

# SHORT STORY CONTEST

## The trials that define us



WINNING AUTHORS  
EDIFY READERS  
WITH LIFE'S PRYING  
QUESTIONS

**W**hat defines who we are? Is it the actions we make under the duress of a frightening, unfamiliar situation? Is it how we challenge society's sometimes flawed conventions? Or is it our ability to bounce back from tragedy and loss to enjoy the beautiful things in life once again? Through the often painful trials of its characters, the winning stories of the Palo Alto Weekly's 27th Annual Short Story Contest offer insight into the deeper questions we've all asked of ourselves.

The Palo Alto Weekly thanks each of the 125 writers who entered this year's competition as well as readers Ann Hillesland and Katy Motiey, 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 Books and Magazines of Menlo Park and Linden Tree of Los Altos. The stories and author biographies of the winners are published online at [www.paloaltoonline.com](http://www.paloaltoonline.com).

### WINNERS LIST

#### Children, 9-11 years

1st Place: "Music for Life" by Julie Meng  
2nd Place: "Journal of a Book" by Chloe Kim  
3rd Place: "Into Their Dreams" by Dori Filppu

#### Teens, 12-14 years

1st Place: "Bittersweet Notes" by Nicole Knauer  
2nd Place: "Escape to America" by Jacky Moore  
3rd Place: "The Vanishing Box" by Caroline Bailey

#### Young Adults, 15-17 years

1st Place: "First, Do No Harm" by Andrew Briggs  
2nd Place: "On Driving" by Valerie Taylor  
3rd Place: "Paper Airplanes" by Gemma Guo

#### Adults, 18+ years

1st Place: "Encounter" by Marc Vincenti  
2nd Place: "Painting Room" by Barbara Evans  
3rd Place: "Captive Bred Birds" by Jane Moorman





Paul Lewellyn

FIRST PLACE: ADULTS

# Encounter

by Marc Vincenti

It's late at night in the city. Rob Doud, age 52 and on foot, turns onto a quiet side-street.

Though in good shape, walking quickly, he's unfamiliar with these surroundings, which are dark and tall. But he's away from the traffic, the doorways are empty and the windows dim, no one's in sight, and the steps to his walkup are only half a block ahead — or at least he thinks so. He's just a renter here with a room for the summer, far from the wife he loves and misses. He's got a brief job with a company in the city; he consults on websites, and likes to stay late in the office on his own.

For a second, Rob stops under a streetlight in the cool air, near some parked cars, wondering whether he's taken a wrong turn. Putting his hands into the pockets of his old college jacket, he deliberately takes his time, reviewing his route and the tricks his mind might have played — which is intriguing and useful to him, because he specializes in helping people navigate online, find their way around a site. Rob's work-life is devoted, in fact,

to helping visitors feel welcomed, guided, supported.

He thinks he had it right, and that a slanted glimmer up ahead, another minute's walk, is where he should be going. Cars beep, back where he turned. Closer in the dark, a dog barks. All at once a midnight cyclist, dressed in bright gear, spins past in the narrow street. And then two noisy men who weren't there before, who must have come from an alley but seem to have emerged from the sidewalk, appear in the gloom between Rob and his destination. He decides to wait, pretend he's preoccupied, keep his distance from their voices and his hands in his pockets. He remembers an article he read about street-crime, and how his wife told him to stay safe,

when she hugged him.

One man's bigger than the other, and they're talking urgently. Rob studies them. The big man has a squared-off haircut, and in the throat of his black jacket, jewelry glints. The small man has his hood up and is holding out an upturned, visored cap with both hands.

"Parasite!" The big man suddenly shouts. "Pervert!"

"So? So? So?" the small man says. Then he scrapes to a stop near a hydrant. He's wearing slippers.

Both men sound somewhere around thirty. Rob has never called anyone names like that in his life or worn slippers in the street; he's startled. He moves away from his street-lamp into darkness.

"So? So?"

"So we're *done*," says the big man.

"So you *say*, Mr. Boss."

Then as if he were hurling a pitch in softball, the big man swings a vicious underhand fist into the lifted hands of the small man, causing a spray of coins to pick out the light and then jingle down into the street where suddenly, too, the small man is sprawling beside his cap.

"So I *say*!" the big man says, smiling and pointing. He spits.

Rob is shocked. Whether or not he wants to be, he realizes, he's already a party to this encounter just because he's there. He's alone, breathing lightly, hands stuffed in his jacket. He could choose to do something now, or wait, or leave. As for taking a side, there's no

choice: one man is big and tall, and the other man is face-down, in the street, in slippers.

The dog barks again. Straining to turn his hooded head, the small man fingers the surface around him. On the curb, the big man pulls something tiny from his pants pocket, up toward his lips — and then the tiny bottle gleams and he swings toward Rob because some oncoming headlights, having veered down the street, are growing suddenly brighter and coming on with the rush of a car. Its horn blares and it swerves, barely missing the small man, then it speeds up and races on toward the next cross-street.

The big man yells out, "Nice try!" and begins to guzzle.

But he hasn't seen Rob — whose heart is racing too now, racing as if to make him act. But his hands clench and his feet feel unsure. In his life Rob has visited people lying in hospitals, jumped into a pool for a child, helped talk a neighbor out of suicide; but he was calm then and there seemed to be no choice. In the darkness, now, he could decide to flee, or shout for help, or

## SECOND PLACE: ADULTS

# The Painting Room

by Barbara Evans

After breakfast, Mrs. Birch used the warm dish cloth in her hand to clean Edward's jammy face and cheek. "There you go, Jam-Face. All clean. You're ready to go." It took Edward by surprise, but pleasantly so. It was a little thing. Edward was nine and so too old by over a year to participate willingly in displays of affection. But not too old to want, need, even yearn for them. The gentle face-wiping comforted him. Made him feel mothered, and for the first time in a long time, the triangle in his throat didn't feel as sharp or as big.

In the van on the way to school, Mrs. Birch asked them all if they remembered to grab their lunches. She pulled up to the school curb and Edward got out along with Mrs. Birch's children and the lunch she had prepared for him. There was always a dessert, something his own mother hadn't done. Four Nilla wafers, a tablespoon of chocolate chips, a cookie, six Skittles, or a sneakable amount of red hots to be eaten covertly during math. Always something. He worried a little that it was temporary, that it might end. He wondered if she packed a dessert for everyone. She did do special things just for him. Since school started, for example, chocolate milk had found a happy home in the Birch refrigerator. The first time she bought it, she stood him in front of the open fridge and pointed at a quart container of buttermilk. "Everyone in this house likes chocolate milk. No one likes buttermilk." She squeezed his shoulder. He didn't understand until she opened the buttermilk carton and instead of buttermilk, he saw creamy chocolate milk inside.

The night before, business as the new usual: homework, Lego. Dinner, more Lego, bed. She made the rounds making sure everyone was pajama-ed, clean of tooth, and tucked in.

Mrs. Birch's bracelets jangled together as she made her way down the hall to the boys' room. In bed, Edward closed his eyes and thought of his own mother. He could see her wearing the old, soft robe that he had loved. He pushed his eyes hard with his fingers to keep the stinging from turning into tears. He felt a triangle in his throat. He imagined he could smell his own mother's perfume. Her perfume had been somehow gold — spicy and warm was how he thought of it. Mrs. Birch just smelled soapy and clean. Edward kept his eyes closed as Mrs. Birch came into their bedroom to say goodnight. She tucked in her son Ben in the other bed.

"Goodnight you two. Why so many clothes on the floor? Ow! These Legos!"

"Sorry, Mom."

"Sorry, Mrs. Birch."

"Ok, ok, no harm done. I didn't like that foot anyway."

And then, what she always did. The window, opened a crack. The night light snapped on. The soapy smell coming in close as she pulled up the covers and smoothed Edward's hair.

"Goodnight, Edward. Have a good sleep. Goodnight boys, see you in the morning. Ben, did you go to the bathroom?" She asked Ben, but he knew the question was meant for him.

He had known Mrs. Birch all of his life. He'd slept over in the very same bed before. Way before. It seemed so long. But he knew it wasn't that long ago. His mom's doctor visits, the good news, the bad news, the hoping and the being positive, and the breast cake when they thought it was gone for good. The cake had made his mom laugh and then cry. "It's a happy cry, sweetie. I'm happy. We're all happy today!" His mom and Mrs. Birch drank tea and talked about the new addition the Birches were adding to the side of the garage. His mother and Mrs. Birch used to talk and laugh for hours. It could be annoying. His mother had helped Mrs. Birch with ideas for the room. She said it would need another window, a sink, and a real wood floor.

Months later when it was finally finished, Mrs. Birch moved all of her painting supplies from the basement into the new room. Ben called it the painting room, so now everyone else did too. It was a tiny room filled with paints, brushes, pencils, pens, paintings, an easel and water jars along the counter. There was a little sink, another window added after dry wall had gone up, and a wide-planked walnut floor. Mrs. Birch painted the expected fruit, flowers and swirly designs. But also she painted scenes from the neighborhood: the Hickory's dog, kids on swings with long chains and a girl playing in a sprinkler. The little girl's hair was curly and long and just getting wet. The sun shone on her hair and made it glitter. The girl's face wasn't visible, but you knew she was laughing. And there was the boys' favorite painting: the old neighbor, Mr. Klein, sitting on the bench in his garden under the pear tree. Ben said he looked like a short Abraham Lincoln. Next to him, on the bench, was a plate of perfect pears. But it was their favorite because the ground was full of pears: ripe pears, over-ripe pears, even some rotting pears.

Edward and Ben used to go in the painting room to ask Mrs. Birch for more cereal, for a ride someplace, for homework help, for whatever it was they needed. They barged in once last summer and asked if she'd take them to

Home Depot just so they could browse.

Surprisingly, she had allowed it. She let them walk all around Home Depot. The drill area. The ax aisle. Forty-two different hammers. Lumber and plumbing supplies. Saying no to the chainsaws, she bought lantern flashlights with little Buzz Lightyears on them instead. Ben and Edward felt too old for Buzz, but they liked the lanterns just the same. She bought hotdogs and Mr. Pibbs. After eating, in the light fixture area, Ben turned a glass and brass chandelier on and off and on and off. Ben said something about how he couldn't believe how nice his mom was being. Standing under the flickering lights, Edward began to understand that Mrs. Birch was doing this — stopping her painting, driving them here, buying the lanterns and the junk food — because his own mother was sick. Even more. Because his mom was dying.

Back at the Birches, Mr. Birch had let him flip the burgers on the grill. His own dad had been there too, then left again to go back. He had slept over that night, many nights.

Tonight Ben's breathing was regular. Ben always fell asleep first. Edward listened to the dryer going. Mrs. Birch forgot to check pockets for change. He thought of Mrs. Birch's foot. How much it must hurt. He'd stepped on Legos before. Red numbers of the clock said 11:08. So, he must have slept. The memory of his dream came back to him. His mom in that high bed at the hospital. His dad's wrecked face. The smell of cleaner and the stiff hospital pajamas.

Instantly, he got out of bed and stumbled over the clothes on the floor. He banged his foot against something. He felt his way down the hall to the stairs. His hand gripped the railing all the way down. The carpet felt like velvet on his cold feet. He moved swiftly through the family room and then out the sliding door to the backyard. Was Mr. Birch calling him?

The grass was so cold! And wet. He saw the light on in the painting room. He saw her through the windows. Her face was inches from the paper, brush in hand. As he opened the door, she turned to him.

"Edward! What is it, hon?"

In two steps he was at her side, and now fully awake.

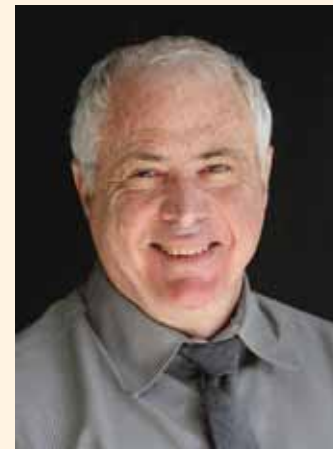
"I wanted to ask you about your foot. Is it better now?"

She scooped him up as best she could and he allowed it. He crumbled in her arms and cried and shook quietly for a long time. ■

## Meg Waite Clayton on "The Painting Room"

*What appears at first to be a simple overnight stay at a friend's house turns out to be so much more in this wonderfully crafted story of love and loss. The reader is steeped in Edward's grief, and in the warmth of Mrs.*

## Marc Vincenti



Growing up in a family that loved books, Marc Vincenti, winner of the adult category, became "entranced" by stories at a very young age. He has been writing fiction and short stories for the past 20 years.

"My stories come from everything I see and hear," he said.

"Encounter," his story, describes the tale of an ordinary, middle-aged man who walks into an altercation on the street one night, which makes the normally helpful person re-examine his disposition in a frightening, stressful situation.

"The story is part of a collection of 15 other stories, titled 'An Impractical Dog,' that I am hoping to publish soon," he said.

Some themes he likes to explore in his writing include endurance, courage, hope, loneliness, love and suffering.

He has previously published stories in literary journals and has also been featured on an NPR radio show, he said.

His other interests include politics, movies, classical music and art.

A former Gunn High School English teacher of 15 years, he took a break from teaching to focus on writing.

"Helping students with their stories in my class on short fiction was good practice for me," he said.

He continues to follow school-board meetings and write about issues related to students and their well-being.

He credits his success in writing to his own public school teachers and various writing instructors at different schools in the Bay Area, "who were my source of strength," he said. ■

— Ranjini Raghunath

## Ellen Sussman on "Encounter"

*This story takes the reader into a frightening world — where we can't trust what we see or what we know. But we can trust the writer to deliver the goods. I loved the writing, the suspense, and the gripping sense of drama.*

run into the street and wave his arms. Maybe he could drag the fallen man off. He doesn't move though and his hands are still clenched. Ahead beside the hydrant, the big man rolls his head as if to loosen up. What he's capable of, or intends to do, Rob can't say.

Back behind Rob, traffic sounds. The man's hood turns against the pavement and the bottle clinks past it. "Nicer try!" With the flash of a bracelet, the big man's fist punches the air happily, then he throws two more punches with one hand, rotating him toward Rob. His eyes widen, then squint.

"Hey," he says. "You. Who're you?"

Rob flushes hotly in anger.

The man rolls a shoulder and slowly grins. "What? You a spy? You a pervert?" He makes

an open-armed gesture toward the small man, who is pushing a toe against the pavement. "Join the party." He begins to repeat the gesture, as if greeting new arrivals.

Somewhere a car honks. Rob's hands are squeezed tight, and his heart is pounding. He looks on the ground for an object to throw, but there's nothing. He's not only angry at both men — the small man is accomplishing nothing — he is now furious with himself.

The man stares. "You not a party animal?" Almost philosophically, he places a fist under his chin and his rings glitter. He nods, smiles. "What? You a parasite?"

Rob's fingers are sweating. He knows he's no special hero but he's also never been a coward. To his knowledge he's always, al-

ways been dependable, and by any measure he's ever thought of, a human being.

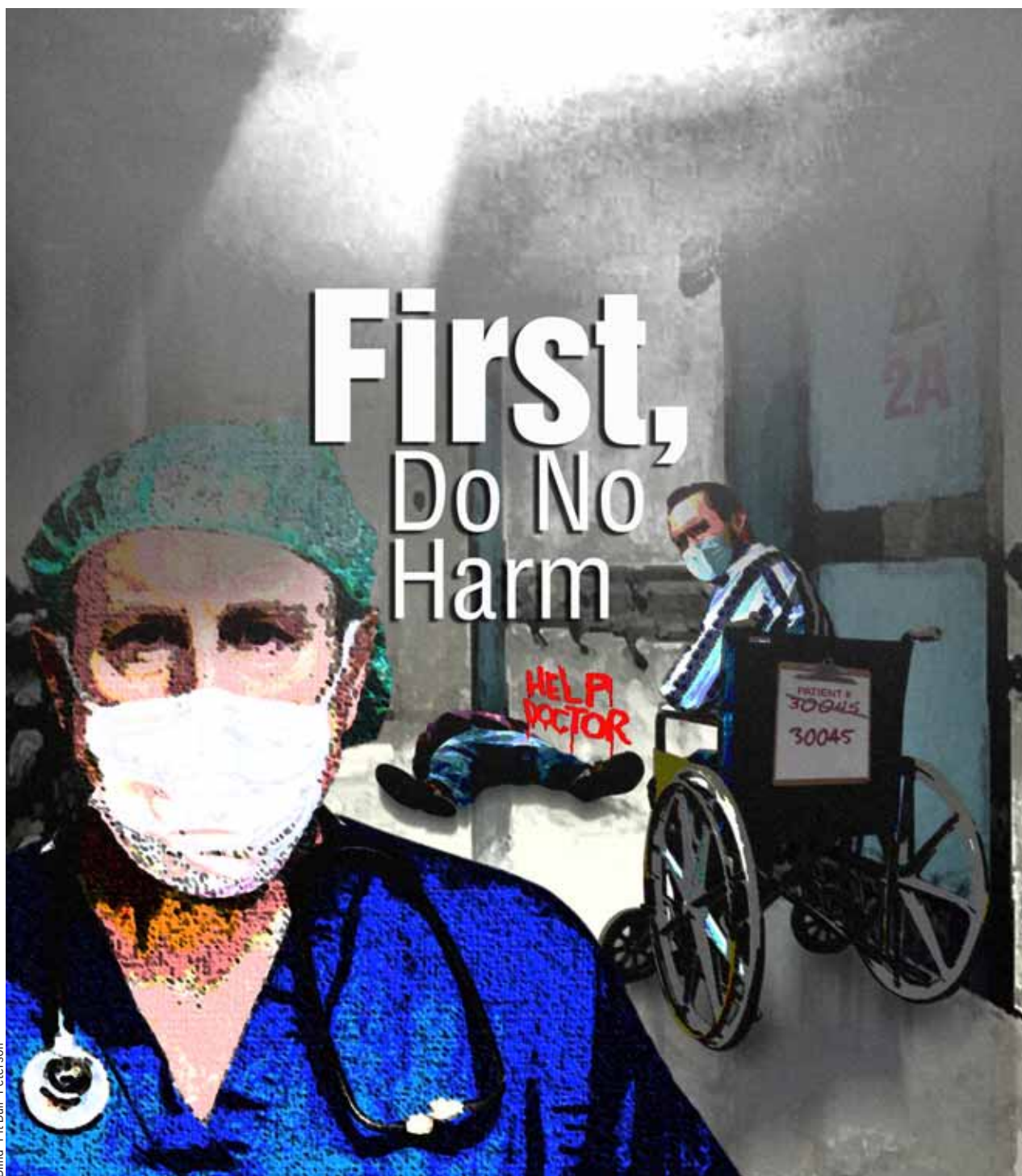
"You! You!" The man cups his hands and bellows, "You don't hear me?!"

The dog barks. And then a street-level window grates up and open, spilling out a shaft of light toward the big man, followed by the voice of a commanding, older woman who yells out, "Inside, baby man, or I'll disown you!" and then spits reprimands until the man shrugs at Rob and bursts out laughing — then says not to worry because he's not going anywhere, and disappears through her apartment's doorway.

Rob sprints forward, gathers up the small

(continued on page 51)





Blind "Pit Bull" Peterson

FIRST PLACE: YOUNG ADULTS

# First, Do No Harm

by Andrew Briggs

It was a quarter past six when William James died. He was not a particularly old man, and had put up a good fight before the brain tumor finally overwhelmed him. As the sunlight receded over the barren trees which dotted the snow covered ground outside his windows, he lay motionless, unseeing, as if numb to the pain of the world. The equipment which once surrounded him had been long since taken away. All that remained was a crash cart, and the telltale chest burns which resulted from repeated use of a defibrillator. The vital monitors, displays black, cast long shadows over the body from where they hung, bolted to the wall on either side of the bed. A mournful silence made the pall complete.

As the light receded from the darkened room, and frigid air pounded the glass, a man appeared in the doorway. The tableau stopped him in his tracks. He double checked the clipboard, then the room number.

"Patient 30045," he said sharply into his radio. "Status: Deceased, close account."

Hanging his white coat on a

hook, Dr. Randall Clark changed from his work attire to the clothes he would wear on the way home. Fastening a disposable mask across his face, he stepped out into the frigid night, and buzzed himself through the barbed wire fence which surrounded the hospital. As he shuffled slowly down the drive to his flat a few blocks away, he marveled at how quiet it had become. "People don't go out much these days," he remarked to himself. There were a few pedestrians, masked as he was, but they hurried, not wishing to talk. Death seemed to follow each of them as closely as a shadow, staring over their shoulder, reminding them that they could be the next person hauled away in a body bag. Randall shivered, but

kept walking. "I simply do my job. I simply do my job. I simply do my job. I simply do ..." he coughed, a half wretch. The taste in his mouth was bitter, the taste of regret. He spat, clearing the unpleasant feeling, and walked on.

"I simply do my job. I simply do my job. I simply do my job."

Dr. Clark was better off than most. He lived in his own flat; even better, it was clean. The stench, though, had not muted over time. Stains of vomit adorned the walls, courtesy of the last occupant. Dengue fever is not a pretty disease, he thought to himself.

"Still, though," he continued aloud. "It must have been a quick death." He knew, however, that this upbeat facade was not anywhere

near the truth. As a 4A, the man would not have received medication for fatal diseases. Grimacing, he turned his attention to his dinner, trying to put the scene from his mind. It was no good, and he threw most of the meal away uneaten. They're never very good anyway, the thought popped up as if from nowhere, adding to the symphony of discontent which had as of late been simmering in his mind. No matter what he did, he could not shake the feeling that there was something wrong. A new emotion, disdain, crept irrevocably into Randall's palate of consciousness. "I simply do my job. I simply do my job. I simply do my job."

The strident ringing of an alarm jolted Randall to life, and he was

half way to his black market gas mask before realizing that the noise was his alarm clock, not an airborne pathogen alarm. He switched it off, replaced the mask in its hollowed out book, and instead reached for a heavy overcoat. It was bitterly cold on winter mornings; the central heating had broken 20 years ago in this building. No one had come around to fix it, and broken it had stayed. Randall could faintly remember a time when there had been people who knew how to fix things, but that was long, long ago. No simple laborer would be allotted even a 5F status, entitling them to basic health exams, though no treatment. It was a shame, he introspected, working feeling back into his toes, which had turned blue overnight. Having dulled the pain in his feet, he gingerly shuffled across the room to the door, and, bracing himself for the blast of even more frigid air which lay waiting for him in the hallway, opened it to bring in the paper. Not sparing a glance, he bent down quickly to retrieve the scrap of paper. Where he expected it to be, his hand hand met only air. Still burying his face



## Andrew Briggs



Andrew Briggs, winner of the young adult category, is passionate about communication, art and technology.

A junior at Gunn High School, he is also “deeply concerned” about social and political issues.

His story “First, Do No Harm” was inspired by the “vitriolic discussion” of Obamacare and the healthcare system in the U.S. during the 2012 elections.

Set in a dystopian, disease-ridden world, the story explores the bleak state of health care and a doctor’s internal conflict between his conscience and the medical principles he has to follow. Faced with making

a decision that could save a life, he justifies his actions with his mantra: “I simply do my job,” while agonizing over the consequences.

“The idea behind the story was a reaction to the debate on the commercialization and ‘commodification’ of healthcare,” he said.

A John Steinbeck fan, Briggs has always been interested in writing, and likes to write about social issues. This is the first writing contest that he has won.

Apart from writing, he is also interested in music — he sings with the Cantabile Youth Singers of Silicon Valley.

An avid fan of computer science, he sees himself exploring a career in the field in the future, but “writing will always be a part of my life,” he said. ■

— Ranjini Raghunath

## Tom Parker on “First, Do No Harm”

*A singular, brave physician in a cowardly, cold and merciless future world where medical care is informed by the maxim, “If you give to everyone, the quality of medicine goes down,” makes an heroic commitment to humanity. It is an homage to the potentially good doctor in us all.*

in his arm against the cold, he reached lower, and felt his hand meet the floor.

For the first time uncovering his face, Randall looked around. On the wall across from his door was written, in a substance he recognized immediately as human blood.

“DOCTOR HELP.”

Below the message was a man, unconscious, his finger still covered in the makeshift ink of his plea, a puddle of which was slowly drying, a puce stain on the mauve carpet of the hall.

Several thoughts came to Randall almost simultaneously. Blocking them out, he knelt, and rolled the man over from the prone position in which he had collapsed. Seeing no healthcare status card pinned to the jacket, he frantically searched the man’s pockets. It was to no avail. Blood pounding in his ears, he let his rational brain take control. The realization of what he must do hit him like a wave, breaking over him, chilling him to the bone. He shook, all of the years of doubt about his life welling up into one beautifully synchronized symphony of grief for the pain that he had seen. All of the people whom he had turned away, glancing at their badges, sentencing them to death, flashed before his eyes. Putting his fingers to the neck of the body in front of him, he checked the pulse. Barely confident that the man was alive, he pulled him into his apartment, and started CPR.

Two hours had passed since John Doe, as Randall called him, had arrived in the apartment. His pulse had slowly stabilized, enough at least for him to breathe on his own. A smuggled syringe of Fibrinogen from the selection of pilfered supplies in his bag had stemmed the blood-coughing. Not entirely conscious, he had opened his eyes, and permitted himself to be seated on the couch. Randall, getting up from checking the man’s vitals, collapsed to his knees in front of his toilet

and threw up. To give healthcare to a 6 was unthinkable. It went against everything that doctors were taught. He remembered, in bold gothic capitals, the inscription on the floor of the hospital lobby.

“Some must die, that others may live.”

It was the founding principle of the Asocial Tannin Philosophy, calling to mind his History of Medicine class at the Bureau of Health. If you give to everyone, the quality of medicine goes down. This was best, the textbook said. “If you break this rule, you kill.” Randall had believed it. He still did, and yet he had saved John Doe. Again, his stomach heaved. “Please,” he panted in between sobs. “Please forgive me for saving a life.”

Punching his code into the entrance keypad, a sharp buzz signaled his arrival into Asocial Tannin Private Hospital. At 9 AM, the facility was already busy inside, allowing him to slip down the corridor unnoticed. Grabbing a wheelchair, he returned to the staff entrance. Opening it from the inside, and simultaneously covering the security camera, he called for his John Doe to come up the steps. Wheeling the man down the corridor, he whispered, over and over, his mantra.

“I simply do my job. I simply do my job. I simply do my job.”

William James’ body had been removed from the room he once occupied. The night shift had cleared it hours ago. Carefully, he removed the accounting closure slip from the door, his hands shaking, and pocketed it. Helping John Doe from the wheelchair to the bed, he reconnected the vital monitors, and paged staff to return the medical equipment. “Your name is William James. You are 2A. What is your name?”

“William James, 2A,” came the response.

William James returned to life. ■

## On Driving

by Valerie Taylor

**M**y drives are the highlights of my day. Driving is simple. Follow the rules, the limits, the signs. I never break a law, toe a line. My room’s a mess and my handwriting is incomprehensible but my driving is total meticulous, rule-book-abiding, every-parent’s-dream perfection. Driving keeps me sane — in control.

I reverse slowly, looking over my right shoulder. Ease down the brake, shift into drive, steady with the gas.

Around age five, I embarked on a complete fascination with cars. “The Car Craze,” as my dad dubbed it. Posters of shiny red Ferraris, Maseratis, and Porphes plastered once-empty walls of my small blue room in thick layers, their corners peeling, looking as though they pulled on the very structure of the room. Like it’d collapse.

I studied cars too, diligently. Memorized facts and statistics, prices and history. I’d work a car fact into every conversation with my dad. And he’d smile, his dimples showing through weathered, stubbly cheeks.

Eventually, I grew up and Car Craze stopped being cute. So the posters went down and I stopped studying facts, but my love of driving persisted. I go out too much. The car’s always missing.

Four-way intersection. Make a complete stop. No other cars. Smooth, hand-over-hand turn. The signal eagerly springs back up, ends its tick-tick-tick.

I wonder if my dad remembers me, pre-Car Craze. I certainly remember the shrimpy, brown-haired freckled boy, the five year old. He sits in the sandbox, legs crossed, with girls. He wants to invite girls over for playdates. He wants them at his party. He wants a tea party for his birthday, he declares, tugging on his dad’s sleeves, with princess decorations.

“Did we raise a boy or a girl?” the dad grumbles, in a tone clearly meant to be undetectable by young ears. The mom hushes him. The boy falls silent. Sees the magazine on the nightstand opened to a Toyota advertisement. Asks for a car party.

I like catching a yellow light at just the right time, and I do today. Just enough time to ease into a nice stop, be first in line, a good row behind me, a good row next to me.

Before I had my license, I walked to school every day. It was incredibly routine and incredibly boring. I thought of assignments, of presentations, of nothing. Stared down at my familiar untied black sneakers, the ones falling apart at the seams, black threads left behind on the pavement.

And some days, as I walked into the school parking lot, a car would pass by me, its driver a blonde boy with a too-big grin. He’d sing aloud to his music, shouting almost, make such sharp turns that I’d worry for the battered black jalopy he steered.

He drove recklessly, youthfully. I was fascinated.

I press on the gas a bit more, bringing my speed to the exact limit, feeling the pedal resist, pushing back on me. The roads are jammed; it’s 6 PM in suburbia. Postured trees line the road, their red-orange-green leaves evidence of autumn.

It seemed odd to me how quickly one could fall in love with a stranger.

I soon started noticing the boy around

school more — I’d see him in the halls, swear that he smiled at me.

One day I was hopelessly late to school, not even attempting a run to make it on time. I crossed the eerily still lot, every car tucked into its own place, sleeping. The black jalopy announced itself with blaring Top 40 hits, and as I snuck a glance with my peripheral I saw Big Grin rolling down his window.

“You’re late too?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m gonna skip first period. Wanna listen to music?”

Suddenly self-aware, I joined him in the car. He introduced himself as Jordan, a junior.

We were fast friends — he laughed at my preoccupations, my habits, my fastidious devotion to following rules; I could watch him for hours. He was alive, in a way no one else I knew was.

We first kissed in that car.

He leaned over to my seat. I tilted my head. And it was as if we were continuing, not starting a kiss; it was so natural and easy and pure. Jordan had never asked if I loved him, never hinted that he loved me. We just knew, and we didn’t tell a soul.

I’m almost there. My routine loop is near over. Pass by the dry, grassy hills in a smooth curve, a curve almost too sharp.

Jordan sent me a text that morning: “Love you, I’ll pick you up in a bit.”

He drove the almost too sharp curve, drove recklessly, youthfully, didn’t see the semi truck backing out, didn’t make it past the hills.

I clench the steering wheel tighter as I drive past. Cleared.

My parents didn’t understand why I was so torn apart over the loss of a classmate. So I quickly adjusted, just like I did when my five-year-old behavior was out of line. I only cried in the shower, the water an excuse for the wetness on my cheeks, the sound a mask for sobs. I smiled every day. I said “thank you for dinner” and “school’s going fine.”

We knew each other only half a year when it happened. Autumn. October 29, 12:23 PM. A year ago today.

I’m almost home. I’m weary from re-visiting these same, worn paths in my memory, from feeling the same way each time, that same pent-up guilt, the weight of concealment.

Turn, I instruct myself, into the driveway of your two-story yellow home. Pull in straight, line up with the neatly trimmed bushes, stop and park.

Pace to the door in those same black sneakers. Open it to the smell of spaghetti, wave hello to mom, marinara sauce stains on her blouse. Squeak your shoes to your room, the small blue room. Open the middle desk drawer, the one with the paper.

Tell them everything. Explain, raw, wounded, but honest. Finally honest. Choose the pen that he gave you and start.

Dear Mom and Dad:

On Driving. ■

## Ellen Sussman on “On Driving”

*I loved “On Driving”! The writer has a fresh voice, a willingness to take risks, and an ability to structure a story in an inventive and dramatic way.*



Lili Cao

FIRST PLACE: TEENS

# Bittersweet Notes

by Nicole Knauer

*After all these long, hard years of keeping my memories hidden, keeping my promise hidden, keeping my past hidden, I decided to write my story, a story that shares my joyful, early life, the tragedy that shaped my future, and honors the kind people who made me who I am.*

— John Wellington, 92 years old

I should probably begin with my first memory. I was sitting in the cozy lap of my father, enveloped in his large arms, sucking dreamily on a lollipop clasped in my tight fist. My mother's sweet-smelling coat was draped over my shoulders, and I glanced at her often to see her eyes closed, her long hair pulled back in a braid, with wisps outlining her face, as she nodded her head and slowly tapped her lean fingers against her thigh. In the background, notes smoothly flowed from a massive, black instrument. A man was playing the piano.

Late that night, my parents led me hand in hand back to our home embedded deep in the city of New

York. Located near Central Park, it steered clear of all the honking cars and shuffling crowds, yet within a ten-minute drive were concert halls and restaurants. I crawled into bed, my father tucked the blanket over my music note-patterned pajamas; and my mother leaned down to kiss my cool forehead. As I fell into slumber, I remembered the beautiful sound coming from the enormous black instrument.

I begged my parents for more opportunities to hear music concerts in town. On my fourth birthday, they bought for me a wonderfully crafted, rich-sounding piano. On cold winter nights, my dad would start the fire in our spacious living room and the orange light made our quarters glow. He would stand over my small figure, directing me to the right keys. My mother

stood, too, capturing my progress, though small, on her video camera. Class time was wasted on me. Impatiently, I stared at the clock, counting off minutes until the final bell released me. With school over, I sped down the hallways and out the door. My pleasure would be waiting at home.

My childhood hobby grew into a serious passion; as I matured, so did my skill on the piano. My parents always beamed when they heard me play, and my mother would dial my grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends, anyone who would listen to my expressive sound. My parents noted my talent and, one morning, they proudly announced that they had signed me up for a benefit concert later that afternoon. "It is for the physically disabled people of New York. Music is an

inspiring yet peaceful way to make them happy."

It was settled: for the first time, at the age of eleven, I would be performing before a large crowd. Well before the event I nervously pulled on the new tuxedo I would be wearing, my fingers shaking so hard that the shining buttons had to be done by my confident mom. "Son," she said, "smile, everything will be okay." She was mistaken.

I trudged outside, the cold biting at my cheeks and slithering down my back. Shivering, I climbed into the car and gloomily fastened my seatbelt. "Ready?" my dad asked, his sound cheerful and strong. "No," I muttered under my breath. Anxiety made me edgy and cranky. He started the engine anyway, and the car sped away through the fog. We passed through fields sprinkled

with flowers, then raced between tall buildings black against the sun. What we didn't pass was the auditorium in New York. We never got there.

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Dazed, I was awakened by a loud beeping. All white surrounded my body, and strange wires hooked through my arms and up my nose. A machine hung by my head, lines passing through the black monitor. Several times I blinked. Several times. Was this real? It was. When I tried to move, a sudden, sharp pang sliced my chest and legs, and a strange person rushed to me. "Shhhh," she comforted, laying her cold hand on my forehead. The throbbing subsided. I looked up, fearful of causing any sudden pain. As I later found out, I was in a hospital, rushed there by an ambulance. The only trace left of my parents was a single speck of blood on the corner of "Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata."

Two months later, after spending much time at the hospital on bed rest, I was allowed out of the dreary building and sent to my distant aunt and uncle, who lived



## SECOND PLACE: TEENS

# Escape to America

by Jacky Moore

**M**y mother shakes me, and I jerk awake. She whispers into my ear, her voice barely louder than the timid footsteps of a butterfly,

"We are going away. Take only what you need, and hurry. Tonight we are leaving for America." My three sisters and I look at one another, then we leap out of bed and try to find our special keepsakes and trinkets. Once everyone has found their prized possessions, we silently slip out of our house and into the night. All eight of us carry a few meager belongings: money, food, and a toy or blanket. Darkness smothers everything, and the moon is covered by clouds. I can barely see my own feet, and the silence is deafening. Sneaking along the quieter roads, we make our way to the beach. Stiff soldiers in dirt-caked uniforms patrol the streets at night, their beady eyes darting back and forth looking for curfew-breakers. Many times, we have to scuttle behind bushes or houses like ninjas. Most of the roads are not paved, so it is excruciatingly hard to keep quiet when we walk along gravelly paths. The tiny rocks crunch ominously in the utter silence and every step seems like it will alert the soldiers to our presence. No one utters a noise. Even my youngest siblings understood the gravity of our situation and stay silent. Should a soldier catch us, we could be killed, tortured, or severely punished. Consequences for our escape race through my head, each one more gruesome than the last. Slipping through a tiny thicket of palm trees, we catch sight of the boat. It's caked with barnacles and seaweed, and the hull is dented. The odor of rotting fish finds its way into my nostrils, and I sneeze. My mother turns around and cuffs me, hard, and I double over in pain. A dull ache presses itself into my cheek, and I can feel the right side of my face swell. Holding my cheek, I stay behind my sisters as we sprint to the fishing boat, spraying up clouds of sand and rocks.

Other escapees are already boarding the grimy fishing boat and paying for their passage. Mother and Father pass the owner a few coins, and he snatches it from them and begins counting the money. His yellow, bitten fin-

gernails slide over the money in a disgusting caress. Finally, he smiles, displaying two crooked, mud-colored teeth and spreads his arm towards the boat like a gentleman. We know better. Everyone, including the captain, trudges towards the boat and step on board. The floor rocks back and forth and my stomach immediately heaves. I grip the rail, trying to steady myself. Leaning heavily on the side of the boat, we walk to a hidden hatch on the filth-ridden floor and peer in. Vomit, feces, and rot waft up in a putrid cacophony of smells that have accumulated over months. It is dark and damp, and the tiny space is already nearly filled with twenty other escapees. All of us look the same: gaunt, coffee brown eyes, sun-baked twig limbs, and cropped black hair. My family and I find an empty corner and set down our things. I sleep next to my three sisters. The four of us have two blankets to share and the clothes on our backs. Mother has a few packages of rice and meat wrapped in banana leaves, but they will only be enough sustenance for a day or so. The captain unties the boat, and we are off. I curl up under the blanket, trying to ignore the rocking of the boat, and close my eyes.

When I wake up, the boat is pitching wildly. Everyone is shouting, and water has begun to seep in through tiny cracks in the bottom of the boat. All of the girls wail and scream, while the boys think of ways to survive if the boat sinks. The walls seem to tighten and compress all of us, and a small pool of fetid water has gathered next to my head. I feel like someone is banging on my skull with a hammer, and my stomach curls and bubbles. My body heaves, and I retch all over my sisters and myself. My father has managed to light a cheap cigarette, and the air becomes grey. Peering through the haze, I can see my sisters and the other escapees vomiting, and the horrible stench combines with cigarette smoke. Someone has gone to the bathroom in his pants, so everyone moans and curses him. Goosebumps ridge my arms

and legs, and my thin jacket is of no help. More water pours into the cabin, and now everyone is drenched. I despairingly lay my head down on my arm and try not to puke. The grooves on the wall are mesmerizing, and I will stare at them for days to come. I can hear my siblings bickering behind me like angry goslings, so I try to shut out the noise. All there is to do is sleep.

The days become weeks, which in turn melt into one another. We have passed security checkpoints many times, but no one suspects a simple fisherman of smuggling refugees out of a war-ridden country. The food storeroom is empty, so all of our stomachs ache terribly. Then, one day, we hear gunshots. Everyone freezes and angles their ears towards the ceiling. Rough, guttural voices order the captain to surrender all valuables. Pirates. Heavy footsteps march around the deck, and all of us below stay utterly motionless. I can't breathe, and I'm paralyzed. A boy sneezes, and it's all over. We can hear the crates being roughly kicked aside, and the hatch swings open with a loud creak. A hollow face peers into the darkness and smiles.

"Anything we can sell is now ours. Give us your valuables and your money," he orders. My mother inches behind my siblings and I and presses necklaces, bracelets, earrings, jewelry, and money into our hands. She tries to give her wedding ring to my sister, Lanh, but the pirate sees her moving and yells at her to stop. He strides toward us and points a gun at her face. "Hand it over," he says in Vietnamese, "I know you've got something." He holds out his hand for the ring, so I grab one of the bracelets my mother gave me to hide, thrust my hand behind my sister's back, and pull my hand back as if I had taken the jewelry from her. Revealing the bracelet, I drop it in the pirate's open palm. He collects the rest of the money from the other families and flings us a bag of rice the size of a pillow. Everyone scrambles towards the stained brown sack. My father gets there first and scoops out a

handful. He lifts up the white kernels for everyone to see, and we all cheer! Later, when we cook the rice and begin to eat, I realize that this is the first time in weeks that I have truly been full. My stomach as tight as a drum, I lie down, and, out of the corner of my eye, I see my sister Chau scratch her head. Tiny white lumps fall from her hair, which I instantly recognize. Lice.

"Chau has lice." All eyes immediately whip to her hair and begin sifting through her filthy locks. When the majority of the passengers realize this is true, they banish her to a corner of the boat. Chau curls into a ball like a roly poly and cries softly under a blanket, and I start to regret my sudden outburst. However, it is too late to console her, for I could get lice, so I simply whisper my apologies and pray that she accepts them. Satisfied, I nestle under a thin blanket and fall asleep.

When I awake, everything is normal again. People retch and relieve themselves, the baby cries, my siblings and I bicker and fight, and the growing stench of life below decks has all but extinguished all traces of fresh air. My legs frequently fall asleep, for there is no room to run and play. I can see my ribs jutting out from my twig-like torso, and I am always hungry. Then, we hear a shout from above decks that resonates in our ears and warms our bones.

"Land!" Cheering and laughing, we all dance and celebrate. Our clothes are rags, our feet are bare, and our bodies are unwashed, but we don't care. This is the time for a new life and a fresh start. We have survived pirates, war, and near starvation. Whatever comes our way has to be better than our past lives, right? ■

### Judges' Comments:

*The choice of details often makes or breaks a story. Here's a piece of fiction in which details are so terrifying, convincing, and brutal that they make the story and more. In spite of its tragic nature, the story ends on a hopeful note. It's like the sun coming out of a cloudy sky.*

far back in the country and were said to be kind and simple folk. I dressed and looked in the mirror. I smoothed back my hair, now overgrown and shaggy, and, yielding to a bad habit, bit off the ends of my nails, so they wouldn't click against the piano keys. "Not that I would probably need to worry about that in a long time," I muttered, doubting I'd encounter a piano any time soon. Shakily, I boarded the plane, carrying all my belongings, mostly sheets of music bundled in a heap, and sat down next to a burly man. Throughout the flight, I stared out the window, tears welling in my eyes as I saw the familiar city, which aroused memories of the life

with my parents, disappear.

Finally, the plane landed in a barren field full of black and white cows. I stood up, yawning and stretching my arms and legs to wake them up a little. Dodging past the line, I exhaled a sigh of relief as I left the airport. Having no way of knowing where my relatives would be or even what they looked like, I stood among the crowd, eyeing every stranger. In a few minutes, I heard a loud, braying voice drone "John!"

Wheeling in shock and confusion, I almost bumped into an extremely large lady. She wore a bright sundress, crisply ironed, and a battered hat shaped like a frying

pan topped her straight blond hair. She smiled at me, her blue eyes sparkling. Behind her cowered a small, anxious-looking man; all the hair that should have been on his head was in his bushy beard. He sent a crooked grin in my direction and uncertainly waved hello. I greeted them with curt politeness and introduced myself, giving my age, grade, and all the basics I thought they would be curious to know. Striding towards me, my aunt embraced me in her large arms and kissed me on top of my head before bellowing, "Come son! You must be starving. Our truck is parked right at that corner, and the drive to our farm is about an hour.

I put some nice, fat pork ribs in the oven; they should be done pretty soon." She took off, half dragging, half carrying me behind her towards the old truck. My uncle scurried behind us, keeping a safe distance from me as though I might suddenly turn and bite him.

On the long journey to my new home, I learned about my guardians. My aunt's name was Suzie, and she was a middle-aged woman who had graduated from culinary school at the age of 30. She was my mother's sister, and they had grown up together in the city. Realizing that the polluted air was too much for her, Suzie had moved to the

## Nicole Knauer



After Nicole Knauer's piano instructor gave her Felix Mendelssohn's "Venetian Gondola Song," she played the piece and thought up the idea for her story "Bittersweet Notes."

"It told a story," she said about her piece.

"Bittersweet Notes" tells the story of a boy whose love for playing the piano is briefly interrupted after losing his parents in a car accident, and how he regains his passion with the support of his aunt and uncle.

Knauer just sat at the computer and the story began unraveling, which she wrote over a couple of weeks, writing off and on during weekends and free time.

"I edited it and edited, and decided to enter," she said.

After winning last year's competition for the children's age group with her story "Nico," she thought of entering again this year, and said it was her family's encouragement that convinced her to try again.

Inspiration for a story about a boy who plays piano and overcomes a hardship came from a love for writing and playing piano with her own family, she said.

"I love writing," she said. "I meet with Anne Knight (a writing coach) once a week, I write stories for school, I keep a journal."

She wanted to make the characters unique and have them all come back full circle to the main character and his actions. The boy's aunt and uncle buy him a piano after he starts living with them, and he gets the opportunity to play in San Francisco, where he was meant to play during the night of the car accident.

"I wanted a message in the story," she said. "The boy pursues his passion, even through hardships. If you like something, you should pursue it." ■

— Rebecca Duran

### Judges' Comments:

*This young writer used a sophisticated fiction technique — framing — to create the perspective of an older, wiser person telling a tale of his younger self. The story is full of well-chosen detail, and it is compelling.*

(continued on page 51)

# Music for Life



FIRST PLACE: CHILDREN

## Music for Life

by Julie Meng

### Prologue

As a little boy, Charles was very talented in music. He could play the violin, viola, cello, double-bass, bassoon, oboe, flute, clarinet, trumpet, trombone, tuba, and every other instrument you can think of, but his favorite was the piano. He could play for several hours, never taking a break from his wonderful playing. He gave concerts every week and went to a special music school instead of going to a normal school. However, one day, something changed his life forever.

### Souls to Heaven

"Mom, are we almost there?" I asked. I was excited but nervous for my big concert at Carnegie Hall. I had won a competition there, and in several years, I was hoping to take the International Chopin Competition too.

"Almost Charlie. Are you wearing your gloves? You don't want your fingers to be cold, you know," my mother scolded as her stern face looked back at me in the mirror.

"Yes Mother," I sighed. Being a musical genius wasn't always easy, for I had no time for other things.

The only thing that I knew of was piano, but I had seen other kids my age laughing and tossing a football. Floating in my daydreams of being a normal kid, I didn't notice someone hovering by my face. I felt a stab of pain as a finger jabbed my secret pressure point that wasn't so secret to my younger cousin, Peter. I winced with pain, wondering what could be worse, for I had no idea that something would happen soon to me that would bring me even greater pain in my body, but especially my soul. "Stop it Peter!" I whirled around and snapped at my giggling cousin who was currently trying to poke me in the head again. Just then, I noticed the squealing sound of tires. I looked up and locked my eyes with the glazed ones of a drunk driver. I

screamed and yelled at Peter and my mom as the car got closer until it finally collided with my cousin's door as I sunk into an eternity of pain and darkness.

### Remembrance

"Charles," a faraway voice called. "Charles, wake up." The voice was sweet and gentle, but not like anyone's I knew. I struggled to open my eyes, but my eyelids were so heavy that it felt like someone had put rocks on my eyes. I groaned. My whole body was in agony.

"Charles!" a concerned voice stressed. "You must wake up now!"

But I don't want to wake up, I thought as I drifted away again, trying to replay what had happened, but it was all fuzzy. Instead, I found

myself looking up at a huge pair of double doors that said one word. Death. Peter appeared next to me.

"Bye Charles," he said. "Keep on playing. I'll be listening from above. It may be hard at first to play, but I know you can do it." And with that, he left me standing on a cloud as he shoved the door open and walked in.

I snapped my eyes open and tried to sit upright, but I couldn't. I tried to use my left hand to prop myself up, but a searing pain shot through my arm, causing me to flop back onto the bed like a fish out of water. I was about to give up and sleep when my eyes opened in horror as I realized why my arm hurt so much. All that was left was a stump where my left hand should have been. I gasped as my eyes rolled back in

my head and I was back in the dark, slipping in and out of consciousness.

When I awoke again, I felt a little better, but my head was still throbbing. I spotted a mirror in the corner of the room next to a vase of flowers. Looking at my reflection, I couldn't even tell it was me anymore. My left leg was propped up and in a cast, my left hand was missing, my right arm was in a sling, my neck was in a brace, and my head was bandaged. Black and purple bruises speckled my body. I was a cripple. At that moment, something dawned upon me.

Mom and Peter, I thought. I didn't even get the worst of it. What happened to them? With concern building up I cried, "Nurse, where is my mom? Where is my cousin? I want to see them now!" Tears were streaming down my cheeks now. "Where is my mom?" I sobbed. The nurse called to someone and they came rushing in. I didn't know who this strange man was. He smelled like sweat and blood.

"Charlie," the man said. "Don't call me that," I interrupted. "Call me Charles."



## SECOND PLACE: CHILDREN

## Journal of a Book

by Chloe Kim

## Day 1

"Scoot over!" the shabby book next to me whispers. Its pages are stained with some kind of brown liquid and its cover is ripped. "There's no room over here!"

I scoot all the way down the smooth birch-colored shelf and huddle against the wall on the other side. I try to make as much room on the shelf as I can between my shiny cover and the book's filthy ripped cover. I slump against the wall. I have only just gotten here at the library, and I hate it.

I miss the shiny books that stood tall in straight rows and columns at Benny's Books, the bookstore I used to live in. I miss the shiny black books with pure white letters on the cover. I remember once I got taken from the shelf where I belonged with all the other red books with shiny covers and crisp white pages with jet-black letters. I was taken to my own personal bookstand and a glass case was placed over my head and I got the honor of staring out the window and having people look at me as they past Benny's Books.

And here I was — in the library! The lowliest place for books. I had always dreamed of living in a bedroom on a shiny mahogany bookshelf, like the kind I had seen in Best Homes (Benny's favorite magazines), unopened, untouched, so I would shine and stay clean forever.

The only time I had ever seen a worn book was once when I caught a glimpse of an old dictionary poking out of a customer's black denim purse. But it wasn't nearly as old as the book that is lying on the shelf next to me.

"Okay, Charles. About your mom. She's in a coma right now, but she didn't get the worst of it. Peter is ... dead," the man said as his false melancholy appeared.

"Peter is dead?" I said, unbelieving, my voice barely a whisper. The man solemnly nodded his head.

A week later, Peter's funeral was held. I couldn't walk and was in a wheelchair pushed by a hospital employee, but at least I wasn't in a coma like my mom was. My dad had left us in the dust a few years ago, so I couldn't lose her too or else I would be left all alone. I didn't want to live with my self-conceited aunt permanently. I was lost in my thoughts and drowning in my tears when the ceremony ended. I remembered all the times he had annoyed me when he was still down here with me, but now all I remembered were the good times with regret, wishing I had enjoyed them more. Like the saying, you almost never fully appreciate a person until they're gone.

"I want to leave," I commanded. "Take me to see my mom." I couldn't bear to stay in this room cloaked with sorrow, but then

## Day 2

Great. What a horrible experience this library thing is turning out to be. Not that it was great in the first place. A little toddler's hand grabbed me and threw me on the ground. I am currently lying down on my back, on the floor, realizing that there are so many different shoe types. Sneakers, freakily high, high-heeled shoes, flip-flops, leather boots so high I can't see the tops, brightly colored high-tops. Oh, how I wish I could get back to Benny's Books where I belong.

## Day 3

Earlier this morning, some sweaty hand grabbed me by my table of contents page, which almost ripped, thanks to him, and stuck me in his canvas book bag.

It's really gross down here. There is a layer of dirt and a couple of empty candy wrappers. Finally, we (the bag and I) are dumped onto what I am guessing is a chair.

"Patrick and Danny!" someone who I think is a girl calls. "Nana says to stop watching TV and read some books or something!"

"It's summer vacation," a boy grumbles. "You don't read when it's summer vacation."

"Yeah," a younger-sounding boy squeals. "You watch teeelevision." Someone picks up the bag by the bottom and I tumble out. I hit a hardwood floor hard. Luckily, I've landed on my back and I can look up. The first thing I see is a little boy about

four with short brown hair and brown eyes. Then, I see a girl with blondish hair and brown eyes as well. She is about eight and she is carrying a book. An older boy I guess is nine reaches down and picks me up.

"The Adventures of Mr. Pieface?" the girl scoffs. She turns around and sits on a stool in front of a kitchen counter.

"Yeah!" the little boy cheers. He grabs the corner of my cover and runs around the kitchen.

"I'll read the story to you," offers the older boy.

"Yeah, Patrick!" cheers the little boy.

"It's kinda funny," Patrick says. I doubt he knows this. He hasn't even glanced at my first page.

## Day 4

Today, I have been returned to the library. I still long to be in the bookstore, sitting on a table or standing tall in a row with other red books. Nothing really eventful is happening at the moment, and I am taking a snooze. I doubt I'll get checked out today. The librarian hasn't even bothered to take me out of the book return box.

## Day 5

Today, a girl about seven with reddish brown hair and green eyes has grabbed me. She checks me out and walks me home in her hand — she hasn't bothered to bring a book bag.

After about ten minutes, she turns into a little cul-de-sac and knocks on the door of a two-story yellow house with thick

longed to hear music again, longed to hear my own music. Unfortunately, there were a couple of problems. First of all, the only instrument I could really play and liked and could be played with one hand at a time was piano, but my aunt didn't have one. Not to mention that all the songs I played required two hands, and I haven't found a song that is complete with only one hand. It would be okay if my mom was alive, but she was dead to me right now. I told myself that after I brought my mom back to life, I could try to become a normal kid, but for now, my duty was to find a way to play music.

I could never sleep at night, twisting and turning in my dreams, replaying the accident in my head again and again. Not to mention the painful stump on my left arm. But one night, I had a different dream. A dream with music I had never heard before. Music pulling me and soothing me. Music from heaven, it seemed. Music I just had to play. Something I could play because the left hand had only one note at a time, but it still sounded complete.

The next morning, I trudged

green grass and daisies growing all over the front yard. The only daisy-free area is a stepping stone path. The girl ignores the path and runs across the grass, stepping on daisies. Dangling from her hand, all I see is a blur of green and white.

When she gets to the door, her hands are full (the other hand carries a fistful of mints), so she holds her hand up and uses me to knock on the door. Ouch, ouch, ouch, ouch.

Finally, the door opens and a woman with auburn hair and green eyes says "Hi, Penelope!"

"Hi, Mommy," Penelope says.

"Put your things down and come to the table," Penelope's mom says. "Melanie and I made some lemonade pops." An older girl about ten that I'm guessing is Melanie comes over.

"Come and eat it while it's cold," Melanie says. "It's gonna melt in this hot summer sun."

Penelope dumps the mints and me on a coffee table and runs out of the room exclaiming, "I want the big one! NO! Not that one! I want the big one! Yeah!"

## Day 6

Penelope sits on the couch with me, laughing at the good parts in my story and constantly running over to Mary to show her the jokes. Mary is obviously getting really annoyed with her.

Mary is sitting in front of the computer on the opposite side of the room, writing an essay or something. Eventually, Penelope's mom comes over and asks Penelope if she wants to go to a friend's house. Penelope drops me on the carpet

(continued on page 50)

## Julie Meng



Julie Meng, who has never entered a writing contest before, wanted to include the piano and music in her story, "Music For Life," because of her love for playing.

In the story, a boy is in a car accident with his mom and cousin. He loses his left hand and his mom goes into a coma, but awakes when he plays her his recorded piano piece.

"I really love piano — I've been playing since I was 4-and-a-half," she said.

She was given the idea for the story after watching the YouTube videos "When you are hopeless, see it" and "Oscar Pistorius - 400m semifinal IAAF Daegu World Champs 2011." The first video depicts different clips of people overcoming physical disabilities and the second shows Pistorius, a double amputee competing in the world championships for track and field.

Since the first grade she has allotted time to write stories and has had a love for it.

Meng had a rough idea for the storyline and filled in the blanks once she started actually writing it.

The basic story is there for her, which she said comes easy to her because she reads a lot.

The hardest part for her was writing the beginning and ending because she wanted a beginning "that hooked the reader and an interesting ending."

She spent about four hours writing the story and three hours editing, rewording small details until she was satisfied with the beginning and ending.

"For me, books are like a portal to another world in your imagination, and once I get in that world, if I know point A and point B and one or two key points of a story, there is just a trail of thought that I just have to pour out before it goes away," she said. ■

— Rebecca Duran

## Judges' Comments:

*Very well written! And very sophisticated, too. The story is full of passion and emotion, not to mention tension. It's a tale of the triumph of art, in spite of all odds, and a good one.*

(continued on page 50)



## Journal of a book

(continued from page 49)

and runs over yelling, "Yeah! I do! I don't mind if Mary comes too! Please?" I lie on the carpet, wishing I could live in Benny's Books forever.

### Day 7

I got returned to the library today. The shabby book is gone (yay!) but some other book that has been checked out has returned.

This book's not bad though. He is pretty clean, only one of his pages has been taped back in and there is only one rip in his cover. He says his name is Elmer Green's Wooden Horse by Linda Meyers. He claims he has several awards. He has been pretty busy being checked out recently, so I kinda have to admit I think he's telling the truth. I don't like him that much though. He has several other more popular book friends like *Mixing Dreams* by Mira Peterson and *Cat by the Window* by Katie Nelson. He's so braggy anyway. I never said I was jealous.

### Day 8

Some kid came today and checked me out. She was just kinda sitting there in front of the bookshelf, staring at the wide assortment of children's books.

Elmer Green's *Wooden Horse* and *Cat by the Window* were goofing around and they apparently "accidentally" knocked me off the shelf. Ouch! I calculated that that was the third time in the past six days. I remember that in Benny's Books, Benny treated every one of us books with care.

The girl picks me up curiously. She has straight, shoulder-length brown hair and green eyes. She reads about me inside my cover and decides to keep me. She walks up to the librarian at the

counter where she slams me and three other books. Ouch! Really? That's the second time today.

"I am going on a vacation to Hawaii for two weeks. I know that usually books are due a week later but I won't be able to return these on time, so will you renew this ahead of time?" she asks.

"Sure, that's fine with me," the librarian replies. She turns to the computer, types something, and then says, "Okay, you can return your book in two and a half weeks."

I gulp. (Yes, books can gulp, somehow.) Great. I was going to Hawaii! For two and a half weeks! That means a thousand drops on the floor and being stuck in a suitcase for six hours. (I overheard Elmer Green's *Wooden Horse* talking to another book about how he went on a trip to Hawaii also.)

### Day 9

"Mom, do you have all my clothes?" The girl who checked me out the other day asks.

"Yeah, Kristi," Kristi's mom replies. "But I can't seem to find your other shirt."

"Which one?" Kristi asks as she gets up from the bed, grabbing me off her bed and putting me in her sparkly green backpack.

"The green one with black sequins," says her mom.

"Oh, I put it in there already." Kristi gestures toward the green canvas suitcase leaning on her bed.

"Okay we're all set then." Says her mom. She walks down the hall to a room farther down shouting, "Maya and Eric, stop arguing and finish packing! We're leaving!"

Kristi zips the backpack shut and the world goes dark inside the backpack.

"Hey, we're gonna be here for six hours, why not make friends?" says a cheerful voice.

"Friends?" I ask. I've never

had friends before. I didn't even think I needed one.

"Yeah," the voice says. "We can chat on the plane."

"Which book are you?" I ask. "I am Toothpaste Man by James Winters, but you can call me Tooth for short." Tooth says.

"Really?" I exclaim. "I am *The Adventures of Mr. Pieface* by James Winters as well, but I've never really thought of a nickname."

"Hmm... what about Pie?" Tooth suggests.

"Pie! I love it!" I say. "Where are the other two books?" I ask.

"They are in the suitcase," Tooth replies. "You'll meet them soon." We chat for the rest of the day. For once, I have forgotten about Benny's Books.

### Day 10

Today I have met all the other books. Turns out they are all by James Winters! I guess Kristi really likes his books. They're called Beano the Popcorn Lover and No No, Bo. Their nicknames are Beano and No No. They've all met before.

We are currently in a hotel room. This is so exciting! I get to sit on the mahogany bookshelf of my dreams! I am so, so, so, so, so, so, so excited! I sit on the mahogany bookshelf and smile and laugh and have sooo much fun.

Beano and No No nap on the shelf. (Tooth is being read and she goes everywhere with Kristi.) They don't get what's so great. But then again, they weren't the ones that lived in Benny's Books and dreamed of a mahogany bookshelf until they were evilly snatched off to live in the library.

### Day 11

Yay! Weee! This is so fun. I'm sitting on the shelf of my dreams!

### Day 12

This is wonderful!

### Day 13

This is fun!

### Day 14

Pretty fun! I still wish I could move around a bit.

### Day 15

Okay, this is getting a little boring.

### Day 16

Why did I ever want to be a new book in the first place? Suddenly, I realize that I have been having fun, traveling to different houses and meeting different people. I just have been feeling so down and sad I haven't realized how fun this has been.

### Day 17

Somebody! READ ME!

### Day 18

Bored, I watch Kristi. She is writing in her journal. Maya, Kristi's older sister, is packing a bag with inner tubes and sand toys. I guess they are going to the beach that I have been staring at for the last week on the shelf.

Maya pulls Tooth out of the bag. "Kristi," Maya says, dusting the sand off Tooth. "Are you done with this silly book yet?"

"Yeah," Kristi says, closing her journal and dropping it on top of the bed she is sitting on. Maya shoves Tooth on the shelf between Beano and I.

"Come and get a new book, Kristi," Maya advises. "We're spending the whole day at the beach and I recommend you grab a book just in case you get bored."

Kristi stands up and stretches. She walks around the bed and heads toward the bookshelf. She shoves Maya's thick, tiny--

lettered books to the other side of the shelf and stares at Beano, No No and I. I wait and hold my breath. Please pick me, please pick me, please pick me. Please, please, please. Kristi is staring at Beano. She reaches out to grab him. NO! Can't you see I am right here, bored to death? Kristi grabs me instead and throws me in the bag.

Ouch! I land on a hard plastic shovel. It hurts, but it beats sitting on that shelf all day. By far.

When we get to the beach, I watch Kristi and Maya's twin brother, Eric, kick sand at each other. Then Kristi joins Maya on the soft striped towel where I am lying. They read together.

A gentle breeze flips my pages and I hear seagulls call in the distance. This beats staring at black and gold books and watching Benny move books around. By far. I have friends now. Nice, wonderful, amazing friends.

I have had so many adventures. Whether it's going to Penelope's house or being flung around the house by a little kid and being returned the next day, it's always new. And, being a library book, I expect that I will have many more adventures. All of them new, all of them exciting.

I wonder why I ever wished to sit on a shelf, never opened, never used, just to appear pretty. I must've been crazy back then.

I might get dirty. I might get ripped. I might be dropped on the floor millions of times. But at least I'll know how to live a fulfilled life and have fun and adventures. ■

### Judges' Comments:

*It's risky to write from such an unusual point of view, but this young writer has pulled it off beautifully. The protagonist, a book, even learns a wonderful life lesson. The main character grows and changes in the course of the story.*

## Music for life

(continued from page 49)

no even with my condition. If I only had a piano.

### Roadblock

"Aunt Celestia, can you please take me to my house so I can play this piece on our piano?" I asked as I tried to act as nice as possible.

"Absolutely not!" Aunt Celestia snapped. "You are struggling to go up and about, and you are certainly in no condition to go play the piano. Anyway, you're missing your left hand!"

"But Aunt Celestia," I pleaded. "I mean what I said. Go to your room right now!" she commanded. I slowly walked with my head down back upstairs. But I wasn't going to give up. I formulated a plan in my head. No, I was going to play whether Aunt Celestia liked it or not.

### Nightfall

That night, I sneaked out with my music and a tape recorder and

crept to my house five blocks away. I prayed that I would find the spare key in its usual place. I staggered around in the dark, only guided by the moonlight. My hand felt a smooth but jagged piece of metal. Got it. I slid the key into the lock and the door swung open. My house had an eerie feel in the dark. It was so empty too. A chill went down my spine.

"I have to do this," I told myself. I stole my way over to the piano. Then, I took out a book light and clipped it to the music stand. I laid the music out and sat down. After turning on the tape recorder, I played. Each note filled me with emotion. I had never felt so joyful and melancholy at the same time in my life. When I finished, my head was in the clouds. I stopped the recorder and closed my eyes. I was still dreaming when the first rays of sunshine peeked through the curtains.

### Close Call

"Oh no!" I exclaimed. "I have to get back to the house before Aunt

Celestia notices that I'm gone!" I hastily grabbed the music and the tape recorder and rushed out the door, slamming it behind me. I dashed down the block and went through the gate and the garden up to the back door of the house. Luckily, Aunt Celestia must have gone out to run some errands because she wasn't home. I took the key out of my pocket and put the door in the lock. I slipped inside and stuck my music and the tape recorder in a drawer before eating breakfast. Right after I sat down with a bowl of cereal, Aunt Celestia drove up the driveway. She walked over and said,

"Let's go visit your mom after you finish eating, okay?" I just nodded.

### Dreamworld to Reality

Aunt Celestia took me to the hospital to see Mom. And this time, I brought the recording. I prayed that it would work, prayed that she would wake up. As we walked down the sterilized hallway, I began to doubt if she would wake up.

I would see in just a few moments. I took a deep breath of air that smelled of chemicals and opened the door.

She looked the same as before, but a little paler. Her breathing looked so artificial. She looked so peaceful, a little too peaceful. I went up to the bed and touched her.

"Mom, I promise that if this doesn't work, I'll try something else, but here I go," I murmured as I started the recording. Aunt Celestia gasped and sat down. I smiled nervously and knelt. My mom remained in her vegetative state for a while, but after a few minutes, she stirred. My eyes lit up with joy.

"Mom," I whispered. "Can you hear me? It's Charles." My mom groaned. Then, her eyes snapped open as she listened to the final notes of the dream music. I gazed into her eyes, the ones that told me of her joy. I gazed into her heart, the one that told me of her longing. I gazed into her soul, the one that told me of her love. I embraced her as tears of joy streamed down my

cheeks as well as my mom's, unlike the tears I shed before.

### Normal

My Aunt said she had never heard anything like my music. My mom said she woke up because of something pulling her and calling her to return. Something familiar yet unfamiliar. She was so curious about what it was, so she woke up. As simple as that. My mom saved her own life in a way. If she hadn't told me that music is the key to our lives, I wouldn't have thought of my plan. And if I hadn't thought of my plan, who knows what would have happened to my mom.

Now that she was out of her coma, I could have become normal. But I didn't. I wanted to keep playing. Fate didn't mean for me to be normal. I was meant to be special. Like Peter wanted me to be. Even though other kids may make fun of me, I know I am special and unique, and nothing can ever change that, not even a missing hand. ■



## Encounter

(continued from page 43)

man, scrapes him to the curb, and helps him to sit. Feeling only pity now, wanting to do everything possible, he kneels and talks to the man reassuringly, scans his hooded, pale face, ascertains he's not injured. The man asks for his coins, but Rob pulls out his wallet and a large bill. "This one's on me."

Licking his lips, smiling with soiled teeth, the man accepts it. "My lucky day."

Rob catches his breath and looks around. The big man is gone, the street empty again. Everything happened all at once and now it's all over. Even the dog is quiet, and everything is calm except Rob's heart. At the intersection ahead, the light changes.

"Do you have somewhere to go,"

Rob says, "for tonight?"

"Sure I do now, sure." The man dangles the bill.

"Can you walk there, on your own?"

"So, yeah." The man peeks around. "Used to patrol."

"But can you find your way?"

"Sure, sure, boss."

Rob studies the man's filmy eyes. "Tell me where you are."

"Buddied with you." He smiles again, nods. "Stayin' out the street."

"Tell me which one. Which street?"

"Well, chill, man. So, lemme zero in."

The man looks up and down the block, and so does Rob — who realizes that he himself can't remember, can't answer his own question right at the moment. Far away a siren wails. All Rob feels for a sec-

ond is this isn't where he usually lives.

Then the man says a street name and it's the right one, Rob knows. The man points at his cap in the street, Rob retrieves it, and then he does the easiest things — wishes the man well, watches him go, listens to the slippers as they fade.

Rob remains there, though, as if his hands had never left his pockets, as if he'd never moved at all. He's tired all of a sudden, almost numb. Remembering his nearby rented room, its bed, he feels as if they're somehow still a long walk away. And already he knows the one thing he'll never be able to forget about tonight: that terrible moment of being at the end of deciding, on the edge of his bearings, when someone else in him — a stranger, the person he would have become — was about to choose his fate. ■

## Bittersweet notes

(continued from page 47)

country upon marrying my uncle. He was an extremely timid farmer who had spent his whole life tilling the fields. From the age of nine, he helped his father at their small farm and now grew corn, potatoes, apples, and several other crops. The couple had met at one of my aunt's culinary travels on which she had cooked him a romantic supper. They married on the spot. Since then, they'd lived in their current home.

Feeling drowsy and sick from the long, windy drive, I began to yawn. No sooner had I closed my eyes, than the vehicle screeched to a sudden stop. I was jolted awake by the piercing barks and yelps of several dogs bounding up the drive and jumping into the truck, greeting us with slobbery licks. I undid my seatbelt and jumped out to survey my surroundings.

A broken-down farmhouse littered one corner of a wide, magnificent field. On the other side stood a roomy house, with a large, welcoming chimney. I sprinted up the steps after my relatives, and once inside their home, I stopped in awe. A cozy fire was crackling. Soft rugs covered the floor, and black-and-white photos decorated the walls. One thing was missing other than my parents: a piano.

Almost immediately, I started attending school in the morning and helping my uncle work the fields in the evening. My hands grew hard and calloused, and I kept imagining how angry my father would be. In the fields, my uncle and I worked side by side; neither of us said a word. In the beginning, I had tried starting conversations with him but soon realized it was hopeless. No matter the topic, he would give only a tight nod or small shake of his head. My aunt, though, I discovered, was warm and talkative, and I often found myself discussing many subjects with her over a warm batch of cookies or glass of milk. She sensed the longing in my eyes for my instrument when I would look at the pianist playing in the church we regularly attended. I sat quietly in the pew, my eyes

closed, as the notes floated in my soul.

---

Winter snow coated the porch and grass: my birthday arrived. Sleepily, I trudged down the stairs and bumped into a dark object. Suddenly awake, I blinked several times to be sure it was no dream. Yes, yes, yes! I could not contain my excitement. Racing through the hallway, I yelled "Auntie, Uncle! Thank you, thank you so much! I can't believe it!" They emerged from the kitchen, holding coffee mugs. Running back to the parlor, I undid the fallboard. There, stood the piano, challenging me to play. My fingers danced on the keyboard. The notes became a blur of black and white, and soon I was playing several pieces from memory, feeling all the emotions from so much pain evaporating beneath my hands. In the doorway, my aunt and uncle stood, dazed, astonished at the beautiful sound flowing from the piano.

From then on, I had a mission. I would come home from school and sit at the piano, practicing endlessly. More and more often I noticed the presence of my uncle silent in the shadows. He noted my progress and even spoke up at dinner to comment on my success. He enjoyed the compositions I played, their beauty, their elegance, their difficulty. Sometimes, he would give me suggestions on how I could improve. Usually, he was right. Glancing outside through my bedroom window, I could see him with a lamp in one hand and a book on piano composers in the other, totally absorbed. Soon, he sat in on my practices as my father had once done.

After many years, when hints of a mustache appeared on my face, I decided that this would be the year. I pulled out from the dusty drawer the sheet music, untouched since the accident and stared at it. Then I put on my tight tuxedo, and my new family and I climbed into the old truck and drove many hours to the place in New York where, several years ago, I was invited to perform.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to welcome you to our 50th benefit concert! Today we have

a special guest joining us, performing a composition dear to our hearts. I welcome John Wellington." I mounted the brightly lit stage and searched for my smiling aunt and uncle. They both waved to me confidently, my uncle especially vigorously, and I nervously walked to the shining black bench. I slid onto it, adjusted the smooth screws, and tested the pedals. In suspense, the audience waited. I lifted my arms and began.

I felt my mother and father behind me, cheering me on, helping me. My fingers trilled the high notes, evoking my old desire for life as it once was. Low notes mocked my inner voice droning on about common sense and how the past cannot be changed. Next, staccato notes teased me to give up. But there always followed the long, cushioned arpeggios, comfortable pillows on which I could lay all my troubles.

A thought struck me then, one I had never before realized. The piano was my connection to the world. It was like a diary. The notes were the words, my fingers the pen. Into my playing I poured all my emotions; the piano's reply was deep, helpful, confident, offering bright chords for my future.

I was ready to start a new life, but the piano also offered a link to the past, letting me see into my old life, plain and simple, and my new one, complex and hard, both happy.

Dear Reader,

*My story ends here, but do not fear, my life does not. As the judge foretold, I became an inspiration to young musicians, traveling to orphanages across the globe to perform and donate pianos so children bereft of parents can experience the thrill of expressing themselves on the massive instrument. For a few years more, I lived with my aunt and uncle before meeting my perfect other half; we now live with our two sons and a daughter. Despite having a million excuses to give up the instrument inextricably linked to tragedy, I chose to remember my parents' and my aunt and uncle's pride in hearing me play.*

— James Wellington, 92 years old ■

## Youth story judges



### 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 books, poetry and plays for young people and adults. Her newest play, "Bashert," based on real-life love stories, was produced last year. She is a member of the Pear Avenue Playwright Guild and Suburban Squirrel, a sketch comedy group. Her website is [www.carynyacowitz.com](http://www.carynyacowitz.com).

## Adult story judges



### Tom Parker

A well-known, local fiction-writing teacher and coach, memoirist, co-author and developmental editor, Tom Parker is an O. Henry Prize-winning short-story writer and author of the novels, "Anna, Ann, Annie" and "Small Business." His work has appeared in Harper's and has been reviewed in The New Yorker. He has taught at Stanford, the University of California, Berkeley, and Foothill and Canada community colleges. His website is [www.tomparkerwrites.com](http://www.tomparkerwrites.com).



### Ellen Sussman

Ellen Sussman is the author of three critically acclaimed books, "Dirty Words: A Literary Encyclopedia of Sex," "Bad Girls: 26 Writers Misbehave" and "On a Night Like This." She teaches writing classes at her home in Los Altos Hills. Her website is [www.ellensussman.com](http://www.ellensussman.com).



### Meg Waite Clayton

Meg Waite Clayton is the 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. Her fourth novel, "The Wednesday Daughters," will be released in 2013. Her essays and short stories have aired on public radio and appeared in newspapers, magazines and literary magazines. A graduate of the University of Michigan Law School, she lives with her family in Palo Alto. Her website is [www.megwaiteclayton.com](http://www.megwaiteclayton.com). ■

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### Palo Alto Weekly

\$500 1st Place: Marc Vincenti  
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THE TWENTY-SEVENTH ANNUAL  
PALO ALTO WEEKLY

# SHORT STORY CONTEST



## Short Story Top-Ten List

### Children

1. Julie Meng, "Music for Life"
2. Chloe Kim, "Journal of a Book"
3. Dori Filppu, "Into Their Dreams"

### Runners-up

- Emma Sloan, "Just Trust"
- Lauren Hodgson, "Tevil and the Flying Friend"
- Nisha McNeals, "My Friend, My Foe, My Sister"
- Sandhini Agarwal, "Vivian and the Wicked Witch"
- Helen Tian, "Final Farewell"
- Amrita Bhasin, "The Theft"
- Aaron Galper, "A Forgotten Life"

### Teen

1. Nicole Knauer, "Bittersweet Notes"
2. Jacky Moore, "Escape to America"
3. Caroline Bailey, "The Vanishing Box"

### Runners-up

- Shawna Chen, "Choice of a Lifetime"
- Mihir Borkar, "The Birch Tree"
- Rena Silverman, "Wolf or Man?"
- Nina Chandra, "Lion Hunt"
- Roark Sweidy Stata, "Never"
- Ariel Pan, "The Midnight Train"
- Grace Kuffner, "Winners at Last"

### Young Adult

1. Andrew Briggs, "First, Do No Harm"
2. Valerie Taylor, "On Driving"
3. Gemma Guo, "Paper Airplanes"

### Runners-up

- Ian Sears, "April Out East"
- Addie McNamara, "Bug's Life"
- Emily Katz, "Stargazing"
- Natalie Silverman, "A Taxi Man's Tale"
- Jack Brooks, "40,000"
- Rebecca Andrews, "Pane of Dreams"
- Caitlin Crosby, "How to Knit a Triangle"

### Adult

1. Marc Vincenti, "Encounter"
2. Barbara Evans, "The Painting Room"
3. Jane Moorman, "Captive-Bred Birds"

### Runners-up

- Maureen Simons, "The Cheese Club"
- Ateret Haselkorn, "White Elephant"
- Peter Stangel, "Bonding"
- Dann M. Wood, "How Rutriki Banished Death"
- Kevin Sharp, "Dear Marty"
- Rick Trushel, "Reading their Only Son"
- David Pablo Cohn, "Jaguar"

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