

Name: Avery Redlich

Work title "Describe Me in a Word..."

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Award: Gold Key

ne·ol·o·gism — *noun* — a newly coined word or expression. [origin: French]

I adore made-up words. I know, I know: "All words are made-up." The notion that someone dreamt up combinations of letters that became communication, understanding, learning, and empathy? If I could shake Webster's hand, I would. There is such power to language, the way we use it, curiosity prodded and fantasy fulfilled in each neologism. Between my physics labs and *Stranger Things* binges, my thoughts wander into the realm of linguistics.

cogn·pel·a·cious — *adjective* — provoking an insatiable hunger or thirst; characteristic of a feast. [origin: me]

My mind swirls, seeking new words. On this cognpelacious adventure, I forage for phrases, drawn toward living expressions of language. I don knee-high Star Wars socks, eagerly chatting with anyone who recognizes my out-of-this-world accessory. I press play on a sitcom I've watched [REDACTED] times, laughing with friends as if the jokes are brand-new. I wave hello to the familiar Marvel movie intro, preparing to anatomize each frame on the big-screen and infuse it with enthusiasm on my upcoming podcast. Jeopardy-level pop culture knowledge in tow, I find myself dancing with new universes, connecting with more people, thwipping quips: a social butterfly talking her way out of her cocoon.

syn·es·the·sia — *noun* — a condition in which one type of stimulation evokes the sensation of another. [origin: Modern Latin]

I've always been fascinated by the concept of left-brain versus right-. Passionate about various S.T.E.M. pursuits from a young age, oftentimes the sole girl in my classes, I remind myself that my creative lens is not just a strength but an asset. My synesthesia goes beyond visualizing words in conversations; beyond mentally painting shapes and colors when composing music; and beyond my unwavering belief that science IS the color green (I will not debate this). It translates into my ability to think strategically and envision things from new angles.

in·ter·ro·bang — *noun* — a non-standard punctuation mark (?!) indicating a question expressed in an exclamatory manner. [origin: English]

What language is more powerful and unifying than music?! It's a language of feeling, universally understood. A few months ago, I led my temple's high-holiday services (singing in Hebrew) on Saturday and performed in an internationally-televised Mid-Autumn Festival concert (in Mandarin) on Sunday. I was energized by the challenge, gratified to honor a diversity of culture and of thought through song. When my hands tango with the piano, when my shoulder hugs my violin, when the microphone hums in my hand—curiosity and elation buzz in my brain.

em·pact·aeon — *noun* — betterment and amelioration through the application of service, skill, and passion. [origin: me]

Don't tell the Duolingo owl (he's been hassling me about my Spanish lessons for the last year), but math is among my favorite languages. While not everyone follows the same phonetic system, numbers make communicating as easy as pi. In mathematics and beyond, problems need solving—my community can count on me as part of the solution. Whether I'm in the lab aiding in intervention research regarding the effects of PTSD on cardiovascular health or educating national audiences about the dangers of climate change on homeless populations, there is a common denominator: my pursuits of S.T.E.M., communication, and genuine care sum up to blooming empactaeon.

lan·guage — *noun* — the principal method of human communication. [origin: Middle English]

Language is an expression of ideas and emotions—a way to empower others, foster unity, and create change. From fighting voter suppression on text-banking Zooms to speaking in front of thousands at HOSA conferences or organizing and rallying with *March For Our Lives*, I know the power of my voice. As I continue to soak up knowledge and speak out for change, I know it's not my passion for words that is most important: it is my *compassion* when using them that will allow me to positively impact my community and world.

Name: Avery Redlich

Work title: Finger Painting

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Award: Gold Key

They don't all have bridges and ponds, you know. There are other ways to paint water lilies. Claude was more creative than all bridges, all the time.

Endless green hues peek out from behind the endless blues. No—purples. Glowing purples. They were piled high from beneath the canvas, from deep into the wall, as if a vertical, bottomless pool of dried paint creating a portal into art history. Strung across the canvas were delightful clumps of paint. A Monet in the flesh. Why should art be flat on a canvas when its purpose is to make a moment from the past feel alive?

I had dreamed of going to Paris my ENTIRE life. All thirteen years of it. Paris. And here we were. I cried as soon as the plane touched down. I would say there was something in my eye, but it's hard to rewrite that particular moment in history when there were witnesses who remember me screaming, "PARRRRRRRIS!" as the tears started rolling. Maybe there were baguette crumbs in the air?

Claude Monet was a French impressionist painter, largely regarded as one of the greatest painters of all time. He's most remembered in history for his Water Lilies, safely preserved in the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris, France since 1927, just a few months after his passing. His first water-lily series dates all the way back to the year 1897.

If I were to stick my hand through the painting, I would never reach the bottom. I'd only find more of those purples. No—I was right before: greens and blues. There were so many shades, so many stories, layered in those thick plops of paint. Monet left them there as a little bonus, special for me. I could feel it. He was there.

When we were planning our trip, my mom clearly explained that we simply didn't have the time to see every museum. "It's l'Orangerie or the Louvre." I know, I know; the choice seems obvious. *You have to go to the Louvre! It's the most visited museum in the world: the home to the great Mona Lisa!* Not to disrespect Miss Mona, but why would I want to stand hundreds-of-tourists away from a painting simply to say, "I saw it," when I could just watch "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" to appreciate Leonardo's skills?

I stared face to face with the water lilies, separated only by a measly little red rope. My breath was reaching the paint, forever linking me to this piece of history. Claude, is that you?

I had long been obsessed with Monet's Water Lilies. I mean, who wouldn't be?! Apart from the stunning array of colors (the purples, the blues, the greens, yada yada—you may have heard of them), there was just so much texture. As far as I was concerned, no other artist of that era had as much heart and soul—or as much paint—on the canvas as Monet.

Imma touch it. Who thought that?! It was me. I wanted to touch it. Oops. My mom could see it in my eyes. Her eyes warned, *NO, DO NOT TOUCH A MONET.* She clearly thought this was a rule I would have understood prior. My eyes replied with *HEHEHEHEHE.*

There was one guard in the room. And he was turned around. The painting was in no frame—history exposed to the present. If there *was* a camera in this room with priceless art, I absolutely blocked it out of my memory. Eh, whatever. I'm telling this story. There were no cameras.

Before you get jumpy, let's not forget that in the 2022 Netflix movie "Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery," Janelle Monae BURNS Ed Norton's Mona Lisa. Mmkay? That's worse. Fictional, yes, but still a good footing for comparison. And this isn't the Mona Lisa after all, because as we've already established, that's all the way over in the Louvre. Also, I was thirteen. That's not to say that I could make poor decisions (because I stand by this being brilliant and awesome), but to remind you that I was a small child and able to execute this little heist with relative ease (#thirteenyearoldgirlsaretherealrebels). Alright, now resume.

HEHEHEHEHE. My fingers grazed a 3D clump of paint on the lower left corner of the canvas. My mother looked terrified. Her eyes screamed, *YOUR FINGER OILS—IF EVERYONE TOUCHED IT, THE ART WOULD BE GONE*, and my eyes responded with *WELL NOT EVERYONE TOUCHES IT... THEY WOULD BE CRAZY!* I don't know what I looked like (save the ridiculous grin), but I imagine I looked just like Claude. One with the art. Preserved in history and immortalized for the future.

I COULD NEVER WASH MY HANDS AGAIN. LIKE EVER. They had touched a piece of history. Because I had been touched by a piece of history. And now and forever, history had a piece of me. Me—another layer between the greens, the blues, the purples. The piece growing even then, even still. Just as Monet intended. And this particular piece did so even without a bridge over a pond.

Name: Ana Moreno

Work title: Love in All the Words

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Award: Gold Key

Is Love Real?

You hear about love all the time. It has been around for centuries. It is in movies, plays, books, and all forms of literature. Love seems perfect and genuine in fiction, so why is it that there is so much fake love in the real world? Is love like the movies real? Why are there so many children having to pack a bag every weekend to visit their father or mother? Is love real? Or is it something romanticized by the poets?

Love is like flowing water. When you're in love, it feels like you are flowing in a stream, some days it's a calm river and other times you're falling down a waterfall and striking against rocks to the point where you feel like you're drowning. It suffocates you so much that you're forced to get out of the river, and you're just a puddle. In that said puddle, the sun dries you out and that's when there's no more love.

On the other hand, it's a calming stream, sometimes there is a little struggle, but eventually you make it out into the ocean, and the ocean is endless. That love lasts forever. Not everyone makes it into the ocean, but that does not mean that love isn't real.

It is all about the attitude and the maturity of both people in a relationship, you can't be happily in love with someone who doesn't care about keeping you happy. Love and effort go both ways, and both people must learn to be mature enough to apologize and talk things out. You also cannot expect to make it to the ocean if there is no trust, communication, and loyalty between the two of you. There must be that foundation to avoid waterfalls and drowning.

That's why most high school relationships don't last, because we're just kids, and that's okay. You don't need to find your soulmate and the person you'll spend the rest of your life with at age 14 or 15. You have your whole life ahead of you and there's an entire world for you.

As for me, I have not had the best experience with love, but I don't want to stop believing in it because of that. If anything, it made me believe even more in love. I still believe in love because of the way I love. I hope one day I find someone who will love me the same way.

Are soulmates and twin flames real?

Soulmates and twin flames are very interesting aspects and theories about love.

It is said that your twin flame is the person who completes you. It is about how you and the same person were born from the same soul, and it was split into two. This person goes through the same things you do, they have similar experiences, and you feel like you've known them your whole life. It is an intense soul connection where it is thought to be your other half. It is two souls that are always meant to be together. No matter the time, place, or even universe, the two souls will never feel another connection quite like it with anyone else. The interesting thing about twin flames is that nothing can keep them apart.

However, once again, this love can be toxic and can drain each other out. Since your twin flame is so like you, then you must learn to love yourself first. Some people can go their whole lives without meeting their twin flame.

Not everyone has a twin flame, but everyone has a soulmate. The concept of a soulmate is often associated with the belief that there is one specific individual in the world who is ideally suited to be your lifelong partner. This idea is prevalent in various cultures, religions, and philosophies. Some people believe that soulmates are destined to meet and be together, regardless of circumstances or obstacles.

You don't feel the same connection with your soulmate as with your twin flame, but they still bring out the best in you. This love could last forever, and it is so powerful and endless. Your soulmate is supposed to know you better than anyone else, and you carry your soulmate with you forever. No matter what happens, you will also love them. They love you at your worst and at your best, and support and appreciate you no matter what.

Can love be unconditional?

Unconditional love is a concept that many people find hard to understand. Can you really love someone with no conditions?

I believe true and genuine unconditional love is when you love someone, and you accept that they don't love you back. It means loving someone for who they are, without expecting anything in return. This kind of love is often considered to be the highest form of love, as it embodies empathy, compassion, and a genuine desire for the well-being and happiness of the person being loved.

The thing about it is that unconditional love can be very painful. Sometimes you want that person to love you the same way you love them. A love with no conditions is, in my opinion, the strongest love there is out there. It doesn't matter if they put in zero effort, you still love their sweet nothings. Many people may believe that it is simple, but you must endure pain and heartache.

It is difficult to be consistent with unconditional love because what if they're disloyal or decide to leave you? You have absolutely no control over that and some part of you may still unconditionally love them. It is a strong and punishing love, but it lasts.

How has love changed?

Maybe it is because we're in the 21st century, but love is not the same as it was a century ago. In just 50 years, love has developed into a rare concept among young people. Before, people would put more effort into love. They would send letters during wars or go against societal norms to be with the one they love. Nowadays, lust and social media have impacted romantic love. Disloyalty like cheating is more common these days. It is very common to hear about someone cheating or getting cheated on. There is still true genuine love, but it is quite rare these days. Most young couples last about 3 months, instead of 3 years.

Name: Katerina Sutton

Work title :Proud of Me

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Award: Gold Key

After attending school virtually for a year and a half, I was elated to return to campus for eighth grade. Today, I remember it as the happiest year of my life. We were all wearing masks, divided by plexiglass, but we were all together.

I enjoyed all my teachers from the start, but one specifically caught my attention: my English teacher. Mr. Mehr was a sharp, witty man, with piercing blue eyes and coffee-brown hair. He was forty-five, but I thought he looked younger.

He was a compelling speaker, a wealth of knowledge in so many areas. I wanted to be around him for more than forty-five minutes a day, to hear him talk, to see him smile, to watch the look in his eyes when he grinned. Because of the N-95 mask covering the bottom half of his face, I learned to detect the nuances in his eyes; when a classmate humored him, or he was ranting about a topic of interest - always completely unrelated to the lesson plan - his blue eyes brightened, almost sparkled.

After each school day, I returned to one of my two houses, neither of which I could ever call a home. I never knew what would await at my father's house; ever since he walked out on my mother three years ago, he always seemed to be chasing youth.

Before the divorce, my dad was my closest companion. We'd set aside nights where he introduced me to classic movies like Forrest Gump and Dirty Dancing; we volleyed for hours in ping-pong, never keeping track of who was winning; we cooked omelets together every Sunday, chatting about our week while chopping raw onions and peppers.

I entered the house to see a woman with overlined red lips and box-dyed blonde hair leaning on the countertop, holding a drink and giggling at something my father had said. She couldn't have been more than seven years my senior.

"Katerina," my father said cheerfully, eyes glazed over with tipsiness. "This is Yolanda, my friend."

My friend.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said, then turned to him. “I’m sorry, but my English teacher gives us, like, a crazy amount of homework. I should get started.”

I saw myself out and entered the comfort of my room, where I could still hear their loud laughter.

It was jarring when he brought these various young women into our space. He swam in the ocean with *them*, went out to dinner with *them*, cooked with *them*. It was expected that because I was his cooperative, resilient daughter, I wouldn’t say anything. After all, I was the only one he’d ever have at sixty-eight years old. I was the peacemaker, the one who always remained strong so my mother and father could be unstable.

I was starting to understand that he was, at heart, becoming a teenage boy, aimlessly obsessed with living the remainder of his life to the fullest. Now, even when we spent time together, it could never just be us again. I began to see him as less of a man, less of a father.

And though I would not show it, I constantly felt the implications of his lifestyle choices. I couldn’t help the discomfort that stiffened my body when he gathered me in a hug, couldn’t help feeling uneasy when he looked at me in a dress.

I had always enjoyed the English subject, and considered myself a satisfactory writer. One day Mr. Mehr introduced a writing challenge to my class called NaNoWriMo, to write a fifty-thousand word novel in November. He generously offered to help me plan an outline in the weeks leading up to it, and I began visiting him before classes.

Soon the journey began, with Mr. Mehr repeatedly assuring me that fifteen thousand words was a perfectly acceptable goal. But I quickly became fascinated with the idea of creating my own novel, something complex and beautiful and polished that I could someday put into the world. The idea of writing a story that could evoke deep emotions within others, like the kinds of the books I read and loved, deeply intrigued me.

Each evening that month I sat in bed, computer resting on my lap, and typed for hours. Anything less than 1,667 words a day was failure. I was fiercely determined to work on my novel as often as possible, and as quickly as I could; it seemed practically irrelevant that I hadn’t written a single page of a novel before that. By the end of November, I produced sixty thousand words.

Each time I hit a milestone, I pranced up the stairs to Mr. Mehr’s classroom. Occasionally, in a quiet voice before class, he’d even ask, “how’s your writing been?” But his response to my achievements was always the same: a mildly interested “good for you!” or “that’s very nice.”

Mr. Mehr treated all his students equally, so I knew I'd receive no special treatment from him. Yet I still longed for his praise, for him to just once say "I'm impressed", or "I'm proud of you". *What would it have to be*, I wondered? One hundred thousand more words? A fully published novel with his name in the acknowledgments, as the teacher who inspired me to soar?

I shared so much of myself with him, so much more than I shared with anyone at home. I certainly spent more time in Mr. Mehr's presence than I did with my father, and he knew all about my writing, about my hopes and aspirations.

I persisted. Forty thousand words in January, thirty in February, fifty in March. In April, I finally finished the first draft of my novel, at 220,000 words, and still I received no praise from him.

Often, I visited his classroom to ask writing questions. In my eyes, Mr. Mehr was the key to becoming a good author. I was dissatisfied with my first draft, feeling that maybe I'd been a poor writer all along, but he made me understand that writing was a constant journey of improvement - which made it all the more vital that I learned as much from him as I could.

Mr. Mehr was my teacher, but he was also my mentor; he was with me from the very beginning of my story's creation. Through our numerous conversations, he watched it expand and grow in complexity, helping me through plot holes and character difficulties.

He was an intelligent, witty, morally stable man. I wanted him to wrap me into an embrace, but I did not desire him romantically; my attachment was solely emotional. I suppose I yearned for a father - one that would not betray me, one that would always welcome me, to listen, to advise me in turn. And yet my pulse raced when I entered his classroom, I was elated for the whole day when he singled me out during class, and I couldn't peel my eyes off him when he passed me in the hallways. Sometimes, the sensation felt akin to a crush, like my friends were having for the boys our age.

It was heartbreaking to leave my eighth-grade year behind. Years later, I find myself missing the pure, unwavering happiness I felt.

I continued to write, began marking numerous corrections for the second revision of my novel. For many days, it felt as if I was just generating more words and never truly making progress. But as I continued writing and revising, I began to cultivate a personal style and tune into my strengths. One day, while reviewing a scene I wrote, I realized I was finally becoming satisfied with my work - this was a wonderful and surprising revelation. It became easier to measure

myself by the quality of my work, rather than my word count. In time, this has become enough for me.

During my year under Mr. Mehr's tutelage, I pined hopelessly for his praise - wanting to be told that *I* could, that *I* was doing a good job, that he was proud of me. After two years of writing and rewriting, I understood that this praise, this confidence in my abilities, could best be found from within myself. I could not depend on the validation of the man in the classroom I was so familiar with, or anyone else.

With this knowledge, I became free.

Since NaNoWriMo, I've realized that writing is a journey, and mine has only begun. My novel remains a work in progress, and from the first to the third draft, I have learned so much about the writing process.

These past months, I have continued to cultivate confidence in myself and my writing, and I excitedly await the future. I still struggle with being hypercritical of my work, but I continue striving to be more compassionate toward myself.

Many years later, I find myself missing Mr. Mehr and the conversations we had, both about writing and otherwise. As I move forward, in writing and in life, I will remember my wonderful eighth-grade year, and all the gifts he gave me.

Name: Ashlyn Gao

Work title: The Apple of My Eye(lid)

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Award: Gold Key

In fifth grade, I always wondered why I looked so weird in the mornings. After many minutes of careful observation, I realized that the problem lied in my eyes. The skin over my eyes folded over in weird angles, making my eyes look like parallelograms and my expression chronically angry. From then on, I'd look at myself (and other people) not in the eyes first, but at the small crease lying quietly above them: the double eyelid.

I'm sure we've all heard of the dreaded "Asian eye". I certainly have. Picture this: it's any other day in your preschool. A blonde girl walks up to you and innocently asks, "Are you Chinese?"

Well yeah, I'm Chinese.

"Oh, yeah, I could tell!"

How so?

And she pulls her eyes by the corners, her cute, sapphire doe eyes narrowing and elongating into slanted lines.

"Because you look like this!"

Yeah. That was me. What was crazy was that *I had no idea what she meant*. Like, what do you mean, you can tell I'm Chinese? Are you psychic? As I grew up, I too could tell Asians apart from my majority Hispanic and White classmates. But why? I couldn't really tell.

I didn't really know until that fateful day in fifth grade. Turns out Asians have these thin slanted eyes because of the lack of a defined eyelid crease, or double eyelid. Monolids. One lid. One less than what everyone else had.

That struck me quite heavily. *That's* why I look so angry? With this newfound enlightenment, every morning I'd push my eyebrows upwards in order to "enlarge" my eyes. I still looked pretty mad. And when I smiled my eyes would turn into trapezoids.

But go on Instagram and you'll see none of those trapezoids in those beautiful Asian models. And their lids would be lofty, arching, and perfectly American. What gives?

And that was when the ads rolled in. People have literally made products to capitalize off of this abominable insecurity. Tape and glue on your lids! Sounds gross right? Unfortunately, I was definitely in their target demographic. I bought packs of those and used tape to mold my eyelids into perfect parabolas.

My left eyelid specifically had a bit of trouble (and still has to this day). Some days, it would stay high and creased while other days (I call them my off-days) it would lie flat as if I didn't have one at all. My days in seventh grade were determined on whether I had my big double eyelid or my tiny one. It's quite sad to say, but when we had time to quarantine at home, I was glad no one would be able to see my uneven eyes and that I'd have time to work on "evening them out".

To add to the problem, my right eyelid had a completely different size and shape compared to my left. That means that not only were my lids uneven, but any makeup I attempted to put on got simply swallowed — one more than the other — when I would open my eyes. I'd look at old photos, zoom in on you-know-what, and either go, "oooh!" or "oh...".

This lasted into high school. I somehow got my left eyelids to stay tall and creased most of the time. I started focusing on changing my right eyelid to match my left. Unfortunately, it was quite stubborn. It also felt extremely uncomfortable with my left eyelid would "go back down". I could *feel* it was lower.

Fast forward to tenth grade. One day in my AP Chemistry class, my friend did the unthinkable and noticed my double eyelid tape. It was partially my fault: I hadn't done a good job on putting it on that morning, so that sliver of pale-looking tape stood out like a sore thumb from my face. Bashfully, I hushedly explained the entire Asian-girl-beauty-standards-big-eye-big-eyelid thing to him, complete with the signature bashful laugh and eye aversion. I felt ridiculous: I was talking about this to a Hispanic guy with the biggest double eyelids I've ever seen.

Do you know what he did? He laughed.

My heart sank.

In between chuckles, he smiled and said, "It really doesn't matter."

I took off the tape soon after.

A couple months later, I was at an overnight summer camp, and I found the roles *switched*. My friends and I went to the communal bathroom and found our friend Elena standing at the mirror. She was vigorously rubbing facial cleanser over the stubborn eyelid tape plastered above her eyes. I had noticed that she wore tape every day (I can never forget what that thing

looks like). She told me she wore it so much that she began to tell people that she wore it to tape her eyes open to stay awake in class.

“You know you don’t need to use those, right?” I had told her. “You look great without them,” I had reassured, accompanied by the high-pitched unanimous agreement of all our other Asian girlfriends.

I truly meant what I said. Yet why did I feel so weird saying it? It’s strange; it felt foreign and bile in my mouth. I knew these words were not words I would say to myself. I looked around and saw many eyes. Grace and Bella both had cute monolids that seemed to perfectly frame their faces. Nancy had pure double eyelids. Ellen had ‘soft eyelids’ that somehow were so Ellen. Even Aien and Emma, unofficially voted as two of the three “hottest girls” in camp, had monolids.

But truly, all of them were beautiful regardless of how their double eyelids looked.

Then there’s me, the other voted nominee, uneven eyelids and all. I felt hypocritical. But being surrounded by girls who supported each other made me feel better.

July 16, 2023, 2 in the morning, a random trail at the ranch we were at. It was pitch-dark outside, new moon and all, but we’d been standing there so long that I could see everything. If I looked up, I could see an arm of the Milky Way, a large starry slash across the sky. If I looked down, I could see white gravel and our flashlights and phones in a neat pile. And if I looked straight forward, I could see the boy I liked.

I was too shy to look up, but I knew he was looking at me. I became ever more conscious of my left eyelid, as of course it had to be an off-day.

Yet he still said, “You have pretty eyes.”

To my utter surprise, he didn’t care about the stupid .5 millimeter difference my variable eyelid made, even after I enlightened him about such a phenomenon. He still kept his statement. He still kissed me afterwards.

I still think a lot about eyelids. I still have my off-days sometimes. My eyes still swallow up my makeup. I still have weird angry angles. I still stare into the mirror a lot. But, as a lot of things in life are,

“It’s just a freaking line!”

Name: Giuliana Leon-Velarde

Work title: The Secret Ingredient

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Award: Gold Key

When I'm overwhelmed to the point where I feel like I'm forgetting how to breathe, I bake. I found a video on how to make "Minecraft cookies" years ago. I am still not sure if it is a sugar or butter recipe, but it is one of my favorite recipes to make. There is a step where you have to mix it by hand. Every time I do it, I can put all my strength and energy into it and let go, maybe only a little, of what has been clouding up my mind. So, whoever said that the secret ingredient to baking is love was wrong.

Through squeezing, crushing, cutting and mixing, my secret ingredients are worry, stress, and anxiety. There is a magic in baking. Almost every ingredient, eggs, flour, baking soda, salt, fear, are things no one would eat raw. But together, through a careful process, they can transform into something delicious.

It's like how a ball of yarn can turn into a sweater with the right amount of effort and imagination. My grandma tried to teach me how to knit and sew when I was younger. While she'd make me and my sisters dresses for our dolls out of old costumes, we'd sew two squares of fabric together one stitch at a time. I was too young for it, my small fingers pricked themselves more often than the fabric, so I had to stop. During the boredom of quarantine, I ordered some hooks and yarn online to learn how to crochet. Although it's not sewing or knitting, each time I'm making a stuffed animal, I think of my grandma. This time my movements were precise, and my results were what I wanted. I enjoy giving most of the things I make to other people

It is the magic of creation, of making something with the purpose of sharing it. I feel a sense of community in my baking. Most recipes serve more than one serving, so I make it not only for myself but for my family and friends. That's my favorite part, getting to know I made someone's day a bit more enjoyable. When I was in elementary school, every time my friends would come

over, they'd ask for my mom's Brazilian carrot cupcakes. She would always bake them the night before. She is the reason I started baking. My mom would always ask me to help her in the process, each time allowing me to complete one more step until I was able to make them on my own. It was her way of teaching me a part of her culture. But, for me, it was my way to spend more time with her.

Last summer my parents challenged me to make a dessert recipe for the family restaurant. I made a key lime pie by modifying, multiplying and mixing different Peruvian and American recipes I found online. I spent countless days making and remaking it to near perfection, cutting and squeezing 30 limes for each cup I needed. It was like planning, writing, editing, and starting a story over and over again, a creative and tedious process.

The hardest skill to master was the patience I needed. The waiting and anticipation, trying not to worry about it turning out badly, learning to trust myself and the process. I still have to step back sometimes, let time run its course until the timer goes off. Because I know that if I follow every step and instruction, even if I have to start over sometimes, everything will turn out well in the end.

Name: Saiya Mittal

Work title: A Collection of Memories

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Award: Silver Key

On that Sunday, the winds shook the palm trees and the rain pelted unlucky Floridians. I rushed inside, into a sterile room furnished with floral couches and chairs. Slowly, people began to stream into the lobby. I looked around the room, unsure of what to expect. *Would they enjoy this? Would they be bored? What if I messed up the notes?* My heart raced as I unpacked my instrument and set up the music stand. After a few minutes, all the floral seats were filled, and I put my bow on the string.

I was at the Sterling Aventura Nursing Home, getting ready to play violin in front of a couple dozen of its residents. This was my first time performing in a setting like this; all of my previous performances had been at recitals or competitions, where the precision of my notes and rhythms was of the utmost importance. I knew that the music was meant to uplift the people who sat before me, but my mind was plagued with self-critical thoughts. *What if they didn't even like classical music?*

I started playing violin in the first grade. After hearing one of my friend's parents play, I became fascinated by the instrument's rich, vibrant sound. In the beginning, I loved every aspect of playing violin: the accomplishment I felt when finishing a piece, the outlet it provided for me to express myself, and the challenge each new piece presented. As I grew older, however, although my love for the instrument did not diminish, it gained complexity. The competition that music presents, whether it be hours a day of practicing, or traveling to compete on the weekends amidst school work, imbued this pursuit with stress. I found that the only times I really performed for others would be when I was competing to win a prize, or in a recital when I was focused on not messing up any notes. Sharing my music with others became a challenge for me, as each performance carried with it the burden of perfection.

At the nursing home, I moved my bow across the strings to play the opening movement of Bach's Violin Partita No. 3 in E Major. When I nervously stole a glance at the audience, I noticed that many of them had begun to smile. Some of the residents were looking at me, others were looking at each other. Halfway through the piece, one woman (whose name I later learned was Linda) stood up and began dancing. The other residents sat up straighter in their chairs and looked up at her in admiration. I smiled, shifting my gaze between my page and her dance.

It was only at the end of my performance that I realized that I had played a note out of tune and skipped an entire line of music. But the most surprising realization came after the first — I didn't care that I had messed up. In fact, no one did. No one was there to rank me, or to compare me to someone they'd heard before me. It was only about the music, the emotion, and the experience. A wrong note, even a skipped line, held no significance within the walls of Sterling Aventura's lobby.

A few minutes later, Linda walked up to me.

"My daughter used to play the violin," she said, seemingly deep in thought.

"Really? That's amazing. I loved your dancing," I told her, and she smiled.

"My son used to play the flute," another resident chimed in.

"And I played piano a long time ago!" a third resident added.

I smiled, excited to witness this spur of energy, excitement, and conversation between the residents who had sat in silence minutes before.

"Will you please come again soon? I loved hearing the music," Linda asked.

“Of course I will.”

When I saw Linda dance, I realized what playing music meant to me. It wasn't about what competitions I won. It didn't matter how difficult the piece I was working on was. If I missed notes and played the wrong rhythms, one thing still didn't change: the joy that music brings.

As I walked out of the nursing home, the rain outside had subsided into a gentle drizzle. I reflected on the experience I just had. For the residents of Sterling Aventura, music provides a welcome disruption to their daily routine. A moment of reflection, a smile, the energy to get up and dance — that's what music is about. More than that, music is a form of transportation. It bridges decades, generations, and time to bring someone back to the brightest moments in their life. That's really all that life is in the end: a collection of memories.

Name: Lily Naider

Work title: A Magical Trek

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Award: Silver Key

The sun is burning, blazing. The day is clear, with few clouds to protect us. Sweat pours down my face and also pools under my arms. It seems impossible that it could be this hot since it is only 10 a.m., but we have been climbing for the past four hours.

Earlier, my phone alarm buzzed at 4:30 a.m. We had arrived in Rwanda the previous day, and so I awoke reluctantly, heavy with exhaustion. My older sister, in the adjacent bed, managed to jump up excitedly and quickly, even though we were equally jetlagged. She sprang, and I sulked. I slowly donned my thick green hiking pants, two nylon shirts, and a fleece jacket. My wool sock-covered feet struggled into my hiking boots. My pink checkered bandana encircled my head. I filled my backpack with water, snacks, and bug spray. I was ready, fully armored.

I stood at the gates of Volcanoes National Park. Despite the layers I wore, I found myself shivering as the first rays of sun encroached on the dim sky. The lead ranger adeptly divided us into groups of eight. Each group of eight would visit a different family of mountain gorillas.

I looked around and was surprised by the number of elderly. Several people ambled to the starting point, haltingly, saddled with heavy bags of fancy cameras and telephoto lenses. Hadn't they google what this experience entails? Didn't they understand that this could be challenging hiking at a high altitude with unpredictable weather? I worriedly anticipated that my family of five, relatively young and fit, would be part of the group that had to hike farthest. I was correct.

We begin our arduous climb. The eight of us are joined by a lead tracker and several rangers with guns (for the possible wild buffalo). The rangers are eager to carry our limp backpacks. We don't have bulky photography equipment. I speak with the pleasantly smiling ranger carrying

my bag. His English is limited, but I learn that he may have been a poacher or knows a former poacher. He shares a story about a silverback's cut-off hands turned into ashtrays for sale.

This isn't a hike up a marked mountain trail. There are no posts or paint. We don't know exactly where "our" family of gorillas is. I follow the ranger, who attempts to clear the dense brush for us. The forest seems impenetrable and smells musty. The ranger happily swings his machete, humming as he slices through the enveloping growth. As the vines fall away, new menacing branches seem to jump immediately into the briefly vacated spaces.

My mom turns to me, sweating and smiling, exclaiming, "See! Aren't you glad you wore these work gloves? If they work for landscapers, they'll work for us!"

"Sure, Mom," I panted.

This journey is my mom's childhood dream. She read about the endangered gorillas as a girl. Dian Fossey continues to enthrall her. However, I think this seems like a lot of unnecessary exertion just to see some monkeys. Following my mom's strong recommendation, I read *Gorillas in the Mist*. Though the book was compelling, it didn't impact me the way it did my mom. My mom admired the persistence and bravery of Fossey. I found her behavior and methods extreme.

As we climb uphill, I feel the piercing thorns penetrate my hiking pants (unrippable? I think not, REI) and the relentless sun continues to coat my body in sweat. My hamstrings burn. I fall, and my knee bleeds through my pants. The tracker quickens his pace, and I desperately scramble to match his stride. I fall, again, with the ground punishing my hands with sharp cuts. My toes bang against the inside of the tip of my boot. I wonder if I will have any toenails remaining.

My stomach is protesting, angrily waving dual picket signs of bloating and nausea. The early morning eggs and subsequent power bars consumed on the go don't seem to be sitting very well. I desperately wish to stop and digest, but I know that is not an option.

I am so thirsty. I greedily empty my backpack's bladder, but no matter how much I drink, my mouth remains dry. My lips cry out for more chapstick, but as soon as I reapply, the moist coating evaporates into the heat of the afternoon. I feel dizzy and faint, but continue uphill. There is a certain spicy aroma in the forest now, maybe from all of the unseen creatures, and that partially revives me.

My mom is motivated by the gorillas; I don't care about the monkeys.

"Think of it as a fun physical challenge," cheers my mom.

"Sure, Mom," I gasp.

I'd like to share that something deep inside me takes over and propels me up the mountain. Maybe this hike awakens an inner strength and a power to persevere. Maybe my desire to please my mom or impress my dad and sisters motivates me. However, that doesn't happen. I keep going because there is no feasible alternative. I imagine myself left behind, alone in the forest as dusk approaches. This very thought enables me to continue. Fear floods my veins, and that outweighs the rawness of my feet.

Suddenly, the ranger turns around and holds up his hand. "They're here."

And they are magnificent. The mountain gorillas, not monkeys. One is shyly peeking out at us through the brush. Another sits on the ground curiously studying us, as she gently chews the stems of a nearby plant. I feel wet on my face. It must be sweat. I wipe it away, and it continues. It's tears. I'm overwhelmed.

The dizziness disappears as does the dehydration. Mesmerized, I watch the gorillas play, fight, eat, and rest. There is a baby with downy brown hair and wide, trusting eyes. My heart jumps as a toddler climbs on an older male and beats his chest, trying to demonstrate that he is big and brave. An older juvenile slumbers a few feet away, and I marvel at how her hands curl and feet flutter the way mine do. I meet the silverback's eyes at one point. There is so much expression, so much depth. We are communicating, and it is spiritual.

I forget my exhaustion and savor the encounter.

After our hour is up, we head down the hill, back through the forest. The forest no longer appears menacing; it is verdant and lush. The air smells fresh and clean. The evening mist begins to envelop the forest. I feel unified with the forest as I do with the gorillas. I do not remember the return hike. It must have been challenging to descend, but my body is light and tingling. I float. I am grateful.

Name: Maya Lopez-Ortiz

Work title: A Story Beyond the Pages: Me and I

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Award: Silver Key

A Story Beyond the Pages : Me and I

Everybody has a closet. In it, are clothes that grow as we get bigger and as we get older. And so, as I got older, the clothes in my closet got bigger. But as I began trying them on, I was confounded. I was finding these “big kid” garments not fitting me the way I thought they were supposed to. They draped over me like curtains, and like a child I engulfed myself and hid away, holding my breath so the boogeyman called life wouldn’t find me.

Obviously, that game of hide and seek didn’t last for long. I was inevitably found and practically forced into my clothes. Foolishly, I believed my childhood had finally been put to rest. She remained though: that scared, little kid. At times, she’s tucked away deep within my heart, but it doesn’t take much to bring her out. Whether it’s Saturday morning cartoons, rain water racing on the car window, or the delicious smell of Little Debbie’s oatmeal creme pies, she manages to appear. But those are nothing compared to books, fictitious works of adventure. Suddenly, there’s more breathing room for both her and me. And it seems as if two pairs of eyes are reading off the pages. No matter where the novel takes us, amorphous or familiar, it invokes freedom, asylum, quiet. Books are one of the few treasures that bring a glimmer of utter bliss to my existence. They are what make me feel understood. They give my breath sense.

I fondly remember the whimsical instant that sparked my burning love for literature. My eyes had been gliding upon the pages of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* as I sat in what was then my shady corner of the playground. Playing tag or make-believe never struck me as fun, but whenever I got my hands on a book my face would instantly light up. And so, sitting in my corner with nothing but a book, I was happy. There were no disruptions, no bothers; well, so I thought. Out of all the people, third grade me was surprised to say the least when the gym teacher approached me, saying in a light-hearted manner, “A little thing like you reading a book like that! Now I’ve seen everything.” I took his words as a competition, reading more and more of the Harry Potter series so I can show off my next big book to him. And without even realizing it, I had fallen in love with literature. From taking me through the unpredictable corridors of Hogwarts to teaching me the arts of magic, I had become enthralled wholly by books.

But when the pages collide, life often shifts into a formula of labyrinthian complexity. It feels as if everybody is in on this witty inside joke and I want to join in on the laugh, too. But no matter the bajillion times I try to make sense of it, I will never be able to latch on to its hilarity. So all I can do is nod my head and awkwardly laugh at the joke, pretending as if I have to catch my breath from the tickle it brings to my ribs. When in fact it doesn't feel that way at all, rather it's more of a "my lungs are playing tug-of-war with my windpipe" kind of feeling because I get scared of not understanding. Again, that scared, little kid surfaces. I'm terrified of growing up, not knowing what's going to happen on the next page of my story. But if I can't grow into my clothes for a world that expects me to, I'll grow into them for that little kid. And hopefully, we won't be so scared of embarking on our story together.

Name: Mariana Perilla Perez

Work title: My Unsaid Goodbye

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Award: Silver Key

My earliest childhood memories are always about him. I remember his old wrinkly hands; they held the moments of his life that made him a man of love, courage, intelligence... They held me for the first time in 2006 and he became my grandfather.

My mom told me he used to give me ice cream when my teeth started coming along so I learned to bite the sweet treat instead of licking it. Of course, I got a sweet tooth after that, so he had to make sure I also learned how to eat healthy. My grandparents' house had a big yard where my mom used to run around as a little girl. There were trees surrounding it; they stopped growing by the fence that separated the yard from the neighbor's house. One of those trees had wicked spiked leaves that I was afraid of. Until my grandpa picked me up one day and showed me how easily he could touch them, they didn't harm him. He gave me a sense of safety and comfort because he showed me not to be afraid of the world. The art of picking out blackberries was fascinating to my little eyes. It was exciting to know I would get to try the little berries I collected on the plate I held. That plate had a blue border and an orange flower painted on it. Maybe I can remember it so well because my little mind was fixated on the little things when life felt simple. We went out together every afternoon that I spent at my grandparents' house. It was our little hobby and a form of our love.

I watched my grandpa pick the fruits until I grew a little taller to start picking out my own. But I didn't get to grow further than whatever my height was at eight years old... because my last memory at that house is looking back at my family as we drove away, waving goodbye. I was only a little girl then, and the world had a filter over it so I had no idea of what that goodbye meant: I wouldn't come back till 10 years later.

We moved from Colombia to the US; I was furthest from my roots where the blackberry plants grew, and from a hug from him that used to be a 5-minute drive. Here, they only had fruit packed in plastic boxes and it wasn't as exciting as picking them up with him. But when I'd pop one in my mouth, the taste reminded me of home (it always will). We called for those ten years, and I never got much to say, my words failed me the most. I was embarrassed when the phone was passed over to me because I was a teenager and had forgotten where I came from. That was until the last calls came in. In 2022, my mom was speaking with my grandma about my

grandpa's health. He had poisoned his body with alcohol, letting it be his breakfast, lunch, and dinner. His skin was turning yellow, and it frightened all of us to see him that way. We knew it was serious, but we never wanted to believe what that meant. On a video call, I saw him sitting on a white chair, he looked peaceful and beautiful just like I remembered from when I was little. I can't recall much of what we spoke about that day, but the only thing I remember saying was "I love you." I found out later that he was at the hospital and the doctors were going to hold him in for a few days because they found the toxicity in his blood, and he had to be taken care of. It was one of those moments where I pray at night because I need an external power to protect what I love since it's so far away from me.

I got plane tickets that year to go back home. I'd see him again and he'd recuperate. I had my hopes up because I overheard my grandma on the phone, and she said "He's so weak right now, but he's trying to fight because he knows the kids are coming back. He's going to wait."

Wait for what? I didn't understand. But I felt safe in my prayers and the doctors, I thought things would be in control.

The week of the flight I still had school going on and we were about to go on winter break. I woke up that morning, and I heard my mom crying in her room. Her cries were so harsh and loud that they completely broke my heart. I found her sitting in the corner of her bed. I sat with her without knowing what to do. Her pain spoke, she told me my grandfather had passed last night. I didn't get to see him one last time, to tell him about my life goals and show how much I've grown; I didn't get to tell him how much I miss picking berries with him.

When I got to Colombia a few days later, I held on to my grandma. She gave me back a hug and said, "This is from him." Suddenly, it was my grieving soul that she was holding in her old, tired arms. I knew better than to take the moment for granted, I held on to that hug for the longest time.

If I could see my grandfather again, I would hold his hand, look into his eyes with their wrinkles underneath them and say, "Abuelito, I grew up to love literature and with my craft, I wish to create beautiful things about my greatest experiences in life. I want to write about you someday."

Name: Kaelin Braverman

Work title: On Kaelin: A Journey through the Eye of the Beholder

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Award: Silver Key

The city is still asleep. Vulnerable, in a sense. The streets are bare, streetlights shining. It's dawn, but hardly a car has passed--only the large, clamoring garbage trucks are making their way down the streets. Shop owners will arrive soon, dreading the monotonies of their day.

I'm sitting nine stories up in the Children's wing in Memorial Sloan Kettering watching the scene unfold. Bumps rise on my arms from the chill inside--or maybe they're from the gloomy streets below me.

A woman coughs next to me. I turn; she gives me a tender smile. Are my eyes witnessing the same scene as the aging woman next to me? Does she see the lonely, unforgiving world I see?

Surely not.

Does she see the sadness in the way the fog settles over the streets, becoming cloudier as more and more lights turn on? Does she see the mangy dog that's sniffing for one last meal, how it's almost tangible the way that his life is coming to an end?

Our experiences shape the way we see the world. I'm young, not yet out of high school. I have not shared the experiences that this woman has: Her late nights spent riding the bus to her job at the bar, then coming home to a quiet house and a sleeping husband. Her son's broken arm and the extra hours she worked to pay the exorbitant hospital bills, all while her joy was slowly being sapped by the burden that was dragging not only her down but her family, too. She has lived. She's built her own perspective.

So the way that she sees the cold void below us versus the way I do--the difference is too significant to quantify.

My mother puts her hand on my shoulder, making me aware of my wandering thoughts. I've been lucky enough to have both parents at home to care for me, to pray for me, and to wish me well. They've provided me with a warm environment, but even their warmth couldn't shield me from the tribulations that were to come. I can remember my earliest years, the years before the diagnosis: flour-stained aprons and strong wafts of sweets baking in the oven. I remember the movie nights and the family walks, the vocabulary lessons and the storytelling.

My parents were my safety blanket... my home. They shaped my perspective about who I am, my worth, and in part, my desires. They taught me what it means to be loved and what it means to love. Love, my mother taught me, even if people aren't deserving.

But these weren't my mother's words--they're the Bible's. Religion has shaped my perspective perhaps more than my parents have. It has provided peace during times of tribulations, given me hope when there seemingly was none to be found.

So when the doctor gave the news that "A tumor is growing around your pulmonary artery," what other choice did I have but to pray?

"God," I whispered, because I was afraid that if I tried to speak any louder, my calm guise would collapse, "I need you."

The power of prayer is seldom spoken of because many don't accept the concept of reliance upon a higher power. One's perspective may find it to be a hoax, yet another may cling to prayer like a child holds her mother on the first day of school. "Surgery might be avoidable," the doctor said, "but if it's malignant, there won't be another option." Religion provides a shred of hope, a way for the outlook on the impossible to somehow turn just a little more feasible, all with a few silent words.

I prayed for a miracle: for the tumor to be benign. And though my prayer was simple, it was enough. The next day, the doctor confirmed my hopes.

Though I recognize the sorrow in the world, I also see the light. Though grief cripples much of society, I stand strong in my faith. Religious perspective, it seems, truly does change outlook.

After that night of desperation, my outlook changed. I recognized the beauty of the fragility of life. And as simple as it may seem, in life, there's merely not enough time to waste in a city that brings me despair. Though my perspective of the New York streets imbues me with dismay, to the elderly woman sitting next to me, they may be a breath of freedom.

I turn toward her once more. A tear fills her right eye, then falls.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

She wipes the tear, smiles, then looks out towards the fog-filled streets. "It's my grandson--he's cancer-free. It's been four years now and we finally got the news today."

"That's amazing," I say. "A miracle."

She nods. "He's always loved the city. Especially when it's dreary like today. He says it reminds him of waving to the cab drivers to give them the sunshine that the day's missing. The cancer made him too weak, but now..."

Heartbeat pulsing in my fingertips, my gaze shifts to the world beneath us. To the streets, the shops, the fog. To the mangy dog below who's found a scrap of bagel to sustain him for yet another day. What seemed so barren and lonely now seems full of promise and life. I understand, now, that the beauty in the world must be sought out, that our perspective is more than just our experiences--it's shaped by the strangers that manage to turn a bad day into a good one, the street cleaners that smile as I walk by, the surgeon that tells me that everything is going to be alright. There is good in everything; we just need to make the decision to see it.

Name: Jack Cole

Work title: Snow Days?

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Award: Silver Key

I spent the first half of my life in New York, and all my early memories revolve around the change of seasons. It was a natural marker of time. I was born in the unrelenting heat of August, and my birthdays would pass in a muggy haze of camp songs, swimming pools, and tick checks. As much as I relished the summers, they were a blip in time compared to the rest of our seasons. In the fall, the air would magically turn crisp, and the robust green leaves would suddenly burst into touches of yellow, red, and purple, reminding me that warmth in the Northeast was never meant to last.

And then, of course, there was the snow. It would be hard to forget the feeling of looking out onto our lawn and beholding the magic of the first snowfall of the year. A silence would fall over my street, and the white blanket would resolutely cover the world, flake by flake and then inch by inch. This wondrous miracle defined my childhood, and I would rejoice at the blessing of the two words – “Snow Day.” Snow Day not only signified I could stay in my pajamas, watch tv, and then wander out into the nature-made playground, but it also meant no school. A surprise vacation – who could ask for anything more? After sledding and snow angels, we would watch in awe as the giant plow would rumble down our driveway, piling up foot upon foot of snow at the bottom of its path.

As much as I loved those first winter storms, the season could, in my young mind, stretch out for an eternity. Snow Days became weekly events, and the days after a storm would be frigid with air so cold, tears would spring to my eyes. Any exposed skin would burn within moments of the air finding it. During most of the winter, the only time spent outside would be the few steps from our car to the front doors of my school and back again. As pristine as the snow was when it first hit the ground, it would quickly blacken with pollution from passing cars and trucks, and my mother would warn me not to eat it. Come March, we would spend time kicking at the ice-capped piles of snow, striking the crunchy, dirty remnants of winter. The ice would snap beneath my boots, breaking off into smaller pieces and then ultimately tiny ice fragments that scattered around the bottom of my driveway.

On a brutally cold day in February of 2015, my parents told me we would be moving south to Florida. I was simultaneously excited and sad. I hated leaving my home and my friends, but the idea of being closer to my grandfather and able to enjoy the outdoors all year round sounded like a dream. I was even torn about the weather we left. I loathed the infinite winters but at the same time feared I wouldn't experience the awe of the year's first snow again. With my mixed feelings in tow, we moved to Florida in June of that year. I have spent the last nine years enjoying the weather, my school, and our life down south. Our Decembers are now filled with refreshing breezes, and a cold spell amounts to a morning low of 60 degrees. The nostalgic tranquility of Snow Days morphed into a cacophony of stormy Hurricane Days. Although I wouldn't trade our January pool days for frigid fingers, I still think back to those Snow Days and smile at how snow could transform the way the world looked.

Between our increasingly busy lives and a few years of the pandemic, we found it had been years since we had visited our friends and family up north. When we finally planned a trip back to New York, the only time that fit our schedule was during my February winter break. My father smiled at me and asked if I'd be able to handle the Northeast winter for a week. I laughed and assured him that as long as we were coming back to the warmth of Florida eventually, time up north was easy. We took out our large suitcases and stuffed them with winter coats and boots and gloves that had been stored away in Sterilite containers placed high up in a hallway closet. When we arrived in New York, we were so busy with our luggage and then the rental car and directions that we hardly noticed the weather.

Then, getting out of the car at my aunt and uncle's, I realized something felt different. Something was missing. It wasn't particularly cold outside. The anticipated bite in the air, the blustery wind, the ice on the driveways – none of it had manifested. It felt damp and a bit chilly, like an early November day. Even the grass didn't look desiccated from the brutalities of winter. It looked soft, almost dewy.

"It's really not even that cold out," I said.

My parents agreed, as they took in the changes, and we walked inside my aunt and uncle's home. After a few minutes of conversation, I was hoping someone could tell me about the weather.

"There's no snow on the ground. Seems like it's a pretty mild winter up here," I said.

My aunt shrugged, smiled, and shook her head. "Nope, it's not that unusual any more. It really doesn't snow so much. In fact, it's been about five years since we've had any serious snow accumulation."

I was in disbelief. "Seriously? The winters were so intense when we left."

"I mean, it's still winter," my uncle said. "It's just not the same as it was when we were growing up, or even when you kids were here. It's just warmer. Snow days are few and far between. You even have to do checks for ticks during the winter because the ticks aren't freezing up any more."

Everyone was quiet for a moment, then started chatting again. I stepped back outside onto the porch. I started thinking about how my frequent Snow Days had disappeared and how the number of Hurricane Days kept increasing. What was happening?

My father followed me, and we said nothing. I looked at the gray sky and then over at him, my eyes filled with tears

"Is it the cold," he asked, putting his arm around my shoulder

"Yeah," I replied. "I miss something I sort of hated for years. And I kind of I want it back."

He knew exactly what I meant. It was one thing to fight the cold, to despise it, and to know that you had to move in order to avoid it. It was a whole other issue to defeat the cold by destroying the world.

Name: Sofia Parada

Work title: Three Words

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Award: Silver Key

Three words kept revolving around my brain. "Just keep trying." Every time I heard this phrase, my heart sank. Once again, another failure. This phrase was supposed to motivate me. Although, I perceived it to cushion the blow of not being good enough. Those three words were made of pity, not care or love. The only person who could stop me from failing was myself. I began to associate help with failure. When a teacher, coach, friend, or family would lend a helping hand, I rejected it without a doubt. Everything had to be done by myself or not done at all. It was all or nothing. I would begin to feel alone and isolated from those that cared for me.

Endless nights of lying awake, reflecting on what I could have done. While what I had done well, slipped away as the day went on. When I was having fun with my friends, all I could think of was what I should have been doing, studying, or preparing myself for the future. One night I was scrolling through my social media. The algorithm had brought me a video of the ideal student. Perfect grades, perfect extracurricular activities, perfect standardized test scores, perfect grade point average, and perfect leadership roles. The perfect student. Why had I not succeeded as well as them? They did not need anyone's guidance. This image of the ideal student did not drive me to succeed. It drove me to isolate myself from those around me. My bedroom was my fortress of solitude. No light could creep in, no person could enter, and the door must be kept shut. I was alone, and no one could help. While my grades soared, my self-esteem plummeted. Why do I not feel complete yet? I achieved my goal, alone.

Since I was about 9 years old, I have played field hockey. For 6 years, it was never about being the best; it was supposed to be about having fun. On a random Wednesday, our coach decided to split the team into two groups: recreational and competitive. I was in the recreational team. How could having 6 years of fun turn into competition so quickly? Was I wasting my time? Did I not try hard enough? So many questions went unanswered. My coach kept urging me to, "Keep practicing." Even after I worked harder, there was no change. I stayed in the recreational team. I did not understand how I could try so hard, but never obtain my goals. My coaches' words kept circling my mind, "Just keep trying." This filled me with anguish and frustration. I wanted to quit. That day my father tried to give me advice. I refused. My father was never able to comprehend why I kept to myself and why I never wanted guidance. I was afraid of failure. I felt that speaking about my troubles made them a reality. I reasoned that I did not want to burden

or disappoint anyone with my sentiments. In an instant he told me not to be stubborn and let him help me. He constantly assured me that the way to better myself was to adapt to a positive mindset.

Those words sunk into my mind. I realized that refusing assistance and isolating myself in the process did not promote individuality or success. It promoted a feeling of emptiness due to never feeling like I was enough. Everything I did was not as good as someone else. I did not need to treat the achievements of others as my own failures. I should use it as a push to reach my full potential. I realized I did not have to be the perfect student, all I had to do was try my hardest. If I failed it would be okay to ask for assistance. Asking for help did not mean I was weak. It meant I was strong enough to recognize when I could use guidance. In practice, I began to enjoy myself again and I improved significantly. Those three words that lived in my thoughts began to remind me that there was always room for improvement. Those words were not attempting to sugar coat the truth, they were aiming to promote confidence. The walls of my fortress of solitude began to come down. The sun began to peak through my window, people began to burst through my door, and the door was open.

Name: Alexandra Pfeifer

Work title: $X+2=X+2$; Find X

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Award: Silver Key

His dark eyes held my reflection: afraid and confused. His face was masked with schadenfreude. Beads of sweat gathered on his hairline as his next-period class waited outside. Glancing at his watch, he smirked, realizing he had four more minutes until class began.

"It doesn't have to be this way, Alexandra. I won't lower your grades if I can contact you...privately."

While most freshmen spent their nights carefree, I stayed home—eyes glued to my phone, fearfully awaiting a text from THE teacher. Even when my phone buzzed at 1:00 A.M., I willed myself awake. I rushed to answer, desperately hoping to protect my friends and fearing he would make them variables in his premeditated algebraic equations. Each morning, I'd wake up to a new grade in his math class: an A reflected his satisfaction towards my responses, and an F reflected his distaste.

In math, there's either one solution, no solution, or an infinite number of solutions. Yet, at the time, texting him seemed like *the only solution*.

Though I had always struggled in math classes—getting laughed at for asking too many “stupid” questions or leaving tests unfinished—I still managed to overcome these algebraic mountains. However, after HIM, my difficulties were exacerbated. I struggled to solve equations, study for exams, and even glance at a formula-covered whiteboard; these were all continuous reminders of HIM—his manipulation. So, I attempted to distract myself by pursuing activities unrelated to math. The busier I was, the less time I had to dwell on what happened.

In the midst of exploring new activities, I found an unexpected love for theater.

The curtain rising, the hectic scene backstage from quick changes, the missing props. These aspects lured me to theater, but it was lighting design—the inconspicuous job behind the curtain—that made me stay. Theater helped to glue the pieces of my heart back together.

During sophomore year, I stumbled upon another adhesive to strengthen my once-shattered heart: public policy. Ironically, it was thanks to the dark eyes that once haunted me. As FBI agents gathered around my dining room table, collecting pieces of evidence to finalize THE teacher's firing, I was bombarded with questions: "When did he do this?" "How?" "Where?" "Why did he choose you?" My answers poured out instinctively, as I had already prepared detailed explanations surrounding every incident. "Please let me help you!" I cried, desiring justice to heal my heart.

However, despite my emotional outburst, the conversation seemed distant—a figure of my imagination; my mind was defending itself from the painful memories. But, I snapped back to reality as I heard...

"This comes naturally to you. Have you considered becoming a lawyer?"

Suddenly, my imagination was no longer a defense mechanism, but a safe haven: I was transported into a courtroom, where I defended my client against the villainous defendant who made her suffer. I watched her life come back together as I won the case.

This defining moment drew me to engage in law-related pursuits. I earned an internship with Judge Yael Gamm at the Courthouse—a position that allowed me to experience trials beyond my imagination. Working in the dependency court, I helped to provide safe havens for young girls harmed by malefactors. Witnessing the resilience of those who had undergone such manipulation has strengthened my empathy and continuous fight for justice.

My younger self originally thought there was only *one solution*. However, amidst my passions—from creating lighting cues to understanding public policy—I've realized there are *infinitely many solutions*—infinitely many adhesives—that can help glue together fragments of my identity. My past scars, rather than tainted by fear and confusion, serve as reminders of my resilience.

I've realized that within the voids caused by life challenges, I can discover myself, my passions, and my goals. Now, when presented with an obstacle, I find the strength to look for *more than one solution*.

Name: Adrienne Mitchell

Work title: Your Kids Thoughts

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Award: Silver Key

A Convo I Would Rather Not Have.

Driving home from my grandma's house, with me in the backseat, my little brother in the front. She asks me how my day was and all the self-control that I've worked years on perfecting breaks from a single question. The tears I've been trying so hard to hold in, roll down my face as I try to wipe them away, get rid of any evidence that at this moment, I'm crying. Though, life doesn't go my way and my red face is shown to her as she looks back in wonder, wondering why I've gone silent instead of answering with my normal "fine". I can tell by how she looks at me that she's confused and heartbroken, even though I don't want her to be. She pulls over the car, right before we pass the stadium and the familiar sign that reads "THANKS FOR VISITING". Stopping the car and looking back at me, "What's wrong?" she asks. Through my tears and broken voice I answer "Nothing." She doesn't believe me, "If it was nothing you wouldn't be crying", or something along those lines. I do not speak, I *cannot* speak. My voice was taken from me the moment I answered the second question given to me. We wait on the side of the road as cars pass us by, she waits for me to calm down so I can regain my voice again and tell her why I've started crying. "Now", a pause, "What's wrong?" I wipe my eyes until they start burning as I feel more tears threatening to spill. I won't let them though, I've already made a fool of myself as is. "I'm just", a pause, a pause as I contemplate whether I *truly* want to speak my mind, "*tired. Very tired*", I decided against it. Would have it been easier to just say everything on my chest? Maybe, but I don't, I *can't*. I don't think I bare looking at her face as it changes from worry to dread to self-hate on how she's "failed as a mother". That's something I *can't* handle. No matter how much I think about the same scenario over and over. Nothing will prepare me for the real thing.

Even though I don't say what I had too, I *implied* it. "Tired" means a lot of things, but the way I said it means only one thing, "I'm so tired of everything.". I pour my *soul* into a singular word, *hoping* that my point would come across, that she would *finally get it*. "You can stay home tomorrow", a pause as she looks at my little brother in her passenger seat, "Okay?". *She didn't*

get it. I nod and she pulls back off, the “THANKS FOR VISITING” sign comes out of view as my tears come back. This time, I’m laying down, she can’t see me. I don’t want her to pull over again, *she doesn’t get it.*

‘You don’t get it’, those same words repeat in my head as I think about how *she didn’t get it.* No matter how much I emphasize the word “tired”, no matter how many hints I give, *she won’t get it. I have to tell her but I can’t.* I’m hyper aware of everything around me, all the noises the car is making, all the movements inside the vehicle, I can even feel my heart at work in my chest. The AC is on full blast but sweat still rolls down my face, mixing with the stream of tears. ‘You don’t get it. You don’t get it.’ Over and over those words repeat... a panic attack. My breath quickens, chest tightness, all of this happening in silence, plain sight. The little breath that I have is quick and shallow until I don't have it anymore. I'm sweating and crying, my ability to breath, ripped from me. Everything is *hot.* Everything is *spinning.* *Everything is too much.*

“What do you want to eat?” She asks, I can tell she looks at the mirror above, but she can’t see me, *she can’t.* “Wendy's”, I say. Masking my voice in drowsiness, *she doesn’t know.* Answering with silence, the car fills with the radio once more and the panic attack that I was having is over, *it had to be over.*

A car honking knocks me out of my daydream. I'm in the car at 5:16am, passing the stadium and a familiar sign saying, “WELCOME TO MIAMI GARDENS”. I look at her as she drives, thinking about the daydream I had just experienced, ‘That’s a convo I would rather not have’ is the last thought that crosses my mind before I close my eyes, drifting off to sleep

This Bridge is Where I Shall Walk

As I walk across this bridge, trying to get to the other side. I see the end but for some reason, no matter how long or fast I walk, I can’t seem to get any closer. While I stop my walk and look behind me, I see clearly that I have not moved from the entrance I once came from. A singular red string tied to my right wrist, connected to all the people that are here for me at this entrance. Is it my destiny to stay at the beginning forever? Never moving across this bridge that dangles over uncertainty? I see the people I’m tied to standing there smiling, waiting for me to come to them. The notice of the black chains, however, stops me from going back. The black chains of death that tie them to the underworld, representing that they will always be dead.

Yet...if I were to go back, would the chains latch onto me too? Dragging me to the comfort down under, with all the people that were kind enough to wait? Shall I make their wait shorter? Or make it longer, letting them wait many more moons for me to cross this bridge once more to get to them. Even though I think this, I hesitate. As if it were sensing my hesitation, the string on my wrist raises in tightness, drawing blood, strengthening the bond between me and them. It's urging me to go, to forget what lies ahead and accept the comfort of knowing I'll be with all the people I love again. Yet...at this very moment, do they love me? Are these truly the people that loved me dearly, that are now dragging me with them down under? Are those really welcoming smiles? Or are those black, drawn on, lines, that are melting down their face to show the scowls that hide underneath. Though...as much as I hate to be wrong, my fate has me always being right. As their true faces are revealed, I now have to come to terms with the fact that those aren't the same people I love. Their chained ankles, bleeding out black, I know now that the real them is still trapped down under. The string of destiny wraps around tighter, forcefully pulling me to the place, I've now decided, I don't wanna go. Pulling back on the string, going my desired way, as the wrist in bound gets covered in my blood shed by my destiny. Oh, the hubris destiny has to think she can hold me back from my fate. Pulling as hard as I can, the string takes my right hand with it, dragging it down to the underworld with the imposters. Yet, there isn't a thing that could make me care.

As I walk across the bridge, I go to the other side. I see the end, and now, it's closer than it ever was before. I know that one day, I'll have to walk on this bridge again, and go to the underworld. That I'll face the same choice as before. Maybe I'll choose to follow destiny this time, letting her guide me through the overworld, never shall I perish. Or maybe I'll follow cruel fate, as she guides me through the underworld, chained by death, never to see the beauty of the over again. That's a decision for when I shall walk on this bridge again. The bridge that separates the under from the over. The bridge where you have to fight destiny in order to choose fate, ignore fate and have the guilt way down on your back, in order to choose destiny. *This bridge is where I shall walk.*

Name: Ava Havidic

Work title: Adventures with Ava

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Award: Gold Key

“This is your Captain speaking from the navigational bridge...” began the commanding voice flooding the cruise ship's PA system. I woke up with a jolt, even though this familiar nautical jargon has been a wake-up call for most of my life. As the waves lulled me back under the blanket, clarity set in. Today was a reminder that I would be saying goodbye to my father and my nautical home once again as I return to my life on land in Florida.

As I started to pack, memories of my adolescence living aboard a global vessel flooded my thoughts. “Born with sea legs,” my mom boasts as she recounts my first steps on the resort deck, clinging to the sticky, sea-salt-covered railings. I recall my birthdays, commemorated with a choir of 65 distinct accents from the restaurant crew serenading me, captained by the proud voice of my father. I remember the bedtime tale my father narrated of fleeing Zagreb as a young man during the Croatian War of Independence, where the cruise ship became his safe haven. I adorned my father’s stateroom door with a handmade red and white checkered flag of Croatia that I made with leftover material from the tailor shop on board. It hung proudly, serving as a placeholder for his strength and ultimately igniting my ambition.

Surrounded by crew members from all seven continents, I became part of their extended family. There was no barrier when it came to language, religion, or ethnicity. The mosaic of international faces on board, all working in unison, served as the frontier for my awakening advocacy. This is how I met Bojana from Serbia.

Bojana was one of the new crew members, perplexed and overwhelmed, struggling to fill out mounds of paperwork. I offered my assistance, and from that day on, we continued to work together to improve her conversational and written English. Nestled behind the orchestra pit, we sat twice a week practicing common phrases in both languages, learning about each other's cultures. There was no animosity between us, even though years earlier Serbia and

Croatia were embattled in war. We bonded over shared interests and our love for Nutella crepes. As the weeks passed, more crew members joined, and our personal English lessons blossomed into a class, mimicking a United Nations general assembly.

During port visits across the Mediterranean, crew members working alongside my father introduced me to communities with struggling literacy rates and poor schooling infrastructure. Moved by their plight, I began collecting the signatures of young students ready to embark on a journey of linguistic empowerment. I was able to mentor young children in villages across Croatia, including Samobor and Jagodno, starting with elementary dialogue and expanding to short stories. The success of the program was the impetus to establish SEAS Connections, a platform and valuable tool for global communication. My proficiency in Slavic multilingualism has been fundamental when outlining EU educational policies with city mayors and US Ambassadors in Eastern Europe.

With my memories stored away and my suitcase packed, I take one last gaze at the boundless sea. The ocean was once defined by the turquoise crayon that I used in sketches while waiting for my father to finish his duties. The simplicity of the crayon was replaced by a pen, arming me with a tool for educational advocacy both on land and at sea. As I disembark the vessel, I turn to catch the image of waving hands from my international family. The bustling rhythm of the port silences as my father embraces me tightly. As the captain emerges from the gangway, he bellows, "Until our next adventure, Ava!"

My connection to the sea transcends geographical proximity and is a bond forged by shared experiences and the endless pursuit of knowledge. I know the ship will soon be 4489 nautical miles away; however, I have never felt closer to my seafaring home.

Name: Adrienne Mitchell

Work title: Journal Entries

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Award: Silver Key

All the Little Things(Journal Entries)

Has that always been there? Why does that look off? Why is there so much wrong? Why are you so ugly?

-Looking at your picture(New insecurities discovered)

♡♡♡♡♡

Many people run forward, wanting to reach ahead. Yet I stand still, feet planted on the ground, as the wind pushes me further.

-Fear of growing up

♡♡♡♡♡

One of these days, I'll go off, and don't be surprised with what I have to say. I'm tired of being your listener.

-My balloon emotions

♡♡♡♡♡

I'm in high-school now

-One step closer to death

♡♡♡♡♡

I'm hot but I'm cold, dizzy yet still, I can breathe yet I can't, can see but I'm blind. One thing's for sure, I'm not calm.

-Panic Attack

♡♡♡♡♡

Can't you just say you're proud of me without wanting more?

-That one person

♡♡♡♡♡

You think I care? I've never cared! I've never cared about your pathetic as*. You're nothing but a mistake! A failure! You can't do anything right! Everyone thinks the same thing! Just give up.

-Talking to the mirror

♡♡♡♡♡

"There's no time like the present!" Yet, I'm not *present*.

-My body's here, but my mind is not



I always seem to lose to so many people. Yet, no one will ever compare to the score I've set for myself.

-My greatest enemy(Myself)



I take bits and pieces of things and sew it into myself. If they would look, they would see the stitches littering over my body.

-Self-made(Who I created)



I jumped into the water to save you, only for a hand to pull me away. I look back and see no one, only to see my own hand on my wrist. I walk away as you drown in your own regrets that will not become mine.

-Save yourself



I look at you and then I see red, but when I look at me I see red. Red then turns into blue. Why was the red you?

-Self-hate(What you project on others)



I look into the sky and see the sun being covered by the clouds. I feel you my sun, clouds can never let you shine your brightest.

-It's always them(Who never lets you shine)

♡♡♡♡

The things I would do for a friend. The things I would do for my family. The things I would do for a pet. Yet, the things I wouldn't do for me.

-Putting others above you(When it should be the other way around)

♡♡♡♡

A lifeful rose that blooms from lifeless soil.

-The light that comes from the dark

♡♡♡♡

I yelled at you today but I don't know why. It seems that I've started to crack.

-The emotions that seem to slip through (Stay hidden)

♡♡♡♡

Oh, what I would give to be in love. Yet I cannot seem to love the vessel I'm held captive in.

-Love you first(Love someone else second)

♡♡♡♡

The black seeps into the white as the white turns black and the black turns white.

-Corruption(Transference)

♡♡♡♡

I got a "B" today. I need to do better, I need to try my best. Yet my best isn't enough. I'm not enough.

-Self-worth based off grades

♡♡♡♡

All the big things in this world

-All the little things(Worry about that)

♡♡♡♡

I have a top 10 list of all the people I love. I don't even make the top 100.

-No love left(For yourself)

♡♡♡♡

I've never been more interested in things until I've met you.

-Interest sparking from the meet.(Next comes the worry)

♡♡♡♡♡

You're amazing. You're beautiful. You deserve to live. But stop being such a f*ck-up.

-Talking to the Mirror(Getting better)

♡♡♡♡♡

I wake up, get ready, go to school, and come back home. Yet when I do, I don't remember a thing.

-Autopilot(Memory Nonexistent)

♡♡♡♡♡

I'm a blank canvas. Until a paintbrush comes along and splatters me with paint. The paintbrush leaves, yet the splatters of color never fade away.

-The marks engraved on you(those never leave)

Blast Off(Journal Entries p.2)

One day when I go to sleep, I don't wanna wake up.

-Peaceful death(Hurtful thoughts)

☆☆☆☆

Writing on a piece of paper then watching as the words bleed into the paper. My hands are littered in bandages, fingers held together by stitches and hope. Hope that you'll notice the trails of notes I've left for you.

-The signs are there(Whether their seen or not)

☆☆☆☆

The moon's skin is engraved with craters among many. I never knew I would relate to a celestial body.

-The moon and me(So alike yet so different)

☆☆☆☆

Their black veins burst, covering my face. I cry the black they bleed. Yet, they laugh at the face they've ruined. Leaving me in ruins.

-Crying for the broken(Soon to be you)

☆☆☆☆

I have two masks, a sad one and a happy one. I know exactly how and when to use them. But, when they break and my real face is shown, it's devoid of all emotions. I have no idea how to feel without my masks.

-Dependency

☆☆☆☆

I open you and then read the lines engraved on. Horrified about what they say and what they talk about. This is why you read the summary on the back

-Reading the warning signs before(Something I *wish* I did)

☆☆☆☆

Blast off into outer space

-Going far away from this place(leaving)

☆☆☆☆

You might as well paint my face into a clown because the way I trusted you was *foolish* and *funny*.

-Clown Act One(Start of my career)

☆☆☆☆

There's a gun sitting on the dresser in my room. The bullets are filled with all the memories, made with metal regrets. Every night before I sleep, I shoot one into my head to remind me of the failures I've had. Reminding me how I'm undeserving of the love I'm given.

-Nightly Routine(Unhealthy habits)

☆☆☆☆

I put wood and pour fire onto my flame to make it burn brighter. But what would happen if you come along with a bucket of water? You use it.

-The people that snuff you out(No more sparks left to give)

☆☆☆☆

I pull my necklace out and hang it on the ceiling, grab a chair to reach the jewel I've put on display. I put it on, making my neck more appealing. The chair below starts wobbling, no matter, I have no use for it anymore. I've reached my destination, the end of my adventure. I ask the chair to move, it does so hesitantly, I'm now flying above ground, my necklace decorating my neck.

-The day I learn to fly(Do you like my **necklace**?)

☆☆☆☆

Let's make a trade, I give you my heart and you give me your love. Wouldn't that be a fair trade?

-Unfair trade(Leads too broken hearts and broken minds)

Name: Claudia Cora

Work title: My Life Through Reading

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Award: Silver Key

According to my mother, I started reading at a really young age. Also according to my mother, I hated it, at first – my sister would chase me around the house, she holding a book with more pictures than words, and me wailing at the top of my lungs because I preferred playing with dolls in my own little corner of the house to trying to decipher boring symbols I only half-understood. Eventually, I would be cornered and caught, forced to sit and stare and repeat after my sister as she read the dreaded book aloud.

I don't know when my feelings of despair changed. I just know that, eventually, they did. From sorrow to pride, I found myself entering school ecstatic that I could say my ABCs before my peers, that I could say my sight words without stumbling. I consumed word after word after word, suddenly wanting to know as much as I could as fast as I could.

And it was... fun. Rewarding. My intellect was recognized with praise and trophies — I was placed on a pedestal and I loved every second of it.

Everything changed when I was 6. Seemingly without rhyme or reason, my military family got ordered to move from their home in a little town in Kentucky to the big city of Miami. It was an overwhelming change, leaving friends I'd had for my whole life and trying to find a new group to fit into. And so, instead of facing such a daunting task, I turned to reading.

Books became my life and my escape. Instead of talking to other kids in between classes I would be far away in a land filled with magical trees that teleported me to moments in history I'd never be interested in otherwise; I would flit between a realm of glittering fairies, helping them solve the problems of kids that were as lost as I was. I consumed anything and everything, always looking for a way to escape — to, maybe, return to the life I had before.

My tastes changed as I grew, though my reasons for reading stayed the same. Instead of magic trees showing me the history of the world, I ran with teens as they escaped mazes and post-apocalyptic worlds; instead of watching sparkling fairies solve childish problems, I fought for my life with demigods from a world so similar to ours yet so incredibly different. And with my expansion of literary knowledge came a new term — fantasy.

I don't remember running from my sister when she tried to teach me to read. But I *do* remember running through Barnes & Nobles, following signs until I reached the long-awaited sign that opened the door to a new chapter in my life. Books lined the shelves and my arms (and the arms of my sister, brother, and mother), each of their pages opening to reveal worlds delicately crafted by the hands of loving authors. It opened my eyes to the endless possibilities a story could hold. The way a map detailed a vast, deadly desert, a large, bustling city, or even simple rivers and forests; the indexes at the very back of the book defining words I've never heard or seen before (because they were made up); and even the characters with detailed and exciting backstories that immediately drew me in.

As I buried myself further into the books that defined my life, I realized I wanted to do exactly what those authors have done for me. I wanted to give other people a chance to escape, to find a reality that wasn't their own but still felt like home. I wanted (and still want) to be an author.

Name: Santiago Trivino

Work title: Pinnacle of Strength

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Award: Silver Key

Tears rolled down my cheeks, the strain of my muscles making me tremble in place. Is this what it really meant to be strong? My brother yelled at me, forcing me to stay in a squatting position for a full minute. I was only eight years old. Feelings of fear and pain coursed through my being, yet at the bottom of it all, the question raced through my mind. What was strength? Is this what it means to be strong? This was the pivotal point that started my journey of what strength meant to me.

Middle school was a breeze, no class was a problem for me and I placed my pride in my amazing grades. High school was an exhilarating thought. I couldn't wait, then the worst possible outcome arrived, quarantine. The sheer loneliness left me depressed, my grades plummeted, and so did the pride I placed into them. I couldn't care, every failing grade only drove me further. I felt like I couldn't talk to anyone or show my fear, my struggle, or my pain.

My family carved a path into this country for my future and there was no possibility I could tell them I was a failure, yet I couldn't improve at all. Soon enough, it was too late, my parents discovered my grades, they flew into a rage. I won't say I was undeserving of it, "Hazlo con excelencia" Do it with excellence was what they told me. They sat me down and told me what I needed to hear, although they struggled, and fought for my family's future, they still understood my struggles; I snapped out of my depression with their help. I did my best to recover, I found love and friends, yet it wasn't enough. I needed to be stronger.

This year was different; Quarantine wasn't there to hold me back, I needed to succeed. I was tough on myself, extremely tough; I grit my teeth and caged myself in an iron heart. I couldn't dare complain over anything, I needed to deal with it no matter how hard it was alone, I couldn't slip up again. I felt okay, I had to. I didn't see the accumulating stress that I was building on myself, I applied more pressure than before. 'I can deal with this.' was what I told

myself. My relationship strained, I put in all the effort I could, I couldn't stop. I couldn't breathe, I needed to keep everyone and everything up. In that stress, I forgot everything else. The strength I made was armor, armor trying to protect my failing mind. Yet, that armor turned out to be a cage.

Soon enough I snapped. My relationship was gone, my mental health in tatters, and my grades were failing, I cried, relentlessly. I questioned who I was, who I wanted to be. What did it mean to be strong? Nothing could lift me from the hole I dug. I sobbed to others, others that I never wanted to involve and yet they showed me love. For the first time in my life, I heard something that seemed impossible. "You are one of the strongest people I know." It didn't make sense. It took time to truly believe that throughout everything, I did grow. I was kind, I could forgive, my brother who had treated me so unfairly is now such a close friend. I finally saw the person I had become, someone people looked up to.

Strength doesn't have just one definition. For me, my strength is my inability to be toppled. Looking at each problem and knowing that I'll get through it, I'll put in my time and effort, and knowing I will surpass it. I am my own unstoppable force. I am my own immovable object. I am as strong as I decide myself to be, and no one but myself can take that away from me.

Name: Alexandria Guerrier

Work title: Paradise

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Award: Gold Key

The pungent aroma of sea salt floating in the air, the soft susurrations of the waves calling out to all of its listeners, encouraging them, nearly imploring them, to take in the beauty and relish in the serenity. Though it is in the name, one does not realize how much Paradise Island truly encapsulates the idea of paradise. Having been there twice before, I did not expect this trip to be any different than the others. My expectations were filled with the thrilling, colorful childhood memories of excitement racing down waterslides and eating more food in a week than I would in a month. However, when the plane landed in Nassau, Bahamas, I had a completely different experience.

Initially, everything seemed to be the same as it always was, rushing to get out of the airport without having to wait in a long customs line and grabbing a car outside the airport to take us to Atlantis on Paradise Island, but little did I know the thirty-minute car ride over to the island would have a fundamental role in changing my entire experience in the Bahamas. A Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) summit was happening while we were in the Bahamas, so state dignitaries from around the Caribbean, the United States, and Canada were gathering at our hotel. Thus, all the main roads of Nassau were closed, and we had to take the back roads to Paradise Island.

This trip through the back roads to the island started normally with the humongous mansions of the rich and famous, but as we took the detour, things quickly became different. The houses began shrinking, and the expansive and well-paved roads turned into grime and old rubble. What was once a road paved with large palm trees and ocean views was now a dense forest and a world that seemed to lack color. Suddenly, we were no longer surrounded by the lush estates of the Bahamas but what could only be described as the slums. The lack of Wi-Fi in the car forced my family and I to only stare out the window and come face to face with the reality of the hustle and struggle that encompassed the hard island life that we so commonly heard from our relatives who lived on the island. These people were not living in the vision of paradise that I had memories of but instead were in the antithesis.

For the first time in my life, I truly understood why so many of my Bahamian relatives were always trying to call my parents and figure out how to, as they call it, “get their papers straight”

and have the opportunity to live in the US. As we drove down the road and saw the inflated storefront prices of milk and other necessities, the shock of these circumstances drove our car ride to silence with only a sense of normalcy coming from the Gospel music I am so accustomed to hearing at home playing in the background. I was overcome with feelings of sadness and guilt that were only intensified when my father pointed out that we had just passed his late father's old tailor shop. Once a renowned tailor who made the uniforms for the Bahamian Olympic team, the center of my Grandfather's art was now another dusty old building in a sea of what, from the outside, could only be described as despair. A despair that was all-encompassing, sucking the air out of the car and forcing everyone to pay attention to the hidden story it was trying to paint. A group of boys slightly older than me walked by, and the realization hit me. The picture the despair was painting became as clear as the azure sea. My father could have been one of those boys, regulated to a life on the island with dreams that expanded to the States. If the sacrifices were not made by my grandparents to make sure that he had the opportunity for a better life, the despair that I was experiencing in this thirty-minute car ride would have been an omnipresent force in his life, constantly driving those it effects to work harder in hopes they could provide a life for themselves that did not lack color, but was a colorful illustration of the sublime. I was filled with gratitude as before that moment, I never truly understood how my parents' immigrating from the Caribbean islands opened a world of opportunities for me that allowed me not only to dream bigger but to see those dreams as a plausible reality.

Tired and hungry the next day, I walked with my sister and father down the sidewalk on Paradise Island on what could only be described as the perfect day. With my AirPods intact, I listened to the smooth afro beats of "Be Honest" by Jorja Smith featuring Burna Boy. The breeze gave the song a new form of life, acting as a perfect accompaniment, enhancing the song's innate beauty in a way I had never experienced before. As I looked to my left, I saw the crystal blue of the Caribbean Ocean, the boats passing by, and the neatly planted colorful bushes of flowers lining the perimeter of the land, acting as the sole barrier between sea and land. In the distance, I could see the grand coral-colored architecture of the Atlantis Hotel. This moment was implanted in my head as all the perfect circumstances came together, and I saw the island's true beauty. I was in the paradise that so many had raved about for hundreds of years. Bolstered by my humbling experience the day before, I felt an immense sense of appreciation and gratitude. The picturesque scenery around me was not just a pretty day but left an implanted memory because it shocked me to my core with the realization that I was on the other side. The sacrifices of past generations had not been in vain, as no longer was my family participating in the hustle of island life, but we were basking in the beauty of paradise.

I was overcome with a sense of peace from that moment on, a peace which I had never experienced before and have yet to ever since. From that moment on and the rest of the week

in the Bahamas, I was at peace with the stress of life and always reaching for more, taken away by the beauty and wisdom that came out of my encounter with paradise.