

## **Section II: Secondary**

### **Fiction**

## SILENT SONG

*James Murphy*

*Commonwealth Governor's School: Massaponax High School, 10*

Drought has ravaged the plains of this country. The earth cracks and crumbles under the feet of the souls brave enough to walk these barren fields. The lonesome riverbed ran dry months ago; the flow of mud has become a wind of dust. Dead grasses layer the prairie with a dusty mulch.

The sun begins to set. The glow casts an orange fire of desperation, but no flames ignite. Nothing stands taller than a blade of wilted grass. The plains are a land without shadows, without life. Soon, though, the greatest umbra of all descends upon these fields: night. The stars shine down, twinkling silently, as if playing a song without instruments. The toneless melody haunts listeners like a long-dry riverbed. The moon casts a gloomy light onto the plains, the river. Another inaudible tone, another voiceless melody.

Suddenly, the moon begins to flicker. A new tune begins to clash with the old melody. The moon becomes obscured—an instrument disappears from the symphony of silence. More clouds ominously slide across the sky and quell the music of the stars. With a blinding flash, a true song reverberates from a new band of thunderclouds and raindrops.

## INSANITY RAMPANT

*Victoria Angold*

### *Commonwealth Governor's School: Spotsylvania High School, 11*

Falean awoke to the sound of her alarm clock ringing. She rolled over, slapping at the snooze button. All she wanted to do was go back to sleep, but if she didn't wake up, she would be late for a seminar on ancient Egyptian history at a nearby college. She gave in to the annoying sound and sat up. The girl slipped out of bed and turned off the clock before getting herself ready for the seminar.

She took off down the stairs, nearly running into her father.

"Sorry Dad!" she called, grabbing some toast and sitting down at the table.

"What's the rush?" he asked, loping over to the other side of the furniture.

"I have that seminar today at the college, Dad."

Her mom walked out of the living room. "Honey, they rescheduled that for next weekend."

The girl blinked slowly, "Can I go back to bed then?"

Her parents grinned, and her mother replied, "Sorry, but no. And don't you remember looking at the college's calendar a few days ago?"

"Now I do," she said, shaking her head, "I feel like *such* a genius. What's the use of having a photographic memory if I can't remember things like that?"

Her father shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe you'll put that memory of yours to a good use one day. You do still want to be a historian, right?"

"Archaeologist, actually. I'm not entirely sure what I want to specialize in, but I know it will probably be overseas. I want to be digging up the really ancient stuff, not things that are only a few centuries old."

"Well, you're only sixteen. You still have two years before you go off to college. That's probably plenty of time."

Falean nodded and finished eating her toast. She knew her parents had to go to work, so she said goodbye to them as they rushed out the door and went upstairs.

She pulled a thick, leather bound tome off her crammed bookshelf. She opened the book and allowed herself to fall under the spell created by the flowing script and beautiful pictures. The volume was about the Fifteen Dimensions, one of which was called *Donum-Temporis*. It was a realm of magic with many different races and an amazing history. She had received the book as a young child, barely able to read, but she had learned quickly. It was an entire series written by a man named Strom; there was no last name. Her mother had wanted her to know about her

heritage.

When she finally tore her eyes away from the pages, she realized that it was two o'clock. She needed to eat lunch, or her mother would kill her for not "taking care of herself." Speaking of which, she needed to call her mom to let her know she was okay.

Afterwards, she sat on the bench in her window and thought about the colleges she was looking into. One was an all girls' school but had everything she wanted; however, all of her friends were guys. Another school had everything she wanted but was in the middle of a crowded city. She wanted something more rural. The college she really wanted to go to was halfway across the country. That was just a bit too far.

She sighed helplessly and looked out the window down to the street below.

And saw a man staring up at her.

She froze, her hair standing on end. He looked a bit less than six feet and had blonde hair with stubble across his lower jaw. She forced herself to relax. It was probably just a coincidence. No one could really see through her window from the sidewalk, especially the way the sun glared off the glass at this time of the day. Still, it was very unnerving, the way he just stood there, staring straight at her like he knew she was sitting right inside. Time seemed to wind down to a standstill as he appeared to realize something. The man grinned and waved before disappearing around the corner.

Falean swallowed and stood, instinctively going for the phone. She had to tell her parents what was going on. That man knew where she was when he couldn't have seen her. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and he was standing at an odd angle to the window anyway. Nobody could have seen her from there, even without the glare. Something strange was going on, and hopefully her parents would know at least a little bit about it.

She dialed her mom's cell phone number. Her dad was a detective, so he might have been in the middle of a case. It was the rule to call her mother before her father if she needed anything.

"Come on, Mom. Pick up the phone," she said softly, fingers tapping nervously against her desk. After two rings, the phone was answered and relief washed over her.

"Hello."

"Hey, Mom. I need to talk to you about something. Now. Are you busy?"

There was a pause, then, "The story can wait. I might be a journalist, but I'm a mother first. Falean, what's wrong?"

"There was this man, standing outside the house. He was looking straight up into the window like he knew I was in here, but I know there was no possible way he could have seen me. Then he just smiled up at

me and waved,” her voice dropped to a whisper, “He knew I was watching him, Mom. He knew.”

“What did he look like?” her mother asked. Her tone wasn’t just worried like it would normally be in this sort of situation. It was terrified.

“He was about...” The phone let out a loud beeping noise. “Mom? Mom, are you still there?”

Her heart sank, and she put down the phone. The cell site must have gone down. Her mother had service no matter where she went in Fredericksburg, Virginia, and that was the only place where she took stories for the local newspaper. She refused to go into areas where she had no cell phone service, since she wanted her daughter to be able to contact her.

Just as she set the phone down, it rang. It was probably her mom calling back. She picked it up and said, “Hello. Mom, is that you?”

There was an amused chuckle from whoever the caller was. “Uh, no. As you can tell, I’m not your mother, nor could I possibly be your mother.”

She almost dropped the phone at the sound of a man’s voice. “Wh...Who?”

“My name doesn’t concern you. I was the man who you were calling your mommy about, Falean Alexander. Oh, yes. I know who you are, I know where you are, and I know that you are all by yourself. That’s right girlie, I know nobody’s home. Your parents aren’t there to save you now.” There was a deranged laugh on the other end of the line. “And I’m coming to get you. Won’t that be fun?”

Falean looked around frantically for anything she could possibly use to defend herself, keeping the phone held against her ear. She could feel her heart forcing more blood into her limbs, the adrenaline rushing into her system. There had to be a way out of this; there was always a way out. She just had to find it.

She heard the front door splinter as it was forced open, and then the man spoke to her again through the phone, “You hear that? I’m coming for you. Better get ready! Barricade the doors, batten down the hatches, and all that good stuff.”

The man hung up the phone and stomped up the stairs. He didn’t seem to have any problem at all with being loud, and he was obviously insane. She had to find a way to fight him; her window was a straight ten-foot drop onto asphalt. Even if she did survive the fall, she wouldn’t be able to run or fight afterwards.

He was in the hallway now, and she ran to lock the door. Now what could she...ah, that might work.

The man grabbed the doorknob and snickered, “How cute. You locked the door.”

Falean stood on the opposite side of her bed, holding the old Native American stone knife she and her father had found three years ago. Of course, it wouldn't do her much good if he had a gun, but she could at least try.

He kicked her door open and she took a step back, brandishing the weapon in front of her. It was very sharp, sharp enough to prick your finger on if you weren't careful, but was it sharp enough?

The man looked perfectly amused by her stance, "Do you really think that little thing will hurt me? You aren't even holding it right. Besides, I'm not even armed," he spun around and lifted the back of his shirt to prove his point.

When Falean shrugged and didn't lower her knife, he leapt forward over the bed, landing in a roll. One of his feet snapped out and kicked the flint blade from her hands while the other swept under her and knocked her to the floor.

He reached down and yanked her roughly to a standing position. She wanted to scream, but her voice betrayed her, forcing her to give in to her fear. She just stood there, feeling the iciness of absolute horror freezing her in place.

The man reached out and pushed her long hair away from her face. "Not that I need the weapons anyway. Stop shaking, girlie, I'm not going to hurt you. My employer would skin me alive if I did. I would like to kill you, drink your soul, and be done with it, but they want me to bring you back alive. Unfortunately."

"Drink my soul?" she whispered, blood draining from her face.

"Don't tempt me. Of course, you have read about my kind. I'm sure your parents gave you copies of some books by a man named Strom. He wrote all about us." The man looked over to her bookshelf, and a book floated off the shelf to land in his beckoning hands. He flipped through the pages for a moment and stopped at one particular page, turning the tome so she could see.

She shook her head after reading the title of the chapter. "Impossible. That sort of stuff doesn't exist here anymore. Donum-Temporis was cut off from this world when Atlantis fell."

He raised an eyebrow, "Then how do you explain the telekinesis I just pulled off?"

"Probably an illusion, like the ones magicians use."

His ice blue eyes burned right into her, making her feel like he was staring into her very heart. "Then why are you so filled with doubt?"

The girl shook her head furiously, "You're insane. Those don't exist. Nothing Strom wrote about does."

The man sighed, "You'll understand soon enough."

He grabbed her arm and began pulling her out of her room. The

frosty feeling was becoming too much to bear. Suddenly she felt the iciness being replaced by liquid flame, scorching her veins and filling her with energy. Falean felt something dissolve in her mind, like a stone wall crumbling down. The energy was filling her, and she knew something bad would happen if it wasn't released. She knew that it couldn't be controlled, that the power had a mind of its own. The energy was tearing through her, and the girl was barely able to hold it. It just kept building, feeding off her fear. She stopped trying to control it when they reached the front door and let it hit the intruder head on.

The last thing she saw before her world fell into darkness was the man lying out in the street, smoke rolling off him as her parents' cars pulled into the driveway.

## A LITTLE LOVE STORY

*Alexis Ankerson*  
*Colonial Forge High School, 11*

Megan lounged in the chair attached to her desk, legs crossed, attempting to twirl her pencil over her fingers with a distracted sort of ambition. She slid her index finger over the bumpy foam grip and studied the contrast between the lime green and her white hand, which used to be tan before the pools closed in September. Now it was February.

February 14.

Valentine's Day.

Besides the fact that she didn't have a designated valentine, Megan was on the verge of a mental breakdown inspired by the endless red and black human checkerboard of clothing circulating the school hallway and classrooms. She was deeply aware of the fact that Valentine's Day was the only day out of the school year for girls her age to gloat about the fact that they were happily in a relationship. It was also the most acceptable day for people to complain incessantly about all the reasons why they were single. Single or taken, girls seemed to flock into one of those two predetermined cliques that existed exclusively on this particular day every year.

To make things easier for everyone, the female population of her high school had subconsciously devised the perfect system for recognizing exactly who belonged where on the Valentine social ladder. It revolved around the thing that all girls take pride in equally in high school: their wardrobe. It was the simplest of color codes, really, based on the most unoriginal and unprofound archetype. Red means you're taken. Black means you're celebrating the holiday with a remote control and a giant bowl of triple fudge chocolate ice cream.

Megan came to school in a ponytail and a baggy sweatshirt, the color of which reminded her of a fresh black eye. For the first time since school started, she brought her coffee into the building with her to keep her hands busy when she felt like ripping her hair out. She would've been happier carrying roses like the peppy cheerleader sitting directly across the room from her, but she wasn't pretty enough to get a last minute rose from a secret admirer. Neither was she flirty enough to pick up any of the cute guys in the halls on her way to first period.

She had received only one valentine card that day and that being from a cheerful girl whom she didn't know very well. The flimsy invitation to "Sizzle with love" was a garden variety square of stiff paper that the momma's girls still passed out to every kid in class, but the best of which was specifically inscribed to the cute, unapproachable boy in the corner.

Megan's lay forgotten in the recycling bin within two minutes, and she had already knocked back the fizzling Skittles with the last of her coffee, hardly resisting a grimace at the harsh combination.

Megan stared moodily at her work for the bulk of first period. Now she just had six more classes to endure before she could take advantage of the promised triple fudge ice cream that she knew her mom had stored in their freezer the day before. She could only hope that her other teachers would be more educationally oriented than Senora Frasier was.

Senora Frasier had winked at Megan at the beginning of class, an unexpected but unsurprising gesture given the teacher's normally eccentric nature. She proceeded to play Justin Bieber songs during class while the students composed love poems in Spanish. Megan usually liked her crazy Spanish teacher, who bombarded her pupils with what Meagan assumed was *each and every one* of her thoughts and feelings on whichever subject decided to pop up in conversation on a daily basis. As a result, the class hardly got anything productive done, which was not normally something for Megan to complain about, it being the ultimate goal of every high school student to avoid as much education as possible. But today she wished Senora Frasier was as lonely and single as some of her wallowing students. One more repetition of *Baby, Baby, Baby* and Megan was certain she would finally unwind.

Only five minutes remained when Senora Frasier called for the class's attention. "Announcements!" She yelled over her unproductive students' chattering. "Quiet everyone, I'm told today's announcements are very important." Her emphasis made it sound like the school news had decided to transition to 3D technology. Her overexcitement generally made the students less inclined to pay attention. Senora Frasier pranced over to the television set that hung in a corner over her desk. Her unchecked joviality frustrated and disturbed Megan, who counted down the seconds left in class with religious conviction.

The class quieted only slightly to avoid any punishment in the form of actual work for the next class. Megan forced her attention from the riveting face of the clock and focused on the TV, which cut from the familiar salt and pepper static to a picture of an empty hallway. Someone came from behind the camera and sat on a chair that Megan couldn't see because it was below the scope of the camera.

Megan smiled, recognizing her best friend of three years, John Samuels. "Hey everyone, in case you don't know me, I'm John Samuels," he said. Megan saw a flash nervousness in John's eye, but he swallowed his nervous emotions and soldiered through the next part of his speech with an expression of brave determination. "I've made this video because there's a girl who is really important to me, and I want to ask her out." *Well, that was straightforward.* Megan almost started beating her head

on her desk. If the day continued to be this sappy, she'd go home looking like an abuse victim from all the headbanging she was liable to do.

She'd had a crush on John since they met, but he always had another girl on his arm and never seemed to feel the same toward her. She had forced herself to avoid thinking of him as possibly being anything more than a friend after their first year as friends, but the attraction she felt for him never truly waned. To see him going all gooey-eyed for some chick was cute and romantic but in the way that made someone want to pinch themselves to make sure they weren't dreaming.

Megan thought it would be easy to block out the hundreds of doe-eyed lovers today after controlling her intense, adolescent feelings for John for so long; but as she watched the announcement, her depression and jealousy grew steadily worse. She couldn't imagine a worse punishment than watching the boy she could never have make a romantic gesture to someone else on the school announcements. What if she knew the girl? What if he asked out her best friend? Megan rested her head on her desk preparing herself for disappointment. John began speaking again.

"I've known you for years, but until recently, I never knew how much you meant to me. When I went to my grandmother's house for the summer, I realized that I wouldn't be able to talk to you for three months. I was sad, but over the course of the summer, I felt completely lost without you."

Megan lifted her head from the desk, smiling at the sincerity in John's expression. How could she be angry or jealous of the pure love she saw there? He had raged when he found out he had to go all summer with virtually no technology. The only contact they had was one static-filled conversation, once a month. He must have been saving his minutes for another girl too. That made her heart sink a little with guilt at the thought that their conversations had been somewhat of an obligation for him.

"When I got back, I wanted to hug you; more importantly, I wanted to kiss you. I admit I was surprised at the intensity of my feelings. I had hoped it was a phase that I would grow out of, but as the year moved along, those feelings stayed. I can no longer deny that I want more than friendship from you." *That* put goose bumps on Megan's arms. "Now that I've put my feelings out there, I suppose my next question is obvious." The John on screen paused briefly.

Senora Frasier's door opened and the real, skin and bone John walked into the classroom, carrying a bouquet of four white roses. Megan's jaw dropped. Then, realizing she looked like a floundering idiot, she snapped her jaw together, almost severing her tongue in two.

*No way.* She couldn't think after that. Or maybe there were so many thoughts in her head at once that she didn't know what to think. None of

them were clear or intelligible in the slightest sense. All she knew was that something *felt* right about this.

The TV John drew a deep breath and looked seriously into the camera lens. Megan moved her eyes from the screen to the real John—the John who was striding toward her.

He stopped in front of her and, as he asked the question, the TV echoed his words so that his voice was heard loud and clear over the now silent class.

“Megan, will you please go out with me?” John offered the roses to her, and the TV screen cut to the regular morning announcements. Senora Frasier turned the TV volume down so there was only a murmur above the blanket of dead silence that settled over the class.

Megan looked at Senora Frasier, who was checking her E-mail with a grin pasted over her face and obviously trying to appear ignorant of the situation. That explained the wink earlier. *Maybe*, Megan thought through the joy bubbling in her mind, *if the coffee kicked in sooner I would’ve caught on faster*. It was obvious now that John had asked Senora Frasier to make sure Megan saw the announcements.

The bell dismissing class rang, but no one moved. Finally, Megan fought to control an emotion that had her heart fluttering and her breath quickening. She could only nod at first, until she swallowed the lump in her throat and then she said, “Yes, absolutely.”

The class erupted in cheers and people finally started to leave, congratulating her on their way out. But Megan ignored them. John hugged her hard, a ridiculous smile plastered on his face; a smile that mirrored hers.

Two girls left the class weeping and clinging to each other. One girl had come to school prepared and offered the two weepers a pack of tissues, yet another girl stormed out in a foul mood. Megan realized she probably would have felt the same way as the moody girl had she been forced to watch the increasingly sentimental scene unfold. But a selfish part of her chose to ignore the way others might feel about Valentine’s Day and just absorb this moment for all it was worth.

*I’m his girlfriend!* She marveled at the thought that kept running through her brain. John finally stopped hugging her. He kept his ludicrous grin and used his thumb to wipe a tear from her cheek. “Why are you crying?” he asked, probably already knowing the answer but wanting to hear her say it.

“I don’t know. I guess I’m just really happy. I’ve liked you for a long time.” She hadn’t thought it was possible, but John’s grin widened even more.

“Me too,” was all he said. Then he kissed her.

## DESULTORY GAMBLE

*Lin Rudder*  
*Brentsville District High School, 11*

The amber liquid arcs beautifully from glass lips to swirl in my veteran tumbler. It seduces me with the ability to burn my throat and memories simultaneously. My flat flares with headlights, spinning past unconcerned by the whisky's neighbor, a .44 magnum.

A different light surprises my bare walls as my ringtone, a sad melody of Tetris, shrills from my cell phone beside the gun. My fingers drift toward the .44, its cold pressing against my skin. I grab the phone, pressing talk.

"Let me up," is all she says, disconnecting. I drain the glass, slide off the couch, and stumble towards the door. My phone slips from my grasp, bouncing once and sliding on the hardwood. The buzz on my intercom makes me wince. By the time she floats in, I've poured another glass.

She snatches a pillow from my bedroom and throws it down without a greeting. As her long skirt drapes over her legs, curled on the makeshift cushion, we face each other grimly, the table of vice between us. I drain another, and the room tilts.

"You're drunk," she says slowly, the words dripping with apathy.

"You're high," I counter, not quite as articulate.

"No," she smirks. "I'm clean." I raise an eyebrow.

"Since when?"

"Yesterday." I snort, rolling my eyes. I manage somehow to get my ass off the couch to grab another glass, slamming it before her.

"Then get drunk." She pours for us both, and clinking in a toast of self deprecation, we drink. She winces, but I've gone numb. When she doesn't move for another round, I turn my attention to the sweat on my palms and roll in my stomach.

"So... clean, huh?"

Her thick hair falls over one shoulder as she pulls up her shirt sleeve, rolling her arm to its underside. Ugly purplish black marks snake up her veins, complimented by fresh scars.

"So you found a new drug," I mutter, irritated. She lets the sleeve fall in place.

"Don't judge me. Let me see it." I look into her brown eyes, a cold enigma, and slide the gun across the table.

Pale fingers wrap around it using both hands, and it steadies at eye level. Her nose wrinkles ever so slightly, unfathomable. I watch, pressing the cold shot glass against my cheekbones like a focal point for my thoughts.

“Hard to believe it’s November seventeenth already,” she murmurs, setting the mag down gently.

“Do you have it?” I ask, closing my eyes. Even with all the lights out, the city seems too bright. I wish I’d closed the curtains. I hear a small revolving clink against the table and open my eyes. Heads up.

We’re quiet, the quarter and gun watching us impassively. Unsteadily, I reach for it. The metal holding my life is thin and warm from her pocket as it rests against my thumb and forefinger. “Tails, I die. Heads, we wait until next year,” I murmur, flipping it into the air. Our eyes watch it, trained by the tense room, until it clatters against the coffee table directly beside the gun. Heads.

I close my eyes, grabbing the quarter and pocketing it. “Happy birthday,” I mutter. She slowly releases her breath and grabs the handgun. It conceals easily in her purse as she stands. “See you.” As she hurries for the door, I notice the ring on her finger is gold, and I know it’s my brother’s. Her new ring has an unsympathetic diamond.

After she’s well gone, I slide the quarter from finger to finger, never letting it fall lest its sacred nature be corrupted. My brother was infamous for amusing kids at parties or always winning petty gambles. But six years ago on November 17, he flipped the quarter and bet on tails.

We’ve always played this game since then. It’s like a pre-holiday to start off Thanksgiving, which she always spends with her fiancé and I spend with a double-sided quarter that ruins lives.

**NO SE OLVIDE A LOS DESAPARECIDOS  
(DON'T FORGET THE DISAPPEARED)**

**Emily Goldfein**

**Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, 12**

February 2, 1977

Abuelita said, "Don't trust anyone."

Mamá slowly nodded in agreement, never taking her eyes off the gnocchi she was feverishly slicing from fresh dough, carefully plopping each little pill into the pot of boiling water; medicine for the aching mind.

I didn't respond to Abuelita, only nodded in unison with Mamá. I had heard that there was some trouble in the city, but we live a mile away, in the outskirts. There was no trouble for us.

"¿Entiendes? Bueno." Abuelita, with her shorn gray hair and plump face, patted my hand. "¡Ay dios mio, these fingernails! ¿Paula, you let *tu hija* get like this?" Mamá shrugged; she had never cared too much about her own appearance, either, with her hair in a permanent bun atop her head. We were very much mother and daughter with our button noses and coarse black hair.

And with that, Abuelita went to get a nail file, all the while muttering, "Ay, dios mío, that daughter of mine."

March 31, 1977

Papá came home from work in Buenos Aires early this afternoon, earlier than usual. "¿Por qué estás en la casa tan temprano?" Mamá asked him, fiddling with the frills of her apron. "It's not even four o'clock."

He ushered her into the bedroom and closed the door. Papá never came home so early, not even for a siesta. I decided to go to the kitchen and make maté for the family when I suddenly heard Papá's booming voice over the screech of the teakettle.

"¡Cálmate! We knew this would happen eventually. ¿Do you want what happened to Las Garcias to happen to *tu familia*? ¿Tu hija?"

Los Garcias? They were our neighbors many years ago when I was so young and still wearing pigtails. Their son, Fernando, used to play escondidas with me, but it was so easy to find him since he always hid in the same spot. But why was Papá mentioning them?

Mamá appeared in the kitchen, eyes pink and swollen from crying. "Ayúdame con la cena, chica."

I helped her with dinner without asking a single question.

April 5, 1977

The house looks the same when you walk in. There are still pots and pans hanging in the kitchen, the dusty couch still sits in the salon. Family photos hang somberly on the walls. But our bedrooms are empty, apart from the furniture. All the clothing and bags are in the family car. Abuelita is already buckled up in the passenger seat, quietly knitting a poncho while the rest of us finish packing.

Papá finally told me about Los Garcias. Señora Garcia had written to us, asking us to help her prove her husband's loyalty to the country. He had run into trouble with the government, and they had taken him away in the middle of the night. The last time she saw him was under a blanket of darkness and a thick cloud of tears. Now Fernando and *su madre* were playing *escondidas* again, but this time with the government.

May 2, 1977

We've been at our new house for almost a month now. Papá still has to commute into work in the city every day. Every night he tells us stories of the happenings there. "There are so many protests, so many angry people," he says. People have been disappearing left and right, and it seems like the more people protest, the more people disappear. Just two days ago, a coworker of Papá at the bank didn't show up to work, and when they called his house, his wife picked up the phone, hysterical. He had been taken in the middle of the night by men dressed all in black, men with guns. Rumor is the government is getting rid of people who are political rebels who don't support *el dictador*, Jorge Refael Videla. Papá fears they'll soon move away from the city and start venturing into *el campo* where we live.

May 27, 1977

Papá's younger brother, Andrés, *mi tío*, came to live with us. Mamá doesn't want him here, afraid he'll attract the cops like flies to rotten fruit. But Abuelita cried with joy to have her youngest son, her baby, where she could see him every day.

Tío Andrés is a burly man with a lopsided mustache and brutish eyebrows. He and Papá look nothing alike, but they are *hermanos por sangre*, brothers by blood, for sure. They have similar mannerisms, like how they both brush their fingers through their hair when stressed or how they'll scratch their noses when they are telling a lie.

But Andrés is different in so many ways. He is very interested in politics, always talking about the injustices of the dictatorship. I overheard

Mamá tell him that as long as he is in her household, he may not utter the words “*Los Monteneros*.” Her glare seemed to scald his face, as it became very red.

That evening, I asked Tío to tell me who *Los Monteneros* were. Tío told me they were revolutionaries, a proud people who wanted a better world. Sometimes, they were violent, but that’s because every now and then that was the only way to get attention. The government doesn’t like revolutionaries, he said.

June 1, 1977

Sure enough, the police came by our house. They traveled shrouded by darkness, their eyes piercing the black night. They came to ask if we knew the whereabouts of Señor Andrés Moreno. Papá said no, he had not seen him. His family was good, not affiliated with *Los Monteneros*. “*Viva Señor Videla*,” he said. He scratched his nose the whole time.

June 15, 1977

Tío was stupid. He went out in broad daylight, knowing full well the police were on the lookout for him. He said he only wanted to go to the post office, mail a letter to his girlfriend in the city. But the police, they have eyes like vultures. Last night, they came to our house, shouting at Mamá and Papá while Tío hid under my bed with bated breath. The police overturned the house and threw the furniture around until they found him. He met their eyes and shouted, “*¡Venceremos! We shall overcome!*” He shook as they dragged him out but not as much as Abuelita shook as she cried and cried...

July 1, 1993

I stand with the huddle of mothers, each holding a picture of their son or daughter, the one they last saw so many years ago. I hold a photo of Tío Andrés, his eyes gleaming underneath those bushy brows. We stand in front of La Casa Rosada in La Plaza de Mayo. Somewhere inside those great pink walls, the president sits behind his desk, indifferent to the fact that we stand here. And yet, we persist, every week standing in La Plaza de Mayo. Perhaps I am not a mother, but I will continue to stand here with Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo until we have answers. We will not forget our sons, our daughters, our uncles, *los desaparecidos*. We will not forget the disappeared.

## UNFULFILLED

### **Ryan Sargent** **Loudoun Valley High School, 12**

Biting his lip, Robert fumbled to open the packet. He always had trouble with those little foil covers, especially after he'd ballooned to 330 pounds. "I'm going to die on my goddamn kitchen floor," Robert thought, "because they can't come up with a better way to package this crap." His heartbeat grew slower and heavier, sweat poured down his forehead, and pain tore through his chest and arm, so Robert was pretty sure he was having another heart attack. Fortunately, his prescription was still good provided he could get it open in time.

Robert twitched, plunging painful metallic splinters into his thumb. He tore it savagely. Quickly, he downed two tablets and held onto his chair, fighting back the looming darkness. With eyelids glued shut and feet planted to the floor, Robert had no indication that time was passing except for the ticking of the clock in the hall. The wait seemed agonizingly endless. Finally, his heartbeat returned to a normal pace, and the pain slipped away. Exhausted, Robert managed to drag himself to the couch. He fell into a cloudy, disturbed sleep.

Fourteen hours later, Robert sat nervously in a hospital gown, waiting for the results of his cardiac MRI. At forty-nine years old, Robert was already very familiar with the peculiarities of the heart exam. He'd handled the bills, the decisions, the stress. His condition seemed almost a secret between his aorta and himself.

"This is what I get for growing up with a mother from Alabama," he thought, trying to inject some humor into the situation. "It's all that butter and gristle. Or maybe I shouldn't have gotten into advertising. With the stress and all." But no matter how he phrased it to himself, Robert was terrified. This was his third strike. And all he had to show for the game was a huge, empty shell of a man.

Robert quickly dressed and slipped out of the hospital before the nurse processed his paperwork.

The bank took some persuasion before he could withdraw all \$35,026.78 from his account, but Robert was finally left with his cash. The tough part was deciding what to do with it. Charity was out of the question. Even directly offering the money to any-old-face on the sidewalk seemed too quick. Too empty. Frustrated, Robert sought the cool sanctuary of a nearby bar.

This dingy and dim-lit place was a dive. Robert wasn't interested in a beer as much as an escape from the radiant streets. He was dripping with sweat only twenty minutes after leaving the bank. After a moment,

though, Robert noticed something slightly out of the ordinary. There was a woman, perhaps eight or nine years younger than he, wiping down a dingy table in the gloom of the back of the bar. Her ankle was bandaged, and though she was in her thirties, she carried herself as if she had lived for hundreds of years. With half an idea on his mind, Robert approached her end of the bar and squeezed into a stall.

"Damned heat," he muttered after a second, startling the woman.

"Mmm," she agreed with a half-hearted smile, returning her gaze to the furniture. After an awkward silence, Robert once again spoke.

"Pardon me...and don't be insulted, but, how...that is, what..."

"What's with the ankle?" the woman smirked, finally fixing on Robert's gaze.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Robert began, but once again he stopped short.

"Don't worry," the woman cut in, "It's just an old break that never healed."

As if the very mentioned pained her, she took a second to rub her foot.

"C...can't it be set? Or something...at least?" he asked.

"Sure, if I had an extra fifteen thou lying around!" she laughed.

Ashamed, Robert began stammering something but he was also secretly intrigued. Perhaps his hunch had been right. Maybe she was an honest, deserving woman.

"I...I'm sorry," he finally finished. With a sidelong glance at the pre-occupied bartender she slid into the opposite end of Robert's stall, smiling.

"You apologize too much," she laughed. "And by the way, my name's Amy." She daintily extended her hand and Robert gave it a tender shake. She seemed surprised for some reason, but didn't rise.

"Nice to meet you, Amy. You got any family?" Robert queried.

"Yeah. A kid at home. Mom's not too far," Amy replied. Robert's hopes rose. This seemed like the one. "And now I'm going to apologize. We need to get going or I'm going to get fired."

"I beg your pardon?" Robert was puzzled.

"Oh, I see, the foot confused you. No, you've got the right place. I can still do pretty much anything you want to. It'll be worth your while," Amy lustily whispered. It took Robert a second to mull over her words, but he finally got it. He got to his feet as fast as he could.

"I...I'm sorry," he stammered "I'm n...not interested in that kind of thing."

"Oh," Amy said lamely, her face slightly embarrassed. She was still looking at Robert when he walked past the bartender. But she had gone back to work by the time he reached the door.

Robert wandered into the city as the sun sank toward the horizon.

Somewhere in the hazy afternoon, he found himself in a crowd of people without realizing exactly how he had gotten there. When he took account of his surroundings, he was looking into the faces of perhaps four dozen dark-skinned people, faces all time-worn with work but eyes full of hope and gratitude. They looked toward not a well-assembled stage nor even a podium but simply toward a smiling man leaning on a stoop. He was well-dressed, well-groomed, and white as Robert had even seen, but somehow he didn't seem out of place. The crowd hung on his every word.

Nearly as soon as Robert arrived it was clear the speaker was ending, thanking the crowd. Robert decided to try again. He got in line behind well-wishers. Some simply shook the speaker's hand and dropped a donation in the nearby coffee can, but others talked with him at length about various local issues. When Robert finally reached the front, a small sign confirmed what he had slowly picked up on. It read, *City Councilman Edward Deacon asks you to donate to your neighborhood: give what you can.*

"Sorry to b...bother you Mr. Councilman," Robert apologized placing a hundred dollar bill in the can, "but I missed your speech. Any chance y...you might...uh, if you don't mind...give me the highlights?" Deacon's eyebrows were raised, but he was chuckling.

"I never turn down an opportunity to hear myself talk," he joked, "but I've got to finish meeting with my constituents first. Do you mind waiting for a while, Mr..."

"Robert. Just call me Robert."

"Will do, Robert. I'll see you in twenty."

Twenty minutes later Robert and Deacon strolled down the street together, engaged in one of the most refreshingly honest political discussions that Robert had ever had. Deacon had plans to revitalize Midtown as a haven for small businesses and middle class families; an urban suburb, he called it. The money he was collecting today was to go toward a community fund to pay back debt

"As you can see," Deacon gestured, "I'm very committed to open communication with my constituents. They've been used as pawns and casualties in the game far too long. I really want to give them a voice." He paused for a moment to take off his tie and wipe his brow. "This neighborhood has never really gotten its due, but it's a great place full of great people. If I gave them fifty years of my life it wouldn't be enough," he continued wistfully.

"I've had money from a successful business—and yet, I feel a connection with these people. I feel the disappointment in their minds, the hunger in their bellies, and the goodwill in their hearts. Every day I wake up and thank God that I have a chance to better their lives. And one day,

I'll better it in the Senate...and maybe even the White House." And this time, Robert observed, the fake smile was gone, replaced with a look of honest passion and ambition. Still, Robert couldn't resist a playful jab.

"Well, that's a bit premature, don't you think?" he joked. Deacon smiled back, but it was a thin and timorous one. Robert began to hastily recant, but before the words could get out, Deacon gestured toward a nearby market.

"Why don't you grab a drink on me, Robert? You look parched. I'll wait for you," he suggested. Robert examined the Deacon's hard eyes and agreed, if only to have a moment alone. He took the five that the councilman offered and headed into the store. Rummaging through the chilled racks of soda, Robert's mind ran raced. Maybe this wasn't the right guy...but the day was getting late. Who was? Maybe he was over-reacting. In fact, he was sure he was. Robert's hand finally settled on a can of Coke, and he headed for the cash register.

As he did, a scene outside the glass storefront caught his eye. A bum approached Deacon, asking for spare change or something. To Robert's shock, the councilman refused and slowly backed off from the poor man, clearly uncomfortable. Before he'd received the change, Robert stormed outside, gave the bum a twenty, and began to walk as far as possible from Edward Deacon.

Robert knew his time was disappearing with the sun. When the moon faded into view, he began to feel stabbing pains in his chest. As the streetlamps came on, a sip of Coke left droplets of blood on the lip of the can. His eyes settled on the crimson rivulets. "Like an old balloon," he murmured, "I'm emptied out before I'm done with." He might have felt sad if he wasn't more determined than ever.

Suddenly, a shot echoed. Thoughtlessly, almost as if he had been jogging there in the first place, Robert rushed around the corner to an alley. He found a disturbing scene. Four teenagers—some as young as 13—had grabbed a very young boy, no older than seven and shaven-headed.

"X him," one teen suggested, and all shouted their agreement. Looking around, Robert found that no one had seen him. When the leader pulled out a knife, Robert knew he had to act.

"Everybody gonna know what you did," the wielder threatened just before his compatriot shouted a warning at Robert's arrival. The youngest teen ran, but the other three threw themselves at the big man.

Robert knew he would lose early on. He managed to knock the knife away from the leader, but the three didn't need any weapons to do their damage. Robert was knocked over quickly, and with three swift blows, struck in the chest, crotch, and jaw. Fighting to stay conscious, he barely noticed one of them digging into his pockets, finding the tens of thou-

sands Robert had so preciously guarded.

"The fat cracker's loaded!" he shouted, and the others quickly turned their attention to scooping up handfuls of cash. Robert could barely squeak a protest, but the mocking, giddy thieves paid absolutely no attention.

"C'mon," the leader protested once they had found all the money, "We gotta get out before the cops show!" And in a despairing moment, they were gone.

Robert couldn't get up. It was over. He just lay there, eyes squeezed shut in the wet filth of the alleyway, thinking of the millions of things he should and would and could have done. He was interrupted from his reverie of pity by the poke of a tiny finger.

'Scuze me," said a child's voice. He looked into the face of the small boy from before; his big brown eyes looked at Robert. "They dropped one," said the boy, as Robert sat up, and then he brandished a damp hundred dollar bill. "It's yours, ain't it, mister?"

Robert gave the child the most genuine smile of his life. "You keep it," he said congenially. "Just make sure you think real good about what you do with it, okay?" The child smiled back and nodded before running out into the street and into a dingy but homey-looking apartment building. Robert Forrester took a long look at that building, dragged himself up, and started to walk.

## UNTIL I ENTER

**Albert Tholen**

**Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, 12**

It starts with the shaking. First I shake my arms, then my legs. I let my head drop, releasing all tension in my neck. My entire body is moving, bouncing back and forth, pressure switching from foot to foot. I breathe slowly and deeply, trying to expel the nervousness building in me, and my eyelids droop.

I have to do this weird little dance in the corner of the black-box theater, showing off my little warm up to the entire acting class while I wait to enter. On stage, my scene partner has already begun his activity, bouncing a rubber lacrosse ball up against the wall. He will continue throwing the lacrosse ball until I enter.

I clear my mind. When it is as relaxed as my body, I think, *My mother is dead*. I take that thought—my reason to enter the scene—and swallow it. I swallow the memories of a stale hospital room, my weak mother lying in bed being pushed out by a doctor. I can feel them sliding down my throat in a big ball. I live each of these moments as I clump them together. I see them all as if they were happening before me. I smell them too and feel them. The entire sensory experience envelops me; everything around me fades away. The ball reaches my chest. Determined to succeed this time, I shake even harder. I relax my abs, letting the memories and impulses sink deeper into my body. My put my hand on my stomach, shaking it as well. Finally, the clump settles in my core, deep in my belly.

I turn to face the stage. I see my partner by the opposite wall, kneeling over something. He is my little brother, we are in our attic, and it is the late afternoon. I swallow these things too.

I can feel the ball's weight like a rock in my stomach. Just thinking about it makes my throat clench up. It takes all the effort in the world to walk up the last step into our attic, dusty and warm, cluttered with the past. The bright summer light pours in. My brother looks up from the cardboard box he is digging through. He doesn't know about Mom. In one hand he has a lacrosse ball; in the other, an old framed photograph.

The scene quickly accelerates. Our argument starts when he tries to ignore me. I had to tell him about mom, but he didn't want to listen. I clamp my hand down on his shoulder. He turns, furious, and shoves me into the wall. A sharp pain stabs into my right shoulder blade and sends a shock across my body. My eyes get cloudy with red. I can barely feel the rock down there in my stomach anymore; my head is pounding with thick, hot blood. He bounds back and raises the lacrosse ball in his

hand, threatening. He throws the ball as I charge him, but it crashes into something behind me. I roar. Before I know it, my arm is in the air, my fist aimed for my brother's face.

"Stop!" my instructor yells.

I take a deep breath, dropping my arm. Suddenly, I was back in my acting class, staring into the eyes of the audience, my classmates. I can feel the fury draining out of me, leaking through my shoes and into the floor. The attic backdrop surrounding me had fallen and left only the barren theater walls and the bright stage lights in its place. I am shivering, the jitters caused by the adrenaline still pumping through my veins. My scene partner, my "brother," and I looked at each other, the glint of exhilaration in our eyes. We both had been fully "in the moment," our goal since we first walked through the doors of this black-box theater six weeks ago.

"Again," my instructor says.

I return to my corner by the side of the stage and once again begin my warm-up ritual. I'm excited now, not nervous. This time, though, I chose a completely different reason to enter the scene: My parents just bought my brother and me a new keyboard, the one we'd both wanted. Swallowing the ball is much easier this time, and I quickly turn and bound over to my brother, beaming.

## ONE BOX OF GOLDFISH

*Dana Wood*  
*Loudoun Valley High School, 12*

I find him sitting on the rock in the clearing he'd showed me two years before, when he'd decided contributing a location to our neighborhood Halloween party was worth revealing his secret hideout.

I climb over it and sit down next to him. He barely moves.

"Hey Chris," I say. "What's up?"

"Did my mom send you?" he asks bluntly, killing any chance at approaching this casually.

"No," I reply honestly, reaching for my cell phone. "Well, she told me what you were doing, but I came on my own."

He tenses when I bring it out, but relaxes when I power it down and put it away.

Eleven seems to me a weird age to run away. Younger than that, I could see it happening; everyone's experienced or heard the story of toddlers who have a fit and decide to run away "and join the circus." They pack up their favorite toys and a snack in the iconic bandana-tied-to-a-stick that they've seen on all their cartoons. Often they don't even reach the street corner before they sit down, and Mom or someone is always there. Sixteen, yeah, I understand that pretty well. Anywhere in that age range you can feel rebellious and invincible enough to "make it on your own." But at eleven, you're either finally the top dog in elementary school or staring middle school in the face. You're too excited or too scared to want to ditch Mom and Dad because your life is moving somewhere in the world you've never been before.

Something taps my arm. He has a box of Goldfish crackers, and he's offering me some. I thank him and toss a few back.

"So," I say after a few minutes of quiet munching, "what else did you bring with you?"

"What?" he says blankly, still not looking at me.

"Your supplies for running away. You bring a suitcase?"

He shakes his head.

"Did you bring any money?"

It's another "no."

"What about food, or water?"

He fails to keep from glancing at the half-empty box between us.

"So this is it?" I confirm, rattling the contents. "One box of Goldfish?"

"Yep," he admits at last, beginning to swing his feet against our seat. "That's all I got."

"You didn't plan this like an escape," I say thoughtfully. "I think you just came here to cool down."

"No!" he says firmly, getting up. "I'm really running away. And no one, not you, Abby, or my mom can stop me!"

Abby is his little sister. She's almost four years old. She was on the front porch when I left his house, with a book he was supposed to read to her before dinner, watching her mother call all his friends and debate calling the police. Her usually neat make-up was smeared over her eyes or on the crisp sleeve she'd used to wipe them.

"Sure, I can't stop you. But where will you go?"

"I can go to my Dad's."

Ah. I think I've found the crux of it. "Did something happen today, between you and your mom?"

He doesn't respond, and I guess I've got to play my trump card. "Here," I suggest, motioning for him to return to the rock, "Why don't you sit down and tell me why you're leaving."

Chris ignores me.

"If you do," I say, "I'll tell you a secret."

He snorts. I can almost hear him thinking, "That trick's for babies."

"It's more of a story. I'll tell you about when I ran away."

I've got his attention now, and I hold out the box as he approaches. "You ran away?" he questions, skeptical. "Why?"

I shrug, pouring little orange fish into his hand. "You tell me first."

He sighs and hops on the stone. "Mom brought her boyfriend home today. His name's Rich."

"Was he nice?"

He thinks about it for a bit, struggling, then fidgets and grudgingly replies, "Yeah. We played Brawl on the Wii."

"So did you like him?"

"I'm not supposed to!" he bursts out, looking at me like he's done something shameful. "They broke up and now Mom likes him and he's trying to replace my dad!"

"It's like that, you think?"

"Maybe not exactly like that, but anyone she brings home she must like a lot. And that means she's gotten over it."

"Doesn't your dad have a new wife?" I throw in, not to be mean, but his reasoning isn't being fair.

"Yeah, but that's why they broke up," Chris says, sounding bitter, "because he wanted to marry *her*. Now that Mom wants to marry someone else, she's doing the same thing."

I start, feeling myself skimming the rim of a deep and treacherous hole. When Chris's family moved in, I heard enough from my own mother, enough to know how to avoid upsetting the kids I'd probably babysit,

but I'm not ready to explain the acute difference between a divorce and an affair to someone almost half my age.

"But your mom isn't married anymore," I reason cautiously, "so don't you think she deserves to find someone to love? Your dad did."

I know he's stuffing himself with goldfish right now to avoid answering. He's afraid of change, the finality of the divorce in two new marriages, not a new father.

"That's kind of why I ran off," I say, leaning back. "I was living with my mom, too, except my father had just died. And I was sixteen, not eleven."

His eyes grow big as he stares at me with a new sense of kinship. I'm no longer "just" that guy in college living next door who sometimes plays basketball with him.

"Why'd you do it?"

"I was just miserable. Tired, scared. Angry at everything. I made things difficult for everyone, and I fought with my mom all the time.

"One night I just gave up. I grabbed my wallet and the first bag I saw on the counter and ran. Just ran, without telling her, writing a note, or even seeing if she was home."

I stop in case he wants to interject, but he just watches me, waiting.

"Somehow I ended up going through the woods, probably because I thought I would find the bus stop faster that way. Soon I was scratched, dirty, and lost. I kept going until I found a clearing, smaller than this one, where I just lay down and tried to remember why I'd done such a stupid thing. God, I can tell you right now, being angsty gets old real fast in the dark, in the middle of nowhere, with no clue what you're doing.

"I wished I was back home. Then I thought of what my mother would say if I came back, and I realized how selfish I'd been."

"What, for not telling her?" Chris interrupts. "I did that."

I wince inwardly, afraid he's missing the point. "No, for all of it. I wasn't the only one who lost Dad, but I was the only one being a jerk about it. She was just trying to work through living without him and still deal with me.

"That bag turned out to be Cheese Puffs, which seemed like the most absurd thing in the world at the time. I made them dinner and laughed like a moron until I fell asleep. In the morning, when I could see the trail I'd made crashing through the night before, I went home."

I help myself to Goldfish, feeling around for whole pieces in the corners. He expects more, asking, "What happened then?"

"I found her sitting at the table with the phone, gave her a hug, and promised it wouldn't happen again."

"Just like that?"

“Of course I had to make good on that, but yeah. I’m not trying to sound sappy or anything, but we needed each other. We still do.”

This time the silence is heavy, but I’m afraid to break it, because I know how important it is that he think it through on his own.

“Hey, Matt,” he says suddenly, sooner than I expected, “I’m gonna go home. Do you want to come over some time?”

“Sure.” I stand as he slides off the back of the rock and walks to the path. “You’re not leaving tonight, then?”

“No,” he says, waiting for me. “I don’t think it’s worth it.”

“Good,” I tell him, smiling as I reach him. Only the plastic lining in the box crackles as I shake powdery crumbs out for the birds. “Because you wouldn’t get far with this.”