinkle again as a grin spreads across his face.
“That could be you,” I whisper.

I crack the window open to hear, noise erupting;
Too much joy for such a little one.
I wrap his head in a soft cloth so we can both listen.
“All that noise can be you too!” I chuckle as I pull him close.

...

I look forward every year, now more than ever, to see the
Green, red, yellow, and blue march willfully,
Reminding me of the life my son has now.
A glimmering horn presses to his lips.

Even two-hundred feet away I know it's
The boy who worked so hard to play
In the parade his mother showed him
Thirteen long years ago.

He knows I'm listening for him
through every window.

A Letter To Heaven

You were the brightest soul
Your smile sparkled and your eyes glimmered
You always had a warming heart open to give the biggest hug
Until one day I did not realize it was my last

My heart ripped to pieces while it was torn apart
I sat in awe, numb from the news that circled around town

I prayed the gates of Heaven would be open to you
Gold above the white glittering clouds
I prayed that you entered Heaven peacefully
The sound of rhythmic trumpets playing
The sun shining brighter than ever before

I was angry and in denial
I found myself lost in a dark void

I began to look at life a little differently
Things began to be more meaningful
Not as big as they seem

I started to grow

I acknowledged some of the most colorful skies I have ever seen

The bluest ocean I have ever put my feet in

The whitest snow that has ever fallen

I learned to love life a little more

And to tell my friends how much they mean to me

The sunsets have never been so colorful

The sun's rays have shined a little brighter

Heaven has been everything and more

Since you entered the golden gates