

SHORT STORY CONTEST

Short, but not necessarily sweet

Stories offer characters with emotional depth

The story of the Palo Alto Weekly's 26th Annual Short Story Contest is one driven by characters — the robot who struggles to define humanity, the horse that longs for freedom, the mother who retreats from her worrisome reality, and the girl who develops in front of the reader's eyes during a turning point in her life. The characters in each story are as distinct as their authors, and each lends emotion and depth to their stories.

The Palo Alto Weekly thanks each of the 142 writers who entered this year's contest as well as writers Ann Hillesland and Shelly King, who chose the top entries in each category to send to judges. Also, thanks to our judges and the contest co-sponsors Bell's Books of Palo Alto, Kepler's of Menlo Park and Linden Tree of Los Altos. The stories and author biographies of the winners are published online at www.PaloAltoOnline.com.

Short Story Contest Winners

Children, 9-11 years old

- 1st place: "Nico" by Nicole Knauer
- 2nd place: "A Tale of a Tail" by Emma Miller
- 3rd place: "Lightning Strikes" by Nisha McNealis

Teens, 12-14 years old

- 1st place: "The Perfect Souvenir" by Maya McNealis
- 2nd place: "Merry Go Round" by Emily Katz
- 3rd place: "Four Knocks" by Alexandre Poux

Young adults, 15-17 years old

- 1st place: "Robot Rob" by Curtis Wu
- 2nd place: "New Shoes Always Hurt" by Gavin Rea
- 3rd place: "Caltrain. Afternoon Service. Makes All Stops."
By Alessandra Occhioini

Adults, 18 years and older

- 1st place: "When the Knock Comes" by Diane Holcomb
- 2nd place: "Bastille Day" by Apala G. Egan
- 3rd place: "Do the Math" by Michele Raffin



by Diane Holcomb
When the knock comes, do not answer the door. It may be the man in the bowler hat and round glasses from the collection agency. It may be the woman two doors down who drinks too much gin and asks too many questions and smokes Virginia Slims hunched forward while her backend does a be-bop and her fish lips puff smoke. You do not want to answer the door. It may be the landlady in her housedress and slip-on shoes worn flat, clutching her tiny rat of a dog that breathes fast and stares at you with moist bulging eyes.

When the knock comes lie still on your Grandmother's chenille bedspread in your white slip on this muggy Wednesday afternoon, hands protecting your heart. Lie still behind those dark sunglasses, hiding from a Technicolor world. Wait for the footsteps to fade down the hall. If the feet stay put and the knocking gets louder, get up and get into that getup — the one you bought from the vintage store, the one you wear every day since the army deployed your only son to Iraq; since you

refused his checks, your savings ran out and you stopped paying the bills; since you started taking the stairs to avoid the neighbor lady and her endless questions about Tommy; since the longing to live in a black-and-white movie, when life was simple, became a constant ache. Slip into that black rayon dress with the wide shoulders and the hemline that brushes your knees. Clasp the white string of pearls behind your long neck. Pin the black feathered hat on an angle to your pin-curls and button the white gloves at your wrists.

When the knock comes, crawl out the window, the one where you first saw the bespectacled man six floors down standing in front of the glass doors adjusting his brown bowler, where you watched the landlady call for Fido and give him a smart spank before stopping to leaf through the mail at the box and then glare up at your window — the one you were hiding behind — where you heard the smoker's cough before you saw the neighbor and her long thin fingers waving her cigarette, saying *I see you, I see you behind that filmy white curtain, and have you heard anything from*

your dear brave boy?

When the knock comes, hurry down the fire escape in your open-toed shoes, and board the bus to the renovated movie palace downtown. Buy a ticket for the matinee, "The Best Years of Our Lives," and sit through both showings. Settle into your seat, the one halfway down the aisle, and let it cradle you in red velvet. Let the air-conditioning be a lullaby against your cheeks — the aroma of popcorn and hot melted butter a soothing balm. This is normalcy. This is a ticket to another world, a world where children beam hope and teenagers say things like *gee, that's swell*, and mothers are devoted to their families, and husbands work in banks, and there are no nosy neighbors. Rock from side to side as the elderly man in the navy blue suit plays the Mighty Wurlitzer, his left foot swinging end to end on the pedalboard, building to a crescendo as the organ descends into the orchestra pit, ending with a flourish as the velvet drapes rise to reveal a giant window into the past, a world where boys come home from the war — maybe without their hands, maybe bottled up with nightmares that leave

them wide-eyed and sweating and panting in a young woman's canopied bed, but they come home — while underneath it all is the lush sound of violins.

You do not want to answer the door. You spent the morning standing in line for your allotment of day-old bread and canned vegetables from the county. When the Latino man behind you said it's easy to get a free meal at Albertsons, "jus' make the rounds of the food demos," you turned and lowered your sunglasses for an instant. "Our country is spending millions of dollars a day to bomb a foreign country into an empty lot," you said, "and we're standing in line hoping for a gray steak." What you didn't say is how it tears you up inside that nobody's saving bacon grease and scrap metal for the boys in Iraq, least of all yourself. You didn't say how you're sacrificing your only son in a war that you're against. You faced forward and thought how Myrna Loy never used food stamps to pay for all those cocktails in "The Thin Man," and if she had,

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the Knock

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violins would have played.

When the knock comes, do not heave yourself from the mattress and travel the long distance to the door.

If you do find your hand turning the knob, pray that it isn't the man you saw six floors down moments ago stepping out of a black car.

Pray that it isn't him with the polished shoes, the trousers of his dress uniform seared to a point, beret in hand, a serious pull to his brow.

Pray, when you open the door, that you hear the soundtrack of a Goldwyn world, and not the regrets his mouth will form, when the knock comes. ■



LISTEN ONLINE
www.PaloAltoOnline.com

An audio recording of "The Knock" has been posted on Palo Alto Online. .

Diane Holcomb, 'When the Knock Comes'



When adult-category winner Diane Holcomb began writing her short story "When the Knock Comes," it wasn't coming together correctly and she was frustrated.

To remedy the situation Holcomb, a resident of Los Altos, began writing her sister, a lyricist, for help.

"I started to describe it to her and it all sort of fell together," she said. "It took an email to my sister to find my stride."

Her short story follows a mother who flees from the stresses of everyday life—both minor and major—and finds escape in the embrace of a theater that plays old movies.

Old movies have a special quality in that they make everything in life seem simple, she said.

"I'm a sucker for old movies," she said. "I was interested in a character that wanted to live in a black-and-white movie."

A major source of conflict for the main character is her worries about her son, who is deployed in the Iraq War.

Holcomb said her feelings about the war in Iraq are in the story and that she thought the country's reaction to it is distinct from its reactions to past wars, such as World War II.

Holcomb was a drama major at Cabrillo and Foothill colleges and worked for many years as an actress. She said her experience as an actor has affected her writing.

"My stories seem to be very character-driven because I'm so used to becoming a character on stage," she said. "The voice in my stories ends up being a lot like the character's."

Holcomb, who is in the midst of the first drafts of four novellas, said escapism is a common theme in her work.

"It seems that a lot of my characters try to deny reality and escape," she said. "Reading is an escape and watching these old movies is, too. ■"

— Eric Van Susteren

Judge's comments

"When the Knock Comes" exquisitely captures a swooping sense of possible loss by funneling the reader's wish for a happy ending into one character's longing for the simplicity of old movies. With the drumbeat of a single phrase, well-chosen details and other stylish touches, the author takes us finally to a stunned sense of desperate hope.

2ND PLACE: ADULTS

Bastille Day

by Apala G. Egan

"Here are some more saris," Meera's sister-in-law said as she laid out a pile of crisp, white saris on the chair. "You might want to put them over there." She nodded towards the armoire as she draped her canary yellow sari with its woven black border over her left shoulder with an easy swing of her arm, the sari straining over her swelling belly.

"But there's no room," Meera said. She faced her visitor, noting the 22-karat-gold hoops on her ears and her finely wrought gold necklace glinting in the morning sunlight of a Calcutta spring filtering in through the window slats. "The wardrobe is full."

"But surely ...," the relative paused. A look of apprehension mingled with pity flitted across her face. "Surely, you know you can never wear those saris again," she said glancing towards the wardrobe.

Meera's voice was devoid of inflection. "I know."

Yes, she knew that she had to eschew all the finery that lay locked in her armoire. Married at twenty, widowed at barely twenty-five, she was forced to wear widow's weeds for the rest of her life; as for her gold jewelry, an intrinsic part of an Indian bride's trousseau, they were to remain forever unworn. Moreover, she had to eschew all meat and fish and conform to a diet that was a strict vegan. Averting her face, the older woman folded some white high-necked blouses with sleeves running down to the elbows. "These blouses will go with your new saris," she said and left the room.

On the dressing table lay a large, mottled brown cowrie shell. Meera's hands trembled as she picked it up. Her throat constricted and her body shook. She pressed the shell to her wet cheek, her hands still shaking. Her ribcage heaved with muffled, stricken sobs, and her hands would not stop trembling. "You stay here, I will be back soon." With those words her husband had gently set her down on the beach, stripped down to his bathing trunks and within moments, began cleaving his way in the sea with powerful strokes.

She had taken off her sandals her bare feet sinking into the warm sand, she sniffed the salty tang in the air and as her sari fluttered in the strong breeze she inched slowly towards the water. She lifted her sari up to her ankles, and ventured in. Oh, the tickling, sensuous feel of the wet, squelchy sand on her bare soles! The turquoise waves lapped at her bare feet, edged with crimson 'alta' paint still visible from her wedding day. A powerful wave approached, and she was on her hands and knees, choking on water and desperately clawing at the sodden sand. The lifeguards came running, but her new husband was there first, his strong brown arms guiding her, his head touching hers. Her sari clung to her skin as she looked down at the tiny droplets of water on the hairs of her husband's glistening arm holding her just below her bosom. She gave a slight shiver and clasped his hand. The lunch gong broke her reverie and she rose with leaden feet to attend to her household duties.

A brimming bowl of curried fish swimming in rich gravy laced with onions and chunks of tomatoes sat on the dining table; the sweet aroma of fried onions filled the

air and assailed her nostrils. The cook placed serving plates on the table as the children scampered in. She stood back a little, and gave the fish a fleeting glance; it had been one of her favorite dishes. She felt a pricking sensation at the sides of her tongue; inadvertently she bit the inside of her right cheek, and blood and saliva mingled to form a brackish mixture in her mouth. Her eyes glistened at the forbidden food. She removed her gaze from the laden table, and clenched her left hand beneath the folds of her white sari; tiny, pink half-circles appeared on her palms.

"Eat your vegetables before the fish ...no, don't push the food to the edge of your plate, you mustn't waste food you know ..." The banalities rolled mechanically off her lips as she circled the dining room admonishing the children. She had no children of her own. Her husband had preferred to wait.

Returning to her room after lunch, she began re-organizing her wardrobe. Her sari lay strewn on top of the dusty rose quilt on the double bed, the fine stitches patterned in ever-widening circles.

Groomed like all girls for marriage she was a skilled needlewoman.

The littlest girl of the house slipped into the room. "Ooh, what lovely saris!" She pulled out one end of a pink sari edged with gold, and draping it around her head looked ecstatically into the mirror. "I am a bride!" After finishing her game, the three-year-old sidled up to her beloved aunt, and pointed to the pile of richly hued silks and cottons. "When are you going to wear those again?"

"I can never wear them again."

"But, why not? Only old women wear white saris, like Grandma, who is so old and wrinkled. Your skin is so smooth." Running her tiny hands over a crimson sari, she raised puzzled eyes. "Do you have to wear white forever?"

"Yes."

That night Meera slept fitfully. The spasms came in sharp, irregular bursts; the cramping in her loins grew more searing.

"Push! It will not be too long now." The starched white headdress of the nurse appeared as brittle as thin wax.

Her thighs felt wet, very wet. She strained her ears to hear the baby's cry, but there was none. Icy droplets pimpled her forehead and trickled down her temples into her ears. She heard herself give a panic-stricken croak and tried to rise. The well-lit hospital room, its walls an antiseptic green, receded. In the sudden darkness, she could discern the familiar shapes of the bolster and the dressing table; it was that time of the month again.

A week later, squeals, laughter and the pounding of feet on the verandah woke her from her afternoon nap. During a lull in the game she heard a loud whisper.

"Mum and Dad are moving into that room. They say it's big enough for them and the crib too."

"But where will she go?" came a plaintive cry from the youngest girl.

The following day her mother-in-law, her white sari draped around her shoulders, her silver hair pulled back into a neat bun, entered her room; her gait was ponderous. "It will be better if you moved upstairs. You can have the room right next to mine. The servants can clear out the bags of lentils." She sat down on the chair and it creaked.

"Besides, our widows' vegetarian kitchen is on the top floor too, and you will not have to climb stairs quite so often." The young woman, her large eyes dark with dismay, stared at her mother-in-law. There was a pause, a long pause. "Yes, mother."

Meera went to visit her family in Chandernagore a month later. The town was a few hours away from Calcutta and as she alighted from the train she saw with pleasure that the old French colonial town that had defied the British domination of the subcontinent was still unchanged, although now it was part of newly independent India. When she arrived home, her mother clasped her in a voluminous embrace.

Meera disengaged herself with difficulty. "I've come home for good."

Her mother was aghast. "What will people say? Who will support you? Your wedding portion was all spent when we arranged your marriage. You can never marry again, now that you are a widow; your brother's salary is just about enough to take care of his family and me."

"I'm not going back. They're moving me into the storage room."

"Aren't they clearing it out?" The older woman's face was alive with concern.

"That's not the point."

After an exhaustive search, Meera found a job as a needlework teacher at the school for girls run by an order of French nuns from Cluny. The students, unused to having such young teachers in their midst, began calling her Miss Ghose instead of Mrs. Ghose. Meera did not bother to correct them. She settled into a pleasant routine of showing them the art of embroidery and dress making.

The summer's heat gave way to the cool sprinkling of the monsoons; the nuns were all a-flutter with the annual preparations for Bastille Day to which the French diplomats from Calcutta had been invited.

After the school's early dismissal, Meera went up the curving staircase and entered the large room on the second floor. Streamers, in red, white and blue hung in loops by the windows, and silk ribbons in the French tricolor were draped over the picture frames that lined the walls, the pictures themselves being reproductions of Degas ballerinas and pastoral scenes in Burgundy. Meera saw that the long stem of the fan that dropped from the ceiling was wound tightly in the multi-colored streamers and on the tables were vases of red and white roses mixed with the indigenous blue aparajita flowers. The windows were wide open, the green shutters flush against the pale yellow walls; outside the sky was streaked with grey and silver clouds while warm, moist air eddied into the room.

Meera went and stood by the teachers, almost the entire teaching staff was comprised of French nuns or women of European ancestry, she was the only sari-clad woman in the room. A thrill of excitement went round the room at the sound of tires on gravel; the women gathered by the window and saw the Mother Superior greeting the diplomats. When the nun and visitors came up the stairs a short while later, she introduced the guests to her assembled staff. The French Consul General, a middle-aged man, was effusive in his compli-

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by Curtis Wu

At precisely 5 a.m. Robert woke up. As he waited for his servomotors to boot up, he scanned his archived files. Robert had gotten in the habit, if a robot had habits, of trawling through the vast memory areas of his central computer. Today, he pulled up the chess games he had played against the past five generations of his family. “I should have moved bishop takes c3, not Knight takes c3,” Robert reflected. He noted that the games started to trend to more predictable positions as his present guardian grew up. He had lost the ability to... think uncritically. To imagine. Robert stood, his servomotors and weight sensors rapidly recalculating. An old Arctic Genesis model, Robert had had his fair share of parts replaced. However, he had been a valuable servant for several generations, and his current guardian was loath to abandon a family heirloom.

As he took the lift down to the first floor, Robert noted that he wasn't really all that different from his owners. Same humanoid structure, same family, same house. They were just made of different things. They were organic, he was metallic. Why wasn't he a real member of the family? He had been around longer than any of them. Robert decided to dedicate some processing power to figuring out the answer, but his further analysis of this topic was interrupted by the lift. He had arrived at the first floor. Robert made a note to fix it. The lift had taken a full second longer than normal to travel the five stories of the house.

Entering the kitchen, Robert finished organizing the family's plans for their upcoming vacation. Airplane fare had dropped several dollars, so he finalized their travel route. Robert never came with them on vacations. Invariably, the family traveled to the tropics, where the humidity and heat would be hard on Robert's fans. Boston was a much more efficient climate. As a short term replacement, a travel bot would be used. Robert thought it would be good for the little robot. He wouldn't want its processors to get slow.

Robert and Mr. Renault entered the kitchen at the same time, and Mr. Renault nodded a greeting at Robert. Fifteen minutes later, Robert had prepared eggs Benedict for the rest of the family, and Mr. Renault was eating breakfast, food in one hand and a tablet in the other. Before him was a medium sized serving of Greek yogurt, a croissant, and some fresh blackberries. A highly ranked coder and behaviorist, Mr. Renault received offers from many of the top tech companies who were attempting to refine artificial intelligence. Mr. Renault turned to Robert. “Ah, I see you've made eggs Benedict. One of Elizabeth's favorites.”

Robert replied, “Yes, it seems that Mrs. Renault reacts favorably towards this dish. I have, of course, removed the yolk from George's serving. He has been instructed to watch his cholesterol levels.”

Mr. Renault finished his yogurt and picked up his tablet. “Notes for today: 7:00: Meeting with Oscillate

about layered personalities. 9:00: Coding seminar with Harvard graduate students. 12:00: Lunch at *Le Rosignol*. 13:30: Lab prep. 16:00: Leave lab and return home.” It would have been much quicker for Robert to have synced all Mr. Renault's notes directly from the tablet. However, it had been widely suggested by beta testers of the Arctic Genesis that a listening option be available. They found it unnerving that the robot could speak to you but you wouldn't have to speak to it. After it had been released, 50 percent of all owners decided to activate the option within the first month, 90 percent by the second month.

Robert cross referenced all of the current schedules compiled in his database. “May I make a suggestion, Mr. Renault? It might be better to return home by 15:00 in order to provide.”

Mr. Renault cut in. “Of course, in order to provide enough time to get to the special occasion. I wouldn't want

to disappoint Miriam.” He paused. “She's the happiest she has been in a long time, isn't she. I will finish my lab prep early. You can adjust the schedule accordingly.” With that, Mr. Renault grabbed the last bit of croissant from the table and walked off towards the garage.

Watching him leave, Robert remembered when Mr. Renault was a child. His stress levels were much lower then. Now, with Mr. Renault pushing 70, he had already hit middle age. Robert would have to make a doctor's appointment. One thing that Mr. Renault had said triggered something in his recent memory files... Robert reviewed Mr. Renault's last comment, and then referenced it with today's analysis. There it was. Mr. Renault had repeated the words “in order to provide.” Robert couldn't figure out the practicality of such behavior. They were wasted words. Every once in a while, Robert wondered if the human-robot hierarchy

was organized correctly. Humans had such weak memories, and their storage space was negligible. His files were recalled with perfect clarity, but every time *they* recalled memories, they were farther and farther from his indelible recordings. There was the obvious counterargument that humans had created him, but plenty of their other creations had run amok. The internet, for example. His further computations were cut short by a disturbance.

Mrs. Elizabeth Renault walked into the kitchen and sat down across from Robert. He placed a plate of Eggs Benedict and a steaming cup of coffee in front of her. Mrs. Renault, at a regal 65, was the head of the family. At the same time, she was a warm companion. In these days, with family connections more important than ever, she worked to mend disputes and organize meetings between the disparate family members. She also contributed occasional freelance ar-

ticles to *The Physicist* and *Modern Cosmology*. Robert hesitated for a few seconds, trying to calculate whether bringing up his latest analysis of human-robot relations would be beneficial.

“Thank you, Robert. Eggs Benedict was the first meal William made me when we were married. How are you this morning?” Mrs. Renault cut into the first egg.

“The day is proceeding satisfactorily. And you?” Robert pulled up the conversation file. Despite their best efforts, the people at Quanta were unable to give the Arctic Genesis a convincing conversational ability. The robot would lose track of a crucial part of the dialogue, and venture into tangent discussions. In order to meet the release date, they patched on a very weak program containing a few relevant phrases. Mrs. Renault knew all this, but kept

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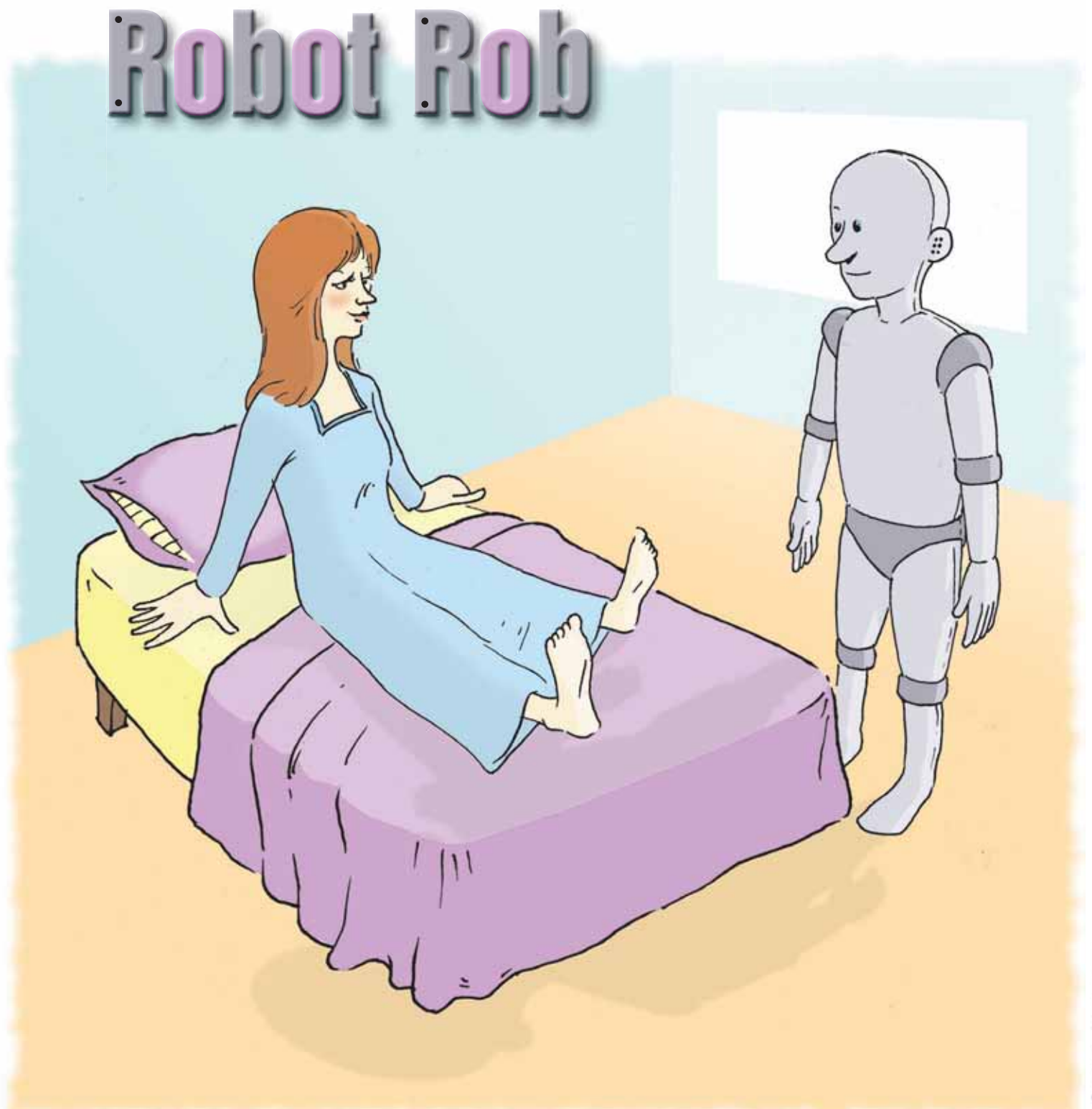


Illustration: Paul Lewellyn

Robot

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trying nevertheless.

"I am feeling well, thank you for asking," Mrs. Renault replied in a polite tone. "I look forward to seeing you at the Charleston. Have you made arrangements as for your clothing?"

"I will be picking the clothing up at 9:00 when the store opens. I will also be collecting this week's dry cleaning." Robert placed Mr. Renault's plate into the microbial sanitizer.

Mrs. Renault, observing that Robert was slipping into a checklist of things to do, gave up on engaging him in conversation. She turned on the television, and returned to eating her breakfast. On the TV, a newscaster was reporting on another advance in Oscillate's research and development sector.

"Foxcroft, Maine. Oscillate, one of the country's greatest leaders in robotics, has been compiling millions of human exchanges to create what they hope will be the most realistic conversational robot. They hope to create a robot that can communicate, not just give information. The prototype, affectionately nicknamed 'Dr. Seuss,' takes almost twenty minutes to fail the Turing test. Dr. Renault, an expert behaviorist, has collaborated with Oscillate to help them achieve this goal. Although Dr. Renault cautions that Dr. Seuss will not be able to produce the subtleties of in depth conversation, he is hopeful that the new robot will be able to leap the first hurdle of conversation, small talk. The robot is slated to be released sometime in the next two years. From Foxcroft, Maine, this is Parker Heatley."

Robert added this news brief to his database. He had forgotten to include conversational ability in his calculations. Conclusions on the topic had to be suspended.

Mrs. Renault looked reflectively at Robert. "I don't suppose you would like a dialogue upgrade, would you?"

"There is a 20 percent chance that the upgrade will corrupt my current operation capabilities. From my observations of Mr. Renault's discussions, it is clear that he would not risk such a corruption." Robert replied.

Mrs. Renault sighed, and then finished the last few drops of her coffee. "In any case, thank you for the delightful breakfast. I can't finish it, it's too much. I know that the children will be happy to polish off whatever is left." She gave him a small smile.

As she called down the lift, she turned to Robert. "Thank you for your service to our family, Robert. Days like today make you appreciative of all the little things in life." Mrs. Renault walked into the lift. Just before the door closed she said, "Let Miriam sleep late, she deserves it. Say, 9:00?"

Robert cleaned off her coffee cup and gave each of the Eggs Benedict a little more heat to prevent the Hollandaise from acquiring a skin. The rest of the morning he was busy cooking and cleaning as the children ran in and out of the kitchen, discussing school assignments and social outings. Mrs. Renault was finalizing her article about the last steps of nuclear disarmament, so Robert drove the children to school. The youngest, Alex, was dropped off at a private kindergarten focused on analytics. Next was Sarah, who was a second year student at the intermediate school. She had already committed to entering the performing arts. James and George were in their final year at the high school, and were working together to find an organic-based communication system. And then there was Miriam. Robert almost drove to MIT, but the recent rewrite of his schedule by Mrs. Renault's last note turned him toward home.

By 7:30, Robert was sitting in his electrically charged chair, having given himself a bit of oil to prevent any rust from creeping into his exoskeleton. The rush of the morning and the task of driving all over town had left his battery depleted. He wondered if battery depletion was similar to stress. Over the years his family had gotten more and more... mechanical. The Renaults were a wealthy family, but spent their time working like machines in a factory. Every day was the same. The children go to school. The mother talks and writes. The father codes and teaches. The children come back from school. The TV turns on. The mother and the father help with the cooking. The TV turns off. The children eat. The parents work. The parents eat, the children work. Final-

ly, they all sleep. Fourteen hours of action. And Robert was in the middle of all of it.

He returned to that issue he had been analyzing. It was much more complicated to figure out than chess games. It was so illogical. Just now, Robert had nearly come to the conclusion that the Renaults were becoming robots, but there was obviously something different between him and them. He had to account for the fact the Mrs. Renault was able to communicate in a different manner. He could come to the conclusion that humans and robots are equal, but then he had to factor in that humans are so much more adaptable. And to change the scenario even more, there was his observation that robots are so much more organized and dependable. Maybe the conclusion that robots were superior was the right one. However, there was the conversational ability that Robert was unable to grasp. There was something missing. Around and around it went. Rock, Paper, Scissors.

Robert filed the problem in the back of his mind. Someday, when there was less to do, he would bring it up again, and maybe the abstract reasoning attachment could help him out. But today was not the day to do that. Briefly scanning the schedule, Robert noted that today was unusually full. He was prioritizing the errands when his alarm went off. He checked the notification, and rearranged his list. When he was satisfied, he started carrying them out from the top. 1. Wake Miriam with a special message.

Mrs. Renault had programmed the event but not what he was to say. Robert composed his words. He even threw in a phrase from his conversation file. After all, it was supposed to be a special message. "Communication, not just information." That's what the Oscillate people had said. When the words were as efficient as he thought they could get, he took the lift to the third floor. He opened Miriam's door. "Good Morning, Miriam. It is time to wake up. It is...." Robert paused. "Your wedding day." ■

LISTEN ONLINE
www.PaloAltoOnline.com

An audio recording of "Robot Rob" has been posted on Palo Alto Online.

Curtis Wu, 'Robot Rob'



Curtis Wu, the 15-year-old winner of the young adult category, is a young man of many interests — music, theater, physics, philosophy and now, writing.

"Robot Rob," Wu's futuristic science-fiction short story, mixes some of his interests and explores humanity and its defining characteristics.

"I think that melding philosophy and science was a goal of mine and I think I was trying to do that in my story," he said. "I was interested in the idea of what differentiates humans from robots, in more than the physical mechanical way."

The story is told through the eyes of Robert, self-aware robot designed to assist a family with household duties. Robert is essentially accepted as a member of the family but struggles to communicate and find connection with them.

"Although I'm interested in their human side, I think

what is eventually going to set us apart is communication," he said.

Wu, a sophomore at Palo Alto High School, is a fan of Ray Bradbury, particularly of "Fahrenheit 451."

"I thought it was interesting how he included the themes of censorship and the intricacies of a modern society," he said.

"Robot Rob" is Wu's first submission to a writing contest, and though he's interested in science, he said part of him wants to pursue a more "artsy" career.

"There's so much out there right now," he said. "It would be very difficult to make a living, but it'd be great if I could influence so many others with my ideas." ■

— Eric Van Susteren

Judge's comments

Bravo! Robots with a twist. "Robot Rob" tells the very human story about a robot gone good, exploring what it is to be a thinking, talking, listening sentient being with wit, humor and imagination — all on a very special day.

Short story judges

Adults:



Tom Parker

A well-known, local writing teacher, Tom Parker is an O. Henry Prize-winning short story writer and author of the best-selling novels, "Anna, Ann, Annie" and "Small Business." He has taught at Stanford, the University of California and Foothill and Canada community colleges. He also teaches classes in downtown Palo Alto and works with individual writers as an editor, co-author and coach. His website is tomparkerwrites.com.



Meg Waite Clayton

Meg Waite Clayton is the nationally best-selling author of *The Four Ms. Bradwells*, *The Wednesday Sisters*, and the *Bellwether Prize* finalist *The Language of Light*, all published by Random House's Ballantine Books and all major national book club picks. Her fourth novel, *The Wednesday Daughters*, will be released in 2013. Meg's novels have been translated into languages from German to Lithuanian to Chinese. Her essays and short stories have aired on public radio and appeared in print in *The Los Angeles Times*, *The San Jose Mercury News*, *Writer's Digest*, and *Runner's World*, in literary magazines including *The Virginia Quarterly Review* and *The Literary Review*, and online on *Ms.*, *AOL News*, and the *Huffington Post*. A graduate of the University Michigan Law School, she lives with her family in Palo Alto, California. www.megwaiteclayton.com



Pamela Gullard

Pamela Gullard's stories have appeared in the *North American Review*, *Arts and Letters*, *The Iowa Review*, *TriQuarterly* and other journals and anthologies. Her collection, *Breathe at Every Other Stroke*, published by Henry Holt, includes a story that won a PEN Syndicated Fiction Project Award, and another that took first place in the H.G. Roberts Fiction Contest judged by Gordon Lish. Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. With co-author Nancy Lund, she has written three nonfiction books; the latest, *Under the Oaks: Two Hundred Years in Atherton*, appeared in 2009. Pamela teaches personal narrative and literature at Menlo College.

Youth:



Katy Obringer

Katy Obringer spent 22 years with the Palo Alto library system, which included serving as the supervisor of Palo Alto's Children's Library. Obringer also worked as an elementary school teacher for 10 years and an elementary school librarian for five years. Her love of introducing children to books continues in her retirement.



Nancy Etchemendy

Nancy Etchemendy's novels, short fiction and poetry have appeared regularly for the past 25 years, both in the United States and abroad. Her work has earned three Bram Stoker Awards (two for children's horror), a Golden Duck Award for excellence in children's science fiction, and most recently, an International Horror Guild Award for her YA horror story, "Honey in the Wound." She lives and works in Northern California, where she leads a somewhat schizophrenic life, alternating between unkempt, introverted writer of weird tales and requisite gracious wife of Stanford University's Provost.



Caryn Huberman Yacowitz

Caryn Huberman Yacowitz writes both fiction and nonfiction for young people. Her award-winning picture books, "Pumpkin Fiesta" and "The Jade Stone, A Chinese Folktale" have been widely anthologized and adapted for the stage. She writes plays for adults and is a member of Pear Avenue Writers as well as the local Suburban Squirrel, Door#3 Comedy Sketch group where she writes, acts and directs as part of this ensemble. She also plays the role of Jane Lathrop Stanford at Stanford University functions. Her website is www.carynyacowitz.com.

2ND PLACE: YOUNG ADULTS

New Shoes Always Hurt

by Gavin Rea

You will want a friend — breaking and entering is not the kind of thing you do alone. Someone else will back you up and stop you from running away; from turning tail even in the face of reasonable fear.

You will want a brick. Just for irony, use the one that came crashing through your kitchen window last Sunday, sprinkling the table, dusting the dishes with shards of crystalline transparent glass. The meal was ruined. A note attached: “Get the hell out of here, go back to where you belong.” You will take sick pleasure in heaving that dull, heavy object into your own reflection cast by the streetlamp, seeing the pieces of glass sliding down to crash and tinkle upon the stained gray pavement.

You will want earplugs to silence the alarm bells. You will wish you had brought them as the noise pries into your head like a crowbar ripping apart nailed 2x4’s. You will be haunted by that metallic ring of cold hard metal on metal for weeks afterwards; you will hear it every time you close your eyes and wish for a dreamless sleep. Eventually, you will feel like that self-same piece of glass — shattered and crashing down to earth, torn in rents and scarred, nothing but the hard white sheen of light upon your flat surface. Broken, empty and see-though; a reflection of the world. You are a reflection.

Bring a flashlight. You will curse yourself for forgetting it, fumbling around in the dark gloomy shop, tearing through cardboard boxes, hands trembling, heart

pounding its way out of your chest. All you will have is that stupid penlight attached to your keychain, the faint pinprick of light illuminating bits of dust swirling in the dank, stale air.

You will wish you had thought this through and reconciled yourself to the possibilities; erased those flashing blue and red lights that will blaze through your head illuminating every dark crevice and secret; erased the screeching tires that you will hear every minute but look up to a parking lot deserted but for the yellow incandescent lights falling away in the darkness.

Wear a jacket so you can cover your head; a hoodie is best. Pull the cords tight to throw a shadow over your face and give you the comfort of anonymity, of a statistic, a data point on a graph. Your quick breaths will come in cold white clouds on this starry night in late October. Shivers will wrack your body, sheathed only in your paper thin white cotton tee.

Don’t be scared. You will be so scared: scared of taking steps against fate, of ruining the best-laid plans. Your friend will tap you on the shoulder and you will turn, your face a mask of fear, the whites of your eyes wide with surprise and horror in the dark night.

“We need to go.” An order.

The hoodie will help here. You will be embarrassed for showing weakness, for proving just how deathly afraid you are. Hide in the black shadow cast over your face, show no emotion. Speak in a voice that does not tremble.

“Okay.”

Fuming at yourself you will follow him, feet pounding on unforgiving pavement, watching his shadow dance and weave along the cracked sidewalks, past chain link fences and the burnt, raggedy lawns of the neighborhood — flying through the night.

A safe distance away, gasping for breath, braced against the night, you will open the smooth, feather light cardboard box and rip out the crinkly brown newspaper. You will tug on the Nikes, smelling of plastic, paint and fresh leather mixed with that of the damp, loamy leaves veined with frost scattering the sidewalk.

Bring thick socks, the scratchy gray ones at the bottom of the drawer. The shoes’ sharp backs will bite into your ankles like faithful hounds who know you are not their owner. But this is a fact of life and you know it: new shoes always hurt.

Legs shaking, you will stagger home, pausing to retch into the neighbor’s garbage can as the evening’s events catch up to you. Your friend will have left long ago. You are glad of this right now, glad he cannot see you weak, consumed by knee shaking, petrifying dread.

You will wince at the creaking of the back screen door strewn with shadows cast by the peeling turquoise paint. Slipping off the shoes you will stalk in with bare feet and practiced silent tread through the hall, keeping to the sides where the boards creak less.

You will put your eye to the crack of your

mom’s door, and, finding her asleep, glide to the bathroom, groping in the darkness for her sleeping pills that she takes each night. You will pop three, right then you will feel like you need them. Stumbling for the stairs you will crack your shin on the coffee table and wait to see if you have roused her.

You will limp upstairs, feet padding unevenly, tossing the shoes into your closet: shove them to the very back, beyond the reach of memory; you will discover them again only upon packing your belongings to leave, years later. You will burn them then, in the early hours of the morning, to forget. That will be your last memory of the house you grew up in, looking out over the white tips of the curling flames licking their soles, bending and distorting the oak front door and the hooded window of your room above with waves of heat.

Shove the night’s events out of your mind in the same fashion. Sitting on the lip of your bed, you will massage the red-raw blisters on your heels. You will remind yourself: new shoes always hurt. As you close your eyes and drift into a troubled, drug-induced sleep you will hear the clanging of alarm bells, shrill and piercing in the clear, black night. ■

Judge’s comment

In an engaging second person point of view, “New Shoes” tells a big story of teen struggle in compact, vivid prose, with a wonderful twist at the end.

Bastille Day

(continued from page 43)

ments and his youthful aide proved equally charming.

The conversation between the nuns and diplomats flowed freely in French; the subdued murmur caressed Meera’s earlobes and throat, till sensuous drops of the language trickled in through her ears and she could almost taste the words and roll them warm on her tongue.

“Please, let us all be seated,” the Mother Superior said in English, and in broken Bengali, gave the order for food to be served.

The uniformed servants came in, one carrying a tray of steaming café-au-lait, another arrived balancing an array of pink and white petit fours and glazed apple tartlets, and a third followed with a platter laden with quiche bites, brioches and assorted puff pastries. The servants placed the coffee cups on the little tables by each chair, and wandered around the room serving each guest with painstaking care.

Meera took a bite of her spinach and chive filled brioche and glanced sideways at the young Frenchman sitting on the next chair.

“So, how long have you been teaching, Miss Ghose?” asked the young man. His English was perfect, though he spoke with a slight softening of his consonants.

“I just joined a few weeks ago,” Meera said.

“And do the students treat you

well?”

Meera laughed. “Of course.”

The Mother Superior, sitting to the right of him addressed him in French. He excused himself from Meera and turned his head to reply. The young woman looked at the back of his neck, admiring the crisp, brown curls at the nape, and when he turned towards her once again, she found herself gazing into his eyes and seeing the infinite grey of the monsoon skies. Her throat and cheeks felt hot and she sensed her color rising.

“How do you like Calcutta?” Meera said.

“I have been there for the last two years. It is too crowded for my liking, but Chandernagore here, is charming. The summers however, are what would you say, broiling.” He laughed, displaying even, white teeth. “I may have to leave on another posting, perhaps in as soon as a couple of months. But it will still be in the East.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Most probably Saigon, or maybe Singapore, who knows.”

The uniformed servant hovered near, proffering a tray laden with savories.

The young diplomat lifted the pair of tongs from the tray and selected a piece of paté chaud.

“May I have the pleasure ...?” He asked, the tongs still in the air.

Meera’s breathing quickened. “Oh no, not ...”

“You don’t care for paté chaud?”

She gazed at the cylindrical pieces of golden puff-pastry encasing a delicately spiced filling of sausage;

the aroma of the forcemeat wafted towards her nose, it smelled fresh and delicious. She had always loved these delicacies, and as a child, the occasional box from the sole French bakery in town had thrilled her; she and her brother had inevitably fought over them. But now, the strictures of widowhood forbade her from ever consuming meat. A stab of resentment swept over her.

“It’s not that, but ...,” Meera said.

The young man placed the piece on her plate and plied her with more of the edibles. “The pastries are delicious. Almost as good as I would get in a café in Paris.”

She looked down at the meat-filled pastry on her plate and tiny jets sprang from the edges of her tongue till her mouth filled with liquid. She swallowed hard and fidgeted with the pleats of her white sari edged with the thinnest of blue borders, her fingers trembling. A wave of anger washed over her.

How dare societal mores shroud her in widow’s garb for life, and deny her the delights of food that was part of her childhood? She took a covert bite. It was more delicious than she had ever remembered. Through the corner of her eye she saw a look of sheer surprise, then reproof, appear on the servant’s face; the look vanished almost as soon as it appeared.

The party broke up soon afterwards and the guests bade their adieus.

Over the next few weeks, the weather broke and the rains came down in earnest. In the evenings

when the downpour had abated somewhat, Meera would walk along the embankment by the river past Dupleix’s restored two-hundred-year-old mansion. She walked in an easy stride and the muddy water of the silted river frothing at the edges reminded her of café au lait, but sometimes at night she experienced disturbing dreams; that of swirling blue waters, her sari clinging to her skin, and an arm that encircled her just beneath her breasts, and when she turned, she saw eyes that were a misty grey. ■

Apala G. Egan, ‘Bastille Day’

The story is based on my memories and experiences in India, where I spent my childhood and youth. Bengal, where I am from, was one of the first regions to fall sway to European powers, both French and English; if the English gained ascendancy in the subcontinent, the French retained their strongholds. The story is set during the twilight of that era.

The story is based on my own childhood recollection of a young woman who wore no make-up or jewelry and seemed to shroud herself in white saris edged with the thinnest of borders; stark white is the color of mourning in India. The image stays in my mind, though as a youngster I scarcely gave it a thought. With the passage of years, thoughts crowd into my brain; could she have been a widow? I grew up in an extended family in a house with two kitchens; meat was cooked as far away as possible from the veg-

etarian kitchen. My grandmother and my elderly aunt who lived with us observed the dietary strictures of widowhood.

I have been working on translating some of the writings by an award-winning woman writer of Bengal, Jyotirmoyee Devi. She was among the earliest women writers of that region and much of her work focuses on the experiences of women, be they wives, mothers or concubines. In the process of translating, I believe I got bitten by the writing bug. I have taken a number of writing courses over the last few years as time permitted. I took the creative writing sequence at Foothill College, and then went on to take specific on-line courses through Berkeley and UCLA and selected in-class courses at Stanford. I also attended the Squaw Valley Writer’s Conference three years ago. My day job is that of a substitute teacher, but the rest of the time is for exploring the world of writing and literature.

This is the first contest that I have ever entered, and I am both honored and delighted that my piece was selected. In addition to my translations, I am also working on short stories and a novel.

Judge’s comment

“*Bastille Day*” is an elegant, finely wrought story of a young Indian widow battling her sensual impulses and the constraints of her culture to forge a new life consisting of small satisfactions and larger guilts.

THE PERFECT SOUVENIR



Illustration: Raul Perez

by Maya McNealis

This summer I was moving back. For the last three years I had lived with my family on an expatriate assignment in India, learning the culture, language and way of life. I enjoyed my last days in Bangalore's tropical paradise with my friends, laughing away the aching sadness at leaving them behind. It had irked me to not have all my US comforts, be up on the latest and greatest cool music or gadgets, or be as plugged into the latest celebrity gossip as my friends back home, but I had to admit that I had managed to enjoy many luxuries and amazing experiences during this time. I wished I could take this life along with me in some sort of perfect souvenir even as our departure approached and I grew restless. Like the birds in the skies, I knew it was time to migrate. It would still be time before my feet touched familiar ground though, because before we said goodbye to India, and returned home to the Bay Area, we were making one last trip. It would be the grand finale to our Asian travels, into the Himalayan state of Ladakh.

The first thing that really struck me about Ladakh was the contrast. Snow

banks stood next to jagged cliffs, castles overlooked slums, and faded t-shirts were paired with furry ski boots. I surveyed its landscape from the plane's landing pad, my breath curling up into the bright, blue sky.

I sighed as I watched my dad standing next to the tour guides, introducing himself while he struggled with our luggage. My mother, sister and grandparents walked over and climbed into the rusty white van, beckoning to me to follow. Quickly out of breath in the low-oxygen environment, I huffed dramatically and loped over to the waiting vehicle, my brown hair swishing in the summer breeze. "Well, this is nice. We all managed to fit in one car," my mother said. "I thought Tara might request a private chauffeur and car for herself." I ignored the tease as I gazed outside, taking off my sunglasses now that the window blocked the blazing white snow. My sister laid her head in my mother's lap, her imperious ten-year old self replaced by a little girl too tired to act mature. I, too, was exhausted after the flight from Delhi. My grandfather's voice swept on from somewhere in the background as he drilled the guide, secretly checking

his information against the guidebook's. My senses melted together as I stared at the flashing scenery. When we got to the hotel I gratefully sipped the lemon tea offered by a welcoming receptionist and then stumbled up the stairs to our room, sleep heavy on my eyelids.

The most awful and awe-inspiring aspect about Ladakh was the altitude. Leh, its capital, is 11,562 feet above sea level whereas the city we flew in from, Delhi, is a mere 774 feet above sea level. And though the guidebook said to rest for two days before any outdoor activity, do you think we listened? No. And so, by the third day there, all of us had gotten the dreaded altitude sickness. Nausea, exhaustion and pounding headaches engulfed the troop, leaving us all feeling more than a little sorry for ourselves until we acclimatized.

Once we finally did acclimatize, I was able to acknowledge the dramatic views and even venture across the highest drivable road in the world. Traveling around Ladakh was more for the outdoorsy, backpacking weirdos than anything I had ever experienced. You really had to rough it, and roughing it is not one of my talents. I was barely

coping with the off-putting bathrooms, unappetizing travel food and prospect of sleeping in a *tent*, but when I heard that we were going to be riding camels; I thought *this is 'literally' the last straw*. I mean, I love horses and riding them is one of my favorite pastimes. But when I think of riding, I think of spotless tack all suited up to match the ribbons in the horses' hair, and of impeccable breeches with dark leather boots, not some flea-bitten blanket covered in three different colors of hair and a fraying string jerking at the camel's saliva-encrusted mouth, which is apparently the fanciest type of riding found in Ladakh. "Ooh, camels!" my little sister squealed as she was hoisted onto the most docile creature's back. "This one's name is Goma!" she told Mom.

I looked interestedly at the curled lashes on Goma's face and up at my sister's own dark lashes. Grunting sarcastically I muttered, "The resemblance is striking," earning me a warning look from my dad. Before I could protest, I was lifted high up onto the back of a short, squat beast that chewed its cud lazily as if it didn't care that I was there. It flicked its tail right at my face, and I spat disgustedly.

(continued on next page)

2ND PLACE: TEEN

Merry Go Round

by Emily Katz

Jerry loved carnivals. The smells of the sticky candies and the buttery popcorn, the bright colors and the men in costume, the thrilling rides, it all made him squeal with delight. Holding tight to his mother's hand, he hopped up and down with joy as his little eyes darted around, not knowing where to look first. Then he saw it. It sat right in the center of the circle of rides, its loud music and dancing banners begging to be the center of attention. It circled slowly to the music, allowing those who rode it to see the entire park. Although in reality it was a giant, clammy piece of brightly colored plastic, in Jerry's four-year-old eyes it was beautiful. He began to walk in the direction of the ride as fast as his stubby legs would carry him, tugging his mother behind him. She chuckled, and let him lead her around. When he got closer, he could see the horses moving up and down, as if they were galloping around and around. The ornate details glimmered in the afternoon sun, chipped gold paint that decorated the harness giving off its tarnished shine, and the pinks and greens and reds of the

flowers that covered them. Their manes looked wind tossed and picturesque; their plastic hides perfectly brushed. Jerry imagined himself hopping onto one and stroking its head as it tossed and stamped, eager to be off. He whistled like he'd always wished he could, and his beauty took off into the sunset, to the adventures beyond. They would be best friends, through thick and thin, and would go every place they wanted. They would battle pirates with long beards and eye patches, and parrots that talked to them. They would fight off the invading robot army from Mars, and save the planet, because without the planet there would be no adventures. Jerry stood there and dreamt. He wanted to be free from the cramped apartment waiting for him after his day at the carnival, free of his dad. In Jerry's mind, his dad was huge; he took up every space in the house with his menacing presence. When his father fought with his mom, he could hear his great voice booming in his room as he tried to sleep through it. In the morning, his mother would smile at him with tired eyes and act like it was okay, but Jerry knew it wasn't. He knew she

was leaving soon, and it made him cry at night. The only things Jerry truly loved in this world were his mother and his imagination, and he couldn't bear to lose one of them. So Jerry retreated into his mind, and he saw himself loving that horse like his mother, and he knew he had to ride it. He went through the line, hopped on his favorite horse and waited for the adventure to unfold.

Hailey turned up her music louder, trying to cover the annoyingly repetitive yet catchy carnival tunes with her favorite punk rock music. As she wandered around with a cynical gaze, all she saw was pink and red and yellow, and irritating sticky children everywhere. Lots of people trying to sell her something, too. She had been forced to accompany her younger sister here, and was determined to hate every second of it. She despised roller coasters, spinning rides, and any other ride that made her feel like she was about to plummet to her death. So, she avoided everything and everyone, standing by herself in a secluded corner of the park. Carnivals were one of the many things she loved to hate. But, glancing around, she

saw it; a black horse. It looked oddly out of place among the carnival scene, contrasting greatly to the carousel on which it stood. Mesmerized, she stared into its rebellious eyes, and saw a fire captured behind the greasy plastic. It was in the process of tossing its head, his nostrils flared, fighting against the reins. It was surrounded by white horses, and light brown horses, covered in flowers and gold with gentle expressions. He stood out, yet blended in at the same time. Unadorned with anything but a worn down silver bridle, his raw beauty was stunning for a plastic horse. Hailey paused her music, and suddenly it was much quieter. She walked closer to the annoying ride, looked at the horse, and thought. Her life only seemed bad because she made it that way, and she knew it. She knew she viewed things negatively on purpose, but she couldn't bring herself to like things, she was so used to hating them. This time, though, Hailey couldn't resist the temptation. She wondered what it would be like

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Perfect Souvenir

(continued from previous page)

But then the camel turned its head up to look at me, and my heart started to melt under its warm, nonchalant gaze. Sitting on the back of the camel, my riding instincts kicked in. I could feel the animal moving under me, settling my weight. I made sure to look put out as the others started walking, then kicked my mount into a steady pace. It wouldn't do to break my ice queen façade by showing my enjoyment, but the calm, rhythmic undulation had me grinning inwardly.

After the camel ride I was exhilarated and even joined in when my family spent the rest of the car ride singing songs and telling jokes. The sun was setting as we arrived at the campsite and we were all hungry as we pulled our bags down to our tents. I was delighted to see that the tents were very classy and had real beds inside. I unpacked my pajamas, then went outside to explore with my sister.

"Look at the daffodils!" my sister pointed as we walked around the property. "And all those pretty streams! I say we follow one. I'm sure it will take us someplace magical." She looked at me with eyes alight with laughter and excitement.

"Alright," I consented, watching the leaf boats we had made float down the skinny creek. "But we only have fourteen minutes until dinner so we have to turn back when I

say so." I started walking along the path of a particularly shiny ribbon of water, my sister tagging along beside me. As the stream widened and we came closer to its source I could feel the mystery of the water pulling me along. I felt the presence of mountain creatures around me in the luscious valley. Mountains enclosed every side of the safe haven, watching over it like dutiful sentries. Holding my sister's hand as I explored the magical spring that seemed to start all of the little tributaries that encircled the campsite, I experienced an unexpected feeling of protection and happiness, spreading from my heart through my body until it encompassed my being.

The next day we hit sightseeing in earnest. The monasteries, stupas and palaces around Leh were some of the most spiritual places you could travel to in India. At lunch we met with a funny little witch doctor. She threw rice in the air, tied silk scarves around our necks and spewed "healing water" for our injuries. She allowed us to each ask her one question. When it was my turn, I didn't know what to say! She tapped her foot impatiently and I hastily blurted out "Will I have a happy life?" To my surprise, she shrugged, then answered gravely:

"Your decisions have the power to make you very happy. I can tell that you are going through changes, within and without. I see hard choices ahead of you. By choosing the right path you can earn good karma and happiness will be yours."

I left to see more stupas with her words tumbling around in my thoughts. The prayer flags

fluttered in the wind, flickering before my eyes like dancing flames. As we drove to the Shanti Stupa I realized that it had an intriguing plaque at the bottom of its stairs that I found myself wanting to read before we explored the site:

Shanti Stupa is one of the main attractions in Leh. The Japanese had it built in hopes of spreading Buddhism across the world. 'Shanti Stupa' means World Peace. Visitors come to this monastery to look at the view and find peace within themselves. Ladakhis come here to reflect upon their life, and to be reminded that in the grand scheme, day-to-day issues are insignificant. The Dalai Lama inaugurated this Stupa in 1985.

The sun beat down like a trained mallet onto the back of my neck as we climbed the last twenty steps to the top of the magnificent white-tiered dome. Gold paint and thoughtful prayers adorned the sides of the beautiful structure. From within I could hear melodious chanting and the alluring, purifying hum of a prayer bowl. I turned around to gaze at the vista before me. The expanse of colors transformed me, awakening me to the beauty and simplicity of the area. I looked up at the sky and made a silent vow to remember this moment forever, and to pull from it the next time I was upset. I took a fresh breath, and then smiled to myself before turning to join my awaiting family. As the sounds of the monastery faded, I knew that I had found what I wanted to take back with me as the perfect keepsake.

"No, not this one either." I turned around,

scanning the store for my parents. Back in Leh, we had decided to spend the morning shopping. My travels to the majestic and humbling sites around Leh had transformed me, inspiring me to change my outlook on life. The past few days I had been considerably more cheerful. I was hoping to find a souvenir to symbolize the inner treasure I had acquired during this trip.

As I swung my head around, I spied it. It was on the top shelf and seemed to glow like a soft ember in the dusty light. The shopkeeper brought it down to me and I took it reverently, awed by the power I felt just holding it. The prayer bowl had curved sides and was carved to appear as though water were rippling around the brim. Inside it were etched the five forms of the Buddha, along with the incantation 'Om Mani Padme Hum.' I watched, fascinated, as the vendor lifted the bowl from me and spun a velvet-coated stick around it. All of a sudden a deep, resonating sound flew around the room, repeating again and again in the newfound silence. As the sound waves rolled over me I became peaceful and meditative. I closed my eyes until the melody stopped, then walked towards my waiting parents. I had completed the journey I had needed to take before I began my next one. I had found what I was looking for. This was the one. ■



LISTEN ONLINE
www.PaloAltoOnline.com

An audio recording of "The Perfect Souvenir" has been posted on Palo Alto Online.

Maya McNealis, 'Perfect Souvenir'



Maya McNealis, the 13-year-old winner of the teen category, believes there are places that have the power to transform one's outlook on life. "A Perfect Souvenir" chronicles McNealis' experiences in one such place.

It's a semi-autobiographical about a girl whose family makes a trip to the Himalayas before returning to

the United States after a three-year stint living in India. It's a turning point in her life and she searches for a symbol — a perfect souvenir — to commemorate her last trip and her time abroad.

McNealis, an eighth-grader at Jordan Middle School, said she was inspired to write the story because of her actual time living abroad and traveling while her father was on an expatriate assignment in India.

"It was just a really magical place," she said of her visit to the Himalayas. "I thought the best way to capture that was with writing, so I wove it into a story."

McNealis has competed in other writing

competitions but has more experience with poetry, which she said can be more difficult.

"I like this kind of writing because I don't get stuck as often as when I'm writing poetry," she said. "With poetry you can be limited because of the pattern, but with writing it's easier to pull yourself out and keep going."

To McNealis, who will start as a freshman at Paly next year, the experience was developmental.

"Usually when you're searching for a souvenir it's all about the material, but when I was there, I changed because I decided that wasn't as important," she said. "It's anything

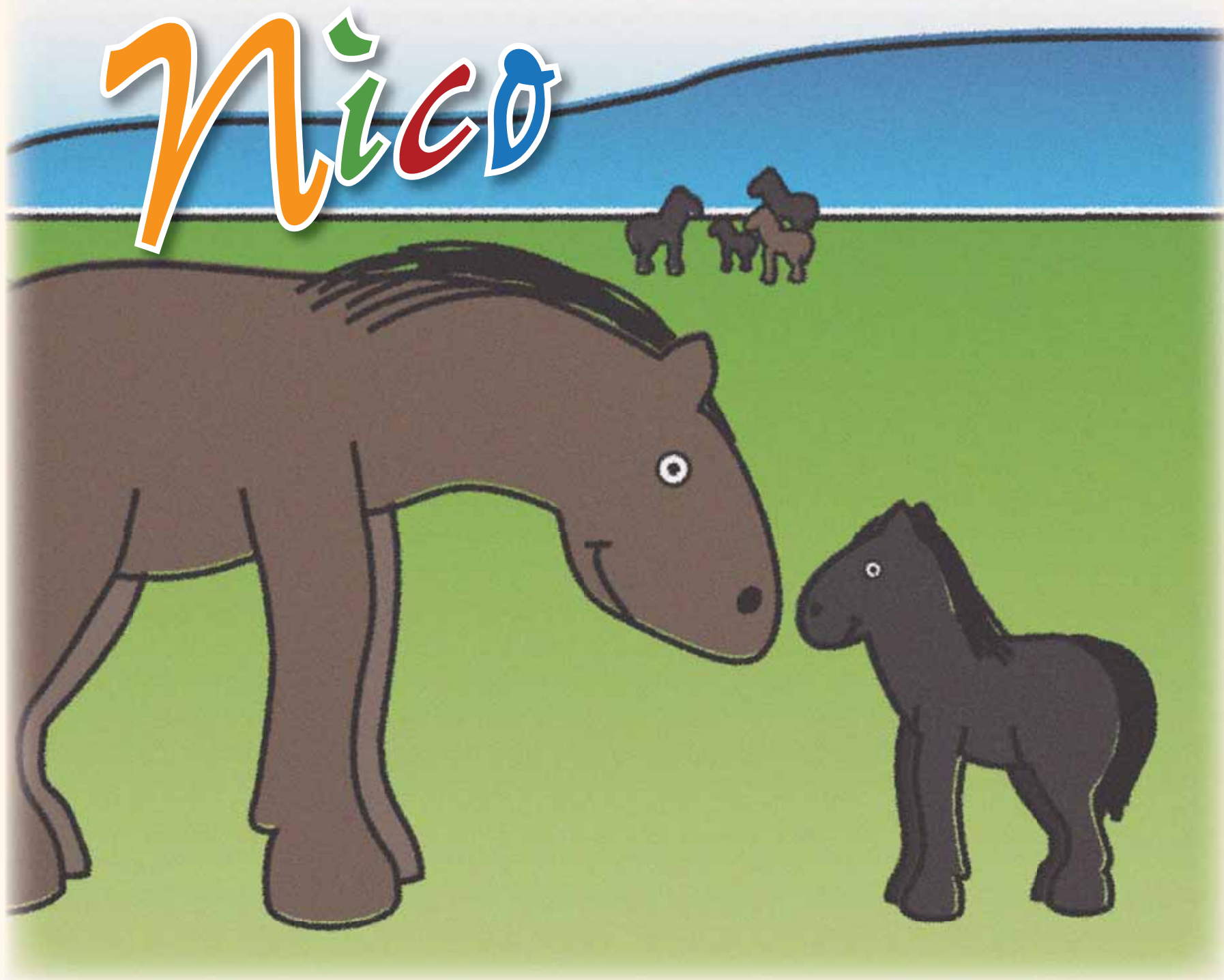
that brings back the feelings you felt while you were there instead of something that's cool or fashionable." ■

— Eric Van Susteren

Judge's comments

This well-written story is filled with rich and convincing details. Here is a writer drawing on something she knows. The story has the sort of confidence that most often originates from direct experience. The narrator changes due to events in the story. Moreover, she thoughtfully reflects on those changes.

FIRST PLACE: CHILDREN



by Nicole Knauer

She circled the cave, the whites of her eyes flashing. Rain pounded outside in the dark, and the horse knelt down on her knees. Resting her huge head on the sandy floor, she heaved and pushed until the small foot of a coal-black foal appeared. It was followed by a sloping head and straggly ears. After what seemed like forever, his long body and soft, broomstick tail emerged from his mother, and he lay next to her dazed, batting his long eyelashes and sucking in long, even breaths.

His mother's broad tongue wiped his body clean and ruffled his fluffy fur. With nudges of encouragement, she willed him to rise. He tried to control his long legs but each time ended up on the sand. After several attempts, he shakily stood up and was soon walking to his mother. He found her warm milk and drank it until his tummy was full. Tucking his knees under him, the foal slept.

When the sun lit up the sky the next morning, the foal trailed his mother out of the warm cave. Suddenly, he was engulfed by many horses, their large nostrils sniff-

ing his body and welcoming him into their herd. Many mares, old ones with graying coats and swayed backs, young ones with fire in their eyes and gleaming tails, greeted him. One horse was big and muscular, splotched white and brown, with massive hooves. Approaching the shivering foal, he and stared down at the youngster. Its big brown eyes looked into small black ones as he silently judged the foal. Slowly, the stallion looked away and paced to the front of the herd. The foal felt welcomed.

As days passed, the foal grew on the ranges and was strengthened by making his way over the rough terrain. He began to drink less milk and eat more grass. His mane grew full and wavy; his tail, long and trailing. He filled out until he was larger than his mother. No longer did the stallion seem so massive; the black horse was its equal — equal size, strength, and capability.

As the black horse grew in power, he became a threat to the stallion. His mother knew, as did the rest of the herd, that it would soon be time for the black horse to leave the herd and form his own band.

That doomed day came.

One morning, the colt was drinking from an icy stream when a strong blow thumped against his ribs. Swirling around, he saw the brown and white stallion in a frenzy. Twirling on his haunches, the stallion bit and kicked, landing bruises on the black horse. Lunging and drawing back, prancing around his opponent, the black horse nipped at the stallion's hide and flicked his hooves against him. They became a black, brown, and white fury. Teeth sank into flesh; blood spattered the ground. Though strong, the black horse was no match for his enemy. After many bruises, the black horse gave up. To avoid being killed, he surrendered, galloping into the waning sunlight. Silhouetted against the dying sun, he felt his heart clench as he watched the stallion drive his band down the canyon and out of sight, his mother with the rest of the herd.

When his wounds had healed and new skin grown over the old, the black horse searched for his own group of mares. Wandering the land, the horse saw his chance. A young stallion, even more in-

experienced than he, was leading a small group of horses. Galloping at him, the black horse smashed into the grey stallion, and the fight was soon over. His opponent vanquished, the black horse marched away his new herd.

As the black horse triumphed in many battles, his herd grew. Spotted appaloosas, shining palominos, ghostly white, and creamy brown horses filled his group, and all was well.

Gathering his courage, the black stallion decided to fight the brown and white stallion and win his mother back. Dodging rocks and galloping through canyons, the black horse spotted the brown and white one. Perking his ears forward, he approached his enemy. Rearing and kicking out, the black stallion began fighting the brown fury. Rising to the challenge, they circled each other in a sort of dance. Sand stung their eyes. Blinded, the horses wounded each other. When the dust had cleared, one was left standing. The other collapsed, covered in sand and blood.

(continued on page 51)

2ND PLACE: CHILDREN

A Tale of a Tail

by Emma Miller

"Flip, flop, flip, flop," the orange monkey tail went lullabying me awake. I felt the cool breezes rushing through my window.

"Ahh!" I screamed. What's the flopping? Quickly I looked down. I had grown a tail!

"Laura," my mom called down the hall over my sister's screeching.

"Oh, no," I said remembering school. The gloomy dark classroom, all black.

The teacher's crooked teeth and evil grin. Her white hair and colorless eyes. The shriveled skin. I zoned back into my bright pink bedroom with my orange bed and bedcovers. My long wavy golden hair and blue eyes were sparkling in the lamplight. The grey carpet flew under my light caramel feet and blue monkey pajamas as I ran to pull on the ugly uniform of a black dress with muddy green socks and shoes. Wait, I have a tail. My mind went and went and as it did butterflies grew inside my stomach. What to use, what to use? Slowly, I used hair ties to hold up my tail.

"Done," I sighed grabbing my books and heading down the hall.

In the kitchen my mom asked "What took you so long?"

"Ugh," I said, "I had important business. Just take me to school."

"Laura," my mom said getting that threatening tone in her voice.

"Sorry," I said getting clearly annoyed.

"Alright, let's go. Christine!" my mom called her voice rising at the end and starting with a big sigh. Christine is my noisy sis-

ter who just happens to love sleeping in and taking her precious time. On the car ride I debated. Should I tell mom? No! Authorities will take me away (Not that I'd miss my sister). But, maybe she could help. And then school was in sight. My mom dropped me off at school and I ran to get to class on time. The bell rang right as I neared the door. I grasped for the doorknob and pulled.

"Laura," the teacher said, cackling as she moved to the front of the one room school-house, striding through the small desks placed in uniform rows, her large one at the back. "Now, now," she said snidely, her grin expanding. "Are we late for class?" she asked.

"Yes ma'am," I said cringing and putting my head down.

"Now class, is she the first one late this year?" she said to all my frightened classmates.

"Yes ma'am," they all replied.

"Oh so I should take pity, NOT!" She said, snot shooting out of her nose as she laughed.

"Let's see. Why don't we look at the punishment wall?" She dragged me to the back of the class where her desk sat.

"Oh," she said, "looks like you'll be cleaning the snake's cage." "Yes ma'am," I said terrified, "but isn't it poisonous?"

To that she curtly replied, "You have a lot of work. And the answer to that question is, positively. The rest of you, recess time! Let's go." She herded them out of the classroom and locked me in. I ran to get the cleaning supplies and stared at the tank. Was the snake asleep?

Was it a good time to reach in? I wondered. "Beware of the witch!" a sizzling voice whispered.

"Who what what said that?" I said looking around.

"Me, Elliot Gercham. That lady, the witch, she slowly turns the whole class into animals that she sells all around the world. I'm a snake. She doesn't know that I've warned you. She doesn't think I can talk. Ssssss." The snake whispered.

"I really am scared. Snap out of it!" I said whacking myself in the head. "Snakes don't talk. Snakes don't talk."

"Then how am I? You have to listen to me. She is going to torture you all as helpless animals!" Elliot the snake said.

"Well, then what am I supposed to do? Kill her or drown her in the magic lake in the middle of the classroom?" I said sarcastically.

"Well, no. You whack her on the head with the flying broom in the closet and she'll disintegrate." He said matter of factly.

"Wha- OK so I take a magic broom and hit the teacher. What ev. Wait how do you know?"

"I googled it on my computer before I changed into this."

"Google has that?"

"Yes. Oh, here she comes."

"But, but, which broom?"

"The one that flies."

"OK, don't bite me. I need to clean the cage for the teacher. Here goes." I cleaned it quickly. Snakes were really tidy.

"How's work going Laura?" the teacher asked.

"Well, I'm almost done." "Let me see." She said. As she turned around I grabbed the broom from the closet, conveniently placed next to the door, and snuck up behind her. Should I do it? How much trouble would I be in if I hit my teacher and she didn't disintegrate? Then, she turned around.

"What are you doing? Give me that!" She spat. Now or never. I brought the broom down and "POOF" she exploded in ashes!

My tail and probably other kids' animal parts shrunk away. The only reminder left was my hair ties lying on the floor. ■

Emma Miller, 'A Tale of a Tail'

I am a 6th grader at Woodside Elementary, and I am 11 years old. I love reading and have a large imagination. I thought of my story in 4th grade during a quick write. Over the years I have kept the notebook and added to my ideas. I find that fantasy inspired by real sights and thoughts is easier and more fun to write. I hope you like my story!

Judge's comment

"A Tale of a Tail" is clever and refreshingly honest. The descriptions are good and the dialogue moves the story along briskly. Well done.

Merry Go Round

(continued from page 48)

to ride that horse, to just let go of herself and circle slowly for a few minutes. After a couple long seconds of debating with herself, she gave up. After looking around to make sure no one she knew was near, she walked up through the line and mounted her horse. Pulling up her black hood to hide her face, she waited for the horse to move her forward.

Toby looked at the scene around with him with heavy eyes. The carnival, which had once been a colorful jumble of plastic joy, was now dull, and overcrowded. The screams of sticky little children and the whirring of the rides sounded blunt and soft, like he was hearing them from behind a wall. He shuffled around the carnival, peering into booths of overpriced stuffed animals and impossible games, dodging laughing children running through the maze of rides. A clown tried to get him to buy a balloon animal and a dog sat on his foot, but he finally made it through to the center of the carnival. Toby came to a stop, resting against a makeshift railing for some ride or another, and slowly eyed the scene around him. To his left was a tiny stage, on which mimes were pretending to be on a seesaw while children stood gaping. To his right was a huge spinning ride, with a line that curved and twisted in front of it like a sleeping snake, twitching every now and then as the ride emptied. There, right in front of him, sat the carousel. In all its brightly colored, short lived glory, it

spun in lazy circles to music blasting from the loudspeakers at the top. He gazed at it, his eyes glazed over as he remembered. He remembered how it used to be her favorite ride, the only one she would go on because she was scared to death of roller coasters. They would sit in the grass on the edge of it together and wonder who picked the music, and where that person was so that they could blackmail him into playing something better. Best of all, they would sit next to each other on their own separate horses, neither speaking, yet somehow communicating. Lost in thought, they would brush their legs together or hold hands as they twisted round the park. Though at first he had felt silly, Toby knew how much this ride meant to her, and so he learned the tradition of not speaking while riding the carousel. It had been her mom's favorite, before she passed away. And just like her mother before her, it had been his girlfriend's favorite before she passed away. The memories of her hit him like a flood, and Toby could hear her laugh, see her smile in the crowd before she turned and ran away, begging him to chase her. But she disappeared, and was lost in the crowd. Every time the carnival came, they would go together, just Toby and his girl. Now, by himself, he felt wrong. Like he somehow shouldn't be here without her. Like he left her behind. A tear building up in the corner of his eye, Toby slowly walked forward and into the line of people, making the unconscious decision to go forward onto the ride. He picked the only gray horse he saw, and swung his leg

over the side, waiting to relive the memories.

Angela wandered through the carnival. As a child, carnivals had been the highlight of her month. To her cheerful disposition, the splendor of carnivals appealed greatly, and she had thoroughly enjoyed every carnival she had ever been to. Now, in her early thirties, Angela saw this carnival a little differently than she had in the past. Angela had gone from a carefree child to an adult, and the transition had been hard for her. Leaving the comforts of her home was a huge shock at first, although in her opinion, she had begun to adjust quite nicely. Her long time boyfriend was a fantastic guy with a huge personality that complemented her own, her job was working out great for her, and she never had a hard time paying the bills. In fact, for a long time, Angela had never had a hard time with anything. Even recently, that remained true. And so, with blissful free time, Angela had put on her boots and trudged out to the carnival she knew so well. The sky was beginning to darken, but she stayed where she was, not wanting to go back home. As she thought about it, she figured out why. She was hiding. Hiding from the decisions waiting for her, haunting her. Angela didn't like responsibility, or rather, she was unaccustomed to it. Decision making was one of the skills she needed to practice, but she didn't like practice either. She knew these decisions would define her immediate life and probably her future as well. She needed to decide; did she love her boyfriend

enough to accompany him to London for his job? Was he the one for her? Could she find a job all the way out in Europe? Angela knew that she would have a hard time getting used to life in a completely different place, and that it would be a lot of work for her. Although it was a risk, it was an opportunity. Her disposition was unfailing in bringing out the best in things, and looking at what she had before her as an opportunity was a great way for her to be able to shrug things off and wait. It was not in her nature to dwell on things, so Angela decided to have a look around while she waited for an answer to come to her. Everything was sticky and sugary and brightly colored; the people, the rides, the ground, even the air. She loved it. She sat and watched a clown pull a long bandana out of his mouth, and then wandered off again. What she saw in the middle of the park made her stop. This carousel was new, different from the one she had grown used to when she was a kid. She remember sitting on the horses and riding round and round, using the time to think undisturbed, which she could not do very often. It seemed like a great idea to her even now, and she realized that maybe a little time was all she needed to decide. She climbed onto the prettiest horse she could find, and waited for her opportunities.

Eloise felt old. She looked at all the young children running, laughing, eating, and she couldn't help but feel nostalgic. In her late sixties, she seemed a bit out of place among the youth of the carnival. She tried to pay no heed to the

feelings as she wandered about by herself. As dark fell and the lights began to come on, the wrinkles on her face looked deeper with shadow, but she smiled as much as she ever had, willing to forget her appearance. To see others happy made Eloise happy, for with her age came an incurable selflessness. This did not happen for everyone, but for her it was there to stay. While ambling through the park, she bought an ice cream for a child that dropped his, bandaged scraped knees on two little boys while their mother was tending to the younger sister, and taken three photos for people. She smiled. Carnivals had always been a place where she could be herself, skip around and have a good time. Older now, she could still be herself and have a good time, but in a very different way than before. She sat down on a bench, being careful to avoid any overly sticky sections, and watched young couples strolling through, young children racing around, even middle aged groups standing together and laughing. That had been her once, and Eloise loved to remember. Life had been good to her. Her husband was her best friend, her friends were amazing and supportive, and her retirement was going as planned. Sitting there, Eloise knew she was lucky, and she wished she could spread that feeling with others. Not to stay in the past, Eloise got up and begin to amble again. When she saw the carousel, she couldn't help but smile. All the different people, put together at one time, it amazed her.

(continued on next page)

Merry Go Round

(continued from previous page)

A bouncing four year old, an angry teenager, a sad young adult, and a thoughtful young woman. She wondered about their lives, how they were, and they would be. To make the moment perfect, Eloise decided to ride the carousel too. Ignoring some of the stares of the people around her, she walked into the ride and sat on the last open horse, and waited for her moment in time.

Soon after Eloise got on the ride, the horses slowly began to move up and down and the carousel started to turn with effort. Jerry, Hailey, Toby, Angela, and Eloise, different people with different backgrounds and stories, circled together for those short two minutes. After the ride stopped, Jerry stayed on his horse, bouncing up and down for another adventure. Hailey sulked off after saying goodbye to the black horse and went to find her sister, so she could maybe try one of those rides she hated so much. Toby moved a short distance away and sat in the grass with a sigh, before a nice girl from one of the booths came over to ask him what was wrong, the beginning of a long friendship. Angela turned and went right home, having made her decisions with confidence and also deciding that she should make decisions more often. Eloise hobbled off and went on her merry way, helping others as she slowly made the journey home to where her husband was waiting for her with dinner. On that ride, for just two minutes, five very different people had sat together and thought. And, after those two minutes, in very different ways, the lives of five people had been changed. All in the course of a merry go round. ■

Emily Katz, 'Merry Go Round'

Writing is more than an activity for me. Writing is a release, and a way of sharing my thoughts with other people. When I learned about the short story contest, I was thrilled that I could have the possibility of sharing with many people, that I had the chance to tell them a story.

I wrote multiple stories, and it took multiple tries, but I decided on this one simply because it was my favorite. I tried to work into it a message about the delicacies of life, how the smallest things and shortest moments can change us, and about how we should make every moment matter. I wanted to show the reader these different characters, with different stories and backgrounds, and intertwine their lives for a few simple minutes.

The end of the story is fairly open ended, leaving the reader to decide exactly where these people go with their lives. The people who ride the merry-go-round represent the fact that everyone has a story behind them, and that story is made up of moments like the ones they experience on the carousel.

Judge's comment

"Merry Go Round" is an ambitious piece of work, featuring multiple points of view rendered in a very convincing manner.

Nico

(continued from page 49)

The black horse stepped forward to claim his new herd.

After that, life was peaceful. The black horse wanted no more than to rest and spend time with his band. Too soon, however, a new enemy approached. This one he could not defeat. This new enemy was powerful, never before seen. This new enemy was human.

"Drive them down the canyon. Make sure no one strays. I want every single one of them in the holding pens at the end of the round-up. Silly mustangs. They won't be taking grazing land from the cattle no more; I'll make sure of it." The pilot muttered, "I'll make sure of it." He swooped his plane down over the herd, watching them panic and gallop away. He was one of many pilots dedicated to rounding up mustangs to free more grazing land for cows. Engines roared below, cars were driving up to the horses, willing them faster and faster. Mercilessly, they never slowed, just drove on as more horses fell behind.

Pain vibrated through the black's body. His nostrils flared. Sweat coated his hide and rolled down his heaving flanks. The wild, proud stallion dared not stop. He galloped many miles between the canyon walls, the roar of the airplanes and cars constantly daring him to go faster and faster until his legs were a black blur.

When the horse felt near collapse, he was driven into a round pen and the gate shut behind him with a clang. He stood there, his sides heaving and his head drooping between his legs. Meekly, he raised his head and neighed softly. His voice was met with silence. His mother was gone, lost in the dirt, her shining coat now plastered in grit.

The fire dimmed from the stallion's eyes; he gave up on life. Without a family or freedom, no longer did he have a reason to enjoy its beauty. His ribs began to protrude from his thin sides, and hollows deepened around his eyes. His mane hung in oily strands, and his coat was caked in mud. Dried blood streaked his body, and his hooves were cracked and overgrown. He wheezed when he tried to breathe and coughed when he moved. Often, the horse fell to his knees and struggled to swallow the small morsels provided. He surrendered to death.

One afternoon, a voice made the stallion open his eyes. The sound was rough, and pain racked his body where feet kicked his belly. Rough rope was tied around his neck, and a burly man pulled at it until the stallion staggered to his knees. He was dragged from the pen into a dark trailer. When the horse pulled back, the sharp sting of a whip hit his rump, and he jumped inside, trembling as the door shut, plunging him in darkness. He rocked back and forth as the trailer twisted and turned and fell every time the wheels bumped over a rock. Suddenly, the engines stilled. He relaxed for a second until the trailer door jerked open and sunlight burned his sensitive eyes, accustomed to darkness. The same burly man took hold of the rough rope tied around the horse's neck, pulled him down the ramp, and led him into a dreary gray building with a run-down sign over it — "PRISON."

The black stallion followed the man past many cells full of his worst enemy — humans. They stared at him with crooked grins. They wore matching orange suits, and their stares were hopelessly shallow. More often than not, they pulled away from his gaze, as though embarrassed that he should see them in such a desperate state. Through one cell, a gnarled hand reached out. It floated over the horse's head and down his neck. "Easy, boy, easy." Did he hear right? Was this kindness? Affection? The horse turned his large head and studied the man whose hand was so gentle. In the man's eyes, the horse saw his own reflection. An 'animal' who had given up on life and was desperate to have his family and freedom back. The man's eyes mirrored the horse's soul.

This gentle man was escorted out of his cell and grasped the horse's rope. He walked the black stallion to the stables. He caressed the great beast and using a soft brush, cleaned the caked dirt. Picking up the horse's overgrown hooves one by one, the man tended them, removing debris and sharp stones. He gently combed a brush through the horse's tangled hair and smoothed out all the knots.

Through all weather, the man loyally came to the waiting horse and each day grew more attached to the big animal. He smeared ointment on the hooves and gave the horse food so his bones would be less visible. Each day, the eyes of both man and horse grew stronger and

less desperate as they again learned to live life.

There came a day when the man led the horse into a sandy arena. He took a heavy saddle from the top rail and approached the stallion. Arching his neck, the black horse sniffed the saddle. As the man placed the saddle onto his back and secured it with a tight cinch, the horse's eyes followed the man's every move. Then a cold metal bar was slid into his mouth and fastened around his head. What was the only human he trusted trying to do? No matter which way he turned, the horse could not rid himself of the pain in his mouth. He twisted in rage and bucked and reared, but still the bit stayed in his mouth. He smelled dead cow in the leather on his back and imagined what predator was near. The smell of leather filled his nostrils, and he tried to run away from the mountain lion he could see in his head. But no matter where he ran, the same fence surrounded him, cornering him with the carnivore. But he didn't hear the roar of a lion or feel jagged claws slicing his body; he heard murmurs of reassurance from the man and felt the gentle hand comfort him. After a while, the horse stopped and accepted the hands he trusted again, that praised him for his hard work. The horse learned to accept the strange things humans did to him.

As the man and horse grew stronger, their need for each other lessened. One afternoon, the horse was led away into a dark trailer and parted forever from his only friend. Once again the horse plunged into loneliness.

The black stallion was towed into a dimly lit arena known as an auction house. A sea of people surrounded him. A number was slapped onto his muscled rump, and he was led around the enclosure. People called out prices; when a woman with blue eyes and blonde hair called out a number, the bids stopped. He was sold.

The woman led him into yet another trailer, and they began the long journey from the Nevada range to the barn he would soon call home. She stopped often to check on him, every time calling him a strange word, "Nico." It became his name. After many hours on the road, the woman led the shaky horse from the van and into a barn that smelled of hay and saddle soap, horse sweat and old leather. The horse's roomy box stall contained fresh straw, clean water, and sweet hay.

His new owner taught him many commands and often rode him on the trails. He made new friends with three other horses, and they nuzzled each other over their stall doors. The woman fed him delicacies such as apples and carrots. Slowly, he let himself care for others, and they cared back for him. Horses, humans, enemies no more. Finally, Nico had found a home and a new family. The woman often rode Nico's best friend, a flashy red bay with a fine dished face, while her husband rode Nico. Huge and wise, Nico was easygoing and patient with the children the woman occasionally put on his back and was quick and daring on the trails. He led a happy life, but he missed the freedom he felt when the wind ruffled his mane and the sun warmed his back as it had when he galloped on the plains.

When the air was crisp and fresh and the grass speckled with dew, Nico saw his chance. If he pushed against a rusty nail, the nail would certainly give way to his large body. He would gallop out and over the mountains and forever be free to do whatever he wanted. At least that's what Nico thought. Nico perked his ears at the fence, approaching it with determination. He leaned his side hard against the board and pushed. With an unexpected crack, it gave way too quickly. He crashed to the ground, a leg caught under his thrashing body at an odd angle. It landed with a dull thunk and the delicate bone snapped. Pain shot through his leg, but he did not feel it. Instead, he felt the worse pang of failure. He had forever sought freedom, but for what purpose? Though not free, he had a new family of loving people and animals. The range was a lost daydream. He heard the woman approach him. She cradled his big head in her lap. From then on, all was foggy. He could focus only on the dull sadness that engulfed him. A needle pricked his neck; slowly, the pain ebbed. He lifted his head and meekly neighed. He stared, misty eyed, at the slopes covered in grass and imagined himself galloping to the horizon. His breathing slowed. Finally, it stopped. His head dropped, and his soul fled to the skies, where it galloped freely with his beloved mother once more. ■

LISTEN ONLINE
www.PaloAltoOnline.com

An audio recording of "Nico" has been posted on Palo Alto Online.

Nicole Knauer, 'Nico'



Children's category winner Nicole Knauer was inspired to write her short story by the death of a horse that was very special to her.

"Nico" follows the events in the life of a horse by the same name — from his birth to his eventual captivity, said Knauer, who has a passion for horses and horseback riding.

"I wanted a main idea to be about freedom," she said. "I wanted to show that there was a

horse, the main character, who was born free and later throughout the story he kept trying to save that freedom. In the end he does have freedom, but in a different kind of way."

Knauer, a 12-year-old at Terman Middle School, said she started writing when she was very young with the encouragement of her mother.

"She'd give me these little books full of binder paper and I'd write these silly little stories on anything I could think of," she said. "I also had some really kind teachers who taught me to love language arts."

Knauer said she usually doesn't require any specific catalyst to become inspired to write. Instead she just sits down at the computer and thinks of ideas, as she did with "Nico."

"We had a long weekend and I just sat down and started writing. ... When I heard about this contest later I edited it down. It was very exciting to do this process and express my feelings." ■

— Eric Van Susteren

Judge's comments

This young writer clearly knows a lot about horses — both tame and wild — and also knows and cares about the Nevada mustangs. The story is suspenseful, with many moving descriptions. The writer makes it easy to identify with the equine protagonist and beautifully ties the horse's plight to the human prisoner's. The writing is as good as some we have seen in published stories by older writers. Bravo!

Short Story Honorable Mention List

The following stories were selected as among the best in each category.

Children 9-11

- 1st place: "Nico" by Nicole Knauer
2nd place: "A Tale of a Tail" by Emma Miller
3rd place: "Lightning Strikes" by Nisha McNealis

Honorable Mention

- Zach Foster - "The Turkey Saving Association"
Chloe Kim "How the Zebra and White Tiger Got Their Stripes"
Benjamin Huang - "LEGO Trilogy Part 1"
Devony Hof - "Grandma"
Lhaga Dingpuntsawa - "The Lost Ring"
Osmanthus Lynch - "Small Isn't All"
Tara Popovic - "My Antarctic Experience"

Teen 12 - 14

- 1st place: "The Perfect Souvenir" by Maya McNealis
2nd place: "Merry Go Round" by Emily Katz
3rd place: "Four Knocks" by Alexandre Poux

Honorable Mention

- Rena Silverman - "Marina's Orca-to-English, English-to-Orca Dictionary"
Jessie Rong - "Trigger"
Ananya Ram - "The Night Before Christmas"
Kyle Chin - "The Blue Birds"
Lauren Bruce - "Weird Type of Smile"
Grace Yukiko Kuffner - "True Colors"

Young Adult 15-17

- 1st place: "Robot Rob" by Curtis Wu
2nd place: "New Shoes Always Hurt" by Gavin Rea
3rd place: "Caltrain. Afternoon Service. Makes All Stops." By Alessandra Occhioini

Honorable Mention

- Isabel Kwiatkowski - "Sam"
Ian Sears - "Complete Recovery"
Olivia Nichols - "Her Mother's Cookies"
Sanjana Saxena - "Ali vs. Ali"
Benjamin Steinberg - "Long Gone"
Brian Benton - "Sweating"
Caitlyn Crosby - "Tock"
Sabrina Lui - "Colors"

Adult 18+

- 1st place: "When the Knock Comes" by Diane Holcomb
2nd place: "Bastille Day" by Apala G. Egan
3rd place: "Do the Math" by Michele Raffin

Honorable Mention

- Dawn Wood - "Magical Places"
Misuk Park - "Somewhere in Birdland"
Janice Bohman - "Sunscreen"
Jeanne Althouse - "Goran Holds His Breath"
Ann M. Jona - "Calle Del Traghetto"
Katy Motiey - "Broken Glass"
Shelly Strebel - "Sake and Ashes"

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CHILDREN



Linden Tree

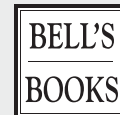
\$100 First Place: Nicole Knauer
\$75 Second Place: Emma Miller
\$50 Third Place: Nisha McNealis

TEEN



Kepler's

\$100 First Place: Maya McNealis
\$75 Second Place: Emily Katz
\$50 Third Place: Alexandre Poux



YOUNG ADULT

Bell's Books

\$100 First Place: Curtis Wu
\$75 Second Place: Gavin Rea
\$50 Third Place: Alessandra Occhioini

THE TWENTY-SIXTH ANNUAL
PALO ALTO WEEKLY

SHORT STORY CONTEST

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