



One School, One Book

2025



The stories and poems in this
book are a selection of entries
from our Annual Writing
Competition.

DE LA SALLE COLLEGE

1st Year Winning Entry - Safwan Ahmed

Creative Writing

14.1.25

Friendship. Friendship is one of the most important things everyone needs. It helps you socialize and express your feelings to someone you can trust and engage with. Communication is one of the main abilities that you can possess, and to succeed in life, it helps you to stand up for yourself and that's what friends are for. There are different types of friendships such as online, long-distance, short-distance. Online friendships take on many various forms, you meet them in a video-game or a tele-communication app to interact with them. You can't trust anyone on the internet though, you don't know who is behind the screen or if they are even real. Online friendships should be taken in a detached manner, they're there to play, laugh and have fun with. Long-distance friendships are similar to online friendships, because think of it in this perspective. Imagine a close friend of yours moves to a new country and is never coming back. New timezone, new chapter in their life, new friends etc. You can't telecommunicate with them too much or too less depending on their timezone & life, so you still talk, but not as frequently. A short distance- friendship is when the person is close by you in any social gathering so you can have an interaction with them. Friendship is about sympathy, empathy, emotion, building trust, expressing your feelings and being your self.

2nd Year Winning Entry - Matthew Brophy

2143 - An Age of Apathy

Part One: The Fourth District

The grimy streets of the Fourth District blew dust and dirt at Darrin as he walked down to his apartment block. To his left the shimmering skyscrapers of the faraway First District came into full view over a recently collapsed apartment block. The buildings here had slowly begun to decay after sixty years without any maintenance. You were lucky to get electricity and running water most of the time. Digging through the rubble of the collapsed apartment block was an elderly woman, clearly trying to get at her valuables. She looked very weak, probably only living on one meal a day after the Pension Reduction Act. Darrin walked right on by, not even thinking to help her. Her clothes indicated she was formerly Fifth District scum, and if he wanted to keep his job and respect he wouldn't go near her. Compassion is a quality easily taken advantage of by others. Everyone knew that. Especially with those from a lower District. Few true friendships remained here in the Fourth District. In the Fifth District, they were rampant as money meant nothing due to the fact that nobody really had much of it. Penniless scum, Darrin thought.

He walked into his little studio apartment. The hum of the 1990s fridge met him first, and that gave him great joy. Electricity was functioning today. Next he checked the tap. Water did come out, but it was filthy - a greenish-brown colour. The filters mustn't have been working today. He sighed and sat down on the old couch. It was a comfy little thing, but holes had begun to appear on the fabric and the stuffing of the couch that poked through was incredibly itchy and said to give you a nasty rash if you lay on it for longer than ten minutes. He thought back to when he was a child. The couch his parents had had lasted about twenty years before they needed to replace it, and by that point he was already moved out and in his own place. But his couches only lasted about two years when he first moved in, and now he needed to replace them once a year. Some of his co-workers said they needed to replace it once every six months now, and the prices had almost doubled in the last five years. Alas, Friendly Furniture was the only company you could buy from for furniture. They owned all of the furniture factories in the Fourth District and most of the raw materials produced in the Fifth District, thus it was incredibly hard for competition to break through.

Darrin picked up the television remote and flicked it onto the news channel. He lay back on the couch in such a way as to avoid the bits of stuffing poking out, and listened to the broadcast. A woman was talking about the new taxation policy in the Fifth District, set forth by the Parliament four weeks ago. It hiked tax rates from 65% to 75%.

The broadcast moved through pictures of families being left on the street as they could no longer afford rent. "These families seem destined for a life in the Sixth District, working on the field and in the mines for the rest of their lives, for generation after generation, forever embroiled in slavery!", the woman boomed over the microphone. She had a British accent, and was evidently a Fourth District citizen too. "The Street Cleaners had these newly homeless families off the streets in less than 20 minutes, thanks to a boost in funding from the trillionaires of the First District. Amid the tax hikes, rent has also taken an upturn. Studio apartments are mainly housed by families, and two and three bedroom apartments now

have multiple families living within them. Again Fourth District News stresses the importance of saving your money at this time. Don't let it be you, ladies and gentlemen! Now, moving onto the Parliament Parade which will march through all districts, save the disgusting, filthy Sixth, Fifth and Fourth Districts and will end in the First District, where the new homeless people from the Fifth District will be sold as Sixth District sla-". Darrin turned off the television at the sound of a knock on the door.

He opened the door to Chris, his only friend. 'Hello, Chr-".His greeting was cut off by Chris putting his hand over his mouth and silently shushing him. He looked both ways down the corridor, like one would before crossing the road, and then stepped inside, locking the door behind him.

He began to talk in a hushed voice. Not whispering, but not talking as one normally would either. "Darrin, we need to talk about something. I... I am leaving the Fourth District.". He paused for a few seconds, but to Darrin it felt like minutes. Chris had been his only true friend.

"Tomorrow," Chris said. "I'm leaving tomorrow."

The words hung in the air for a few minutes, and the silence following them was somehow heavier. Darrin was stunned. Chris was moving up the districts, into the Third District. In order to move up a District, you needed to have enough money to pay to get in and stay there. It was the cost of a mortgage in the Fourth District, and in every other District. The different Districts had their own cultures and traditions and way of talking. Hell, some of the upper Districts had begun to develop newer languages to separate them from the 'ratlike pests' of the lower Districts. The Third District was the beginning of the top three Districts.

"How? The money required, Chris, you'd need, like, an entire life's worth of savings!", Darrin finally said, after around 10 seconds.

"I'm not going to the Third District, Darrin. I'm going to Varin.

"Wha-"

"Hush, now. Let me explain, Darrin. I was given.. you can't tell anyone about this, yeah?"

"Absolutely."

"I was given hush money. By the businessmen of the First District. I've discovered something, something terrible. There is a plan to turn the Fifth District into slavery District. They're going to expand the Sixth District, and keep expanding it until all of Thavin is embroiled in slavery, and select few, the ones at the very top currently, rule Thavin."

Darrin was stunned, but also was a bit apprehensive. "So, basically, you're saying that instead of, like, doing the obvious and **killing** you, they gave you money and a ticket to Varin.", Darrin said.

“Yes. But I'm not meant to be travelling to Varin. Turns out, a bunch from the Fourth District have discovered this. So they went and said that they have friends that know too, and that if they don't give everyone that knows money and a ticket to Rhavin, they'll tell the scum below them and trigger a small rebellion. Obviously not a successful rebellion, but nonetheless an annoyance. I have a business partner that told me, and so I was brought into this strange office on the border of the Third District and given my hush money and ride to Rhavin.”

“However, some of us weren't happy with this, including me. Some, like me, are sick of this unfair regi-”

“This isn't an **unfair** regime.” Darrin cut in. “You work your way up to the top. I just need to move one District up and then I can leave for Rhavin, and then who cares about anyone else?”

“Can I continue? So, I'm going to Varin as there's going to be an uprising there. We're gonna tear down the border walls, restore equality and end this regime.”

“Brilliant idea. Let there be a giant power vacuum embroiling three planets in a giant war for absolute control, and that's if you win, which you're going to try to do against the Fleet? Really? Take the hush money and go to Rhavin, you'll love it there. Used to be this big red hunk of rock, now it's meant to be absolutely bea-”

“We're going off topic here. It's not about whether or not we fail, it's about sending a message. Telling people these underlying feelings of frustration at this regime are shared among us. They've been manipulating us since the start. Every little unfair scandal discovered has been silenced with money. It's wrong. Everyone at the bottom wants to avoid being sucked down into the lower Districts while those at the top gouge more and more money out of them to get to the highest District possible. There's no help. There used to be no walls separating those of different wealths into Districts, just a free state, a mix. It's for equality, Darrin. Please come with me. This hellscape is no place to live.”

“Chris,” Darrin began, “You and I both know you have rejected this world since you were born. It's why you're **here** and your siblings are on Varin. But look, you want freedom, and what I see is a chance of attaining a better life, so I suppose I'll come with y-”

“Great. We leave tonight.”

Darrin tried to muster some form of protest, but only 10 minutes later they were out the door and into the night, with Chris' money at the ready so they could attain access to the Third District.

Part Two - Arrival at Varin

The Third District gate was not a pretty sight. A big hunk of red brick, barbed wire and metal made for an unpleasantly rusty feel to the surrounding areas of the gate. Chris was in front of Darrin, leading him towards the gate, and Darrin saw that in actuality, most of the 'gate' was just wall, plain and ominous blotting out the night sky. It must have been about 100 feet

tall. They were still at a fair distance from the wall, but already the streets began to fill with empty, abandoned houses, probably after the smell and infection caused by the rust began to set in.

As they approached a bush, now in view of the actual gate, Chris dragged Darrin down into it with a split-second reflex.

“Jesus Christ, man!”, Darrin hissed in a whispered voice.

“Look ahead” was the response.

At the gate were three guards standing over a horde of dead bodies, all with blood seeping out of various bullet wounds. The people were dressed in regular Fourth District attire, now stained with blood and in some cases an intestine. Likely a knife pulled by one of the guards. No words needed to be shared between the two, they knew what had happened. Everyone given the hush money was dead.

The two stood there, their faces a mix of horror and also despair. Chris knew he was being hunted, and that now more than ever he **must** get to Varin. He debated with himself whether it was fair to bring Darrin into all this, but he decided that they would know Darrin was his friend and hunt him too. He tapped Darrin's shoulder and pointed behind him. In a fast crawl they went back to the abandoned houses, and lodged there for the night.

The next morning Chris outlined his plan. To the west of the Fourth District were the factories, and one of those factories took in old ships to dismantle them for scrap metal. These ships were still functioning, but not nearly as well as the other ones. They would sneak to these factories that night and hijack one of the ships, and fly it to the planet of Varin. The Fleet wouldn't notice them as they were preparing for the parade the next day, a grand display of military and economic might done by the First District men in the Parliament. It went from the Third to First District, but avoided the bottom three entirely, especially the Sixth District. Not much in the top three Districts were meant to know about the Sixth District. It's why each District had its own news channel.

That night, they set off. It was a long, uneventful walk, but eventually they did make it to the factories. The lights were mostly off in this part of the Fourth District. The ship factory was incredibly tall, and quite hard to miss. They made it there and climbed through a gate, its bars were unusually wide. Chris had worked in this factory for a few months the prior year, and thus he was able to navigate the complex with relative ease. Darrin followed behind, still stunned he agreed to this. What he wanted more than ever was to return to his apartment and fall asleep in his own bed.

They finally got to the hangar where the yet-to-be dismantled ships were. A relatively small one was able to fit both of them, and then they discovered an issue. Chris had flown before in his childhood in the Second District, but these new controls were largely alien to him. They sat there for about a half hour, thinking, before Chris decided he'd rather die flying a plane than in a dirty Fourth District jail cell. Darrin wasn't a fan of the whole dying part, but nonetheless agreed. He was beginning to feel sick to his stomach with nerves. If they were caught, Chris would be able to just pay the police and get out, but he wouldn't be able to bail

Darrin out. Compassion was a taboo, something that wasn't really seen publicly. Businessmen infiltrated the Parliament years ago, and began to pay off judges and fix elections and set up the District system, and thus money became wholly important to everyone, greedy thoughts the only thoughts on people's minds.

Darrin had been 6 when his brother, then 10, was harvested by his father for organs so they wouldn't fall down to the Fourth District. Darrin had seen it as somewhat necessary at the time, but now, he was beginning to wake up and see the evils of the world. Justice would never be served to those people lying dead on the Third District gate. That's what they were fighting for.

The ship flew for six hours (the controls had turned out to be relatively simple, but a close call with a cargo shuttle almost ended their journey) and they arrived at the planet of Varin. Its thick, dense clouds blanketed all the heat in and thus the ground was a fiery hellscape, destroying every space probe and droid sent under the clouds. Thus, humanity had built 'sky towers', big giant things sticking out of the clouds. This had been after the Districts were established, thus the slaves were sent down with experimental armour to build everything. Of the 20,000 sent, 3 made it back, but they all died the next day.

The Fleet hadn't been an issue for them either. They hadn't seen one of the dreaded ships out in the cosmos. Once they neared Varin, formerly called Venus, Chris began to get the shuttle-ship ready for landing. One of the Rebels was in control of a landing bay, so they were able to land without any trouble from the guards. As they landed, a battalion of the Fleet flew overhead, reminding them of the danger they were in. Ominous black ships, they were some of the fastest in the world. The Fleet had been in operation for over 60 years, hunting down criminals and terrorists. The feared room 234 was their torture chamber, a place no prisoner that went in ever came out sane.

Darrin and Chris got out of the shuttle and looked out at the sky tower. This was the eighth of fifty built almost 65 years ago. It was absolutely massive, full of skyscrapers and glittering lights. Off to the distance they could just make out the giant enclosed bridges used to get from the different sky towers. Chris was reminded of his Second District childhood, and Darrin was utterly overwhelmed by the sight, but at the same time amazed. It was also quite windy, Chris' long black hair was blown all about, and he eventually decided to put it in a ponytail, though strands still hung over his freckled face. Darrin's shorter sandy hair managed to not annoy him too much, but occasionally the wind would fly into his ears and he wouldn't be able to hear a thing.

A man came over to them, a stern but cautious look on his face.

"You're Chris, I understand?", he spoke in a whispered voice, and after every few words would look around to see if anyone was watching. This arguably made him seem more suspicious, Darrin thought, but he kept that to himself.

"Yes.", Chris responded.

“Alright. My name's Shea, and I'm gonna take you to meet the Big Man. He's organised this whole thing, so treat him with some damn respect, will you? Last guy demanded a bunch of money and a high ranking position.”

He strode forward in a brisk walk (Chris and Darrin had to at times break into a small jog in order to keep up with him), and they went into the medium-sized office block left of the landing bay. The landing bay was relatively small, and seemingly very quiet - Chris and Darrin's shuttle-ship had been the only ship there.

They arrived at the Big Man's office.

“Shea?”, Darrin said.

“Yeah?”

“Who is the Big Man?”

“Only the leader of the rebellion you're about to pledge your life to.”

And with that, they went into the Big Man's office.

Part 3 - Preparations

The Big Man was a relatively large, burly man, He bore a white-haired mustache and a bald head.

He began to speak: “I'll ask you to keep your voices down. Eyes and ears everywhere. So, I presume you know what's happening. You're going to fight for us in the uprising tomorrow, which will hopefully blossom into a rebellion against this regime. I'd like to personally welcome you both to our army of about 5,000. I.. don't have much time today, so I'm going to outline the game plan at 11 tonight. It's 10 in the morning currently, so that gives you both about 13 hours to prep. Practice with guns, eat some fueling food, whatever. Just **be ready**. I apologise this can't be a longer meeting, but I just wanted to personally meet you, Chris. You took the hush money and your first thought was rebellion. You deserve credit for that.”

“Thank you, sir.”, Chris responded. “But, one question. Do you have a name, or are we to refer to you as the.. Big Man?”

“Jake. **Commander** Jake.”

“Well, alright then! Let's get going, shall we?”, Darrin cut in, green in the face.

Chris curtly nodded and they both left the office of Jake/Big Man.

Darrin excused himself to the bathroom and threw up the last 24 hours of food. His resting heart rate was now at about 80 beats per minute on Varin. They were going to fight in a battle. Darrin hadn't even held a gun before.

'Let's get to the shooting range, Chris. I-I nee-" and he threw up again.

The two ate some food at this lousy corner store then went to the Cowboys' Range. Chris paid for them to practice for about 4 hours with all the latest gun models. Darrin had surprisingly good aim with guns, despite not ever really using one before, and while Chris was rusty, he still had decent aim. They bought a pistol each for the uprising tomorrow, as per Darrin's suggestion, just in case the Rebels ran out of rifles.

After the four hours passed, they walked along the brilliantly clean streets of the Eighth Tower to look for a spot to eat. Darrin felt like a God at this point. Everyone that found out about their money would admire them, look up at them like some sort of higher being. One old man grovelled at his feet for money. There was some feeling in him, beginning to rise, a feeling of superiority, of supremacy to those around him, due to the money in Chris' pocket, that Chris had begun to share and give to him, and now half of the hush money was in his pocket. He was beginning to love that money.

Part 4 - The Eve of the Uprising After Chris and Darrin had bought a hotel room (they were immediately put in the presidential suite), Chris collapsed on his bed and began to go to sleep. Before he did, Darrin told Chris he wanted to see the sights for a little bit, and went off for an hour and a half by himself. He knew the location of his hotel well, considering it was the tallest building in the Eighth Tower. A haggard woman had come up to him, crying and desperate for money. She said she was smuggled on a cargo plane from the Fifth District. Darrin gave her petty change, and went on his way, grinning from ear to ear. He was enjoying this now.

Darrin returned to his hotel room half an hour before they were meant to meet up and collapsed on his bed. He fell asleep.

Darrin was shaken awake by Chris at about 6 in the morning.

"Darrin. We need to get the **hell** out of here."

"Why?"

"Th-the Commander, Commander Jake was killed last night. Some damn spy tipped the police off and now he's been found dead in his office. We're going ahead with this uprising without him, we've decided. We still have enough people. At 2pm the Parliamentary Parade marches its way through the Eighth Tower. We will attack, then, and claim the Eighth Tower as its own Republic."

"Until the Fleet comes and blows us all to hell, you mean?"

"I explained this to you back in the Fourth District, Darrin. It's about people realisi-"

"That their deep-rooted anger towards this **regime** is OK, and blah blah blah. Let's get ready for the uprising, **Shakespeare**." With a grin Chris began to get changed, and so did Darrin. By 12 they began to make their way towards the Shopping Area, where the Parade would march. A soldier called Gustavo

owned a shop on the street where the main cohort of the Parade would march and allowed the Rebels to use his upper windows. Not all of the Rebels would use Gustavo's shop, others were hiding in alleyways and around corners, and they all entered at different times, so as not to arouse suspicion. They were nearly there now.

The Shopping Area was brilliant, a huge block of neon lights, unique shops and hordes of customers. But today it was mostly empty, brimming with anticipation for the parade. Most of the crowd wasn't in this area, as the shop owners kicked up a fuss a few years ago, because some of the poor folk from the less well-kept towers were there. They rounded the corner onto the Main Street of the Shopping Area, where Gustavo's proud giant clothes shop was. The duo entered Gustavo's shop.

"Hey, Gustavo!", Chris said.

"The stairs are to the right."

The upstairs were crowded with Rebels, with the blinds drawn. Darrin was beginning to hear the thundering boom of the Parade beginning their way down Main Street. A pit was in his stomach. He had never been more nervous in his life.

Part 5 - Money, All-consuming As the parade made its way down the street, Rebels began to make their way out of shops and charged towards the military leaders being displayed. But the leaders seemed calm. The Rebels tore through the first layer of defensive troops with the second layer dispatched almost just as easily. Then a deafening roar sounded overhead. It was the sound of doom, of menace, the kind of sound that makes you cower, made you wish you were dead. It was the engines of the most feared battleships in history. The ones that were heard everywhere. The interplanetary terrors.

The Fleet had arrived.

"How did they know?!" Chris screamed, the bombs beginning to drop. Snipers from the windows of the opposite buildings killed all the Rebels that had begun to shoot out of windows. One of the Rebel bodies collapsed on Chris. A huge rush towards the downstairs began, but that soon became a rush towards the upstairs rooftops as the Fleet soldiers began to rush the buildings surrounding them. They were trapped.

Chris could barely breathe. Darrin pushed the body off Chris. Most people had cleared out to go upstairs, and they were on the fourth floor, so the Fleet had to clear out the bottom-most floors first.

Chris got up and picked up his rifle, and walked over to the stairs leading to the lower floors. It was there he would stand guard, to try and let the others escape. Darrin took his pistol out of its holster, and walked over behind Chris.

"I'd put that rifle down if I were you.", Darrin's voice lacked emotion, perfectly monotone, perfectly cold.

The Fleet were now just two floors below them.

'Huh?', Chris responded.

'You're trying to thwart a perfect system, Chris. It isn't right. Now **put the rifle down.**'

'D-Darrin?'

One shot flew into Chris' foot. He crumpled. A devilish grin grew across Darrin's face.

'Tomorrow, I will return to Thavin, Chris. I told a senior officer about these planned **escapades** of your uprising. The sum they offered me to bring you in alive was quite hefty. You're nothing but Fourth District scum to me now. A common beggar with no money and no respect.'

'Darrin, I explained this to you, this regime is unfair, it's discriminatory, it's evi-' Another shot hit Chris' hand .

'On my leisurely walk last night, Chris, I had to go attend some, ah, **errands**. Largely consisting of reporting your uprising to a senior officer, previously mentioned, and killing your beloved **Big Man.**'

'See, I don't really understand why you want to give this life up, Chris. We deserve this, after all. Good upstanding citizens. Hard workers. We **des-**'

'Darrin... I don't believe you.'

The Fleet had begun to make their way up the stairs to the floor they were on.

'The rebellion's over, Chris. Your money is **mine.**'

And with that he shot Chris in the arm again, handed him over to the Fleet, got his hefty sum of money, and took a business class ride back to the wonderful planet of Thavin on a beautiful shuttle-ship. A hundred years ago or so, it had been known as Earth.

Epilogue - The First District

Darrin sat down and flicked the TV on. He had been in the First District for the past month or so. The news began to play.

"And just today, the Fifth District has become a slavery District, and finally we are free of those wretched peoples. A plan has been unveiled to load the Fourth District with heavy taxes, to push them down into slavery and **finally** rid us of the filthy bottom Districts! Good riddance, I say! Now, moving on to the Parliamentary Parade, which has been postponed after the failed uprising on Varin..." Darrin chortled and ate his caviar.

THE END




Overall Winning Entry - Sophia Savchuk 3rd year

For most, the meaning of friendship differs. For some, it's loving somebody, for others it's the bond developed over time and shared experience. But to me, friendship is being there — actually being there — for the ones you love. And by that definition, I suppose I have failed. I suppose that makes me a terrible friend.

Every summer, my family and I would take time off and fly to Ukraine to visit my grandparents. They lived in a small, rural village, east of Zhytomyr, where life was simple, the air was fresh, and time moved just a little slower. We'd usually stay for around two or three weeks, depending on the work schedules of my parents. To an adult, it might not have seemed like much — as short as a blink of the eye. To ten year old me, though, those weeks were long and joyful, afternoons filled with lifetimes' worth. I gathered many memories there as treasure: sunshine days in the fields while helping my grandparents work, bread hot from the oven, and laughter that lingered in the air long after the sun set and we were left with a dark night sky, illuminated by millions of glittering stars.

It was then that I made friends — real ones. Real ones who spoke a different language but understood me better than children back at home ever did. There were some around my age, others three or four years older — most of them were my older brother's mates. There was a Sunday in 2021 when my dad took us to watch the football match between our village and another. The boys that played were around sixteen at the time. The whole village had come to cheer them on, and everyone was bubbling with excitement. I remember how they played as if the world were watching — hard, fierce, with hearts full of fire. I didn't know back then, but that game would be the last time I ever saw many of those boys. And now I find myself asking the question, how many of them even made it? With war breaking out, we stopped visiting.

My world shrank overnight. What was once a yearly trip had become a brief moment frozen in time — unreachable. As I stayed in the protection of another country, I watched helplessly as the events unfolded. I watched as villages were bombarded, buildings destroyed, praying that my village wouldn't be next, and faces and names without faces lost forever. I would search through out-of-focus videos for familiar faces, listen to foreign broadcasts hoping that I wouldn't recognize a single name. Because if I did, that would be the last time I would ever hear it. Gone like a passing gust of wind, never to be uncovered again. But there was nothing. And with the nothing, came guilt. Because I wasn't there. Because I'm here.



Because while they were digging trenches, I was scrolling through social media. While they were cowering in basements, I browsed playlists. While they probably — definitely — died, I breathed freely under peaceful skies. I couldn't be with them. Not even to say goodbye. Not even to know. And what kind of friend is that?

I convinced myself it wasn't my fault. That I'm only a child. That there was nothing I could have done. But that doesn't hush the aching. The reality is that I don't know who made it. I don't know who didn't. Those boys sprinting across the football field as if they were in combat — maybe they were just preparing for the real thing. Maybe some of them traded jerseys for uniforms. Maybe some of them just never got the opportunity to take them off.

That's the part that haunts me.

And still, I still think of them as my friends.

Even if I never see them again. Even if their names fade from village legend. Even if I only knew them for the summer or two. Friendship, I've found out, is not just about presence — it's the pain you feel when someone's gone, and the fragment of you who holds on to them in fierce memory anyway. I wasn't there when it mattered most, and perhaps that renders me a terrible friend. But I still care. I still remember. And perhaps — just perhaps — that's a form of being there too.



Transition Year Winning Entry - Andrew Madden

How Much I Love You ♥
-By Andrew Madden Ty

No matter how much pain I've taken
No matter the mental lows
Knowing I have you forsaken
Makes me handle all those blows

You hold me close when I need it most
I find the warmth in your arms
My sorrows melt away at an instant
When I know your love is felt.

The smell of your perfume
The touch of your skin
Your voice as soft as the clouds
Your empathy and your love

I think of this always
I think of that too
I remind this of just

How much I love you
XOXO



5th Year Winning Entry Bernardo De Castro Hogemann

And I'll miss you again

By Bernardo Hogemann (5th year)

I didn't even check to see if I had everything. The clothes were on me, my pockets felt right and the warmth – the blankets of murmurs from quiet conversations beyond the brown tiling and the lively: the silent bustle in the little kitchen, a couple long steps from me – they all pushed me to live, live and live. Then, I let it drown me for a moment.

I noticed the ornate mahogany bench, which I was half sure had some religious background from before I was born. It was in the corner, and a miniature nativity slept lazily on the sill on top of it. The bench itself had cushions on its seats, enough to not be discouraging.

I tried to guide my gaze along streams of light breaching in from an indecisive window, half-open, droning on to the little storage room just before the kitchen. This was where she kept little chocolate squares, now seeming so inconsequential, so fundamental, so precious. I remember the spaces of time we'd fill together. I remember the light in seeing her face, those walks to nowhere, and everywhere. She was my best friend.

I could see myself zooming past, doing the bend of the track (the star of this particular circuit) in the little blue plastic tricycle, around the mahogany bench and further, to jungles of smells in their bedroom and the other rooms.

Then I felt the draught coming in from the open room, out from beside the fridge which I heard my grandmother crack open for some butter. It died on over the decorated dining table. It had no one to admire its knitted scarves now, as it was morning. Still somehow, it felt full. There was the olive oil can still on it, sheathed in a familiar red and yellow label. Without a doubt, it was my grandfather's.

I was broken by time and heard myself shouting, "Be back soon", to my grandmother. Just then, I wished I had enough ignorance to go and hug her, but then again I realised I had to go. At this point, I didn't even remember why I had to, but I faintly knew so. She called after me, with the typical, beautiful, quiet comfort of her voice, that probably came from much pain. She loves me. I loved her too.

I didn't really think that then, not the way I do now at least. I went towards the door, matching the stares from dark, unlit rooms and felt the death of the television on the white

rack and I smiled, knowing the toys and scratchy jumping rope that lay inside of it, which my grandmother left there. I used it only once, but they were always there, with me.

I felt the chill air, travelling in from the gap below the wooden door. The talk had died down in the houses around and I looked up in front of me. Then I held my arm out and pushed, feeling the weight of the door push back.

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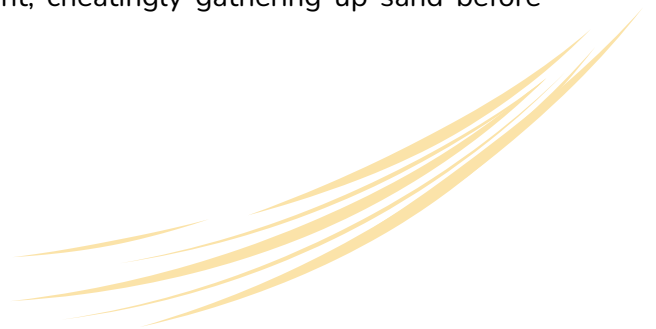
The brightness took me as soon as I opened the door. Behind me I still felt the warm embrace leaking from inside the house. It took me a long time to close the door.

I heard that satisfying 'click' of the lock and felt strange to be on my own. Confidence had evaporated off of me into the air, and the cold brought by it felt as if I was forgetting. For relief, I looked back, over at the vertical convex curves of glass panes around the door, searching for some notion of what happened before, and what will happen next. All I saw was that it wasn't dark, it was overcast.

The sky wondered with aberrated clouds journeying along glass oceans, and over waves the sky looked now a sunken blue. I turned and faced the start of the long stairs. They were out of place, probably the only thing coloured jade for miles. The sharpened edges of its steps led down out to the sand and dirt below, just before the gates of the square yard. It was barren. The little dog had died some time ago, there were tyre markings of that black car in the sand, and the woman who drove it was gone. They were all gone, really.

I didn't really think about this. I didn't know I knew this. The silence told me. Just then, the sun shone a little through gaps in valleys of clouds, down to the little raised verandah, and everything lit on fire, like fields of golden, dry grasses. All of a sudden, I was back to those sweet afternoons just after school, when the passionate heat was just cooling off and the air seemed weightless with whole worlds open. With my bag, I would sprint past blurs of the school – greys, whites and blues – to the open yard where she stood. Its walls were covered in tiling, but I was too rushed to care. I ran for my grandmother's hug which was engulfing, as if a sea of cool, loving blankets and I'd know everything would go right then.

The first step was hollow. It was uncertain. I was reaching for the makeshift marble bannister that ran along the stairs and left my hand on it. I heard shufflings from spiked leaves in the neighbour's as a slow wind dryly swept left to right, cheatingly gathering up sand before throwing it in my eyes.



I swiped and blinked it off, before me and my best friend from school, Matthew, would all walk together for some part of the long trip home. We would go, an infantry of four, him and his grandmother as one, trudging through cracked and busted cement paths. Me and him in front, swaying like carefree birds (he one too matching me), thinking and talking about everything, nothing and dreams. We passed the parking lot on the right. It was haunted by dust and a weird sense of absence, which never felt right to me. I saw the restaurant my mother took me to on rare occasions on the left, and remembered the bliss of being with her. Those minutes were years to us.

We reached the tapestry store, with a must of old and tang of new, it was a resting place before the confusing, breathtaking and incomprehensible nature of the intersection it opened up to. This was where we parted ways. It was always bittersweet. We could let go, because we knew the next day would come, and the next. But what if it didn't? What if we took the bus and never found our stop, winding back here over, and over? What if I loved him so much I could never find him again?

The distant rumblings of vehicles moving past outside the gate brought me back to dusk, desperate nights spent wondering and waiting. My parents would be out for the night, and there I would be on her bed, watching as bursts of hope, loss and longing flew by in the form of venomous snakes trailing headlights of cars until the right one came along. There was an ocean around me. In it, she would find me, and bring me up for air, till they came home again. I would smile and laugh at her jokes, tickles and kisses, and then my parents would arrive, and in their submarine, take me away from her ruins deep down in the sea. When I looked back, most of the stairs were done.

People were speaking outside, some birds chattered and the Sun stung. My hand began to feel the heat jumping off the bannister, not warm enough to force me off of it, but enough to warn me of what was to come. I was two steps from the ground now.

There was the pavement to the right, the road beside us was resting without so much a whisper. The trees sighed a little. There were cement houses built some time ago, and the dreams that built them permeated the air with a soft, gritting wind which passed by us momentarily, then faded away. Me and my grandmother walked, we walked to the last part of the way.

To our left was a snowy wall, with valleys of rising and caving bumps that seemed to go on for eternity. I held her hand. Her soft, strong, calloused hand that would never let me go unless told so. Our feet ached, the only thing driving us being the comfort of our own turf dampening our pain with worn, hard concrete. The dreams were quiet, some shivered by the houses. Some met me by my face at the last step.

But they were dwarfed by my grandmother's dreams. They wrapped around me, like arms safeguarding me in music, music that travelled through the air. We passed the side gates of the wall, which were closed, and talked: talked about so little. There were only our steps then. I enjoyed her silence. I made the most of it, because I knew it would end once we got home. I remembered my friend, my good friend, and felt the rancour of not flying with him then, and now, and there. The waiting, the longing, the being. Then I let go.

The bannister was scalding. My grandmother's hand wasn't on mine anymore. We walked, and walked, but never reached home. We just kept talking, walking.

The Sun was in my eyes,
I couldn't see her anymore.
I would never see us anymore.

It was so cold.

But I felt her in the air,
I felt him in the smells,
And I found them again.

So I went,
And I'll miss you again.



6th year Winning Entry - Carla Dimartino

A Friendship That Saves You

April 15 2075

It was a sunny day when Will left the house, stopping for a couple of seconds in his tracks to welcome the feeling of the sun on his skin since this was the first sunny day in a long time. The young boy with curly back hair and emerald eyes then took off, heading towards the supermarket to get the week's shopping done. Same street, same shopping back, same boy the only difference was the passing of time. He started this routine at 18, as soon as he had been able to leave the foster care system and live by himself in the small house in Bettles, Alaska that counted just 12 residents.

Life was peaceful and calm. No loud sounds at insane hours of day and night, no weird freak accidents and no strange neighbours (except Ted which was a little weird but harmless in the end). In such a small town making real close friends was hard. Yes, everybody knew each other but for William it never went beyond a little chat in aisles of the supermarket, on the streets or at the local bar on Fridays' evenings.

But something today was off. Something felt eerie, weird. The people on the streets, which usually were at least two or three running errands, were absent. The streets more empty than ever.

Empty except for one person walking towards him.

They seemed...lost, hollow. William inched closer to understand what was going on, who this person was. He had never seen them around so they must have come from a nearby city. Maybe they hitchhiked, maybe they got lost and needed help.

He inched closer, now just two feet from the person.

<<Hey are you okay? Are you hurt? Do you need any help>> he turned slightly around to point to the nearby clinic <<There is a small clinic over there. It's not the best but they could->> but before he could finish he was caught off, a sharp pain invading the arm that was holding the empty shopping bags which fell on the ground with a **TUD**.

Will immediately turned back around, his hand running to the bite now present on his arm. He was so confused. What had just happened? What

was going on? So many questions invaded his brain but before he could find an answer a crisp voice in his head put an end to them all.

“Run”

Without a second thought the young boy turned around and ran, the bags still on the floor while the person seemed to stand still, a grim smile on their face. A smile, a grim image the boy could still see in front of his very eyes as he entered, locked the door to his house and, from outside, heard a loud noise as if something or someone had just hit the ground.

April 16 2075

As the morning light pierced through the bedroom curtains, William slowly opened his eyes. The night had been long: never ending moments of blankly staring at the ceiling, the smile, that chilling smile, haunting the young boy; followed by brief moments of sleep interrupted by nightmares, that smile present in each one of them. After laying in bed for a while the boy slowly got up, a shooting pain in his arm after every movement he did. He looked down. The bite looked infected, puss and thick liquid whose color was more similar to black than red oozed out of it.

He had to figure out what was happening. He needed to understand why did that person bite him, why, while spending the day at home after the attack, he saw nobody else on the street. No one going for a walk. No one going out to get groceries or go shopping or go to the movies not like what usually takes place on a Saturday afternoon. No one even walking their dog. What was going on? Did they know something he didn't?

His brain continued to try formulating possible explanations just to, in the end, abandon them and, as that chaos clouded his mind and thoughts, a sound interrupted everything.

The doorbell had just rang. The boy looked at his arm, then at the glimpse of the empty street he could see from where he was and then at the door. Who could it be? Who would wanna expose themselves to this?

The doorbell rang again and as the noise grew louder and more persistent the boy slowly walked towards the door. He wasn't sure if this was a good idea, he wasn't even sure why he was doing it but something, something deep inside told him to. And so he did and as the door creaked open a visibly tired man's figure with red cheeks and appeared at the front door.

<<Who are you and what do you want>> demanded William, his gaze slowly studying the man in front of him.

<<I-I need help please they...they are all gone, all of them. I don't know where else to go>> <<Gone? What do you mean by gone?>> he demanded, not wanting to take any chance <<They were attacked, bitten and they...lost it. I don't know what's going on>> The person at the door lowered his gaze and in that moment he noticed the bite <<They got you too>> he whispered softly to himself William quickly covered his arm <<It's nothing. What happened to the people?>> The stranger seemed to hesitate <<Listen>> he said slowly <<It's a slow process. I know. I saw it. You...you are going to stop eating then you are going to stop drinking which will only make everything worse and then the fever will start until the disease gets to your head. You'll be unstable, some become aggressive and then...you will die>> Will took a couple of steps back. Dying? Just because of a bite? No,no,no this didn't make sense, the guy must have been lying but when he looked at him, his expression, his demeanor were...sincere. <<Listen, I have nowhere else to go and if you wanna have a chance at a slightly less painful death, you need a hand. We can try to find something to help and I'll take care of you>> Will stood in silence thinking, weighing the options and every time his brain tried to push the idea that the guy must have been some kind of thief or who knows what, there was something else, a voice in his head, that told him to take this leap of faith. And so he did. <<Okay but my house, my rules. Are we clear?>>

17 April 2075

The day after was, for Will, kind of a blurr. Moments of complete clarity like a nice breakfast cooked by the new tenant, conversations in which he came to know more like how his name was Michael, he came from a town just 8 kilometers away and how he loved poetry, paintings and nature followed by Will talking about how he grew up in the system for a great part of his life, he really like poetry as well and loved reading old classics; were followed by moments of loss in appetite, throwing up and difficulty in drinking.

There was only one thing that remained constant: Michael. Michael was there for the whole time. He fetched water and convinced Will that “just

another sip and you'll feel better" or he would grab a snack and attempt the same technique. He was there when Will started shouting and screaming at him, throwing the food and glasses on the ground. He was there to hold his head up when he threw up in order for him not to bang his forehead against the toilet seat. He was there to hold his hand when the crying fits started: remorse, guilt, fear all building up inside of him as his impending doom came closer and closer. He was there to tell him stories, to chat, to make jokes, anything he could think of to make the pain and the situation more bearable and he was there to clean his wound even when William refused because the pain was too much. He was there through it all. And as the two got closer William, for the first time, told Michael how, after his mother's death, he had tried to end it all, seeing no more meaning to this life and just wanting the pain to end. <<Do you think this is my fault?>> <<What do you mean?>> <<I played with death and got really close, do you think this is its way of punishing me for doing so?>> <<I don't think death holds any kind of resentment or anger towards. You were just tired and lost. It wasn't your fault>> <<Mhm>> commented William and a part of him found comfort in the boy's words as his gaze wandered to the stars he could see outside his window.

25 April 2075

William didn't know why or how but the person who was once just a stranger that knocked on his door was now taking care of him, experimenting with herbs and plants that helped but didn't cure him while William couldn't get up no matter how hard he tried, how hard he pushed himself he just couldn't, but Michael didn't seem to mind. He never complained, instead he cheered him on when he was able to perform even the simplest of tasks: drinking a full glass of water, going to the bathroom or eating. He listened to everything William had to say on the rare occasions in which he could manage to hold a full conversation and then cuddled him, hugged him tightly and consoled him saying that they will find a cure.

William didn't know how or why but maybe that didn't matter. Maybe understanding why we trust some people so much even if we have known them for such a short time it's not important. Maybe how they enter our lives isn't important. Maybe what matters, what is truly important is not those with which it's pleasant to spend the nice sunny days with but those who hold you tight during a storm and, despite it all, still tell you that everything is going to be okay. And Michael was just that. Facing a storm he didn't have so that William wouldn't have to do it alone.

26 April 2075

The day had started like any other except for one thing: the pain had gotten worse and now the two guys laid on the sofa, William squeezing the boy's hand while leaning on him, his teeth greeted and his eyes closed for the pain. <<It-it hurts so much>> <<I know but we will find a way I promise just hold on, okay?>> <<I can't>> <<Yes you can. You are stronger than you think and you are going to get through it>> <<Michael I...I think I'm dying>> <<No>> said the boy sternly, not letting the panic seep through <<Remember the story you told me? That time those bullies beat you up so bad you thought you weren't going to make it? It's just like that. You are going to beat this bully>> <<Michael I can't, I am too tired>> <<Then I'll lend you my strength, my health, anything you need>> <<Michael stop!>> The other boy grew quiet, watery eyes fixed on the friend <<You and me...we know I'm dying. It's the final stage there is-is nothing to do>> <<We could->> he tried one last time, a tear abandoning his eye. <<I prefer dying like...this with you by my side then alone while you-search for an impossible c-cure>> he gave him a faint smile <<Thank you for everything you did. Thank you>> he started, interrupted by a cough <<Please d-don't let them take you. Live.>> he said, his vision growing slowly more and more blurry <<Live for me...okay? Do...stupid things. Roll

down a hill. Dance in the rain. Watch the stupidest movies you can find>> he said a small sad laugh escaping both their mouths <<Find love, marry, have kids just like you always planned>> he carried on <<Give one of them my name maybe>> he joked, tears streaming down his face. <<William is a good name for a kid>> said Michael playing along. <<Yeah>> <<I love you>> <<I love you too, my friend>> he said trying to clutch his hand but failing as the strength abandoned him as the time passed <<See you on the other side>> It was at that moment that Michael spoke <<Oh William, you still haven't understood?>> he asked and upon receiving no answer he continued. <<You die, I die>> <<**I am you**>> And as William's eyes slowly closed while trying to make sense of those last words an old poem came back to him.

*"The same brian that tried to kill you
Will one day save you life"*

And with that William and Michael slowly slipped away, as death welcomed them as an old friend.

Carla Dimartino

