

# 2019 Writing Contest Winners



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*We would like to thank the Oshkosh Public Library for their generous support*



# POETRY

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## Jesus Portrait

By James Roberts

on the floor  
i spread my arms wide  
ready to be crucified  
fire on my fingertips  
a holy hole in my mouth  
clouds roll by outside  
indifferent denied  
forming & re-forming whips  
bloodying truth  
cumulonimbus energy  
passing up gone souls  
heaven's stormy synergy  
air heavy as biblical books  
i blink & see neutrinos  
rivering two directions  
everywhere i look  
now comes nails hands  
Again blood  
in a moment i also  
will be risen  
above the raging flood  
seeking flight redemption

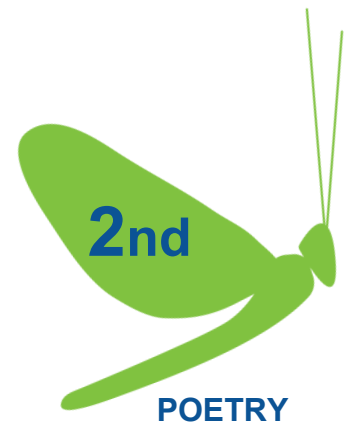


### **Author Biography:**

*James P. Roberts is the author of 16 books in the fields of fantasy & science fiction, poetry, literary biography & baseball history. He lives in Madison, Wisconsin where he is a regional vice-president for the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets, haunts Little Free Libraries, and has a passion for women's flat-track roller derby.*

**Survivorship**  
**By Margaret King**

If I lost a piece of myself,  
Would you kiss the surgical scar?  
Do you love that which is not there--  
Or what is?  
How we adore survivors--but shy  
From their reality--  
While we all walk around  
Pretending we haven't amputated parts  
Of our hearts and souls  
Just to survive.  
"Survive."  
The etymology of which  
Is  
"To outlive another."  
The river threw rock a curveball  
And created the Grand Canyon  
We think our bodies and minds  
Should be whole, smooth land  
When each scar  
Is a miracle  
And survival  
Is also one of the Natural Wonders of the World.



**Author Biography:**

*Margaret King is a Wisconsin writer who enjoys penning poetry, short stories, and novellas. Her recent works have appeared in Ghost City Press, Mojave He(art) Review, Trace Art and Poetry Collaborative, Bombus Press, Unlost Journal, Moonchild Magazine, Poetry Superhighway, and The Ginger Collect. She is also the author of the novella Fire Under Water.*

## Writing About You

By Dan Hansen

The job of a poet

Would seem to be a wielder of words

    sorting by simile

    accessing with allusion

    hyperbole through hope

    metaphors of meditation

But it is not

The job of a poet

Is to find where words fail

    mirage metonymy

    forgotten foreshadowing

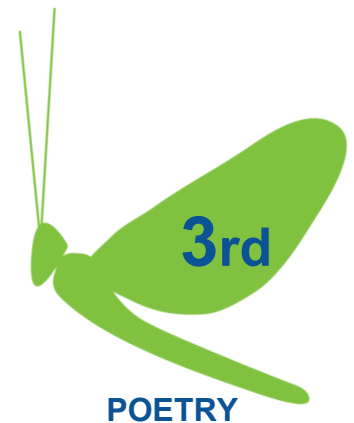
    aborted assonance

    imperfect parallels

And it is then

A poet may discover those things

That are meaningful beyond description



### **Author Biography:**

*Dan Hansen lives in Elkhorn, WI with his wife, Becky, and their two children Josh and Liberty. Dan teaches high school English at Fort Atkinson High School. With his wife, Dan also coaches the high school debate and forensics teams. Dan and Becky also work hard to promote good poetry through their professional development business, The Poetry Professors. Their goal is to help teachers teach poetry better with “less guessing and more accessing.” This year they presented at the WCTE Convention in Milwaukee and will present this summer at the National Speech and Debate Association Convention.*

# FLASH FICTION

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## The Prisoner By David Updike

Alex is going insane.

As the minutes and hours pass, he feels four walls marching closer, engulfing him relentlessly. The darkness punishes him. He's trapped inside this confining prison cell and wonders if there's any possibility of escape. Will his entire being slip away into this invisible black hole? Will he see light again or will this time be the last?

Alex calculates he's been caged up for at least half a day, yet in this darkness it's hard to be certain. There was no trial, no jury, and no justice. He was thrown in here without hesitation, but by now, he should be accustomed to this procedure. He's been in cells like this before. Often, in fact. They all have the same isolation. The same claustrophobic terror. He never stays in one cell for very long, but still fears that one day, the moving will stop. One day, Alex will be forgotten and left alone for good. No hope. No escape.

Maybe it's better in here. Outside, in the supposedly real world, his existence is purposeless and meaningless. He bounces around from place to place, never staying for very long before moving on. He has no space to claim as his own. His world is nearly never-ending darkness. The hopeful moments are brief as he feels himself pushed roughly from place to place. The endgame is always the same; a door slams shut and he's alone again. Or is he?

His breaking point is near. Alex calls out to anyone who may hear:

"Is there anyone else in here? If there is, please answer! Please!"

An eternity passes. Then: a miracle. A voice to his right calls out:

“Yes. There is someone here. Who is this?”

“My name is Alex. Who are you?”

“I’m Andy. Do you know where we are? I can’t see anything in here and it’s getting damn hot. Can’t hardly breathe. Don’t have any idea what time it is.”

“What were you doing before this?” Alex asks desperately, “How did you get here?”

“I don’t know.”

A second voice rings through the nothingness. This one is coming from Alex’s left and belongs to an old-timer named Abe. He claims he’s homeless; a nomad.

“I ain’t never stayed in one place for more than a few days,” Abe says in a self-satisfied drone, “I guess I just ain’t worth much, so people don’t want me around. My memory gets a little foggy sometimes, but before I got here, I was hanging out with a buddy of mine. George. He moves even faster than I do, never staying put, always on the run.”

Alex tunes out the old man. He forces his memory to recall the other cells and strange places he’s visited. Why is it a blur? How is there no consistency? Why is it so...random? His thoughts flash to the dozens of rooms into which he’s been thrown and finally remembers talking to people like Andy and Abe. There are others. Wasn’t there another prisoner with whom he spoke? That guy was special. He was kept in seclusion, away from the other prisoners. What was his name? Ben? Alex thinks this sounds correct.

He tries recalling more details.

Sometimes there are brief flashes of light accompanied by a clanking or rattling sound. Is he always alone? No. Sometimes there are others in his cell. Friends? Not a chance. They’re only folks who keep him company for moments before being taken away to...somewhere.

It’s never the same and adds to Alex’s restlessness. Will this ever end? The hours roll on and Alex feels his anxiety slowly turn toward a depressing acceptance. There’s no hope this time. This time they won’t let him out from his cell. His eyes get heavy and he falls asleep.

Time passes.

He awakes to the sound of keys rattling. A lock turns. Is this yet another small miracle?

A grim prison guard strides in, his face expressionless.

“You’re free to go. You’re needed elsewhere.”

The guard says nothing else and Alex obediently follows behind.

“What about Andy?” he questions him, “What about Abe? Are they leaving too?”

“They’re not needed right now.”

Alex doesn’t understand but asks nothing else. He leaves his prison and is met with brightness. He takes in this joy as quickly as he can, understanding the inevitable. After only a few seconds, he is again being plunged into darkness.

*The cashier hands the customer a worn ten-dollar bill in change.*

**Author Biography:**

*David Updike is a manufacturing engineer from Middleton, WI. He is a hobbyist writer of short stories and poetry who has participated in writing groups in the Madison area. When not putting his pen to paper, he enjoys Farmers’ Markets, live theater, art fairs, and summertime in Wisconsin.*

**Reversion**

**By Amanda Fox**



He never would tell us where he found it or what made him pick it up. All I know is he left home for work one day, and he came back with it tucked up under his arm. I was too young to remember much else except how excited he was to show it to Mama.



I don't know if he and Mama fought about it. Such things weren't brought up in my presence, and anyway, after a while, no one brought it up again. We were used to it, I guess. Wouldn't have mattered if we weren't.

That lamp.

It wasn't a pretty or interesting one you might find at a rummage sale and buy on account of the kitsch. No, this was a simple lamp without a shade or bulb, not significant in appearance other than its permanent position under his arm. He carted that lamp everywhere he went. As far as I know, ever since he picked it up, he never put it back down again.

Didn't matter where he went or what he did; that lamp never left the safety of his arms. Just between you and me, I suspect it was the reason why I never got any brothers and sisters. And I tell you, you think you've seen all things until you've seen a man in the wash basin with his lamp as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

Everyone in town knew him. Everyone in town knew his lamp, too. I guess small town folk don't worry themselves too much over the eccentricity of one of their own. Sure, at first it was a little awkward for them, but never for him. I'd wager he thought of the lamp as an extension of himself, if he thought about it at all.

Early on, a couple of kids thought it would be funny to take it from him. I don't think they realized he never put it down, and I don't think they counted on his reaction. Now, I'll tell you that Mama and I never touched the lamp. I'm not sure about her reasons, but as for mine, well. Something about it repelled me. I can't explain it, but I felt as though the lamp didn't want me to touch it. I never did. I never wanted to.

I guess those kids didn't feel the same way. I've never seen my father as angry, and I swear I never knew he could be the violent type. Both those kids never spoke to my family again, and one never got the full use of his hands back.

Mama died of consumption, but I don't think my father noticed. On some level, he must have, since he went to the funeral, but that was just him going through the motions. He didn't care about anything else once the lamp showed up, and we all knew it. Even Mama, but she tried her hardest to love him despite everything. I think she let the consumption win.

After the funeral, he spent less time outside. He'd just sit there with his lamp staring off at nothing. I ran errands and kept the house clean, but I don't think he would have noticed if I hadn't. He just held on to his lamp and got older and held on to his lamp some more and kept getting older.

Eventually, I grew up and married and started a little family of my own. You get busy with little ones, you know, and everything else fades into the background. Before I knew it, he had died.

So here I am, just walking the familiar path to my childhood home knowing exactly what I'll find when I arrive. He'll be in his chair, lamp nestled into the crook of his arm like a favorite hound, his eyes seeing nothing. This is exactly the scene I take in when the door swings open.

There's the lamp. It's quite pretty, actually. I pick it up from his cold embrace, raising it for a closer inspection. Such fine craftsmanship. I can see now why he would want to keep it closely guarded.

I think I'll bring it home and show my husband.

**Author Biography:**

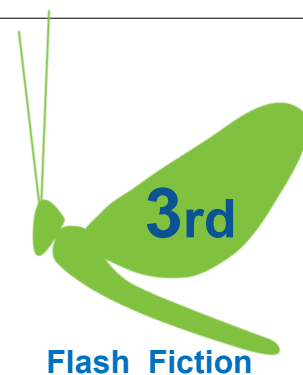
*Amanda Fox is a Texas transplant who refuses to move back to a warmer climate now that she has experienced a real winter. She shares her birthday with World Octopus Day and identifies as Chaotic Good. Amanda works in the emergency management field in Manitowoc County. She lives in Manitowoc with her ridiculous little dog and currently basks in her role as Sputnik Fest's 2018-19 Ms. Space Debris. Amanda would like to remind you to recycle and be nice to your neighbors.*

**Moving On**

**By Kathleen Waldvogel**

Geoffrey stroked his chin and watched his wife of twelve years. She tapped her pen, puzzling over the daily crossword. Her sigh indicated frustration. Why did she bother? She never completed one. Poor, simple, vapid Constance. Oblivious to everything. He exhaled forcefully. Tomorrow couldn't come soon enough.

Constance glanced up, tilted her head, smiling faintly. Geoffrey once loved that smile. So mysterious, as if it held secrets. Now it annoyed him, mocked him. He couldn't wait to get rid of it—and her.



He closed his eyes, envisioning his plan, luxuriating in it. Tomorrow they'd hike to Crater's Ledge overlooking Moon Lake. An hour's drive or so. Constance had eagerly agreed when Geoffrey suggested they go. They had hiked there often when first married. The views were spectacular. It was perfect. There was so much to see. Eagles, herons. He'd point out something to distract her. Then just a slight nudge on the narrow curve of the trail. Her feet would slip. She'd tumble over the edge. That damn smile gone forever. She'd never see it coming.

After a few weeks, he'd claim the life insurance. Not a fortune, but enough. He'd confide to his friends, "The memories are too painful." "I need a fresh start." They'd understand. He'd move on. Maybe Florida.

The next day, the couple headed out, the sun bright, air crisp. They spoke little as they ascended the trail. They hiked for an hour when Geoffrey stopped on the narrow ledge. He turned to Constance, stroking his chin. Pointing to a soaring eagle overhead, he encouraged her to lean a bit more to check out the view. She smiled that faint smile. Suddenly, the eagle changed direction and seemed to dive at the couple.

Geoffrey reached out, Constance pulled away. Confusion distorted Geoffrey's face as he stumbled over the narrow trail's edge. His last vision was of Constance, head tipped to one side.

Three weeks later, Constance followed her morning routine. She woke, went to the kitchen, made coffee, and began the daily crossword. After a few minutes, she put it aside, unfinished. She closed her eyes recalling the events from that fateful day. Beautiful sunshine. Fresh air. Geoffrey pointing. The eagle. Geoffrey tumbling over the edge.

Her cell phone's ring shook away the memory.

"Hello."

"Constance? Susan. Wayne and I have been out of town. We are so sorry about Geoffrey. Is there anything we can do?"

"Thank you, but no. I don't think so. It's just so hard. Memories, too painful. Everything here reminds me of him, of us."

"I can only imagine. What will you do?"

“Well, I’ve been thinking. Geoffrey had insurance. Not a lot, enough. I could move on.

Start over...you know, maybe a fresh start.”

“We’d hate to see you leave, but we understand. It has to be so difficult for you. Moving on might make sense. If that’s what you decide, we support you. But we’ll miss you.”

“Thanks. That means a lot.”

“Have you thought where you might go?”

“Not really. Maybe some place warm.”

“Wherever you decide, keep in touch, Constance. Take care.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Constance put down her cell. She poured another cup of coffee and walked over to the window, taking in the view and the beautiful sunshine outside. A faint smile reached her lips.

**Author Biography:**

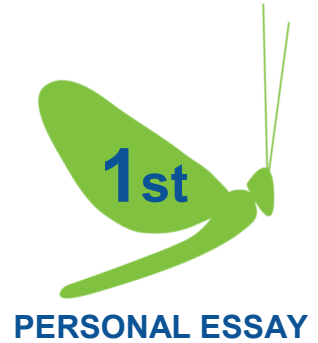
*Kathleen Waldvogel lives in northwest Wisconsin. She has B.S. and M.S.E. degrees and has taught elementary and middle school. Waldvogel is a member of SCBWI, Wisconsin Writers Association, the Yarnspinners writing group in Wisconsin, and the Scottsdale Writers Group in Arizona. Her first picture book, Three Little Ghosts, was published in September 2017. She and her husband love Wisconsin’s lakes and seasons but also enjoy Arizona. Waldvogel takes pleasure in being with family and friends. She hikes, plays pickle ball, travels, and reads, reads, reads.*

# PERSONAL ESSAY

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## Understanding

By H.R. Larson



Victor is talking on the phone with his mother, sitting as far away from me as possible. He wants privacy but knows I must supervise the call. I try to look distracted with dinner preparation in the kitchen. I understand his desire for secrecy but still need to listen for the words that could hurt him.

“Mom. Remember that time you wanted me to help you outside? Do you still think it was my fault?”

I hear the silence stretching on. No response from his mother. She knows I am listening in the background.

“Mom. Remember that? You said if I had helped, this wouldn’t have happened?”

I know exactly what he is talking about. His mother does, too. She won’t say the words he’s looking for, though, won’t undo the last thoughts she gave him about that day. A week ago I had heard the words sliding out of the phone speaker towards her eight year old son like an invisible knife.

“If you had helped me, this wouldn’t have happened. I asked you to help me. You didn’t come out and help. If you had helped me, the neighbors wouldn’t have called the police.”

By the time I intervened and reminded her that the social worker wanted her to accept responsibility for her actions, the damage had been done.

Now, the silence stretches on.

“Mom? Did you hang up?”

“No. I’m still here.”

“Did you hear what I said?”

“Honey, let’s not talk about that,” she says with a distracted tone. Then, almost like an afterthought, “It was nobody’s fault.”

Victor meets my eyes from the farthest corner of the couch. I am careful to arrange my face to not show any of the things his mother’s words make me feel: Anger, disappointment, sorrow, exasperation. Instead I hold up an orange and raise my eyebrows in a silent query, ‘Would you like one?’ He nods yes, and I split the skin of the orange with my thumb and release its sweet-sharp scent into the air. By the time his mother has said her desultory goodbyes, the slices are arranged in a smiley face on the kitchen table next to a glass of milk. It is something small I can offer him. I won’t reference the conversation directly now or he’ll clench his emotions together like a tight fist and start getting silly, a smokescreen I recognize from my own frequent use - laugh at funny me and forget that other thing I don’t want to talk about.

The real thing I offer him is understanding.

I remember the hurts of my own mother’s accusations. I grew around them like a tree around a barbed wire fence. Everything was my fault. We were running late? My fault. Mom was angry? Also my fault. My parents’ divorce? Her job loss? Most definitely my fault, always my fault, until the guilt of existing weighed me down like a sodden wool coat I was sewn into. Until I met a slap or an insult with the recognition that I deserved it, somehow.

Victor has gathered the orange slices and consumed them in a single handful. Around them he asks, “When’s dinner?”

“Twenty minutes.” I do not remind him that we shouldn’t talk with our mouths full, or use our shirts for napkins, as I see him doing. Now is not the time. Working on manners after that phone conversation would be like touching up the paint on a burning house.

“Can I have another?”

“Let’s wait until dinner.”

An exasperated groan. “I’m soooooo hungry.”

“Drink your milk and see if you feel more full.”

Here is another worrisome thing I recognize. He uses food to soothe his hurts. That issue unfortunately falls pretty far down the list of other priorities we need to address, like catching him up academically, and helping him learn to control his frequent angry and destructive emotional outbursts. Things like stealing and lying have to be weighed in importance against the fact that they are both learned behaviors and necessary in his mind for survival. He has only known us for 3 months. It might take 3 years before he learned the rules of our trust.

At bedtime that evening I sense he may be ready to talk about the phone conversation again. It’s one of the things I’ve been gifted by having a parent with a mental illness. I’ve learned how to constantly watch and read people until I do it without even being aware that I am doing it. It’s a secret language of looks, word choices and tones; body gestures, postures, and movements that you absorb and utilize like a seasoned sailor navigating the tides, currents, and winds. Watch, and be aware, and avoid the danger. I use it now to discern Victor’s willingness to connect and unburden. After reading a favorite book, and the games we play that are a combination of gentle touch, clapping, and silly voices, Victor asks about my mother. It’s like another bedtime story, a strange and often scary one with many chapters: My Mother Who Was Broken and Who I Loved Anyway.

“Did your mother hit you?” he asks me. I keep my voice is neutral when I answer, the same tone I’d use if my husband asked about needing more milk from the store.

“Yes. Lots of times.”

“My mom doesn’t hit me. My uncle hit me, though.”

“I know. I’m sorry that happened.” I also know this uncle is actually his mother’s boyfriend, but it’s not a fact he needs defined. I know he knows it, too, and that his mother told him to say it was an uncle.

“Didn’t she leave you at the store once?” He smiles mischievously as he asks. I smile back at him when I answer.

“Yes. She thought I was being naughty so she left without me.”

“Did you cry?”

“Yes. After I realized. I didn’t know at first because I was looking at some comics. I didn’t hear her calling me, and that’s why she thought I was being naughty. She thought I was ignoring her. So she left me there.”

“Did she say she forgot you?”

“That’s what she told the store manager when she came back to get me. That she forgot I was with her and came back right away when she realized she had left me behind.”

“But she didn’t forget?”

“No. She told me in the car on the way home that she did it on purpose because I wasn’t listening. She said if I didn’t listen again, she would leave me again and not come back.”

“Were you scared?”

“I was terrified.”

“How old were you?”

“I was 5. I had just started kindergarten.” I stroke the side of his face as we talk. He loves the feel of it, and would happily let me do it for hours. This, I know, is a good thing. It means when he was younger someone gave him consistent affection and built the trust necessary to accept and even seek out this touch.



“You know it wasn’t my fault that my mother left me at that grocery store, right?”

“Yeah,” he says.

“And you know it’s not your fault that the neighbors called the police about your mom?”

You know it’s not your fault that you and your sisters are in care, right?”

“Hmmm,” he says. A noise. An affirmation, maybe. Probably the closest I will get. I lean over to kiss his brow and tuck the blankets around him one more time.

I turn out the light and try not to think about what happens in a few months, when he and his siblings are back with their mother. How I might see him again after that, I might not. How he’ll have so much to overcome, and how the chances are low that anyone will be able to guide him through it. How the chances are high that most people will convince him he’s not valuable. I try not to think of my own stumbles and struggles when I was younger and how for a long time I was convinced I didn’t have anything to offer anyone. I try not to think about how when he is gone I will wash the bedsheets and make the bed and eventually there will be another child lying in it, a child who defines normal in a completely different way than most of the world.

A child for whom the only real thing I can offer is understanding.

***Author Biography:***

*H. R. Larson is a musician and writer who was born and raised in central Wisconsin. She and her husband live on a small farm in Omro where they grow children and vegetables.*

## On Contests, Near-Death and Obsessions

By Nancy Jorgensen

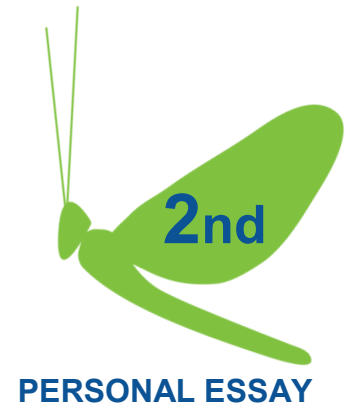
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On an 80-degree Monday in August 2017, with snow-capped Mount Hood on the horizon, Gwen ran a few miles before doctors induced labor. Two days later, she screamed and panted in the white walled, white-floored, white-sheeted hospital room. Her body refused to relinquish the baby, so doctors delivered eight-pound Stanley by suction. The room smelled of blood. Gwen smelled of sweat. Her pallor matched the walls and floors and sheets. Her torn vagina would require internal stitches and months of pelvic floor therapy.

Four weeks later, her first postpartum run outside her Portland home was a walk. One block. But she methodically, incrementally, retrained her muscles and ten months later, on July 4, raced the USA Track and Field 10K National Championship in Atlanta, Georgia. As 60,000 runners lined up, forecasters warned of extreme heat, but Gwen had prepared for any condition. Her result: 32:54 for seventh place. Her performance: on track for the Olympic marathon trials.

Gwen fuels like a trucker pumps diesel. Frequently. At great expense. With top quality product. Her chef/manager/husband drops \$100 a day on oats, eggs and coconut milk for breakfast; rice, veggies and Tillamook cheese for lunch; bison, beef or chicken for dinner. Between meals, she tanks up on cashews, blueberries, peaches, yogurt, rice cakes, dark chocolate—all organic. Once a week, Gwen eats out and orders two entrees. She fine tunes her body like that driver maintains his engine, intent on reaching her destination in the fastest time. She competes for prize money and perhaps a Nike or Oakley bonus. Her training goal: 120 miles per week. Her performance goal: Tokyo 2020.

Gwen trusts her body. Six years before, on the 2012 Olympic triathlon course that looped Buckingham Palace, she punctured a tire and finished 38th. She spilled tears over the defeat and then focused on August 20, 2016, in Rio de Janeiro. To train, she swam New Zealand's ocean currents, crashing waves and pool lanes. She biked Spain's jagged cobblestones, rolling mountain and manmade velodrome.



She ran Australia's park paths, forest trails and cinder tracks. Then, on the penultimate day of the 2016 Olympic Games, with millions watching via computer, NBC or the grandstand, she dove into Copacabana Beach. Her goal: Olympic gold. Her result: Olympic gold. Again, she spilled tears—joyful this time—and declared making a baby and running marathons her next challenge.

## 64

In January 2017, as light snow swirled in Wisconsin, Joel arrived at the hospital for a hip replacement. The procedure would give him control on his mountain bike, correct his golf swing and improve his stability on the frozen tundra's icy sidewalks. But what should have been routine turned ruinous. His surgeon nicked an unnamed vessel and blood loss threatened Joel's life. A team sprinted him to ICU. Doctors pumped five units of unmatched blood into his veins. They wired his limbs with needles and cords. A ventilator pumped his breath and a mechanical sigh expelled it. His room, lit with monitors and machines, smelled like antiseptic and fear.

The loss of blood shut down Joel's organs. It scarred and obstructed his colon. It paralyzed his kidneys. It killed the muscle in his left leg.

Joel, pale and unshaven, moaned and thrashed from the abdominal pain. He chattered his teeth from the chill of dialysis. He asked if he would ever walk again. Twice, in the delirium of ICU psychosis, he ripped out his central line. He didn't see home for three months.

Joel's first postoperative walk, from the edge of his hospital bed, where a physical therapist spotted him, was a shuffle. One step. When he eventually walked 30 steps, doctors discharged him—with two battery-operated wound vacuums attached to his leg, a colostomy bag on his abdomen and a tome of instructions. At home, therapists and nurses coaxed him to move, first with a walker, then a cane. They measured his gaping 12-inch fasciotomies. Every three days, they changed his colostomy bag and cleaned his stoma, releasing the smell of defecation. Joel hid his pain and frustration from caregivers but in the late afternoon let go sobs and at night woke screaming.

After eight months of rehabilitation, he traveled 2,000 miles to meet his newborn grandson. He stuffed colostomy supplies in a carry on and walked with a leg brace and a cane.

After 19 months of rehabilitation, Joel again traveled 2,000 miles to visit his now 10month old grandson. He had donated his colostomy supplies to charity when the surgeon performed a reversal. He walked with only a leg brace.

Joel trusts his body. He swept the baby off the floor, tossed him in the air and toted him on his hip. He adjusted the stroller's shade, protecting the baby from a blazing Oregon sun and Stanley, in return, declared Grandpa his favorite. He cried when Grandpa left the room. He squealed when Grandpa poked his head back in: peek-a-boo!

## **35**

Elizabeth is addicted to contests. In October 2016, after a decade of winning radio contests, writing contests and Facebook contests (her house filled with free barbeque grills, televisions, snow blowers, a custom closet, a diamond ring) she entered her city's weight loss challenge. By losing the greatest percentage of weight, she won the competition at 157 pounds.

For Elizabeth, wins are a drug. If she scores one, she needs another. She bought a gym membership and hired a personal trainer. She shoveled snow from her Wisconsin driveway so she could get to Gold's Gym for spin class. Then, after teaching high school students, she completed a second workout, run or weight session. She drank more water. She drank less beer. She ate protein and beets and broccoli and berries. She gained strength. She lost pounds. Her trainer posted her stats on Facebook and Elizabeth shared the post—she's also addicted to attention and reinforcement.

In October 2017, Elizabeth completed the city's second weight loss challenge. Her winning weight: 144. Elizabeth trusts her body. She runs faster, lifts better, works longer. She weighs in now at 134 and admires her image in the mirror, acknowledging lost pounds, striving to internalize that perception. She can't quite keep pace with her sister, but last month on a run in Portland, Gwen only bested her after the first mile and a half.

Thirty-five and thirty-two years ago, my body grew two babies. The process made me nauseated, exhausted and heavy. The first baby was delivered via forceps after nine hours of labor, the second in a quick whoosh after I arrived at the hospital. Their personalities, evident immediately, presaged their paths. The first, a screaming, hard to soothe bundle remains outgoing and vocal, opinionated and social. The second, quiet and independent, remains inwardly focused, eschewing praise in favor of intrinsic motivation. Both love to win. Contests. Prizes. Races. Gold medals.

When my husband lay in a hospital bed, I hovered, asking questions, signing consents, requesting treatments. I held his hand and smoothed his forehead. I lost 15 pounds and floundered through depression. Then, as his body healed, I allowed mine to recover too.

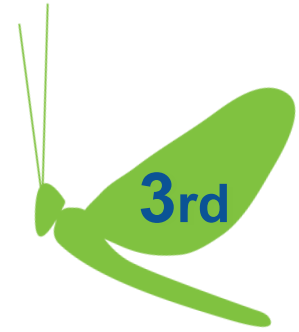
Now, I begin my day sweating through 30 minutes on the Stairmaster. Then, with an exercise app, I do 30 minutes of squats, pushups and planks. It's not Olympic grade but when my body is tired, I find inspiration in Gwen's achievements. Later, I hone writing skills and practice piano. I am not addicted, but I glean motivation from Elizabeth's persistence.

I trust my body. It hosted two embryos who developed complete and separate from me. It sustained me when my husband fought for life. It supports me in my creative and physical endeavors. And when Joel and I are in the City of Roses, it gives me strength to change diapers, practice first steps, nuzzle Stanley's neck and circle my arms around his mother.

***Author Biography:***

*Nancy Jorgensen is a Wisconsin musician and writer. Her choral education books are published by Hal Leonard Corporation and Lorenz Corporation. Her memoir of daughter Gwen Jorgensen's journey from CPA to 2016 Olympic Champion is due in 2019 from Meyer & Meyer Sport. Shorter works appear or are forthcoming at Prime Number Magazine, Smith Magazine, Cagibi, Coffin Bell and elsewhere.*

**Keeper of the Shoes**  
**By Peg Rousar-Thompson**



**PERSONAL ESSAY**

I was born with what my family jokingly calls The Collector Gene. Inherited from my father, I seem to have a knack for accumulating stuff. Not just junk as it may appear to the untrained eye, but representations of both moments and passages of time. I am happiest when surrounded by my treasures, those precious things that are an extension of my personality.

When my mother was in the hospital with her first baby, my grandmother sent a lovely ceramic baby shoe filled with ivy. A symbol of new life and continuity, the yellow flowered shoe adorned my room all throughout childhood. I would show my friends, telling them in essence, how my birth had changed the world of my parents and grandparents. My sister came along, and a pink shoe was added to the shelf.

In turn, as a new mother, I received a baby shoe while in-hospital. Blue, signifying the big, beautiful boy added to our clan. Each week while dusting, I would gently wipe the shoe and remember again, bringing a new life into the world and the changes that had come.

It was ten long years before I was rewarded with one more blue shoe, and of course, a perfect baby boy to accompany it. Life was ideal - I had a home of my own, a garden to tend, and two wonderful boys to watch grow. I treasured every day, even the hard ones.

And there were hard ones. Days that finally left me with only one of my sons, left me too exhausted to dust shoes or to tend my garden. I went for help. I told her about my baby, my dusting and my collector gene.

She gave me an assignment; get out into the world. Find something that brings you pleasure, hold it in your hand, just for a second.

How, I wondered, do you shop for delight? On the way home, I stopped at a yard sale. Maybe

someone else's treasures would kindle hope. I spotted a lonely glass baby shoe among the usual flower vases and odd china plates. I picked it up and held it in the palm of my hand. Like she had been waiting for me, a woman stepped up and began to tell its story.

"Oh," she said, "that's from my daughter's birth in 1943-" and talked of her easy delivery and her good-natured baby. It was difficult, she said, downsizing, preparing to move to a senior facility and parting with her life's mementos. Her memory of Baby Catherine was given freely that day. I bought her shoe for a quarter, took it home and placed it on the shelf next to my three.

It began to happen. Everywhere I went, pastel ceramic shoes appeared. Antique shops, church jumbles, yard sales. Pink, green, and blue, some perfect and some faded with age, one still held its potting soil. The minute I would pause, the second I would hesitate, a mother would rush over and I would be entrusted with her sacred story. As thick as my own grief was, I learned to listen. I learned to carry those stories alongside my own.

Stories of waiting, wanting, and mothering. Tales of babies born and babies dying. Sarah and Katie the twins, Robert, who was born with Down's Syndrome. And for each story that was shared, another shoe was added to my shelf. Many were just given to me, the mothers happy that someone would guard and treasure the times of their lives and the stories that accompanied them. I took them all, each shoe, warm in my hand, and each faultless story.

My yellow shoe is cracked with age now, that first blue shoe is nearly forty years old. The other one grieves with me for a child gone too soon. Much to my surprise, a delicate pink one was added to the mix a few years later.

And there we all sit, myself and my three children, surrounded by the love and lives of so many, all represented by their tiny ceramic shoes.

**Author Biography:**

*Peg Rousar-Thompson believes writing can fix most of the world's problems. She's organized writing groups in her community, volunteered for NaNoWriMo, planned writing retreats and taught creativity classes. She served as editor for Left of the Lake Magazine for six years and is currently working to revise her first novel. Her work has appeared in Epitaphs, Buffalo Woman's Vision, and Bereavement Magazine. Her work was included in the collaborative project, Pandora's Box and Nosferatu. In 2018, she won the Jean Nelson Prize for her short story, Food for Thought. And she writes every day because she can't not.*

# Teen Short Story

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## Scribbles in the Stairwell By James Back



## Teen Short Story

Silver moonlight illuminated the rotting wood stairs of the gloomy house. Its windows gave the look of empty, unblinking, eyes staring into your heart and casting judgement upon all your actions. The pair of teens gave a silent shudder as they approached the house.

“Maya, I don’t think this is a very good idea,” Kai’s voice shook. “Just look at these stairs. We aren’t even in the house yet and it’s barely stable!”

“Are you honestly scared of an old set of stairs? Come on Kai it’s just a house.”

“I’m not scared of the house, I’m scared of falling through the stairs of said house and getting tetanus,” his face turned steely as he spat the words at her.

Maya chuckled and took the first step onto the creaking step. She stumbled, Kai jumped forward to support her. She started laughing and he pulled away.

“Kai, you’re too on edge. It’s not going to break, I’m fine,” she pulled herself back up and stood on the second step waiting for him to follow. Reluctantly, he sighed and complied.

For as long as Kai had known her, Maya had had an interest in the macabre. Ghost stories, old cults, unsolved murders. If it was taboo and creepy, Maya was engrossed in research on it. In fact, she and Kai shared a blog about the topic called *Cryptid Prose*, though it didn’t have much traffic. Every other weekend they would go out and ghost hunt or explore, all so they could get proof on some sort of local legend. Her hunger for adventure and mystery was unquenchable.

The bright, adventurous personality of Maya clashed rather harshly with Kai. Kai had always been a little more subdued. His interest, rather than the frightening and mysterious, leaned more towards quiet



reading and individual sports. Where Maya ran and dove into things, Kai preferred to analyze and then dive in. Needless to say, there are a lot of things that Kai would prefer to be doing on his Friday night other than being dragged into the Old Mortem House by his best friend.

The Mortem house was certainly an oddity in their hometown. Its past was a blur of fact and fiction, truth and rumor. There are hundred of versions of the house's history being passed from mouth to mouth. Who could possibly tell which was the truth? There are those who say there was family of squatters that once lived in it after it was abandoned. They say the parents couldn't afford to care of their kids any longer so they killed them and hid them somewhere in the house, though there are no records to prove the story. Some claimed that the couple who originally owned the home were sociopaths, determined to use and abuse their brood of children. Others still say a cult used to be housed in its depths, the concrete floor soaking up the morbid secrets of their rituals. Kai, always the skeptic, chose to believe that it was just a creepy old abandoned house that should be left alone for safety reasons.

A sickly sweet smell, almost like rotting meat, permeated the air in the house. Years of dust coated every surface.

"Oh god, what died in here?" Maya gagged.

"Whatever it was it was clearly from the 1970's, this wallpaper is so tacky."

"Alright, I'll take the kitchen, you take the living room. Look for anything of interest, old letters, legal documents, photographs, you know the deal."

They searched every nook and cranny of the downstairs, only turning up dust, a few papers. And an old chewed up bouncy ball.

"Maya, this place is a bust, can we just go already?"

"We haven't even been in the office yet will you cool your jets? We don't have to be anywhere tonight, our folks think we're at the movies, you don't have to worry about Kai," she placed her hand on his shoulder reassuringly, "Take a deep breath, okay? We'll stick together for the rest of the search. Now let's go upstairs," her hand fell back to her side as Kai gave a weak smile.

The third step to the upstairs groaned under their collective weight. Maya swore she saw a tuft of dust emerge from it. As they went up Kai drew his fingers along the yellowed wallpaper until his eye caught something and he froze.

“Maya...”

“Don’t tell me you felt a coldspot.”

“Oh shut up, look at this wallpaper.”

“Yes we already established it’s ugly Kai, now can we please just finish looking around this house and go home?” her growing irritation was very clear in her tone.

“Will you stop snapping at me and just look!” he exclaimed.

Faded crayon drawings decorated the wall starting at the spot Kai was pointing at and spread up the staircase like a virus. Flowers, dinosaurs, explosions, scribbles, none of the drawings matched each other. They clashed and twisted around each other in a sick dance leading to one single drawing. A family of four, drawn in a vibrant, yet scratchy, red. It featured a mother, father, and two children. All of them had deep black tears streaked down their faces.

Maya’s eye blew wide for just a moment. Goosebumps spread across her body and she let a quiet gasp escape her before composing herself.

“Maybe the previous owners had artistic kids. You’re letting your nerves get to you,” she turned away from him, her steps a little faster than before.

The first door on the second floor was hanging off its hinges, a cracked and moldy tile floor visible behind it. The air felt heavy around them and the two friends shivered.

Kai’s eyes wandered around the bathroom area trying to take in every detail. The mold on the shower curtain looked as if it had been there so long it had its own civilization growing. Then, he landed on the porcelain sink in the bathroom. Its slow fade from an ivory white to a deep red-brown was unsettling.

Meanwhile in the bedroom, Maya had finally found something of interest. A thick layer of dust coated everything in the room, tinting the colors with gray and making them muted and much harder to distinguish. Amongst the dull colors was a shimmering object set underneath the nightstand. She cocked her head inquisitively, her eyes squinting. Her hand began slowly reaching out towards it when she heard a sound from above her. She jumped, pulling her hand back.

“Hey Kai, did you hear that?” her voice shook as she called out to him.

“Yeah I did, what the hell was that?”

“I don’t know but it sounded like something rolling on a floor above us. Does this place have an attic?”

The two friends let their gazes crawl upward following the cracks and seams at the same time unknowingly.

“If it does I don’t want to see it-” the same noise from before cut him off. Maya ran to him and dripped his arm in a gesture of both excitement and fear.

“Maya I really think it’s time we left,” Kai whispered, but Maya was no longer listening. She had finally spotted the door to the attic and now she inched towards it, her eyes never moving from it.

“Kai, try and find something to get this open won’t you?”

“Maya seriously you’re taking this too far. It’s already late and we’re trespassing,” he whispered in a rushed and angry voice. Maya turned to look him in the eyes.

“Kai, I know you’re freaked out. I’m scared too, but it’s been so long since we’ve found anything and this house is our best shot! Our blog could finally get some recognition and think of all the cool antiques we could find up there! Just work with me on this, okay?”

He took a deep breath and nodded. He knew that she had a good point, so he willed his shaking legs to go forward. He eventually found a pull-down pole for the attic stairs. Pushing up on the door the stairs clattered to the floor. Tck tck tck. A red crayon rolled down and bounced on each step, stopping at Maya’s shoe. The friends shared a look, then slowly brought their gaze up to the gap in the ceiling. Maya thought her heart stopped. Kai dropped the pole, the thud sounding louder than it should have been. Peering out the opening to the attic was a small, pale, face with decaying smile.

### ***Author Biography***

*James Back is a fifteen year old sophomore at Williams Bay. He has a passion for creative writing and this is his second year entering the Lakefly Writing contest. The only thing holding his writing back is a deep perfectionist streak and a nasty habit of procrastination, but he continues to hope that putting himself and his writing out there will allow him to progress and grow as a writer.*

**The Carvings in My Bones**  
**By Emmah Scott**



**Teen Short Story**

The pen slides across my paper as I fumble through my thesaurus. My mind ruffles through the million of words I could use to describe the color of the ocean. My Christmas lights decorate the ceiling above my head and reflect a hazy glow against my paper. Ah, the perfect word. *Cerulean*. A smile carves its way across my face as I write the word in my neatest penmanship. I can just imagine the way the waves will curl at the tops, crumble at the water's edge and roll up against the most sand. I envision the waves churning the path for a wooden boat, making its way across the wildly blue waters. The main character sitting on the bow of the boat, long curly brown hair swirling around her firm pale figure. The clear imagery makes my writers' mind proud of myself. I awake from my daydream and look down at my paper. The pen's ink went wild and ran off my paper and onto my desk. Sighing, I try and rub my finger against the mark, but it's no use. The black ink smudges at the touch of my finger but stays put.

Exasperated, I close my eyes, and lean back in my chair. Now, the problem is how to make the captain's son fall in love with the girl? My mind files through the endless ideas, like notes written on millions of note cards. They flutter around my thoughts and bring me a feeling of peace. These ideas, these characters and these storylines are my life. The people are my friends, my only companions. The places they visit, they are my home. And these ideas are the things that hold me together, like the glue that fills up the cracks of my heart. The words that I write down are etched out across my soul, carved into my bones and written across my flesh. The people I carry my problems to, are the people I have created. The people I have written about, have made me the person I am. I feel the ocean's current sweeping me under the waters, and crashing down on top of me. A surge of excitement and adrenaline fills my immune system and gives me all the words to write down. The girl slips on the edge of the ship and is shoved down under the intense waves. She fights against the swirling foamy waters rushing over her head and suffocating her. The question is, should my story

end here? My mind thinks through the memories I've made with this girl, and it come to me. Her true love sees her flailing her arms around and spitting out the toxic sea water. He dive in, and swims against the raging waters, and fights up against the raging waves. His hair is matted down with seaweed and his eyes are red from the salt water. He wraps his arms around her and carries her back to the ship. He grabs hold of the ship's edge and heaves the girl and himself up. He breathes life into her, as she coughs, signaling that she is alive. I smile as I imagine the rest of the story. My head starts to hurt from all the imaginable possibilities.

I set my pen down in my pencil holder and stand up. I stretch my legs from the position I've been in for an hour or so. The ocean's water slowly drains from my room and onto the pages of my book. As soon as it is all captured between the lines, and hours of pain poured into the book, I close the leather covered notebook, and stuff it into one of the desk's drawers. I sigh, trying to focus my mind on the day ahead. I shove the discouraging thoughts out of my head and glance at the clock. The sun's brilliant rays start shining through my room and onto my face. I squint as I look out the window smudged with my own wandering fingerprints and see the bus coming up the road. I race down the stairs and grab my backpack. The second my feet hit the pavement of our driveway, the bus slows in front of me. I hitch a ride and sit down in my usually lonely seat. I look out from beyond my own ship's bow and watch as the waters around me churn. The sea forms into a familiar daunting monster, forbidding me to cross its path, but at the same time it dares me to enter the foggy mist. My own storm approaches ahead, as we near the school: but just like my main character, I'll live through this storm.

### ***Author Biography***

*Emmah has been writing for as long as she can remember. She is a 14 year old 8th grader. She can be found with her nose in a book or filling a notebook up with words. Her favorite color is yellow and has a current obsession with Converse high tops.*

## When I Let Go

By Addison Rahmlow



It wasn't my fault; that's what I said to her.

Truth be told, I'm not actually sure. The night is only a faint echo in my rattling brain, thumping against my skull slowly at first, then harder, then harder again, until my heart is pounding against my chest, and my frail skin drips with cold sweat.

Nothing but a wisp of the memory remains.

That was until the letter came.

Enveloped in a soot-soaked paper, sealed with a firm red sticker, it sat there in my mailbox aging as the years flew by. The spring equinox arrived, soon followed by crisp fall air and the scent of peach cobbler, but still, it sat there in my little black box.

Now as I rock in my wooden chair, glancing out the window from time to time, watching children shriek with delight as a jump rope swings across the paved street, I clasp the worn paper. A tear blots my left cheek, but I dab away at it with my gray cardigan, streaking my chipped nail through the ashes. My breath clatters in and out as I make up my mind.

I'll do it.

*Dear mom,* It reads, the handwriting so perfect and precise it dances across the page, *I don't know what to say. I barely even remember that night, only what happened afterward. You know, as a five-year-old, I didn't understand what was happening. And still, I don't understand. I mean, I now know why it happened, I just don't know why you didn't do anything to stop it. I'm not mad, more so, confused.*

*As I was cleaning out Nani's house yesterday, I found the transfer order. It all clicked.*

*Of course, I'm mostly mad at Nani. If it wasn't for her, this never would've happened. But still, its no excuse. You're supposed to protect me from stuff like that. You're my mom.*

*So, I'm not writing this to make you feel bad, I know you're probably struggling more than I. I just wanted to let you know that I'm open to starting over. In fact, I want to begin again.*

*Love, Elise.*

*My head falls into my lap as tears stream down my face. Somewhere, a child yells with glee, their voice so pure and rich, it fills the air like a song.*

*I shake violently, my heart rate accelerating to dangerous speeds, my breathing coming out in short huffs. It starts to come back.*

*I'm sitting in the front seat of my old blue minivan; Beatrice, as I named it, gripping the wheel tightly. Elise's laugh erupts throughout the vehicle as she taps her magenta polished nails on the dashboard. The stereo is cranked up so loud, my eardrums scream, but I don't care. Elise is loving it. Her head of red hair bobs up and down, and her silver sneakers, etched with smiling multicultural princesses, the ones she begged and begged me to buy, pound to the beat. For a second, we share a smile. To comrades, mother and daughter, not caring about anything other than the moment.*

*Then it happens.*

*The lights flash brightly. The car slams to a stop. A scream echoes.*

*Elise's scream.*

*I'm thrown forward into the glass, as it shatters in my impact.*

*My head throbs. My lungs scream for air.*

*I can only think about Elise.*

*I'm sitting in a courtroom, shuffling in my seat and clasping a small yellow duffel bag tightly. My hair has been combed neatly for the occasion, or, as neat as I can get it, as my tight blond curls still poke out behind my blotchy ears. Elise sits in the other corner, holding the handle of her wheelchair tightly, a white bandage wrapped around her hair. Nani takes hold of her small hand and places it on her lap, shooting me an ugly glance while at it. I look down at my brown flats and pretend not to notice.*

*The judge pounds his hammer into the oak table, silencing the chatter. His wispy gray hair is flattened to one side, flickering in the fluorescent lights. My vision blurs as Nani's lawyer takes the stand. The world swirls around me.*

*I can't watch.*

*"Ladies and gentlemen,"*

*Please no.*

*"We are gathered here today concerning the well-being of Miss Elise Charmian."*

*Don't do it.*

*"For the last five years, she has been raised by her mother entirely. At four months, the father, Jonothan, died."*

*"Objection!" The prosecutor pipes.*

*"Continue." replies the judge.*

*"The dad has never been officially declared 'dead.' According to the legal, records he disappeared on a camping trip and never came back."*

*"Understood, but, Iyena Charmian, the grandmother of Elise, or Jonathan's mother, knows him better than anyone, and said he had no reason to disappear. The only theory is that he got lost, and wasn't able to call for help."*



*“Objection!” The prosecutor barks again.*

*“Sustained.”*

*“There is no evidence proving that theory.”*

*“Well, if you doubt me, why don’t you hear from Iyena herself.” The judge nods in approval and Nani walks up to the stand, making sure I see her expensive dress as it flows behind her waist. She takes her place in front of the jury box and clears her throat.*

*“Jonathan was always a good boy. He was an A-plus student who dreamed of playing the alto-sax professionally. I never doubted him. Until he met Sarah.” She turns her head towards me and fake smiles, smacking her cherry coated lips. “Sarah was still in high school when they met, and she, well, how do I put this..... was living in a group home. Not that there’s anything wrong with that though.” She fake smiles again and I ball my fingers into fists, my face fuming. “You see, she didn’t have a good education or money, and when Jonathan left us, I knew she wouldn’t be able to support Elise and herself. In fact, I had found evidence three months ago, when I caught them sleeping in their car.”*

*“Objection!”*

*“You may go on.”*

*“That is confidential information for only Sarah and Elise to share.”*

*“Well, it’s family information, and technically, I’m part of the family.”*

*“And how did you find this out?”*

*“I saw them parked at Sonics overnight.”*

*“Continue then.”*

*“As we all know, three weeks ago, Sarah drove point-blank into a stoplight, knocking it over and gravely injuring Elise. How irresponsible! When this happened, it put me over the edge. That’s why I put in a custody order. With Elise with me, she would be able to attend a great private school, have three meals in her*

*belly each night, and go to college. Fully paid. I don't see why it should go any other way."*

*She steps down, her silver heels clicking the polished floor. The audience claps and murmurs as my ears rush with noise.*

*The lights spin.*

*My head rocks.*

*I fall forward in my chair.*

*Don't. Take. My. Daughter. Away.*

6:01 p.m, my eyes flick open. The coffee machine gurgles in the background, as I snatch the side of my wooden chair, my face still covered in sweat. The scent of beef casserole drifts through my nostrils, as reality clicks in.

*Darn. I bet it's burnt.*

My legs wobble as I stand up, my mind still fresh with the thought of Elise. The memory clings to my soul, making each step heavier as it pulls my heart farther and farther away.

Guilt is a monster.

As I walk over to the kitchen, a ring suddenly erupts the eerie clock-ticking silence. The doorbell.

I dab my face with a cold rag, hoping the frigid water will tone down the swelling so I don't look like a hot mess. I toss my dish in the sink with one hand and turn the brass doorknob with my other, revealing a young woman holding a toddler.

Her hair is shoulder-length and strawberry blonde, her eyes a deep green. For a second, I pause, brushing my own stringy hair behind my neck. "Do I?-" I start, searching the woman's eyes for recognition, but then it clicks. The woman smiles warmly shifting the toddler onto her back.

My heart stops.

My mind freezes.

It can't be.

"Elise?" I choke, wiping a tear off my eye.

She nods, opening up her arms and embracing me.

At first, I don't know what to do. Do I take them? Do I leave?

But slowly, I relax, letting my head fall onto her shoulders. She smells of honeysuckle and vanilla mixed with the after-scent of a home-cooked meal. My eyes start to water but I hold it in, instead, grasping her tighter, and tighter, because this time won't end like the last.

So yes, it was my fault, Nani.

But, not how you're thinking of it.

It was my fault for running into the stoplight.

For not going to college.

But, where I really messed up, where I really, really, messed up, was when I let go.

**Author Biography:**

*Addison Rahmlow is a 7th grader who, as long as she can remember, has loved writing. Currently, she's composing a novel with one of her friends which they hope to finally finish, as it seems like they've been writing it for a lifetime! In her free time, Addie also likes to play striker in soccer matches, make macarons for her family, read, run cross country, visit her family in Alaska, play the flute, and eat seaweed soup (yum!). But, no matter what, writing will always be her favorite hobby, which she hopes one day will turn into her career.*

