Fiction Winners

First Place Elementary School

“A White Christmas” by Joy Xu
Grade 5
Urbana Elementary School
Frederick, MD

Anna pressed her nose against the window. Snow, snow—where are you? She wondered, gazing at the peaceful yard stretching in front of her house. It was Christmas Eve, and so far there was no sign of snow whatsoever. Anna had always loved snow—the soft, silky white blanket slithering through her fingers, cushioning her falls, the foundation of her snowmen with lopsided smiles and angels with broken wings. There had always been more than enough snow during Christmas, but this year was her first Christmas in Florida, and so far there had been no sign of her fluffy white friend.

“Anna! Dinnertime!” her mother called from the kitchen. Reluctantly Anna tore her face away from the window and dragged herself over to the table. A delicious aroma wafted up from the bowls her mother set down in front of her, but even this did not make her forget about her dilemma.

“Why the long face?” her mother asked cheerfully, sitting down in her chair.

“Mph,” Anna grunted, picking at her food half-heartedly.

“Pardon?”

“There’s no snow, Mom,” Anna said glumly. “There’s never any snow here. Ever since we moved.”

“Well, honey, there may not be much snow, but there are other good things about
Florida,” her mother said gently.

“Like what?”

“Disney World?” her mother grinned. Anna, in spite of herself, grinned back. Okay. So she couldn’t argue with that. “But still,” she said, fiddling with the edge of the tablecloth, “I wish we could have a white Christmas.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Then her mother spoke up. “I miss the snow too, Anna,” she admitted quietly. “But there’s nothing we can do about that, so we shouldn’t dwell on it.”

“We could move back home,” Anna blurted before she could stop herself. Her mother shook her head and smiled sadly. “Anna,” she said, “You know we can’t do that.” Anna knew. But she didn’t say anything.

“Well, come on, eat,” her mother said, patting her back and getting up. “You’ll feel better. And remember, Christmas is tomorrow!”

Yeah, Anna thought. Christmas without snow.

That night Anna curled up in her bed with her blanket wrapped tightly around her, staring out the window. Pale moonlight washed in, creating a silvery pool on the carpet of her room. Why couldn’t it just snow? It was so simple. Even just a couple snowflakes would do. Anna sighed and turned over on her other side, so that she was facing away from the window. She prayed for a miracle, that somehow tomorrow when she got up there would be a fresh blanket of snow sparkling in her yard.

The next morning Anna awoke. Immediately she squeezed her eyes shut, felt her way to the window, and prayed, as she had been for the past week. When she opened her eyes, for a second she thought she saw a fresh white blanket covering the ground, but then she realized it was all in her head. The street was as bare as ever.

“Merry Christmas!” Her mother’s jolly voice sounded from behind her. Anna didn’t reply. She felt a tiny tear trickle from her eye. “Why can’t it just snow, Mom?” she cried. “It’s so simple.”

“Anna,” her mother’s voice said quietly, “Christmas is not just about snow.”

“It’s about celebrating. It’s a time of joy, a time to take a break from the hectic rush we call life. A time to give and to receive. Snow is not even a quarter of it.” Anna drank in her mother’s words silently, sitting on the edge of her bed.

“Give me a smile. Please?” her mother said, sitting down next to her. Anna finally looked up at her mother. “Okay,” she said, giving a tiny smile.

“That’s my girl.” They stood up, and together walked down the stairs. “I prepared some breakfast for you,” her mother said loudly. Anna looked at her questioningly, then turned back around and gasped.

“MERRY CHRISTMAS!” Her old friends from back in Alaska were gathered in the kitchen, which had been transformed from a plain little room into a winter wonderland. Fake snow glittered from every cupboard and corner, and tinsel was strewn across the floor. In the middle of it all stood the tallest, most beautiful Christmas tree Anna had ever seen.

“Oh my. . .” she turned, struck speechless, to her mother, who stood beaming at her. “How did you do it?” she managed to ask.

“I’ve been planning it forever, dear,” her mother replied, smiling so wide her face looked like it was about to crack. “Ever since the move you’ve just needed something to cheer you up—and only snow could do that. So, since we couldn’t go to snow, I brought
snow to us. What do you think?”

Anna looked around at her friends smiling up at her, all the familiar old faces from her former hometown. In that moment she realized that this was what Christmas was really about—not snow covering everything outside, but the unconditional love shared between everything and everyone.

First Place Middle School

“Poles Apart” by Zaynab R. Gholston
Grade 7
Cradlerock School
Columbia, MD

From my seat on bus 234 she looked ok—sitting calmly on the bench outside of Springhill Middle, staring hard into a book. A black curtain of hair like a wave from a dark, yet beautiful sea, shielded her blue eyes from me. She reminded me of a china doll.

She looked ok, as if Billy Conifer hadn’t bullied her in front of the entire seventh grade, making her appear even weirder than before. A pretty girl like her could’ve had a lot of friends, but no one even came within a couple feet of her. It was as if she had a gigantic green glowing head and spaghetti for hair. The seventh grade had classified Maria Canada as untouchable.

We weren't great friends, but I couldn't help feeling sorry for Maria. Middle school had shunned her. I pressed my nose against the glass; my breath made it foggy. Maria was lost in a cloud of white. The bus engine purred louder as Ms. Lottie began to pull away. I wanted to get one last look at Maria, but it was hard to see. The sun blazed white, trying in vain to melt away its adversary, cold. I looked to where I had last seen Maria. But in her place, a boy stood, pointing towards our bus. He was screaming. Somehow I knew what he was trying to say.

“Stop the bus!”

Two Days Before the Accident

Miss Dylan was discussing Soviet Union reform, and I was fantasizing about French toast when the intercom beeped.

“Miss Dylan? Do you have Lena Shakoor?”

“Yes, do you need her?”

“Yes. Send her to the office.” The intercom beeped off.

The student counselor, Ms. Williams, was waiting for me outside the front office.

“Hi Ms. Williams,” I said.

“Morning, Lena. We have a new student I would like you to show around.”

“Cool.”

Ms. Williams led me into the office. A girl sat by her desk. Her head was thrown back, staring at the ceiling. Ms. Williams tapped the girl’s shoulder.

“Maria.” The girl shook her head. “Yes?”

“This is Lena, you’re going to shadow her for the day.” We exchanged ‘hi’s’. “Lena this is Maria. Please show her around.” Ms. Williams waved us out.

“We’re going to Ms. Dylan’s. She’s first period Social Studies,” I said, stuffing my hands into my pockets.
“Cool,” she said brightly. She seemed totally normal.

Last period is when things went wrong. Maria sat in front of me with Carla and Dominica, on either side of her. I could hardly see over their mountains of hair.

“We’ll continue frog dissection tomorrow,” Ms. Barnes said. “Clean-up, and I don’t want to see one unfolded apron.”

I slid my frog into the wrapping. “Maria, could you hand me the blue tray?” No answer. “Maria, I need the tools.” I turned to look at her. Her face was shockingly pale. I snapped my fingers in her face. Nothing—just like that office thing. I shook her shoulder. She blinked. Something. That was good.

Suddenly, her hand grabbed the scalpel that we had just used to slit the frog’s stomach. The tool flashed toward her hand. Carla turned just in time to scream and yank it away.

“OMG! What’s wrong with you? You just tried to stab yourself. Are you crazy?” Dominica yelled through a mouthful of gum. Ms. Barnes was there in an instant.

By the time I got to my locker, the entire school was abuzz over the scalpel incident. I was thinking of checking on Maria when Mica showed up.

“Hey…”

“Yes, I know about Maria,” I said annoyed.

“I wasn’t even talking about that.” Mica sounded offended. After hopping onto the bus, though, Mica begged for every detail of the incident. I was still annoyed, but not enough for me not to tell the story.

**Morning of the Incident**

All I can think about is Maria. I’ve resolved that today I’m going to befriend her, no matter what. She walks to school, and I imagined if we passed her, I would open the window and say hello. But she didn’t show.

Since I couldn’t talk to Maria that morning, I decided to sit with her at lunch. During class there were too many ears and eyes around. I watched the clock until lunch and even got three math questions wrong! When the lunch bell rang I was the first one out.

“You’re in a hurry,” Mica said.

“Yeah, I’m going to do it.”

“What?”

“Talk to Maria.”

“What! Are you crazy?”

“Mica, she needs a friend! I thought you were different. I thought you weren’t like them.”

“I’m not. But Lena, she’s… you know.” Mica must have seen the determination in my face, because she gave in. “Two friends are better than one.” Mica smiled.

The cafeteria was packed. Mica’s keen eyes picked over the student-filled lunch line and the entire cafeteria. “Where is she?”

“I know she’s here.” Suddenly, Billy Conifer caught my eye. He was standing on the stage, gesturing and shouting at a girl in front of him. Maria. By the tears in her eyes I knew that he wasn’t saying anything good. Maria was gone before I reached them, but others were still laughing.

**After the Accident**
The bus driver got to Maria first. She was so still. Ms. Lottie made me stay back, but I held Maria’s hand. Black hair flowed everywhere. Maria’s eyes were closed. Her hand lay still in mine. Too late. I could have reached out to her earlier. I could have, but I didn’t.

“Please, Maria, please.” You’re different and I know sort of what it’s like. I’m different, too. I wear this scarf on my head, but people accepted me and I accept you. So, just please.” Finally I gave up. Whoever was pulling at me succeeded in wrenching me away. But before they did I felt a slight pressure, as if my finger had been squeezed lightly.

First Place High School

“Two Cups of Coffee” by Colin O’Donnell
Grade 12
Towson High School
Towson, MD

“About time, huh, Curt?” Teddy Strozier asked.
It was three o’clock in the morning, and Teddy was drinking black coffee at his kitchen table. After coming back to his apartment, he had found the energy to change into his loafers and shag robe. He felt like hell—probably looked like it, too. Late night jobs always left him like this.

He took another sip from his coffee. Behind him, Curt Albatross flicked off the safety on his Jericho 941.

“Sorry it had to come to this, Ted,” Albatross sighed mournfully.
“Mind if I finish my coffee?” Teddy grunted before he took another sip.
Albatross hesitated. Teddy calmly sipped again. The coffee was burnt, but that was alright. Coffee at three in the morning for a man who felt like hell didn’t have to be perfect.

He heard the Jericho’s safety click back into place. “Go ahead, Ted.”

“Thank you,” Teddy said. He nodded at the seat across from him. “Why don’t you sit and have some?”

Again, Albatross hesitated. Teddy turned to see the Jericho still staring him in the face.

“Come on, Curt. It’s been a while since we shared a cup of joe.” He held up his steaming mug.
Albatross lowered the Jericho. “Yeah, he admitted. “I think I’d like that.” He walked to the other side of the table and sat in the creaky chair, laying the gun in front of him on the table.

“I’ll grab you a mug,” Teddy said, lifting himself up.
Albatross snatched the gun up. Teddy froze. The two of them stared at each other for a moment. Somewhere outside, a police siren went off. “I remember where they are, Ted.”

“Alright, Teddy said, and eased slowly back into his chair.
Albatross found a mug and poured his coffee as the siren outside came whining past the kitchen window. “I’m sorry, Ted,” Albatross apologized again while he sat. “It’s…it’s a job, is all.”

“I know, Curt,” Teddy said. He absently drank more of his coffee.
Albatross took his first sip and grimaced. “Christ, Ted, is it burnt enough?”
Teddy laughed, “I admit, it’s not my best.”
Curt laughed back. “You never could make a good cup of joe.” He took a huge swig, coughed, and set his mug on the table. He looked long and hard at Teddy, his eyes pained. He held his breath before he said, “Why’d you do it, Ted?”

“But what?”

“Do what?”

Teddy leaned back and rubbed his eyes. “I missed.”

“You missed, “Albatross scoffed. “Thirty-three years in this line of work and you mean to tell me that you missed a man standing ten feet in front of you?”

“I never said I didn’t miss on purpose,” Teddy said. “Not that it matters, anyway. The point is, I missed, and now Mancini wants me gone—and what Mancini wants, happens. So you’re here with a gun on my table.”

“Damn it, Ted, just answer my question,” Albatross fumed.

Teddy sighed. “Alright.”

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No one had told Teddy that Rob Brown had a kid.

Rob Brown was some pencil-necked accountant for the Vasily family, a close competitor of Mancini’s. Teddy’s job was simple: follow the man, shoot the man. It would send a message to the Russians.

And here Teddy was, standing in a parking lot outside of an apartment building, where he had waited for Rob Brown. But when Brown came out to his car, he had a kid with him—a little girl no more than twelve years old.

The little girl was staring at the gun in Teddy’s hand, and the gun in Teddy’s hand was staring at Rob Brown’s chest.

Brown was saying something to Teddy.

“…please, man, just put the gun down.”

Teddy wasn’t listening. He only saw that little girl, staring at the gun and squeezing her father’s hand for dear life.

Teddy squeezed the trigger and the boom of the gun rocketed through the parking lot. Rob Brown’s daughter screamed as her father threw himself over her.

The bullet had lodged itself in a windshield behind Rob Brown, cracking it into a Safe-T glass spider web. When Rob Brown looked up from his sobbing daughter, Teddy was already gone.

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Albatross sat with his arms folded across his chest. Teddy had a sip or two left of his coffee when he had finished his story.

“She was a little girl, Curt.”

“He was your hit, Ted.”

“Have you ever killed a man in front of his children?”

“I’ve killed children in front of their parents.” Albatross’ voice was hollow as he stood and picked up the Jericho from the table. “That’s what our line of work takes, Ted.”

“I don’t have that much to give,” Teddy said.

“I know, Ted. I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not.” Teddy drank the last two sips of his coffee.
When Albatross finished his work and left Teddy’s apartment, two cups of coffee still sat on the kitchen table. One was empty. One was not.

POETRY WINNERS

First Place Elementary School

“Where I’m From” by Naszil Bond
Grade 5
Southwest Baltimore Charter School
Baltimore, MD

I’m from a strap that makes me happy again.
I’m from a friend with spare pieces.
I’m from a sprained appendage and helping hands.
I’m from all of this.

I’m from a store full of fun and wonder.
I’m from a state with beautiful beaches.
I’m from a shoe that’s been missing for many years.
I’m from all of this.

I’m from a toy that makes me happy.
I’m from wet tongues and bad breath.
I’m from a black and white fat cat.
I’m from all of this!

First Place Middle School

“Widist, Wodist, Woe” by Ally Anderson
Grade 6
Home School
Owings Mills, MD

Wunst upon a gerdad’s waffle
I didst see a foe
“A gerst!” he cried
“A gist!” called I
Widist, wodist, woe

And wunst upon a geirdid’s woffle
I didist see a friend
“Mooco!” she cried
“Hey ho!” called I
Widist, wodist, wend
First Place High School

“Baltimore” by Will Fesperman
Grade 12
Towson High School
Towson, MD

I want to sit with the Asian woman
who, on a park bench outside Peabody,
cups her hands around her face
to make a private place for crying.
I want to feel what smolders
in the throats of those flinty-eyed
radicals with patchy beards,
hisssing about the proletariat
in Red Emma’s over cups of chai.
I want to give my money,
my mind,
my vision of 2020,
to the woman in Mt. Vernon
with creased black leather skin
who flashes a bitter eye at the policeman,
spitting,
If they don’t want my gay rights,
Then why they want my gay dollars?
I want to know the last names of the men
who sat with me on a water-stained mattress,
listening to I have a dream, that one day
this nation—this city—
this battered brick firehouse
with faded slogans turned
home for addicts
will balloon to astral heights;
I want to walk among hot,
stopped cars on MLK
with the sweaty boys peddling bottled water,
shouting, searching faces
for someone to meet their stare.
I want to listen to mumblings
and laughter of people
hanging outside on slumped porches
and by the chainlink car shops
that make a long bleak line
down North Avenue,
down to a dead end of stone gates,
the Baltimore Cemetery with its
fields of white obelisks,
angels,
hundreds
of etched names.
In traffic-light daydreams,
I walk the rows and read them all,
not knowing or remembering
any.