

FIRST PRIZE

Snow-frosted Wings Stained with Blood

Birdsong broke through the morning air, fluttering above silent whispers of sound. Above the frozen emerald shallows of rippling waters, whooping cries of a distressed bird responded. Snow-covered reeds swished, swaying in sudden gusts of wetland wind.

Weatherill scanned the marshes. Curiosity filled her teal eyes. A sandhill crane rattled loudly above. She knew every species of bird from their call. Her camera flashed with pictures of blue herons. A desperate note whooped through the air, begging for help. Weatherill flipped through her notebook rapidly.

“Where is it? Where is it?” she mumbled impatiently, before exclaiming, “Found it! Whooping cranes, *Grus americana* are graceful birds with snow-white feathers and crimson caps on their heads. They’re the tallest birds in North America. Sadly, this beautiful crane is endangered.”

She traced her colourful drawing when the bird cried again. She dashed around, searching for it. Her camera swung back and forth, bumping against her chest. Her marsh-brown hair tangled with snowflakes and feathers billowed in the wind. Her heart hammered with wild excitement. The bird whooped in agony once more, trembling in the snow-laden reeds.

“Poor thing, trapped during migration,” Weatherill gasped.

She crept forwards, hoping she wouldn’t alarm it. Turning, she found herself gazing into the amber eyes of a whooping crane. The world seemed to stand still as their spirits connected. For a fleeting moment, Weatherill thought she was the crane. Flashes of memories filled her head, making her catch a glimpse of the bird strolling majestically in the marshes, probing the ground for food, nesting on the ground, and doing a wing-sweep dance with the rest of the flock.

The girl felt a burst of agony as it opened its long, grey-tipped beak to whoop in pain. The crane trashed its midnight-black legs as it tried to open blood-stained wings. Jagged ice shards dug deeper into the bird’s cuts.

“Stop, you’ll hurt yourself more!” Weatherill exclaimed.

To her surprise, the bird stood still. The girl inched towards it, crawling forwards on crackling ice. She shattered the shards into pieces, untangling the frost-covered reeds that wound around it like chains. The whooping crane watched with gratitude as she tugged the last chunk of ice free. The bird’s snow-white wings stained with ruby-red blood stretched into the sapphire sky.

Thin sheets of ice crackled, swaying beneath Weatherill’s feet. She smiled, knowing that her spirit bird would fly with the whooping cranes. The bird circled above her, gliding forever free in endless kingdoms of air as the ice swallowed Weatherill into the shadowy-blue depths of endless snow.

by Mingmei Dang (Grade Nine)
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FIRST PRIZE

Syreni

She trips along the shore, stumbling on the countless rocks worn smooth by centuries of the ocean's wrath. You can barely tell she's crying; the wind pushes her tears away before they fully leave her wild, blue eyes. A sudden gust whips her blonde tresses into her face again; she reaches up for what feels like the millionth time to throw them over her shoulder. She turns to look at the waves pounding the shore. The crashes are deafening, and as she watches, frothy spray shoots high into the air.

Farther out, a vicious storm brews over the water. It turns the sky roiling shades of blue and grey, often split by forked tongues of lighting.

She wishes she could just leave everything behind, be swept away by the storm and disappear, so she wouldn't have to hurt anymore.

Her eyes go far along the coastline, finding the highest cliff. She briefly considers letting herself shatter on the jagged rocks below, letting herself be swept away with the tide. Now, there is nobody left to miss her.

But . . . no. I am not that brave. . . .

Up ahead, she can see piles of new debris washed in by the tide. She crawls over a huge tree, slipping on the wet film coating it, and falls into a hollow of driftwood.

She finds huge green eyes staring at her with an unreadable expression. The woman looking at her is less woman than beast. Long tangles of black hair fall around her face, mottled grey-blue skin stretched taut over narrow cheekbones. She opens her thin lips to expose sharp canines built for ripping soft bodies to pieces. Somehow, she is terrifyingly beautiful and hideous at the same time.

But this is not what catches the girl's attention. Rather, it is the shimmering appendage extending from below the woman's bare torso that holds her eye. Long and sleek, it shines dully in tones of silver and blue. As the girl watches, the merwoman reaches up to grip two branches, strong muscles flexing under her weight. She lets go with a gasp, cradling her left arm, and looks at the girl. "Please," she speaks in a dead rasp. "Please."

The girl climbs back up and anchors herself in the driftwood. She reaches down to grab the merwoman's outstretched hands and pulls her up. She helps her slide down the tree.

But back on the beach, instead of letting go, the merwoman smiles the most terrifyingly feral smile the girl has ever seen. She grabs the girl, pinning her arms to her sides, and with one flick of her powerful tail, launches herself through the air and into the ocean, where she tears the girl to shreds.

by Anika Aschbacher (Grade Ten)
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FIRST PRIZE

Sunday Evening Contrition

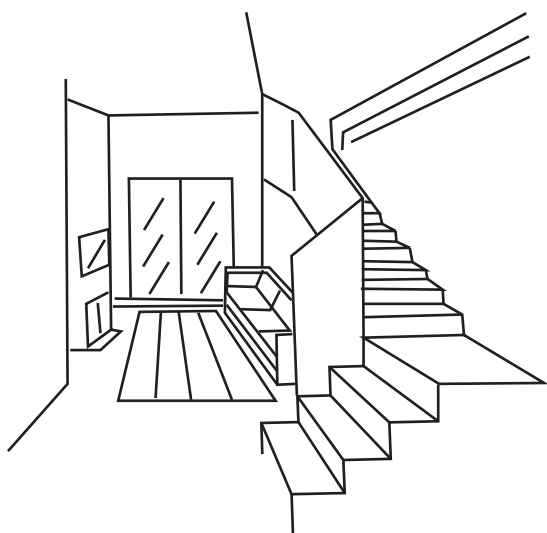
Restless motion competes with the solid pattern of drips: one, rhythmic and fixed; the other, a product of absolute boredom. The rain outside the tarnished window pane seems to draw away from the glass, reluctant to come near the contagious atmosphere of dismal drear. Moths flutter around the buzzing fluorescent light, unaware that their attraction will be their demise. Ambition, aspiration, and optimism crumble away into nothing. Nothing is all there ever was before there was something, and nothing is all there will be in the end.

As I check the clock for the umpteenth time, I wonder why the rain never seems to stop. I couldn't remember one day this week when the sun had shone for more than ten minutes before being engulfed once more by the menacing, grey storm clouds. I had been stuck in the bookshop since seven-thirty this morning. Who would be that eager to buy a book at such an hour on a Sunday morning, when no one seemed to be eager at all to buy any books at all? I sink back into my hard, wooden chair and sulk, glaring at the people passing outside, all bundled up and cozy with somewhere to go.

Suddenly, I see an old man crossing the road. He looks miserable, his hair dripping down into his eyes, shivering from the cold. The crosswalk sign changes to a flashing red hand, piercing through the drizzle. The man continues walking, achingly slowly, feet dragging along the wet pavement. Cars begin honking their horns, a chorus of disgruntled drivers late for Sunday dinner, their frustration heaped upon the elderly man slumping across the street. As I stare on in horrific fascination, some cars begin to inch forward, their engines growling in animalistic anger. The man stumbles, glancing wildly around, panic showing in the whites of his eyes like a spooked horse. His eyes meet mine, desperation and pleading surges through my heart, but there I stay, frozen in cowardice. Abruptly, a hand reaches out of the crowd and pulls the old man to the side of the street.

My shoulders slump in relief, my breath becomes more even. I look up, and find the eyes of the old man, fearful and shaken. I glance away, but his look of helplessness and betrayal still flickers in my head as I hide the guilt deep in my heart. That image will stay with me forever, and I will see those same eyes in every person I help, but it will never make up for what I didn't do.

by Tessa Warhurst (Grade Eleven)
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FIRST PRIZE

Imposter

“Aaron, come here, please,” Sarah ordered.

I had almost escaped. It took me five minutes to tiptoe down those stairs without making a sound. I lingered too long in the hall.

“Aaron, come here, please,” Sarah repeated, pulling out her “mother” tone.

I sulked over to the living room, where Sarah stood with arms crossed. Dad sat on the edge of the couch behind her, elbows on knees.

“What?”

“Don’t use that tone with me,” Sarah warned.

“Okay, what do you want?” I responded, my voice dripping with honey.

My dad’s frown deepened. “Aaron, act your age.”

“I’ll make it my new year’s resolution. Maybe you can join me.”

Dad took a deep breath and released it in a thin stream that whistled through the silence. “There’s something we need to ask you,” he said.

“Ask away. Can’t promise I’ll answer.”

Dad took another deep breath to calm his anger.

“Aaron, this is serious,” intervened Sarah. A pause, then, “Did you steal from me?”

I blinked twice and couldn’t find anything to say.

“Aaron, I asked you, did you steal from me? The money I keep in my dresser drawer is gone. Did you take it?”

I let out a noise of indignation. “You actually think I stole from you. You have so little trust in me that you think I’d take your money?” I turned to Dad. “What about you? Do you think I’m a thief?”

Dad fixed me with a stare. “Come on, Aaron. Who else could it be?”

I couldn’t believe him. I turned to attack Sarah. “Are you sure the money’s actually gone? You probably spent it all on booze, then blacked out and forgot about it.”

“Do not talk to your mother that way!” Dad yelled, standing up.

“My mother is dead; in case you’ve forgotten.” Sarah’s only an imposter. She orders me around. She tries to set rules. My mother died a long time ago.

“Aaron, did you or did you not steal from me?” Sarah asked again, showing no sign of backing down.

Of course I stole from her, but it hurt that my dad thought I did.

I locked eyes with Dad. “I did not steal from you. I can’t believe you think I would do something like that.” I watched Dad squirm as the guilt settled in. I took satisfaction from it.

I turned and walked away.

“Where are you going?” yelled Sarah. “We’re not finished here! Aaron, don’t you walk away from me!”

“You will never be my mother!” I screamed over my shoulder. I slammed the front door behind me and went to spend all of her money.

by Charlotte Moryto (Grade Twelve)

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SECOND PRIZE

Twilight in Pricton City

It was a night as cold as any other in Pricton City. The frozen moon hung, its lifeless corpse dangling from dark clouds as it swayed back and forth in the cool winter breeze. Patches of smoke from blocks of industrial factories cast thick shadows over the city, tinting towering skyscrapers an arctic grey as evening began its reign.

Shuddering, her fingers gripped the frosted-metal handles as the rich scent of roasted coffee beans immediately filled the empty cold. To her delight, the dimly lit shop was warm and hospitable, unlike the raging war of windy sticks and stones outside.

"It's a cold day today," she muttered, eyeing the hot, steaming, dark liquid sitting in the corner. It mesmerized her as it simmered and bubbled, steam evaporating into pitch-black walls. She silently watched the families outside, their grey coats and grim scowls, as they waited, pondering at red lights. *Their silhouettes resemble tall figures in crisp, black suits, casting dark shadows as they walk—*

"Ma'am, what did you mean by a cold day?" a quivering, young voice interrupted her thoughts.

Scanning for the source of the sound, her eyes settled on a filthy young boy, stained with dirt and straw. His eyes were milky white, staring forward at nothing.

"Well, it looks as if it's going to snow. It hasn't snowed for many years. . . ."

"I—I always wondered what snowflakes looked like." He smiled nervously. "People told me that they are white and small, and that they look like tiny dancing crystals shaped like delicate stars."

It seemed like eternity before she asked, "Where are your parents?"

"I don't know."

Silence.

"Here, I have something for you." The boy handed a pair of silver glasses to her.

"Look, I think you should go."

"Trust me. They're magical, you'll see."

Not wanting to upset the young boy, she hesitantly slid the glasses over her eyes.

Never in a million years had she seen such wonder. Shining, clear icicles as sharp as silver, glistening swords lined the roof of the coffee shop, while tiny, delicate angels, white as ivory, danced between gusts of wind, patiently making their way down to the cement. The world was engulfed in a dangerously cold, ivory snowstorm. All was quiet. The moon shone brighter than the sun against the pale orange street lamps.

"See?" he exclaimed.

And yes, she did see.

Of course, there were never any magical glasses. There were no icicles that lined the roof nor any moon that shone brightly. There were only dark clouds, sad gusts of wind, and even more smoke. There was only imagination, something that was lacking in Pricton City.

by Yimeng Li (Grade Nine)
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SECOND PRIZE

Maven's Cage

Maven was eighty-five-and-a-half years old, going on twenty. Cooped up in a retirement home, she felt like a tiger in a cage. It was all her son-in-law's fault. He had told her it would be better to move, better for her to leave the house she'd lived in for over fifty years and move to a stuffy, crowded, retirement home that stank of prune juice and denture cleaner. Maven could not live like this.

"Oh, I just love this place!" exclaimed her overly optimistic friend Frieda. "My meals are made for me, and I have people waiting on me hand and foot! I could very well be the Queen of England!" the old lady chuckled, hardly noticing Maven's silence.

I wouldn't want to be the Queen of England. I would hate to be trapped in Buckingham Palace, never able to go outside without security officers following—

"Isn't it just grand?" Dolores chimed in, interrupting Maven's thought. "My grandchildren visit me more often than they used to!"

Maven had seen Dolores's grandchildren around the retirement home. They were infuriatingly rambunctious, always making a racket. Her lips tightened, holding back her snarky response. Family was not a benefit to her. Family meant a lot of noise, more dinner to serve, and more mess to clean up.

While the others continued their endless chatter, Maven's attention drifted towards the tall, sunny windows, designed to create a "natural" atmosphere. *As if anything here were natural.* Nevertheless, they presented a marvellous opportunity: *Freedom.*

Disguising her determined march as a leisurely stroll, Maven made her way to the window. She unlatched it, as though to get her desperate breath of fresh air. In a quick motion, quite unsuited to a woman her age, Maven swung open the window and jumped out onto the pavement below. Legs met the ground with a sickening crunch, as Maven's ankle twisted, crushed between the weight of her body and the concrete. The world became cloudy and suddenly distorted. Before she sank into darkness, she heard an alarmed shout, "Grandma!"

Maven awoke in a hospital bed, her leg awkward in a heavy cast, but not as awkward as the man sitting nearby. Before she could say anything, her son-in-law spoke up, "How are you feeling?"

Maven's heart unexpectedly warmed. He didn't question her tumble out the window. Perhaps she was a little muggy from the fall or the pain medications, but she began pouring out her musings and complaints.

The son-in-law leaned back in his chair and said thoughtfully, "You know, Grandma, you may have to come stay with us for a while."

Maven let a small smile creep across her features.

by Katherine Corrigan (Grade Ten)

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SECOND PRIZE

The Shooting Star

She saw the look in my eyes before I said anything.

“Mama and Baba are gone,” the little girl of only four summers stated.

I faltered in my step and her eyes pierced mine. It wasn’t even a question. It was a fact that somehow she had perceived from me the moment I stepped into that untidy room on the third floor. She had somehow read my slumped shoulders and my short strands of ebony-black hair hanging in front of my eyes, trying to conceal the pain in my face.

My lips quivered, and I sank to my knees, burying my face in my hands. The echoing gunshots, the streets in ruins, and the bodies scattering the ground like dolls tossed away, burned my mind. No tears came, and yet, my body shook violently with silent sobs. I knew they could thunder in here at any moment, and that soon, where I was sitting would become a pile of broken buildings and broken souls.

My sister took my hand in hers, as a single tear trickled down her cheek. “I know a way,” she whispered.

I followed her as she raced up the dark stairwell onto the roof. Though night veiled the whole city, I could see distant buildings kneeling to their conquerors. A strange chill in the air nipped at my bare feet.

Amina gently grasped my arm and guided it upwards.

My eyes followed it to the inky-black sky dotted with glowing diamonds. *It’s just the sky*, I wanted to say.

“Find a shooting star,” she said.

I dropped my arm to my side and shook my head. “Amina, wishes don’t help.”

“No. That’s not what I want,” she breathed.

I turned away to climb back downstairs.

“I want to catch one.”

I spun around and eyed her questioningly.

“Please,” she pleaded, grabbing my arm again. “I’ve tried every night. I come up here and wait, and when one comes, I reach out for it, but I can never grasp it. I’m too small.” She took a deep breath. “Please,” she murmured helplessly. “You’re so much taller than me.”

My heart melted, and I strode to her side but tensed when I heard deafening voices shouting in the street below. “Amina, we have to go!” I bolted towards the stairs.

She seized my hand. “The star, Asad!”

I paused for a moment. “Why do you care about a silly star?”

“Asad! Catch one for us. Bring it down here. Because we need something to protect us—something that can save the good guys and kill the bad guys.”

I looked back at her, as gun shots erupted below.

A *shooting* star. She wanted a *shooting* star.

by Alketa Wolf (Grade Eleven)
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Langley, British Columbia

SECOND PRIZE

Good Night

It is never too difficult to terrorize young children. A little scrape here, a little shadow there, and their naïve imaginations do the rest. But there was one child from whose bedroom all the best monsters I've assigned have returned enraged, frustrated, and often times, defeated. I decided to visit this child myself and figure out what was causing her extraordinary fear of nothing—whether it was ignorance or plain weariness.

As darkness fell, I positioned myself underneath her bed, ready to summon terrors no mortal could ever imagine. "I know you're there. I'm not afraid," I heard her whisper. She spoke quietly, meekly, but also with such raw ferocity, it almost surprised me.

"False courage is not enough to save you," I answered, amused.

"There is nothing you can do to scare me."

I grinned. I was hungry to see the fear on her small, cherubic face. With claws sharpened and teeth gleaming against the dim moonlight, and with all my muscles savouring the chilling rush of recoil, I positioned myself, ready to unleash my malevolence.

Downstairs, I heard a voice. Every word was dripping with unforgiving, venomous hatred that could only come from far too much alcohol and self-loathing. I could taste the rage in every drunken slur as he called her name. He forced her bedroom door open. He reeked of stale alcohol and cigarettes. Drugs? Maybe. But his dishevelled appearance only proved that he cared neither for himself nor about this young child who only minutes ago had amused me with her ignorant fearlessness.

I cringed as he hurled his empty bottle of whiskey above the child's head. Shattered pieces of glass rained around us. I heard her whimper.

"You worthless. . .," he drunkenly blabbered.

Right then, I understood that she had her own demons far greater than all of us combined. I found myself embracing a new purpose. I dragged myself out from beneath the shadows and revealed myself in all of my deformity, cracks of skin and angular horns that would have put the darkest beasts of hell to shame. I bore into his soulless eyes and saw such an empty shell of a man that I almost pitied him. I growled. "This is my child now. Don't you dare touch her."

Terrified, he scampered away, stumbling, vomiting, and screaming to high heavens.

Pathetic, I thought. I crawled back under the bed where the poor child lay, tears streaming down her face. Against the dim moonlight, I saw the bruises on her face and cigarette burns on her once porcelain skin.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Good night." Maybe monsters can be guardians too.

by Darian Agapay (Grade Twelve)
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Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan

THIRD PRIZE

She Was Late

Montclair trudging through the heavy mist. The louder her heels clicked, the more ominous the atmosphere grew. A dingy newspaper fluttered beside her, dancing with the wind. *Strange*, she thought to herself, catching a glimpse of the crumpled paper. It was such a small town with hardly any curves or edges to the streets. *Girls going missing?* Montclair ignored the paper. She had to get to practice by seven o'clock; she couldn't afford to be kicked off the team.

As she weaselled her way through the smog, she managed to catch a sight towards her left. A water bottle. She shrugged to herself. It probably got left behind by some girls on their way to practice as well. Montclair swooped down, picking it up. She checked the label, written in curved handwriting: "Carissa Katuki." She didn't dwell on it much, continuing on her way. *How incautious could these girls be?* she thought to herself.

Montclair vacated the alley, briskly walking down the cobbled streets. The truth is, she'd been missing practice to avoid the frigid fog. Montclair despised the biting wind. She wasn't at all familiar with the route. At this point, she was ready to whip out her phone and call her coach.

Then she saw him: a mysterious man, wearing a misplaced cap and a black and red accented jacket. God had been good to her after all. Montclair grinned to herself and bounded down the stone walkway, reaching for her last light of hope. *This man can help me.* Gleefully, she tapped his shoulder, happy for not disappointing her coach.

The man turned to her awkwardly. He stumbled like a drunk in awe, and his eyebrows furrowed at sight of her.

"Ah, sir, could you please tell me where to be on my way? There should be a school nearby. Have you seen it?"

The man studied her and took a step forwards. His eyes shifted from her features down to the water bottle tucked in her bag. "Where'd you get that?"

Montclair took another step back, for she saw something she shouldn't have unsheathed at his side.

"That's my daughter's."

"W-what's your name?" She fumbled backwards, an aching fear growing in her stomach.

As the man gave her an answer, her eyes widened with stupefaction. It was quite the opposite of what was expected. Montclair moved back inch by inch, aiming to get as far as she could from the foreigner. "That's not her na—"

The man laughed and walked towards her. "Really? She seemed to look alike. So did the other ones." With a chuckle, he reached for what Montclair hoped he wouldn't.

She realized then, that the red accents weren't fabric.

by Paulette Dawn Descaya (Grade Nine)

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Edmonton, Alberta

THIRD PRIZE

The Penalty Poem

“In the Reath, people live in fear.
No one can leave, they are forced to stay here.
For in the Reath, the fairies come at night.
Stealing young children out of anger and spite.
In the Reath, fairies are stronger than men.
And if a child is taken, you never see them again.
Here in the Reath, I live . . . um . . . strangely,
And I long for more that what’s here for me.”

“I like it,” my sister complimented in an encouraging tone, “Although, I don’t think it would be wise to read that to our class, Lewis.”

“Oh, why not?” I whined to her and flopped down on my bed. “It’s poetry!” I exclaimed, “For goodness sake, it’s the truth!”

“But not everyone sees it like that, Lu. You’re going to get yourself in trouble again. Mother has enough to deal with right now because of Father, she doesn’t need you getting another penalty.”

“They can’t give me a penalty for speaking the truth, Rosie.” I told her. “Can they?”

She tilted her head as if to say, *Well*. . . . “I just don’t want you getting in trouble with Mrs. Finley again. She doesn’t exactly adore you, Lewis.”

“Leave it to my sister to point out the obvious.” And we remained silent for a moment. I sighed and explained, “I just wish we didn’t have to pretend that we like it here. I bet you there’s a whole world out there, just waiting for us! One day, I’ll see it. One day, we’ll be free from this place. You and I, together, we’ll be free!”

“And leave it to my brother to have impossible ambitions. We can’t leave here, Lewis. Since we were kids, you’ve never understood that. Why can’t you just accept that we live here, and try to make the best of it?”

I shook my head though.

“For Mother?” she continued in a lecturing tone.

That, try for Mother, I could do. “Will you help me write a new poem, then?” I asked her. “It took me hours to come up with this one, I’ll never finish another one by tomorrow on my own.”

“Only if you promise to keep that one tucked away—that is, if you don’t burn it by morning, which I strongly advise,” she commanded. But then her furrowed brow began to soften as she saw my disappointment, so she reached for my hand with a sweet smile and said, “But I do like it, Lewis.”

by Abbey Lenardon (Grade Ten)
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Milton, Ontario

THIRD PRIZE

Supernova

It was a cloudless night, mild and just the right weather for a hike. At least, that was what I told Julius, my pupil of over six years.

“It’s close,” I grunted. “We’re almost there now.”

Julius paused. “Are you all right? Do you need to take a break?”

“Damn knobby knees,” I grumbled. “I’m fine, though, don’t worry. Getting old for trudging around on mountains. You’re lucky to be so young.”

Julius took a quick break anyway. “What will we do if a bear finds us?” Julius asked. “Or wolves?”

I wheezed a laugh. “Run. If you make it, you’ll be hard-pressed not to have gotten over writer’s block.” His Pulitzer certainly hadn’t helped. It seemed even born talents were vulnerable to their muse.

Julius chuckled but spun the flashlight, chasing shadows. The path was barely visible, a trail of worn grass in the darkness. “Almost there?”

“Right around the next bend,” I promised.

Thankfully, Julius spared me any more speech.

We stumbled out of the thicket onto a patch of bare earth—all that stood between us and a sharp precipice. Slowly, I led Julius towards the edge, a nasty drop of over 300 metres.

Julius gasped. “It’s . . . beautiful.”

I couldn’t help but agree. I saw the stars, the wondrous little pinpricks of light that illuminated the night sky. The dense forests below, lit only by the light of the moon and her sister stars, carried a mystique about them, as if one could get lost forever in the dark boughs between the countless trunks. It was breathtaking; yet, beyond that, I felt nothing.

“Beautiful?” I remarked. “That’s all you could come up with? You’re paid to write prose, and that’s the best you could do?”

Silence. I glanced over at Julius and froze. There was a nostalgic look in his eyes, something in his slack expression that I envied. Wonder, amazement, revelation. He had *something*. We both saw the same vista, the same view in all its splendour, but I was the one who came up with nothing. Two writers witnessed the same scene, but only one was inspired.

Like the twinkling lights far above, Julius was visible but tauntingly out of reach. While Julius had won the Pulitzer Prize, I, his constant mentor, had fallen short—unfair, all of it.

“I’ve got it!” Julius exclaimed. “I know how to continue my manuscript!”

I smiled gently and placed a hand on Julius’ back. “So have I.”

I didn’t.

“What are you thinking of?” he asked.

“A murder.”

Julius grinned. “A mystery, is it? What’s the setting?”

“Sorry.”

“What for? This was—”

I shoved, hard.

That night, there was one less glimmering star in the night sky.

by Alex Chen (Grade Eleven)
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THIRD PRIZE

The Black Quarry

When the starship *Cantor* disappeared in the year 3622, it shocked colonies across the cosmos. Transmissions from its bridge showed it gliding through galaxies, winking across solar systems, skirting the edges of supernovas and wormholes until, somehow, the stars ran out. *Cantor* found itself faced with an endless abyss of pitch black. It was wider, deeper, and darker than even the densest black hole. Then the transmissions cut and *Cantor* vanished.

The mysterious phenomena were dubbed The Black Curtain, and in the months it took the Federation to deploy its investigation, it was a topic of intergalactic debate. From senates to research boards to conspiracy forums, The Black Curtain dominated.

When the Federation's dreadnought recovered the wreck of *Cantor*, they found it in a peculiar state. It hadn't been warped by spatial flux nor crushed by a sudden increase in pressure from deep space.

It had crashed.

Like the *Titanic*, *Cantor*'s hull had been breached. The passengers had drowned in the vacuum; their corpses hung in flash-frozen limbo.

The crewmen of the dreadnought gaped horror-struck at the obsidian-black cliff face, *Cantor*'s demise. It wasn't part of any planet, and it stretched so far in all directions without end that they wobbled with vertigo.

Next came an escorted research vessel, *Galileo*, and its host of scientists. The first manned descent to The Black Curtain's surface showed that it was not without life.

The creatures were thin strings, nervous systems, stained darker than The Black Curtain itself; beings made of empty space; living Wisps of void. So potent was their non-existence, that it came around full circle, and so they simply were.

And Wisps did exactly one thing: dig. With their flimsy tendrils, they chipped at the surface of The Black Curtain, scratching it away one dust mote at a time. Astrophysicists later theorized that their flotsam dust would coalesce into burgeoning stars.

The Black Curtain took on a new name: The Black Quarry.

Expeditions were launched to measure the scale of The Black Quarry. Using the wreck of *Cantor* as a starting point, *Galileo*'s scouting ships radiated outwards, staking red beacons along The Black Quarry like ley lines.

Millions of light years away, the lines converged. Decades of research and The Black Quarry was discovered to be all encompassing and without a single breach. It turned out that the universe was shaped a bit like an ostrich egg.

The mysteries of space had run out, and what used to be infinity was now reduced to a monotonous science, a stale list of certainties.

But humanity was not resigned to the idea of a finite horizon. Instead, it took up arms and joined the mining effort, clawing ever outwards.

by Lauryn Bilawka (Grade Twelve)
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