



# Winning Entries

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# **My Head is in an Oven**

Poetry - 1st Place

by Ross Bazzichi

My head is in an oven, my patience wearing thin.  
My head is in an oven, no clue how I got in.  
I just know I can't get out, no matter what I try.  
    Shouting,  
    Screaming,  
    Punching,  
    Kicking  
    Finally, my thoughts run dry.  
Trapped inside that oven the heat begins to rise,  
    Almost in an instant, my brain begins to fry.  
As the heat continues climbing, my tears, they turn to mist.  
With your head trapped in an oven, one surely can't exist

## 4 Walls. 1 Window

Poetry - 2nd Place

by Agustin Garcia

There are four walls and a window  
Four walls and a window  
4 walls. 1 window

There's a door too, but that's negligible  
For all it matters, there could be four doors and a window  
Doesn't matter. Negligible, remember?

Gray, white, white, white  
Window on white

Now this window, this wonderful, gorgeous window-  
Is falling apart. The insulation is tearing  
The wind goes through and out the door  
(It doesn't matter that the door is open, ignore it)  
The screens held together by tape, poorly  
Drapes drooping, devilishly dead

Doesn't open, doesn't close, doesn't do a window's thing  
Unlike the door  
(Ignore the door, for god's sake)-

This window, this wonderful, gorgeous window  
A dash of purple, droplets of pink, sitting softly on sticks  
Splotches of green, greener in the distance  
Soothing fields of blue never to be touched

Oh, to be the birds that sing and fly and play  
Oh, to be the birds that touch those fields  
Oh, to be the birds that feel the wind firsthand  
Oh, to be the birds that wake so early  
Oh, to be the birds, so lucky and free

Needless to say,  
This window should open  
But it doesn't  
The door, however-

Tic Toc Tic Toc

4 walls

Tic

1 window

Tic

Is a broken window simply a wall with a hole?

Tic

Feel the wind firsthand

Oh, to be a bird, so lucky and free

Oh, to be a bird, flying like me

# **An Accident in Three Parts**

Poetry - 3rd Place

by Mel Gross

## *I. Grace Street*

When we moved in nineteen years ago, it was  
a rooming house. There was a kitchenette in the laundry room,  
a mattress in the foyer, & an orchestra  
of crickets in the basement. The house was ninety years old  
& not aging well.

My father winced at everything: the gas bill,  
the water damage, the splintery floorboards. But my mother  
saw past the peeling paint. She called the rotted colonial columns  
"good bones." She imagined color & curtains in place  
of cobwebs. And most of all, she loved the wrap-around porch.

It was an unbelievable investment. It was every penny  
& more. It was a monstrosity.  
But she loved that wrap-around porch.

So my father fixed everything. He patched  
the walls, sanded the floors, laid down sod  
in the backyard. He even built  
the stairs. You can tell how much he loved her  
just by walking up the stairs.

## *II. The New House*

It was an accident—we weren't ready  
to move. But when that blue-tiled bathroom & the cup  
of its perky little bathtub came into view, my mother & I paused  
together in the hallway, and we just knew.

Of course, my father still had to be sold on it, and he's not

an easy man to convince. But he heard the delighted spread  
of my mother's laugh in the kitchen. He saw the expression  
on her face. And he just knew.

So they took out a bridge loan &  
crossed their fingers hard &  
bought that little house  
across the city.

### *III. Better Bones*

The new house across the city  
has a big, happy backyard full of flowers  
that my mother calls "weeds." It has a big  
cracked concrete stoop & a big  
ugly knocker on the front door. Best  
of all, it has a little blue room just for me, flooded—& I mean  
absolutely flooded—with light.

# Why Lyon Kaltz Was Late

Fiction - 1st Place

by Sara Acevedo-Bonilla

Lyon Kaltz's classmates waited every morning for Lyon to be late. He would always tell a story on why he was late, and for many of the students in classroom 306, it was what really woke them up in the morning. They would then go to their parents and siblings and repeat Lyon's story. Lyon's teacher was constantly waiting for the day his excuse could be proven a lie. Often the story included why he did not have his homework, which made the teacher even more determined to prove him wrong. Many don't know how, but something would always happen that would prove his story true. Most just supposed he just had the best luck in the world. Today, however, Lyon was especially late to class, and his classmates were fidgeting in their seats awaiting his arrival. Finally, just as the clock hit 8:45 a.m., Lyon burst into the classroom. His brown, mopy hair was wet despite the sunshine outside and his clothes were damp, with his shoes making a squishy noise. The students glance at each other, waiting for the show to begin. The teacher clucks her tongue, showing her disapproval.

"Late again, Mr. Kaltz," the teacher slithers. Lyon looks at his teacher with a wide look.

"Oh, Mrs. McLaren, you won't believe what just happened," Lyon says with a glint in his eye. His classmates start smiling, ignoring the work in front of them.

"I'm sure I won't. Why are you late Mr. Kaltz?" asks Mrs. McLaren with a raised eyebrow. Lyon takes a deep breath.

"Well, Mrs. McLaren, I woke up and started getting ready extra early so I would not be late for school. Once I was ready to go I said goodbye to my parents and hopped on my bike. After only two minutes in my ride school, I had to hit the brakes on my bike cause there was a cow in my way. I almost hadn't seen it, cause I was enjoying the scenery. The cow stood in the middle of the road while munching on something. I didn't want to go around it and leave it alone in the middle of the road because I didn't want anyone to accidentally hit the cow with their car. So I got off my bike and started trying to move it. I pushed it hard again and again, but it would not budge. I tried pushing on its side, then I tried pushing from behind, but the cow would not move! Then I tried yelling really loudly and jumping to scare it, but it just looked at me with a bored look. I decided to get my parents' help, so I rode my bike back to the house, but my parents had already left the house. I got back on my bike and rode back, but the cow was gone! I looked around, trying to find it, but it was nowhere in sight. At this point, I checked my watch and saw that I could still get to school on time if I tried, so I got back on my bike and started riding. I decided to try and take a shortcut, but when I turned around the corner of the street..." Lyon pauses for dramatic effect, thrusting his arms out, "there was the cow, and it looked like it got all its friends because there were about thirty more cows behind her. I tried to go back but there was one behind me and I accidentally rode on its tail. It mooed super loudly. All of the other cows looked at me with a creepy look, so I went around the one behind me and started riding away. Then all of the cows started mooing super loudly and I heard a loud sound behind me. Without looking back I could tell they were coming after me. I started pedaling harder, trying to get away, but cows are faster than I thought. I kept riding and zigzagging, but I could

not lose them. Then I had an idea: if I went towards Main Street they would get scared with all the cars and stop chasing me. So I went in that direction. When I cut through the main street, cars started honking. I went through the park and looked behind me, but the cows weren't there.

"Grinning with victory, I looked ahead just in time to see a pond right in front of me. I tried to stop and put the break on my front wheel but all that did was fling me into the lake. My foot got stuck in the bottom mush of the pond and I almost drowned! Thankfully, my foot got unstuck and I was able to swim back to the top." Lyon looks at his teachers with an innocent look, "I lost my bookbag in the pond. Sadly, my homework was in my bookbag. I tried to swim back down to the bottom of the pond to find my bookbag but I couldn't find it. So I got out of the pond and got back on my bike. Looking at my watch again, I realized I was now late for school. So I started riding towards school. Just as school was in sight I heard a loud noise that can only be explained by a herd of cows. The cows found me! Determined to make it to school, I pedaled harder. Just as the cows were gaining on me I hopped off my bike and ran into the school. Then I ran as fast as I could and got here to the classroom," Lyon finishes panting. His classmates look up to their teacher to see how she was going to react. Mrs. McLaren frowns, wrinkling her nose.

"Mr. Kaltz, how do you expect me to believe this story? It is absolutely ridiculous" Mrs. McLaren asks. Lyon shrugs and opens his mouth to speak, but just as he does the loudspeaker of the school turns on.

"There will be no recess outside today. We are having a cow situation and we want no children hurt," says the principal. Lyon's classmate's grin, suppressing laughter. Mrs. McLaren frowns, annoyed that once more luck was on Lyon's side.

"Sit down, Mr. Kaltz. No need to interrupt my class any longer," she says turning around to face the class. Smiling wide Lyon walks to his desk nodding hello to his classmates the whole way. After he sits down all the students in classroom 306 prepare to wait another day to hear another adventurous excuse for why Lyon Kaltz was late.

# The Florist

Fiction - 2nd Place

by Cara J. Hadden

I've always loved flowers. They remind me of my mother. She taught me that a well-cared for flower can comfort a lost soul or mend a broken heart. I just wish flowers could explain the visions.

I was about seven when they started. My mother took me to her 'office'—a small flower cart permanently stationed just off Main Street—and sat me down on the curb while she sold flowers to tourists and husbands in trouble with their wives. My brown hair waving in the wind, I watched people step into stores and leave with crinkly plastic bags. It was then that I made eye contact with an old man in a black suit about to cross the street. My head went fuzzy, and in my mind's eye I saw the man in the same suit, but younger and happier. He was dancing with a woman in a white dress with sweet pea flowers braided into her blonde hair. As the man twirled her, the woman looked at me and pulled a pink sprig from her head. She then pressed the flower into my hand and whispered, "Tell him I had to say goodbye." With a wide smile, the woman returned to her loving husband before finishing the dance with a dip.

The vision dissipated as quickly as it appeared. Once again finding myself on the edge of the curb, I glimpsed the old man shaking his head and stepping onto the crosswalk. Filled with an odd sense of purpose, I grabbed a sweet pea flower from my mother's cart while she talked to a customer and ran after him.

I caught up to him on the other side of the street and tugged at his jacket to get his attention. His eyes widened in shock when he saw what I was holding.

"Who—what—why do you have this?" the man spluttered.

"The lady in white that was dancing with you told me to tell you she had to say goodbye," I said, raising the plant closer to his face.

Tears pooled in the man's eyes as he took the flower. "My wife wore this in her hair when we got married. It was the happiest day of my life." He sniffed. "I buried her today."

"Maybe that's why she wanted you to have a goodbye flower."

The man silently broke into a smile and hugged me, his hands shaking. "Thank you, little one. Thank you." When he let me go, he gave me a five-dollar bill and placed the pink flower in his lapel before walking away with a lighter step.

I never told my mother about the vision. Or the dozens after that. Frankly, I didn't understand them enough to know how to tell her. But over time, whenever I viewed a piece of someone's life connected to a flower, it almost always led to more business for Mom. She never discovered my secret power, but I could tell she was proud of me.

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Fifteen years passed, and eventually, so did Mom. When I took over her flower cart, the visions became more frequent, but selling flowers kept her close to my heart.

One humid summer day, I was putting up an umbrella over my cart to protect the plants from the heat when I saw a young woman carrying a toddler with ginger hair. They were wearing threadbare sweatshirts, and the toddler looked like he hadn't bathed in a long time. As I made eye

contact with the mother, the world went fuzzy, and in my mind's eye I saw the woman wearing an elegant gown in a hotel room. The bathroom door opened to reveal what appeared to be an adult version of the redheaded toddler wearing a tuxedo and a medal depicting the profile of Alfred Nobel. The woman all but flew to her son and hugged him tightly before he presented his mother with a bouquet of pink carnations.

I was jolted back to reality the moment the mother walked past my cart. One of the colorful plants must have caught his eye, because the little boy pointed in my direction and yelled, "Pretty!"

The mother turned to the flowers and said softly to her son, "I don't have money for flowers, sweetie." The toddler grew fussy when she walked away.

"Wait, ma'am!" I grabbed a pink carnation off my cart and caught up to the woman. "I couldn't help but notice your son liked my flowers."

The son clapped his hands with a smile, but the mother scowled at me like I was about to steal her kid. "He's, um, allergic to pollen, so he can't be near flowers." Her eyes darted from side to side before shuffling around me, the little boy now starting to cry.

"That's too bad," I said before she was out of earshot. "This particular flower is for free today."

Seemingly against her better judgement, the woman hurried back to my side, plucked the flower from my hand and placed it in her son's. His smile was bright enough to light outer space. "Thanks, lady. I think you made his day."

I shook my head. "No, you did. A pink carnation symbolizes a mother's love. If you keep doing what you're doing for him, he'll accomplish great things one day. I know it."

The expression the woman gave me all but telegraphed that she thought I was nuts. "Ok, lady. Thanks again."

"You won't think I'm crazy in twenty-five years," I said under my breath, the toddler waving goodbye while his mother turned the corner.

I returned to my cart to find a handsome man standing in the shade of my umbrella, talking on his phone. He looked around my age, wearing a t-shirt and blue Bermuda shorts that clashed with his dirty blond hair.

I stepped behind my cart just as he ended his phone call, and when we unintentionally locked eyes, the world quaked with a violent ferocity. In my mind's eye, I saw the man lying in a field of red roses, seemingly asleep. After a moment, he sat up and stared at me with cornflower blue eyes and smiled like he had seen the sun rise over the horizon. In the vision, I felt myself lay down next to him, and he reached over to pick a rose just above my head. "A rose for my Rosie," he said before he gave me the flower and kissed me gently on the lips. I felt a sharp pain—the thorns were digging into my hand—but I didn't care so long as I was with him.

"Did you see that?" The man under the umbrella asked me when I grabbed my cart for support until my head stopped spinning.

"Of course I saw that, I always see stuff like that, but—" I did a double take as his words set in my foggy mind. "Wait, you saw it too? That's never happened before."

"The field, you, me, the roses. And—oh, you're bleeding." He gestured to my right hand, which was dripping blood from wounds that could only be from rose thorns. "Is this, uh, normal for you?"

"Kind of." I wrapped my hand with some paper towels from under the cart. "I get visions a lot, usually scenes from other people's lives that involve flowers, but no one else has ever seen one of my visions before. And I've certainly never been hurt before." I knew I was rambling, but the man's blue eyes shattered my composure and I couldn't stop myself.

"Wow." He looked completely dumbfounded, grasping for words not yet there. "And do these visions come true?"

"So far, yes. Besides, the subjects of my visions often become good customers, so I can't complain." I immediately cringed. "I promise I'm not a scam artist, I just see things I can't control so I try to make up for it by giving flowers to people who need them."

The man laughed. "Don't worry, I believe you. I saw you with that mother earlier. It's inspiring how you bring people joy." He cleared his throat awkwardly. "Well, since this vision is bound to come true, I should probably introduce myself. I'm Hunter."

My hand throbbed a little as blood rushed to my cheeks. "I'm Rosie. Nice to meet you."

"I don't suppose I could buy you a rose, Rosie?"

I smiled. "Sure, what color?"

"Red?"

I raised an eyebrow. "It's the color of love, but rather expensive. Are you sure?"

He held my injured hand and lightly kissed it. "If I truly saw a glimpse of our future, then it's worth it."

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It's been five years since my last vision. It's also been five years since Hunter and I married. My mother was right. Under the right caretaker, a flower can bring joy, peace, and love to anyone willing to accept such a simple gift.

# Stone Smiles

Fiction - 3rd Place

by Autumn Ryan

The air felt empty. She heard no wind, no shouts from children playing in a distant field, no birds singing in the trees above; even the leaves beneath her feet, sodden with that morning's rain, were silent. Her mind was the same. The echoes of arguments that usually bombarded her on these walks didn't come, even as she contemplated that fact. Her thoughts were wordless, and her feet moved on instinct.

She admired the trees around her. Looking at them, her sense of solitude felt rather ironic: These trees were alive, and had they been able to move she would've been in the midst of a bustling crowd. And yet, she felt utterly alone. But the trees weren't what she came for.

At the end of her path lay a cliff just high enough, with slick black rocks below just hard enough, to strike her with grateful oblivion should she jump. But that's not what she came for, either.

Beyond the trees, and beyond the cliff, there were mountains. Rounded by age, their slopes were so smooth that she could imagine sliding down one like a child on a playground. The sheer size of them held her in awe, but there was more to them than that. Their already soft-looking surfaces were made fuzzy by thick layers of moss painting the dark backdrop with bright shades of blue, yellow, and peach, like streaks from a giant's paintbrush. It was easy to let her mind wander, and she gave in to imagination's sweet escape.

She could see the giant (made of gray stone criss-crossed with jade vines) carelessly streaking the landscape with springy pastels. When he finished, his chair--a solid plateau jutting from five conjoined peaks--sat ready. She watched as he absent-mindedly brushed some brown, oily-looking birds from its surface. They squawked in complaint. The giant caught sight of her and gave a gentle smile before bending to sip from a spring. The birds settled on his broad shoulders, and the quiet stillness of this imaginary world returned, and remained--until it was interrupted by, of all things, wind chimes.

She looked around, only vaguely aware of the reality that still surrounded her. She'd hiked for miles, and there weren't any houses around. A quick search for their source revealed a rope ladder just feet from her right arm.

She jumped. Of all the times she'd been down this path, she'd never noticed it. But there it was, swinging lazily over the deadly cliff and back as if there were nothing wrong with its existence. As if it belonged there, just like the clumsy-looking treehouse it hung from. A brown bird squawked from its roof.

"What the..." A breeze stole her words. Once again, she moved instinctually, this time towards the ladder. She wrapped her hands around the rung just above her head, then began to climb.

It was as if reality hit her the second her feet left the ground. The ladder was as careless as ever, swinging smoothly towards the precipice. A sudden gust of wind from behind didn't help. The ladder's smooth motion became urgent, and it rushed forwards until it was too late for

her to let go. She watched the ground escape from behind her until she was nearly parallel to it. The ladder paused.

She lay on nothing but air, clinging uselessly to this loosely-tied bundle of ropes, the origins of which she had no idea. And yet, she'd trusted them with her life. All it would take was just one slip of a hand or foot, and she'd be falling down, staring at...

The sky was beautiful. She saw it as clearly as if she was laying in an open field. Its blue was richer than she knew possible, and ordinary clouds would have seemed yellow in comparison to the pristine white of the ones in that moment. The sun would've been painfully bright had the cool afternoon shadow of the trees not reached her.

Unfortunately, she only had a moment to appreciate this before the ladder began its hasty return.

Her descent seemed much faster than her approach. And, whereas before she could save herself by clinging to the ladder, she was now headed straight for a tree. If she'd had more time to think, she would have realized that the top of the ladder wouldn't swing quite as far; if she climbed a few rungs higher, she'd have walked away with only a bruised behind. Or perhaps if she just let go of the ladder as it swung back over the cliff, the leaves would've been a more forgiving cushion. But she couldn't process either thought before the forest echoed with the crack of bone on solid wood.

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She awoke to disappointment. The magnificent blue of the sky had faded to a lackluster excuse for a sunset: dingy orange, like a prison jumpsuit. The rope ladder still swung lazily above her. Upon closer inspection, she noticed one of the rungs was missing, which explained the frayed piece of rope she clutched in her right hand. *Strange*, she thought, having no memory of the ladder breaking. She attributed her confusion to the head trauma she suffered, then stood.

One of the oily brown birds she'd seen on the giant's shoulders stood before her, tilting its head curiously. It was larger up close, its beak fist-sized. It stretched its wings, then glanced over the cliff. It looked back at her meaningfully.

She crept to the edge. The giant's massive stone hand waited for her just below the precipice. Below the hand was the giant's face, greeting her with the same warm smile as before. She felt the bird's greasy wing press against her, urging her to step down. It squawked, then hopped onto one of the fingers. She followed.

As the giant's hand descended, the brown bird flapped its massive wings and returned to the cliff. She watched it peer down at her as she came closer to the moss that had fascinated her for years. The fuzzy covering seemed to wave in greeting, moving as if it were made of many small parts instead of being one thick mat of plant. The giant paused a few feet from the surface. She was close enough to jump, but wasn't sure if she should; one glance at the giant's amiable smile told her not to worry. She took a few steps back, then leapt.

Her feet landed on the moss. She didn't hear the soft thud of an object on carpet like she expected, but instead the unmistakable crunch of hundreds of exoskeletons. A squelch not unlike sticking a spoon into a new jar of jelly followed. The moss began to crawl up her legs. Its thousands--looking farther, probably billions--of tiny pincers flashed in the dwindling sun.

The bird lingered a moment, then flew away.

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*The Sycamore Gazette*  
May 28, 2020

When witnesses reported hearing a single gunshot from Euqseakfak Forest two weeks ago, police expected to arrest a poacher. They searched for less than an hour before leaving, promising the area's residents they'd return if it became an issue. When no further reports were made, the incident was forgotten.

Except by local resident and self-proclaimed "nature guardian" Jay Brown. He claims to be one of the original witnesses. "I knew right away somebody was messing with my woods," he remarked to us in an interview on Friday. "When I heard the police just gave up, I took it on myself to protect that forest." So, two days after the incident, Brown found himself wandering through trees, not sure what he was looking for.

That is, until he found it. "After I looked in all the popular hunting spots ... I decided to check the pretty trail. It leads to this nice overlook on Figment Lake. I really didn't want to find anything there, because if I did, something really weird's going on. But I found something," he told our interviewer.

But what did he find? A trail of small footprints--"probably from a young lady," Brown suggested--that led him straight down the little-used trail to an even stranger sight: a piece of frayed rope laying on the ground. "I have no idea where it came from," he admitted, "but the rest of it's probably over the cliff." He reasoned that since there was only one line of footprints, whoever made them didn't return.

Brown relayed this to police, but they have yet to take action. Speculations have arisen connecting this strange occurrence to the case of a teen girl who disappeared just hours before the gunshot. She is labelled as a runaway, a decision police are unlikely to change. It seems both mysteries are a long way from being solved. The only comfort that we at the Sycamore Gazette can offer the community is a comment from our citizen hero, Jay Brown: "There's no body below that cliff. I made sure of it myself."

# Ancestors

Non-Fiction - 1st Place

by Patience Wallace

I clutch my bookbag to my chest, trapped by my mother's angry gaze. Her lips are pointed, her dark brown eyes are nearly boiling; she's really mad. My stomach starts to flip, realizing I've gotten myself in trouble.

"Did you sit in the back today?" mom growls, daring me to challenge her.

"Yes?" I'm confused, how did she know I was sitting in the back?

"What have I TOLD you about sitting in the back," she yells.

"Well all my friends sit in the back, I don't want to sit up in the front with the kindergarteners! People will make fun of me!"

"Would you rather be made fun of or get in trouble?"

*Rather get in trouble*, I think. "Be made fun of," I reply. "How'd you even see me sitting in the back?"

"When I saw you walking all the way from the back of the bus when I picked you up from your stop. You know better! What have I told you about this, do you not think about Rosa Parks?"

*No, not really*, I think. A painting of her hangs over the loveseat in the living room. Her light brown face surrounded by the warm yellows of a public bus, the purple dark leather of the bus seat stark against her light pink tweed jacket. Her hair is frizzy, a slash of white through the black strands, her lips set in a straight line, the light bouncing off her glasses. I don't really care about her, she died in 1960 or something.

"You should know what she went through so your black butt can sit in the front! And what do you do? Sit in the back like we were forced to do!" I stare at my mom blankly. Yeah we were forced to do it, but that was a long time ago; now we can sit wherever we want. But no respectable fourth grader would be caught dead sitting with the little kids. I briefly think about Martin Luther King Jr., one of the three black role models I had been taught about, including Harriet Tubman and Rosa Parks.

"People died so you can sit in the front. You're disrespecting our ancestors! You should be ashamed of yourself!"

*What?* I think. *Disrespecting my ancestors?*

"If you were smart, you'd find it in your best interest to sit in the front." She moves and I flinch, squinting my eyes as I prepare to be hit. The hit doesn't come, but her thick fingers pluck me, a quick pinpoint of pain in the middle of my forehead. I instinctively rub the spot, my facial expression turning sour.

"Fix your face." She stares at me for a minute, seemingly deciding whether she would punish me or not. "THIS time, you're getting a pass, but if I see you sitting in the back again you're getting in trouble." My eyes bubble with tears, biting my lip to keep from crying; but I manage to give her a small smile.

"Yes ma'am." I nod quickly, putting down my bookbag as she turns away, not wanting her to see me cry.

The next day I sit in the middle of the bus, not daring to go all the way to the back and risk getting caught. I'd turn around and yell at my friends through what felt like 50 rows of seats, complaining to them at lunch about my crazy mother and my "ancestors". We all laughed about it like it wasn't true. Like we hadn't felt less than because of our blackness. Like we hadn't been treated differently than our white counterparts. Like we hadn't feared for our brothers and fathers lives. Like we didn't know about the feeling of deep-rooted shame we were born with, just because of the amount of melatonin in our skin.

It wasn't till I saw the freedom riders, dark smoke billowing from the windows, till I saw the skeleton of a bus being put out, till I could imagine the panic in the bus as people burned to death. It wasn't till I saw the bloated face of Emmett Till, leached of all signs of humanity. Until I saw Martin Luther King Jr., the man with a dream, lying in a coffin.

# Listening From Behind the Counter

Non-Fiction - 2nd Place

by Lillian Lam

Sometimes kids do not understand how hard their parents work to provide for them. I always felt upset when my parents never showed up to any school events, like band concerts. I couldn't participate in any activities outside of school because my parents never have time to drive me. You see, my parents owned a restaurant, and they have to work every day of the week to help support finances. They would spend all day working from the time they get up to late at night, and I would help out after school by being a cashier. I was always taught that you can learn about the world from any job by listening to others, which listening to customers' stories helped me realize. Despite having only a glimpse into other people's lives, I've learned so much about diversity and human connections. Perhaps being a cashier isn't anything special and it also isn't the best job, but it can help you realize how unique every individual is.

People from all stages of life come to the restaurant, and some share their experiences with me. There are parents who come in with newborns barely a week old. Love and excitement of becoming a new parent is always a beautiful sight, and parents who adopt also have the same look in their eyes. I have met a family who experienced transracial adoptions, and the love for their child is the same. These parents spend a lot of time trying to incorporate the child's original culture with their own. Sometimes parents bring in toddlers, which are sometimes difficult to handle. They run around while the parents try to calm them down, but it's all in good fun when they wave me goodbye. Families come in all shapes and sizes, and once there were parents who came in with seven children by their side. Kids are truly a gift of innocence and a blessing in people's lives.

Teenagers are a common sight because they appear in groups when school is out. They talk among themselves, and sometimes they know me from behind the counter. Some stop by to say hello while others come in without a word before leaving awkwardly out the door. Parents of some teens will drop them off at the front door to pick up their food. The purpose is for the teens to learn how to pay for their own things with cash or a credit card. However, it's not always easy when dealing with teenagers because there are times when they do not realize the rudeness of their actions. Many times, parents come in talking about how much they worry about their child's future. They talk about teens getting in trouble with the law, smoking at home, and throwing their hard work in school away. These parents usually tell those stories to receive comfort and teach a lesson to me so that I don't make the same mistakes.

The workforce comes afterwards, and some students join the workforce while others go for higher education. I've met people from all parts of the workforce. Sometimes there are people that are homeless and without a job. They come in to pay with coins, and to say some wise words about reality. They talk about their mistakes and how they are just finding their way through life. These people make my heart ache as I wish them a nice day. Others work in labor-intensive jobs, such as iron mines and construction work. They usually come in with dirtied hands that are black as coal from working on dusty ground. Once a man came in to give me a heavy rock to show the iron formation. Another came in, quite malnourished, talking about how

he spends his days placing asphalt on roads. These people talk about their long work hours and the pain of having such demanding jobs. I have learned so much about these jobs from the workers, who have mobility problems and sometimes walk with a limp.

There are people that come in from higher paid jobs. Teachers are one example, and some are the ones that taught me in the past. There are people with jobs like me, a cashier, and complain about rude customers from their long day. Office workers appear right after work in Polo shirts and dead looks in their eyes. Military workers arrive in uniform and the nation's pride. They are all waiting to return home to their families, the happiness in their lives. Some people are more accomplished, owning a large business. With expensive cars and clothes, they seem to have a league of their own. Most would think that the wealthy would act snobby and pretentious, but the ones I know are kind, down to Earth, and have bright smiles on their faces. I've also talked to people from all parts of STEM: nurses, doctors, engineers, programmers, and scientists in all fields of science. Scientists that are biologists, NASA scientists, chemists, and environmentalists. Conversations with people from all parts of the workforce helps me understand each occupation's strengths and weaknesses. Ultimately, these chats will help me in deciding the right job for my own future.

Diversity blooms where people least expect. A restaurant allows people of all unique differences to meet and interact. Races and ethnicities do not have a boundary in small business because they are all seen as customers that I can befriend and serve. I've conversed with people that trace back from different parts of the world. People all have an ethnicity that they identify as: Indian, Korean, Chinese, African-American, Irish, Russian, German, Filipinos, Mexicans, and many more that I cannot possibly name. Every person has their own culture, and they tell me about some of their traditions. Even though I cannot meet people from every culture in the world, I can still learn about diversity from the different people that talk to me. A person's skin does not identify who someone is, and I've met someone who had vitiligo and talked to me about the condition. Gender and sexuality also do not have a boundary because I've talked to people that are gay, lesbian, transgender, and many more. People have differences but are equal because they are all humans.

I have learned so much from talking to the older generation and people with health problems. There was a customer who changed his lifestyle because he survived a heart attack. There are customers who battled cancer and are grateful for life. A man I've met had larynx cancer and uses an Electrolarynx to talk to me. There is an elderly woman who always wears a nasal cannula because of respiratory problems, and I deliver the woman's order right to her car. Some elderly people have high spirits and tell jokes to get some laughs. However, many people live in nursery homes and are waiting for a family member to visit. They talk about their new grandchildren and how proud they are of their children. Conversations are about how much one visit from family means to them, and these people tell me that I need to visit my parents when I become an adult. Having a family member die without a visit will cause regret that will last in a lifetime. Even one surprise visit can let one person die with peace in his or her mind.

People do not realize how connected their lives are at a local scale. A simple job of a cashier can connect me to people that are different in unimaginable ways. To take the time to listen, to watch, and to understand the stories of customers can make a big difference in a person's understanding of society. It makes someone more understanding of differences and

more open-minded on issues that are local and global. Talking to different people allows for different perspectives on a topic and shows the similarities and differences of people's beliefs from different generations. I always felt that being a cashier wasn't a good or a 'cool' job, but now I think that it is truly a blessing to have this job and learn about the local community and the diversity in it.

Despite many people having differences that makes them seem distant from one another, they can all be connected under something as little as a cashier. Everyone that has talked to me are connected to me and each other because they are all customers and people that shared their experiences with a teen. Some people that come in are children of people who are customers when the restaurant was first opened. Others are new and just moved into the area, and many have watched me grow up from a baby to a cashier. I'm grateful for my parents for allowing to learn via this job and to the customers that share their experiences with me. One thing is for sure: people can be connected by something small such as a restaurant, a smile, and some words.

# **Apollo 13: The Successful Failure**

Non-Fiction - 3rd Place

by Alyssa Kitts

President John F. Kennedy challenged NASA to join the Space Race and in doing so he instituted America's greatest achievement due to his strong desire to beat the Russians. NASA accepted the challenge and soon launched a man to the moon. While Apollo missions were major accomplishments for NASA, the Apollo 13 mission is considered the "most successful failure" because of the crew's quick observations of the problem and the determination of the experts in Houston's Command Center to solve the problem.

President John F. Kennedy was determined to win the Space Race because Russia was much farther along. By 1957 Russia had already launched the first living creature into space, a dog named Laika. Also, in 1965 Alexei Leonov became the first person to walk in space. The first attempted mission for the United States' Apollo program, Apollo 1, was a failure. During the on ground flight test, the ship door got stuck and the men couldn't get out. The three astronauts on the ship died in the fire.

So NASA decided to take it slow and the next 5 missions were unmanned. Apollo missions 2 through 6 were unmanned flight tests to find out how they could get astronauts into space safely and then get them back home. Apollo 2 through 6 went up into space without any astronauts and collected data about how to keep them alive. Apollo 2 studied weightlessness, and Apollo 3 tested navigation and guidance systems. Apollo 4 worked on the heat shield, and Apollo 5 and 6 worked on re-entry and the possibility that man can live in space.

Apollo 7 was the first manned mission. On October 11, 1968, Apollo 7 took flight. It did not quite get to the moon but orbited around Earth. On December 21, 1968 Apollo 8 was launched, this mission was able to orbit the moon ten times. It was also the first manned mission to enter lunar orbit. Apollo 9 got to orbit the earth 152 times and was sent up to demonstrate rendezvous and docking. Apollo 10 was able to orbit the moon for the second time in NASA history. In 1969 Neil Armstrong the Apollo 11 Commander made history by being the first person to walk on the moon and made his famous quote, "One small step for man one giant leap for mankind." We had won the Space Race and beat the Russians. Apollo 12 was the 2nd mission to land on the moon. Then came Apollo 13.

On April 11, 1970, Apollo 13 launched. During the launch, the center engine shutdown, but this did not affect the mission. On the ship on April 13th with the quick observations of the crew, Apollo 13 was saved. The astronauts thought they had felt a hit to the ship, then Commander Jim Lovell noticed fumes coming from the side of the ship and quickly alerted Houston's Control Center. Apollo 13 was headed for the Fra Mauro area on the moon, but all of that changed when they found out the oxygen tank had exploded at 10:07 p.m. on April 13th. Turns out Beech, the tank manufacturer, failed to change the 25 volt heater switch to a 65 volt like it was supposed to. Also the oxygen tank had been dropped 5 years earlier and no one had noticed that the vent tube was out of alignment. They had the risk of losing air and the ship could easily go off course.

Before Apollo 13 took flight, people wondered about the mission because it was set to launch at the 13th minute of the 13th hour on April 11, 1970. NASA didn't pay attention to all of the fuss and continued the mission anyway. Then during liftoff, the center engine broke down, but that was only the beginning. Then on April 13th while in space, the O2 tank exploded. After the explosion they had to use the moon's orbital stream to throw them around the moon and launch them back to Earth. This gave them the record of being the farthest mission away from Earth. Jack Swigert the Command Module Pilot, who unfortunately died of inoperable lung cancer in 1982, was in charge of getting the Odyssey back safe and sound, with the help of Fred Haise the Lunar Module Pilot, and Commander Jim Lovell. The mission was a success and they achieved splashdown on April 17th at 1:07 pm.

The Houston Command Center was a big part of the Apollo 13 mission accomplishment. They produced a solution about the oxygen dilemma and they played a major part in getting Apollo 13 home. The Command Center helped them design a filter made of simple tools onboard to suck in the carbon dioxide so they would have more oxygen. The Command Center also figured out how to get them home safely. They figured out that the crew would have to use the moon's orbital stream to launch them back to Earth. The Command Center had a hard time figuring out a solution because of how little power they had left in the ship.

In conclusion, the Apollo program was very successful. All it took was one footprint of the Commander of Apollo 11, Neil Armstrong to step on the moon to win the Space Race and beat the Russians. President John F. Kennedy gave the American people a goal of reaching the moon, an achievement for which the American people should be proud. While the Apollo missions were great accomplishments for NASA, the Apollo 13 mission was known as the "most successful failure" because of the crew's quick observations of the problem and the determination of the experts in Houston's Command Center to solve the problem and because no one died - the astronauts returned to Earth safely.