



Randall Albers Young Writers Awards 4th Annual Recognition Ceremony

Harold Washington Library's Reception Hall
400 S. State Street, Chicago, IL
Saturday, April 18
1:30–3:30 p.m.



CONTENTS

This Afternoon's Lineup	3
Prize Winners.....	4
Welcome to RAYWA! by Randall Albers.....	5-7
Student Bios	8-10
The Future of Chicago Literature by Kayleigh McNamara.....	11-15
Daisy is Waiting for Us by Lucille Malloy	16-20
Half Present Moments Among Lasting Memories by Vanessa Anda.....	21-23
The Sanity Memorial Center by Nate Schieber	24-28
The Cartography of Almost by Kabir Singh	29-33
Abecedarian Appeal by Chloe Xu.....	34-35
Seagull Yahtzee by Liam Benham.....	36
Bilingual by Sofi Vargas	37-38
Mount Helicon by Camila Ortiz.....	39-40
Back Judges.....	41
About Chicago Literary Hall of Fame	42
Upcoming CLHOF Events	43
Quotes from Previous RAYWA Winners.....	Back

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THIS AFTERNOON'S LINEUP

Jane Hseu: Chicago Literary Hall of Fame President

Justin Shannin:
Chicago Public Library's Digital Media Coordinator (Teen Services)

Randall Albers

Anna Hyslop & Jasminum McMullen: CLHOF Associate Board Members

Livee Pohlmann: Reading her story, "The Birth of a Siren"

Timothy David Rey: Final Poetry Judge

Camila Ortiz: Reading her poem, "Mount Helicon"

Megan Stielstra: Final Prose Judge

Nate Schieber: Reading his story, "The Sanity Memorial Center"

Sofi Vargas: Reading her poem, "Bilingual"

Vanessa Anda:
Reading her story, "Half Present Moments Among Lasting Memories"

Liam Benham: Reading his poem, "Seagull Yahtzee"

Kabir Singh: Reading his story, "The Cartography of Almost"

Chloe Xu: Reading her poem, "Abecedarian Appeal"

Lucille Malloy: Reading her story, "Daisy is Waiting for Us"

Donald G. Evans: CLHOF Founding Executive Director

Reception

2026 PRIZE WINNERS



PROSE

First Place (\$300): Lucille Malloy

DePaul College Prep, Grade 11, "Daisy is Waiting for Us"

Second Place (\$200): Vanessa Anda

John Hancock College Prep, Grade 12,
"Half Present Moments Among Lasting Memories"

Third Place (\$150): Nate Schieber

Walter Payton College Prep, Grade 9, "The Sanity Memorial Center"

Fourth Place (\$100): Kabir Singh

Stevenson High School, Grade 9, "The Cartography of Almost"

Honorable Mention: Lucille Hachtel

Senn High School, Grade 11, "First Days of Summer"

Honorable Mention: Livee Pohlmann

Lincoln-Way West High School, Grade 10, "The Birth of a Siren"

POETRY

First Place (\$300): Chloe Xu

Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Grade 11, "Abecedarian Appeal"

Second Place (\$200): Liam Benham

The Chicago High School for the Arts (ChiArts), Grade 11, "Seagull Yahtzee"

Third Place (\$150): Sofi Vargas

East Leyden High School, Grade 9, "Bilingual"

Fourth Place (\$100): Camila Ortiz

Lincoln Park High School, Grade 12, "Mount Helicon"

Welcome to RAYWA!

by Randall Albers

On behalf of everyone at the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame, I welcome you to today's festivities. We are so happy that you are here to celebrate these young people who have distinguished themselves by writing stories and poems that give voice to the images of their waking dreams. Your support of these talented writers offers a significant boost to their ongoing efforts to render these dreams vividly and freely; and to those of you who interact with them directly, perhaps daily, we thank you for helping them carve out the space to create their excellent work.

The Chicago Literary Hall of Fame began, in the hands of Founding Executive Director Don Evans, by honoring the work of Chicago's departed literary giants, and today, no fewer than 67 legendary writers have been inducted into its ranks. Along the way, CLHOF began recognizing great living writers, too, with its Fuller Awards, and 18 brilliant authors have received this honor over the years. The past and present having been established, the Governing Board saw fit to envision the future by recognizing writing excellence among the next generation with the Randall Albers Young Writers Awards.

RAYWA today marks its fourth year by offering awards to four poets and four prose writers, along with two prose Honorable Mentions. You will hear them read from their work, and you will no doubt be struck by the liveliness of voice, the seriousness of purpose, the vividness of imagery, the play of heightened language, and a maturity far beyond their years. You will come away inspired, feeling a renewed sense of hope not only for Chicago's literary future but also for our country.

And yes, in these troubled times, we need to locate our wellsprings of hope and act energetically from those sources to fashion a better world. The work of imagination, the dreaming exhibited in the creativity of these writers, is the same imagination that all of us must exercise in order to fight the forces that daily threaten to deplete our language of meaning, to ban books that make us think, to stereotype and isolate and even deport our fellow human beings, to undermine truth with false narratives, to unleash the worst impulses of narrow minds, and to stifle the best of human interaction and free

expression. With their creative work, these young people are already taking a stand against those dehumanizing forces by fashioning stories and poems that shape their identity, define their cultures, clarify their vision, and use the power of language ever more vigorously to cross boundaries and foster understanding.

We at CLHOF celebrate that border crossing and encourage all of you to do the same. And to the writers, know that we need to hear your voices, loud and clear. You will encounter obstacles along the way, no doubt. Keep busting through them. Your persistence will pay dividends for yourself and your world.

Ten people will receive recognition today, and we congratulate them. But we also celebrate the writing and initiative of the nearly 200 other writers who entered this year's contest. That number marks a large jump from last

year, for which we are grateful. It takes guts to have one's creative work judged in a contest, and I hope that even those who did not win awards feel a measure of pride and accomplishment in having put their work out

for reading and discussion by the judges. My advice? Do it again! And again! And again!

Thanks go to Don Evans for overseeing all aspects of the judging and today's event.

Thanks also to CLHOF Board President

Jane Hseu and the creative, committed

members of the Governing

Board, to Anna Hyslop for managing the collection and distribution of manuscripts,

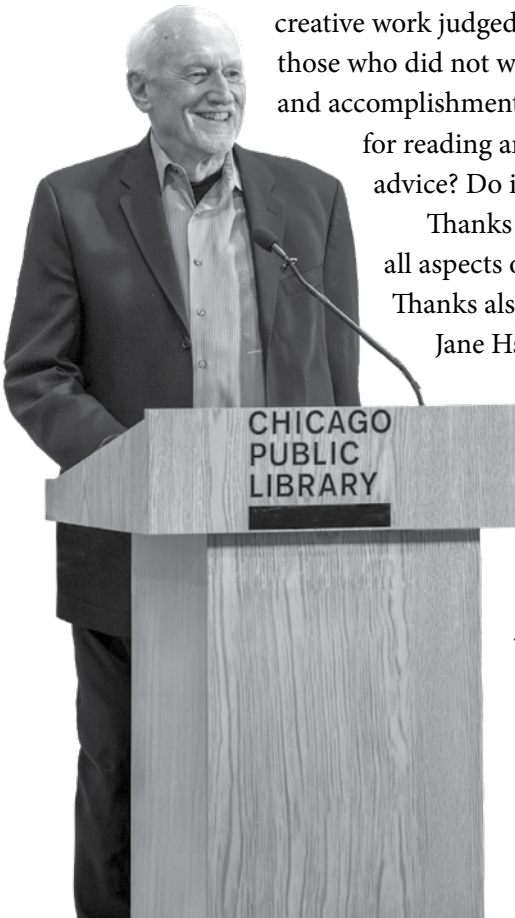
to members of the Associate

Board and others for preliminary judging, to volunteer workers

ensuring the success of today's event, and to folks at the Harold

Washington branch of the great

Chicago Public Library system for hosting us.



Thanks, too, to donors to the RAYWA Fund. We welcome your contributions, which have already allowed us to add the Poetry category and offer more prize money. We look forward to further expansion in the coming years, with your help.

Finally, a special thanks to prose judge Megan Stielstra and to poetry judge Timothy Rey for their conscientious, thoughtful work in making incredibly difficult final decisions. Very accomplished writers themselves, they know quality when they see it and made excellent awards to some amazing work. For further acknowledgements, please peruse the rest of the program.

Most of all, thanks to the young writers whose work we will hear today and to parents, friends, teachers, and others of you who are here to offer your very welcome support and to celebrate the future of writing. In these young hands, the future looks bright indeed.

Randall Albers is a former Chicago Literary Hall of Fame president. He is Professor/Chair Emeritus of Fiction at Columbia College Chicago and former Founding Producer of the Story Week Festival of Writers. This award bears Randy's name because of his tenacious commitment to serving, encouraging, and teaching young writers.

2026 RAYWA WINNERS



Lucille ‘Lucy’ Malloy was born on June 22, sharing a birthday with Cindi Lauper and John Dillinger. In her freshman year she received an honorable mention in Scholastic Art and Writing awards and was published in *Unsolved*, a Young Writer’s collection in her sophomore year. At school, she participates in poetry and book club and bowling team. She is currently a junior at DePaul College Prep. Her short story, *Daisy is Waiting for Us* was her first time participating in the Randall Albers Young Writers Awards. She can’t remember what inspired the story but remembers having the idea for a long time before she finally wrote it. Besides writing she loves reading, listening to classic rock and exploring cemeteries.



Vanessa Anda (she/her) is a senior at John Hancock College Preparatory High School. She has been accepted into the Integrated Health Studies program at the University of Illinois Chicago, where she will begin studies this fall. “Half Present Moments Among Lasting Memories” is her first published narrative. Vanessa is a member of her high school’s National Honors Society and is an active participant. She was a member of the STEM Scholars program at UIC last summer and eventually became an intern and an ambassador for it. Vanessa also has a job part-time at the Chicago Ridge Mall. She wrote the short story “Half Present Moments Among Lasting Memories” after the loss of a parent and the realization of life’s fleeting moments.



Nate Schieber (he/him) is a freshman at Walter Payton College Preparatory High School. “The Sanity Memorial Center,” a short fiction story, is his first published work. He is currently working on a collection of short stories set in the same universe. Previously, while in middle school, he received Honorable Mention from the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards (Alliance for Young Artists and Writers) for an excerpt from his novel, *Island of the Quill Lizards*. Aside from writing, Nate also enjoys filmmaking, running, and playing the piano. “The Sanity Memorial Center” was inspired by the current divisive political climate of the US, the music of Radiohead, and the dystopian genre.



Kabir Singh (he/him) is a Freshman at Adlai E Stevenson High School. “The Cartography of Almost” is his first recognized literary award; his writing has also appeared in *The Statesman*, his school newspaper. Outside of writing, he also plays the Tabla and is captain of the volleyball team. Kabir wrote “The Cartography of Almost” after his ELA teacher challenged him to incorporate something personal into his writing, he brought in video games, and the story took on a life of its own.



Lucille Hachtel (she/her) is a junior at Senn High School. She is an Intern at the Chicago Public Library and Co-Editor-in-Chief of her school’s newspaper. She is also the secretary of her school’s Model UN team and plays on the Badminton team. “First Days of Summer” is her second published work; her short story, “In the Modern World,” took fourth prize in the prose category of the Randall Albers Young Writers Awards in 2025. “The First Days of Summer” is inspired by a reflection on her younger and older selves.



Livee Pohlmann (she/her) is a sophomore at Lincoln-Way West High School. “The Birth of a Siren” is her first published short story and her second published work. She has previously had her poem published in her high school’s literary magazine, and she has written two unpublished novel-length works. Livee writes and designs pages for her school’s yearbook and participates in Creative Writing Club. She also plays badminton for Lincoln-Way West’s junior varsity team. Livee was inspired to write “The Birth of a Siren” by her long standing fascination with sirens and other lore and by the struggles women face in their own battles to be believed. She hopes to convey in all of her works a deeper exploration of the human experience through the medium of fantasy worlds.



Chloe Xu (she/her) is a junior at Adlai E. Stevenson High School who serves as a member of the Spoken Word Team. She has been recognized by YoungArts, National Poetry Quarterly, and the National Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. Her work has been published in *Psalterly and Lyre*, *Teen Ink*, and her school literary magazine *The WIT*, among others. She wrote “Abecedarian Appeal” as a response to the overturning of Roe v. Wade. When she is not reading or writing poetry, she enjoys playing French horn and harness training her cat.



Liam Benham is a young writer based in Chicago, Illinois. He attends the Creative Writing program at The Chicago High School for the Arts and has been published in several student collections. Benham's favorite animal is a dachshund, and his favorite color is orange. 1st place winner of The Randall Albers Young Writers Award for poetry in 2024, he is primarily known for his thought-provoking stories and unconventional narratives throughout all mediums of writing.



Sofi Vargas is a freshman at East Leyden High School and is celebrating her first published work. An active participant in Writers Week, the school's annual poetry-slam-style celebration of student voices, she enjoys exploring creative expression even as she continues to grow her confidence as a writer. Outside of writing, she is deeply connected to her family's bilingual world; although she is only partially bilingual herself, her experiences navigating a majority of her family being Spanish-only speakers and a few bilingual relatives have shaped both her identity and her artistic inspiration. Her frustration with relying on others to translate — and her desire to bridge the language gap on her own — motivated her to enroll in Spanish Heritage, even though the class has been more challenging than she hoped. These experiences also inspired the piece she submitted, which reflects her longing to belong more fully in her family's linguistic and cultural space. Driven by a strong sense of justice and a desire to advocate for others. She is considering a future in law enforcement or pursuing a career as a lawyer.



Camila Ortiz (she/her) is a senior at Lincoln Park High School and a student in the International Baccalaureate program. She will attend Fordham University in New York City this fall to study Economics and Art History. Although she only began writing poetry this winter, writing has long been a natural form of self-expression for her. “Mount Helicon” is her first completed poem. Camila also serves as treasurer of Lincoln Park's National Honor Society and captains the school's soccer team. The poem was first drafted in the early hours of her 18th birthday, inspired by reflections on the search for artistic inspiration after a late night out.

The Future of Chicago Literature

By Kayleigh McNamara

In anticipation of the Randall Albers Young Writers Award Ceremony, I had the opportunity to speak with Randall Albers and Barry Benson, who both currently serve on the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame's advisory council. Their decades-long friendship led to a conversation brimming with inside jokes, playful ribbing, and an evident admiration for each other's work. We discussed the inspiration behind the awards and their hopes for its future. I asked them about their own experience as young writers.

Barry Benson: When I was a kid I loved to write. I was passionate about writing from a very early age. Any adult who would read my stack of stories was my favorite person in the whole world. I understand and recall the value and the motivation that comes from having that validation. Writing, first of all, is its own reward. I remember that feeling even as a very young person. But, having other people read your work and appreciate it is really critical, not just for the formation of young writers but for the formation of young people. I took my stories to a few young writers contests. I remember going to a conference one time and we all sat at a table eating cookies and we had to read our stories. I ventured out and wrote what I thought was just a standard horror story. But I'll never forget, I was reading the part about a mad scientist's brain exploding. I looked up and the teacher, or our table's adult chaperone, was in the middle of eating a cookie and she just crumpled it to crumbs in her hand. I realized I might have gone too far. The next step could have been sending me to therapy because it was a pretty dark story. But anyway, the point is that it made a huge difference and it let me know that there was not just the personal validation that comes with any creative process, but there was so much more to it. There was an opportunity. For young people, writing really can be a thing in their lives later on. It can be a career choice. It can be something that they continue to do to find fulfillment. It was so important and so meaningful during those formative years

Randall (Randy) Albers: I was more of a literary critic than a creative writer. I was more interested in reading and analyzing text. When I made the leap to creative writing, it wasn't that far. I could feel that I was coming at a text from

the inside out, trying to understand how things worked, then applying it in my own writing. Even before I knew how to write, I loved hearing stories. For me that's really where it started. I was very young but I remember my mother reading stories to me out loud. She helped me understand that there was a code on the page that related to those sounds. The music of those sounds eventually resolved itself into the magic of writing. That's kind of what writing is—It creates this dream world. One of the things that I love most about this contest is that we give the students the chance to read their work to the audience. You learn so much about your writing and the writing process by hearing it loud to an audience. It's very different from reading it to yourself. I think it's important to hear it out loud. The movement of voice has such an organizing power. It's such a magical power, the physical voice coming from the page to the audience. Going all the way back to the cave's mouth when they were probably telling stories, sitting around a fire somewhere, part of that was to develop a kind of group cohesion. I think that's still what happens when we're at the Harold Washington Library and hearing these wonderful students' writing. It's got a great unifying feel.

BB: It really connects us. Being in the audience at these events is an amazing experience. At the risk of sounding dramatic, there's so much love and support in the crowd. There's so much enthusiasm and goodwill from the adults and the other students, who in most cases haven't met one another but there is so much mutual support. It's remarkable to be a part of that experience. Being in the audience at the Randy Albers Young Writers Award is an experience unto itself.

RA: It's always a little embarrassing for me to have my name so prominently displayed. I'm very grateful to Barry for coming up with this idea originally. He said he wanted to do something through the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame and attach my name to it. I said as long as it's something that might encourage writers, I'd be fine with it. I'm grateful to Don Evans, Amy Danzer, and everyone at the CLHOF for their support. Carrie Muehle ran with this for the first couple of years and did a remarkable job. It took the effort of a lot of people. It's rewarding. I think it's rewarding for the students and the parents. It's all too often that young writers get ignored or told that they're just doing something for fun—that there are no career outcomes. I've spent a lot of my

life in education trying to disabuse people of those kinds of notions. I really feel that creative writers develop wonderful skills that are widely applicable. They just have to figure out a way to apply their creativity to getting a job. That's part of the message I try to give to the writers who come to the awards ceremony.

BB: I would say that the awards are emblematic of the great work being done by the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame. It's another way of shining light on talented writers who deserve the attention. The CLHOF mission speaks of honoring writers past, present, and future. We were doing a great job of honoring deceased writers and calling attention to the work that they've accomplished. Same thing happily for living writers. Now through this award we're looking at new generations of writers. And we're lifting them as we're doing with these other cohorts of writers. It feels like it's completing something. Not to make it too tidy, but we've got the past, the present, and the future. It's really wonderful that we have this missing piece that we're now honoring. The award embodies so many things about Randy. His career has been about helping people. He's a generous person who is caring and giving by nature. He has been responsible for inspiring the writing careers for so many people. So many young people have taken his classes, learned from him, and have lived to talk about it. In my mind and the minds of many other people, including those folks who were on the board of the CLHOF at the time, there was no question, this would be a great way to honor Randy and to acknowledge his lifetime of accomplishments in inspiring young creative minds.

If you get a group of Chicago writers together, you'll often hear them lamenting or groaning about Chicago being thought of often as flyover country in terms of its literary output. One of the great things about CLHOF in general is that it spotlights all the people whose work really counters that line of thinking. But, through this award we're also making it so that Chicago is not just flyover country. We're developing these new generations of writers and hopefully many of them stay in Chicago and continue to honor this city through their talents. If you look at it that way, it's a part of a bigger puzzle. There's a lot more going on by recognizing people and celebrating their talents.

RA: And there is so much talent out there. When you're hearing these stories being read at the event, you realize the power of imagination is so great among these people. It's inspiring and it gives you hope for the future. I think it's important for us to understand that this city is a great place for writers. It's a great place for nurturing writers, for celebrating writers, and allowing writers to grow and develop and to find support. That's what we're trying to do with this contest, certainly, but I think it has been the main emphasis of this organization for a long time and it's really looking more and more outward. I'm very happy about that.

Kayleigh McNamara: The contest has already grown so much in its four years. What is your hope for the future of RAYWA?

RA: There have been a lot of great students and I think one of the greatest things has been the increase in submissions every year. That's the hard work of Don and the associate board, building connections to schools. The more we can make those connections the better. It helps us tap into the diversity of Chicago which is, of course, in my opinion, one of the great strengths of the city. I'd like to see more and more schools involved. I think the more we can celebrate the diversity here, the greater the strength and the greater support there will be for writing. I taught at Columbia for many years. Longer than I probably would like to admit. Nostradamus and I were very good friends.

BB: You called him junior.

RA: *Laughter.* Yeah we were buddies. The thing I loved about Columbia was its diversity. People sitting in the same classroom and hearing stories about different cultures. I always thought there was as much learning in the stories being traded as there was in the rest of their education.

BB: I certainly agree with everything you just said and would like to underline some of your points with a dark thick marker. I, too, love this opportunity for its ability to embrace and bring in diverse voices. That's something that the CLHOF has always been about. Through recognizing writers who are up and coming, it can plant the seeds and live on which is a really beautiful thing. I've worked as a non-profit consultant so I'm always thinking bigger, better, more. One day I'd like to have something tantamount to a young writers jamboree with an entire theater of young writers who are there because

they've submitted their writing. They can break off into groups, and maybe they don't read about the exploding brains of scientists, they'll have more suitable stories, but they get to share and they get to interact. I think there's an opportunity to facilitate enduring connections.

KM: Community is such an important part of writing. I think that's an important message to share. What other wisdom would you like to impart on our young writers?

RA: The bottom line is write. When you're stuck, write, and keep writing. We're faced with an age of suppression, especially the suppression of certain voices. But, one of the things that we deal with as writers is self censorship. What keeps us from writing? What keeps us from writing honestly? What keeps us from writing the secret stories that are often the most powerful? They can come from anybody as long as people feel the permission to write the material they want to write and say it in their own voice.

BB: What he said. It's about expressing yourself and pushing yourself and knowing that what you have to say is valid and valuable and people will be interested. It's just a matter of sitting down and making it happen.

RA: You said that so much better than I, Barry, gee.

BB: Shorter. And that's not something I do very often.

RA: Anybody can be shorter than I am.

Laughter

Kayleigh McNamara is a graduate student of Publishing at DePaul University. She has a B.A. in English & Creative Writing from the University of Iowa where she was nominated for the Iowa Review David Hamilton Prize. Kayleigh currently serves on the Associate Board at the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame.

Daisy is Waiting for Us

by Lucille Malloy

I don't remember when we decided that Daisy hadn't died. I remember driving home on what would've been her birthday, with a cake in the backseat where she would've sat but I think that was just confirmation. Proof that we wouldn't admit it.

The cake was chocolate with white and red frosting. A plastic Mickey and Minnie Mouse were stuck into the top, holding up presents, cheering silently. It had been an impulse to buy it, stupid, pointless. But it had been her favorite color, with cartoon characters that had made her laugh on Saturday mornings. It would have made her so happy. And to be honest I liked walking up to the display counter and asking for it. Watching as the saleswoman put it in a box marked *happy birthday!*, pretending to be slightly impatient as though someone was waiting at home with presents and balloons. I was proud of myself when she noticed.

"You've got a birthday coming up?" She smiled, watching me out of the corner of her eye as she totaled it up.

"Yeah, it's for after tonight. I'm cutting it kind of close."

"Your son or daughter? Or are you the Mickey Mouse fan?" She added with a chuckle.

"You got me." I laughed. "Actually it's for my daughter, Daisy."

"What a sweet name. Who's her favorite?"

"Minnie, probably. But she loves Goofy and Scrooge McDuck too. She thinks they're the funniest."

"Well then." She went back to the counter and took out a tray of cookies, each with a Minnie Mouse face on top in icing. Placing next to the cake box she said, "On the house."

On the way home, a voice in the back of my head told me I should feel guilty. But I didn't. Perhaps it wasn't a lie, Daisy *had* loved Minnie Mouse, it *was* her birthday, who was to say she still didn't, somewhere. That's not why I bought it. I bought it because I liked pretending, pretending to be that man who had a little daughter at home, waiting for me. I liked pretending to be the man I used to be.

When Cheryl found it, I wasn't sure how she would react. I hadn't meant

to show her but I couldn't bring myself to throw it away either so I had put it in the fridge while I tried to think of something. I had been afraid she would cry or get angry but she didn't. She smiled a little then picked up her purse and told me she'd be back later. I waited for her, she probably wanted to be alone, give herself time to think.

I waited in the living room for her, watching TV. It had stopped being entertainment for me, instead it was just a way to make my thoughts stop.

I wish I hadn't bought that cake. I wish Cheryl would talk about her, I wish she would come back, I wish Daisy was here-

Dulling my thoughts through images was easier. Just pictures and sound. My hand pressed the remote buttons but my eyes didn't see. National Geographic, news, ESPN, Discovery. National Geographic, news, ESPN, Discovery. But it always came back to -

I wish Daisy was here.

Cheryl didn't say anything when she came back. She came into the kitchen, carrying a shopping bag that she set on the counter. I watched her waiting, imagining her yelling at me or bursting into tears any second. But she didn't.

"Can you set the table, hon?" Her voice was steady, more than steady even. Maybe happy.

"What?"

"Can you set the table while I find the candles?"

I didn't say anything, I couldn't. Cheryl didn't notice though.

"Dan, can you please set the table? Daisy will be bouncing off the walls in a second and I'm trying to find these things."

My head moved, nodding up and down. My voice answered back.

"I think they're under the sink. I'm glad she's looking forward to it."

Cheryl placed the cake in the center of the table, next to the presents she had taken out of the shopping bag. We sat across from each other with Daisy's place at the head. We watched as her candles blew out and her dinner sat there. I asked her questions about school, Cheryl asked if she liked dinner.

Cheryl spoke like she used to, strong and happy. I even got her to laugh a couple of times. It seemed like magic.

After dinner while Cheryl washed the dishes I quietly put the presents in Daisy's room. We couldn't open them, they were hers. And I couldn't take them away with Cheryl around. For the same reasons a magician doesn't show

you the trapdoor.

The next day Cheryl drove Daisy to school, packing jelly sandwiches for lunch. And I picked her up, making sure to throw the stale sandwiches away before Cheryl checked her backpack. We did that the next day and the next. By Daisy's next birthday, Cheryl had returned her car seat to the back seat and I had torn off the wrapping paper of last year's presents and placed them around her room like she was just playing with them. At work Cheryl told people about Daisy's grades and school play and I didn't explain it to friends when they saw me driving home with an empty car seat.

When Cheryl told Daisy to clean her room I'd put away her toys but leave the books on the floor like she used to. When I mentioned Daisy was probably starting to grow out of her shoes, Cheryl took her shopping. After a couple weeks, I brushed the news shoes across the lawn to give them the grass stains Daisy's always had. Daisy had come home and this time she never left.

Cheryl and I went to her 8th grade graduation and we signed our Christmas cards from the three of us. In high school Daisy took up cheerleading and yearbook. She came home from school, smiling, and I never let Cheryl see me throw away the lunch she had packed that morning. On Fridays we drive to her school and wait in the parking lot to pick her up. It was our special day where we'd go out to dinner or the movies. Cheryl would wait in the car for a few minutes until I came back with Daisy. We'd give her a chance to wave goodbye to her friends then leave for our evening.

It was spring when it happened. Cheryl was quiet when we pulled up to the school. I had taken a wrong turn on the way there and passed by Green Meadows. The gates were austere and tall, either for keeping out foxes or discouraging mourners. Green Meadows was several hundred acres, with a chapel on the west side and even a man made pond. But it couldn't distract from the fact that somewhere in there was a small stone that said *Beloved Daughter, Daisy Edwards*.

I pulled up in front of the school as usual. Cheryl watched the kids leaving, talking to their friends, texting and walking, dragging sports bags. I never knew what to say to her when things were like this. I occupied myself changing radio stations, never staying on one too long, just like the TV. News, sports, pop music, then back to news. I couldn't escape as well with just the sound but it was better than silence.

"Daisy." I jumped a little. Cheryl didn't notice though, she said her name

again. “Daisy.”

She was watching a girl walking away from school with a friend. It was hard to see her well from far away but I knew she was the one Cheryl was looking at. Cheryl opened the door and followed her, almost running to catch up with her.

“Daisy!” The two girls glanced behind them briefly but they didn’t realize she meant them until she came close.

“Daisy, sweetie, you’re going the wrong way.”

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s alright, come on, your father’s in the car.”

“My dad?” She looked at me, catching up with Cheryl. She looked back and forth between the two of us, trying to decide if she was serious.

“Come on, Daisy.” Cheryl didn’t sound impatient, she was smiling, happy that who she thought was Daisy was here. Because she did look like Daisy, if she had ever been that age. Her hair was reddish brown, straight instead of wavy but still very similar. And she was small for her age as well, which probably wouldn’t have happened to Daisy since both our families are so tall. But her eyes were brown, brown that was exactly like Daisy’s.

“My name isn’t Daisy-” The girl said.

“Of course it is, stop messing around, honey.”

Her friend jumped. “Her name is Cora and she doesn’t know you.”

“I’m sure you’re trying to be nice, sweetie, but I’m her mother, I know she is.” Cheryl’s smile became frozen, locked in place.

“You’re not my mother.” Poor Cora’s eyes kept darting back to me asking for help.

A man who I think was a teacher was walking towards us now, teachers are always good at smelling trouble.

“Daisy, stop this. Please get in the car.” Cheryl’s voice didn’t sound angry, it was desperate. She took her hand, not tightly but it still alarmed her.

“Get away from me-”

“What’s going on?” That was the teacher, he had joined by then.

“It’s alright, I’m her mother-”

“No, she’s not.” That was her friend again.

“No, I am. I am!” Cheryl’s eyes began to water, her voice to raise.

“I’m calling the police-”

“She’s my daughter!”

“She’s not, Cheryl.” My voice was quiet compared to the others. Cheryl heard me though.

“But Daisy-”

“She’s dead.” I couldn’t look at her pain so I looked at Cora. She was crying too. Maybe from pity or fear, I couldn’t blame her for either.

Cheryl gave in, she let go of the girl’s hand. She walked away, tears running down her face.

“She’s dead, Cheryl. Let’s go.” We walked back to the car, my arm around her. The teacher and girls watched us leave. I think the teacher was still considering calling the police but he didn’t. We both cried on the way home. When we pulled up to the house we didn’t get out right away. I looked at Cheryl, she was still crying and still missing Daisy. I hated watching her feel like that. And I knew there was only one thing that could make it stop. I forced my voice to be happy, like we used to be.

“We should go inside, honey. Daisy is waiting for us.” Her tears stopped and the game continued.

“Daisy is Waiting For Us” grabbed me from the very first sentence—“I don’t remember when we decided that Daisy hadn’t died”—and didn’t let go until the very last. This fully-developed gut-punch of a short story examines grief in all of its complexities; parents unable to cope with the death of their child decide to pretend she’s still with them, continuing the game until it isn’t a game anymore. The cinematic detail made me feel like I was watching a movie; at times, I cheered them on, and at other times, I covered my eyes and begged them not to do what they did. I deeply understood these characters, not only because I’m a parent myself, but because the author painted their interior struggles so clearly through their external actions, especially the devastating climax (I screamed!). Congratulations to the author on this excellent work, and please, please, keep going.

– Megan Stielstra, Final Judge, is the author of three collections: *Everyone Remain Calm*, *Once I Was Cool*, and *The Wrong Way to Save Your Life*. She is an acquiring editor at Northwestern University Press.

Half Present Moments Among Lasting Memories

by Vanessa Anda

I will never forget the scent inside his car, or the way the seat felt against my back on cold mornings. I will always remember how he urged me to get in, his voice a constant reminder that I needed to be on time for school. *Oh how I wish I were still early to school.* The engine was already running when I slid into the passenger seat. The interior already smelled like coffee and his packed lunch for his long shift, the scent so closely tied to him that I never imagined it could exist without him. The radio played softly, the same radio station he loved to have on every morning even though it often annoyed me. The voices behind the radio hosts blended with the low rumble of the engine, filling in the quiet space between us. As the pale morning light stretched across the windshield, my father glanced at me as he was pulling out of the parking spot, smiling the way he always did with his tired eyes.

“Did you sleep enough?” He asked, glancing over at me briefly before returning his attention to the road.

I wondered the same thing about him but didn’t dare to ask, I knew he hadn’t slept much like always. I shrugged, staring out the window as houses blurred past us. My mind was often elsewhere, thinking about that test I had to take as I stepped out the car, or maybe that class I dreaded going to. He kept talking anyway, reminding me to eat, to be careful, to call him later. I nodded along, half-listening, assuming there would always be another car ride, another set of reminders, another morning like this one. As he pulled up to the front of the school, I realized I had reached for the door handle way too quickly. However, I brushed that moment off, telling myself that I would see him later that night anyway. He told me he loved me and even though I said it back, I said it without looking at him, already halfway out.

“I’ll see you later,” he murmured.

Later that day, my phone buzzed in my pocket while I was in math class. I glanced down at the screen discreetly, and his name lit up the screen.

I didn’t answer.

I told myself that I would call him when I had a moment, maybe when I was back home. Maybe I’d stay up late to talk to him when he came home. I

told myself there would be time. There always had been.

There wasn't.

The next time I saw my father, I wasn't met with his familiar kind eyes or the easy smile he always saved for his "little girl". Instead, my gaze fell on pale, unmoving skin, his body resting silently inside a casket. The air in that cramped room reeked of incense and flower bouquets, nothing like the comforting scent of his car. His hands were folded neatly, the same hands that once rested on the steering wheel just days before, tapping softly along with the radio. Those same hands that led me through my 8th grade graduation, same hands that walked me to Pre-K. I felt uneasy in that room. That couldn't be that same man who had been there through all 15 years of my life. I couldn't comprehend how his usual energetic body who could withstand everything could suddenly be put to rest. My mind kept drifting back to that missed call, as if answering it now might somehow undo this mess.

His call remained unanswered, no voicemail nor explanation, just proof that he had reached for me one last time and I hadn't been there to answer. The memory of that car ride returned to me in fragments: the hum of the engine, the softness in his voice, the way I had rushed out of his car that morning. What once felt like an ordinary morning pressed against my thoughts with unbearable intensity; every word I half-hearted feeling permanent, every second I didn't stay feeling irreversible.

In the days that followed, that missed call reminded me how often we move through life distracted. How easily we assume that there will be another ride, another call, another chance to hear someone out. I had always treated my father's presence like something that would always wait for me, that didn't require urgency or attention.

I've come to understand that love follows us in unexpected ways, whether it be through a sudden phone call you think you can return, or a familiar speech given to you every morning. However, it won't follow us forever; we must acknowledge it and grasp what it really means to us at that moment, because it may be the very last moment.

That quiet morning in his car was never meant to be memorable. It was ordinary in every possible way. That is what makes it impossible to forget. As I move through the most important moments in my life, I've acknowledged that the moments we rush through are often the ones that stay with us the longest. Memory tends to focus on things that don't make sense at times,

holding onto the seconds we sometimes half-live. I carry that morning with me, in the pauses I take when life seems to be moving too fast, the goodbyes I make sure to cling onto, the calls I make sure to make before assuming there will be time later. Sometimes, when the air is cold once again, and I settle into a once more familiar car seat, I return to that cold morning reminding myself to be present before reaching for the door.

Because before I know it, those half-present moments can become lasting memories.

“Half Present Memories Among Lasting Memories” begins with bodily impressions--the feeling of a cold car seat, the drone of a radio, the scent inside a vehicle. These sensory details are so vivid and ephemeral that I sense grief before I even learn the narrator is reconstructing a last memory--a routine ride with her father to school. The moment haunts this story, and the narrator returns to it again and again in an attempt to process an event that resists understanding, but accrues meaning. Pay attention, she tells us. Be present. Through the act of describing, circling, and witnessing, the narrator finds a way to share her experience and to keep her father’s memory alive. And what a voice--sharp, observant, and immediate. I expect we’ll be hearing more from this wise young author in the near future.

– Rachel Swearingen, Back Judge, is the author of *How to Walk on Water and Other Stories*, which which received the New American Press Fiction Prize and was named the 2021 Chicago Writers Association Book of the Year, as well as a *New York Times Book Review* “New & Noteworthy Selection.”

The Sanity Memorial Center and Other Recollections of Reform and Our Beautiful Country

by Nate Schieber

Sol 18th, 2113 (July 5th, old calendar–estimated)

Columbia District, PAS

The SMC was considered one of the most important landmarks in the People's American States. In fact, it consistently ranked in Top Ten lists, with only a few exceptions. One reviewer even placed it as high as third.

It was a beautiful work of art, some said. A perfect depiction of the exact moment the country had shifted for the better. The only reason it wasn't ranked third (or higher) on every Top Ten list was its proximity to other larger landmarks in the Columbia District.

Ending the forced vacation timeframe was one of Henry's favorite recent decisions made by High Governor Thorne. He had always wanted to visit the Columbia District, and now that his schedule was finally free, he decided he'd rather go during a month where fewer tourists were there.

Something that surprised him was how nice the trains were. It seemed that the Columbia District had better levitation tech, as it was much less bumpy than the ones where Henry came from. There was also simply a better feel about them, with clean cars showcasing the best of the PAS's combination of brilliant minds and cleanliness.

It was natural for the nation's capital city to seem superior to the others, so as to impress any foreign visitors that might stop by. Still, Henry knew better than to think that this was mere vanity or selfishness on the part of High Governor Thorne, as all evidence suggested the high governor was above such petty things as narcissism.

Despite a lack of crowds that day, Henry still had to be scanned before entering the park. The Reason Agent that scanned him didn't seem particularly happy that day, but then again, watching tourists seemed a more uneventful and boring job than catching rebels to Henry.

The architect that designed the Sanity Memorial Center truly had done

an excellent job, Henry thought to himself as he stepped inside. They had managed to take a place that could easily seem like a boring history museum and transformed into a fascinating look at a flawed ideology.

Wall to wall, in great detail, was an archive of all the major scandals throughout the existence of the PAS. As it turned out, a great number of those scandals had been caused by Logicals, the members of the disgraced former Sanity Party. The damage they had caused to the country would have been irreversible had it not been for High Governor Thorne's sharp thinking. In fact, it had been so great that entirely new dictionaries needed to be printed, revealing that sanity and logic no longer described something good and important, but rather the ideas of those who tried to put the world in a box and examine it like heartless scientists. Alas, their assault on the near flawless English vocabulary could not be undone.

Henry enjoyed the whole exhibition, but admittedly skipped or rushed through much of the indoor section, as most did. What he had really come for was the centerpiece, the part of the SMC that made it, well, the SMC.

The statue was modeled around the ancient myth of the fall of Icarus, depicting a figure wearing torn angel's wings plummeting from the sky. It was so realistic that the metallic sheen of the feathers almost made them appear as if they had been plucked from the real thing.

At first glance, the figure appeared to be some nameless, faceless legend, born straight from the sculptor's imagination. Even those versed in history might think this at first. Upon further inspection, however, the statue's true nature was revealed.

Enough time had passed since the event that, while it was still an important social and political milestone, its recency had faded, and it was beginning to slip into history and legend itself.

In the early days of the PAS, as with all societies—great ones included—the country was experimenting with different types of government. There was no perfect system, the saying had gone, and what a silly saying it had been.

Nevertheless, one could not fault the founders, as they had not had the foresight to see what would come of their first form of governance.

In order to provide balance, the founders had deemed it necessary for two main heads of state to be selected. These heads of state were called Consuls, and each represented one of the two leading parties, the Rational Party and the Sanity Party. Alongside the Consuls, there were also representatives from

the Workers' and Artists' guilds, but most of the major decision making was placed in the hands of the heads of state. Four cycles of Consuls went by, until a critical decision was made: the appointing of Consuls Jordan and Thorne.

Thorne was a young, likable Rational while Jordan was a middle-aged, misguided Logical, which generally tended to be the dynamic among the two parties. While Consul Thorne had done many great things for the PAS, even during his short tenure, Jordan had fought as hard as he could to prevent those decisions, likely due to pressure from other power-hungry Logicals.

Evidently, all that pressure had been too much on the poor man, and he ended his misery with the help of a tall building.

At the time, it was considered inevitable but tragic. High Governor Thorne had helped the public grow to see the brightsides—which existed for every situation. Yes, perhaps it was a rather unfortunate way for it to happen, but Consul Jordan's death had shown the flaws in the Consul system, and helped Thorne make the completely justified case for the rearrangement of the PAS's system of government.

Also, it was rather funny that such a strange individual as Jordan had been appointed, wasn't it? Yes. Of course, the Sanity Memorial Center acknowledged that the death of anyone loyal to the PAS, including misguided loyalty, was a bad thing, but it did not attempt to suggest that Jordan had been a good leader.

There was much joy now within the country, and the death of Sanity—no matter how it was achieved—was a key contributor, if not the sole one.

Henry was slightly too young to have heard of this, having been but ten years old at the time of Jordan's death, but there was a theory. A theory that perhaps, Consul Jordan had not jumped off the building, but instead been pushed by someone hired by High Governor Thorne, who wanted the position to himself. Due to the treasonous (and incredibly unlikely) nature of this theory, most adults who were old enough to remember the initial aftershock of Consul Jordan's death decided not to share this theory—and the less it was spoken about, the less it was remembered.

Henry did not know any of this, but when he noticed a woman of about fifty or sixty sitting on one of the benches by the statue looking in his direction, he couldn't help but become curious. The woman didn't exactly appear trustworthy, but there were enough Reason Agents nearby for Henry to decide it was worth it to approach her.

“You been here before?” she asked.

“Uh, no, I haven’t,” Henry said. “You?”

“Oh, yes.” She chuckled. “I remember when all this was going on.

Everyone was so scared, wondering what would happen in the future. I guess Thorne solved everything, or so I’ve heard. Anyway, I’m sure you’re aware of the theory about Consul Jordan.”

“No, I don’t believe I am,” Henry said.

“Eh, it’s all nonsense anyway. Some people say that Thorne killed Jordan, but nah. Whole nonviolence policy and whatnot. Thorne is not the type to break rules, just bend and rewrite them to suit his will.”

Henry scowled. “So you’re one of those. Think everything Thorne does is evil because you’re jealous or something.”

“You listen here, kid,” the woman whispered, suddenly urgent. “You want to know the truth? Thorne didn’t kill Jordan. Ordered his family taken out in a fire is what he did. Wanted some bill passed or another, from what I’ve heard, ended up with the whole government to himself.”

Henry was pondering this, almost believing this preposterous statement, when someone placed a hand on his shoulder. He turned around to see a couple of Reason Agents behind him.

“Excuse me sir,” one said. “This individual you were speaking to has been spreading misinformation to innocent museum-goers here at the SMC, and we require your assistance apprehending her. Will you assist?”

“All right,” Henry said. “What do you need?”

“Just take this, please.” The Reason Agent handed him a Justice taser, which Henry pointed at the woman.

“She shouldn’t be dangerous,” the agent reassured. “It’s just a safeguard.”

The woman hardly even appeared to resist or defend her case. She simply hung her head low, raised her hands in the air, and allowed Henry and the agents to escort her out of the museum, while muttering, “This whole place is one goddamn echo chamber.” Once they were outside, the Reason Agents told Henry that he could go now, that he had been a great help, and they were so pleased to see citizens being so noble and upstanding.

Henry tried to remain cool, but he couldn’t help but think about how awesome it was that he had gotten to assist with the betterment of society in such a major way. Still, there was more of the SMC to look at, so he walked back inside to continue his tour.

As Henry walked away from the Sanity Memorial Center building, satisfied with his visit, he considered how strange it was that some claimed their freedom was being taken away, when a Reason Agent had willingly entrusted him temporarily with a weapon. And that woman, with her crazy rants and theories? The PAS truly was a country of diverse opinions indeed.

The one thing he was sure of was that he felt bad for Consul Jordan, who had never gotten to see the amazing country his fellow Consul had built. This day was a glorious day, as all had been for twenty-six years.

For those interested in the fascinating history of a unique country, additional stories from the PAS may be released as soon as they are confirmed to be in compliance with both the perceived and official truth.

Nate Schieber put a lot of creative thought into building a fleshed-out alternative history and society. The casual, mundane style of the writing in contrast with the dystopian concepts really sets the tone for their setting. But what I found most memorable was the ending! "The Sanity Memorial Center" isn't afraid to play with complex ideas and makes its reader uncomfortable in all the right ways.

– Kelci Dean, Back Judge, is a long-serving CLHOF Associate Board member and a ranking bookseller at The Book Cellar.

The Cartography of Almost

by Kabir Singh

Salt crusts my lashes as I cough myself awake. The storm that swallowed the *Meridian* is gone; only peach dawn and the hiss of surf remain. Ten yards off, Henry kneels beside Mr. Mehta's decapitated head. The eyes aren't rolled back. They're open, surprised, the way he looked when Henry beat him at chess during our lunch periods.

No other classmates. No debris. Just white sand and the hollow feeling the Atlantic has finished its roll call.

I count to 10 before I stand. Henry is still kneeling.

"We should—" I start.

"I know what we should do," he says, but he doesn't move. His fingers worry the drawstring of his hoodie, the one I've seen him twist during rounds when he's about to lose. *About to lose*. I want to laugh. Instead I taste bile.

We don't recoup. We don't move on. We stand there while the sun climbs and the tide turns Mr. Mehta's head slightly, politely, away from us. When we finally walk, we don't speak. We count our steps aloud—one, two, three—like children proving we still exist.

The palm trees offer shade but no comfort. Henry walks ahead, his shadow stretching long and thin, and I find myself watching his shoulder blades move beneath the damp fabric, memorizing the rhythm because it is the only thing in motion that I recognize.

The shoreline turns craggy. Sheer cliffs rise like black spires, and in their weathered faces, caves nestle—dark mouths that might swallow us or shelter us. We don't discuss which. We simply climb, and when Henry's hand finds a hold, I note the scarring across his knuckles. *He's a boxer*, I remember suddenly. *Sophomore year. He went to nationals, placed 4th, and went crazy on a judge over a bad call*. I wasn't there, but I heard about it. Everyone heard about everything, eventually.

In the tide pools, bright blue mushrooms bloom. They illuminate the shallow water with a bioluminescence that has no business being this color, this steady. Our stomachs speak first—a rumble from Henry, an answering twist from mine.

"We don't know if they're—" I start.

“Poisonous?” Henry’s laugh is a dry click. “Mr. Mehta’s head is staring at seagulls. We’re already in the story where people die.”

We split one cap. The flesh is rubbery, tasteless. I swallow and wait for death.

Instead: the world tilts.

A translucent grid snaps over my vision. Contour lines etch themselves across the cliff face, pulsing teal where fresh water seeps from rock, red claw-marks throbbing in the caves above us. A HUD for reality. I turn my head and the map scrolls, seamless, responsive. When I look at Henry, his mouth forms the same silent word: *Map*.

We test it. Sprint, and the grid refreshes with our momentum. Freeze, and it stalls, waiting. Drift within ten meters of each other, and static swallows everything— the world reduced to guesswork.

So we stay apart. Voices our only tether, shouting distances across ravines, around bends. The island becomes a game board I don’t want to play. Crabs ping green; oysters glimmer with protein icons; a jag-shaped cave promises shelter. We loot like thieves, filling pockets with rain-pooled water and a cracked lighter from a splintered lobster trap. I find a sea grape branch and use it to lash the lighter to my wrist, the salt-crusting leaves stinging where they’ve lashed my shins raw.

Night drops. In the cave, we huddle on opposite sides, ten meters of damp stone between us. The map keeps drawing itself, pixel by pixel, across my vision even when I close my eyes. I see Henry’s heartbeat rendered as a soft gold pulse in my periphery—eighty-two beats per minute, steady, alive. I watch it until I sleep, and in sleep I dream of Mr. Mehta’s eyes, open, surprised, *disappointed*.

Day three, the rectangle appears.

Perfect. Man-made. Half-swallowed by jungle northwest of us. The HUD shows no predators inside a two-hundred-meter radius—a dead zone too clean, the red claw-marks simply stopping at its border as if bitten off.

“We should check it,” Henry says. We’ve been avoiding each other’s gaze for thirty-six hours, but now he looks at me, and the map flickers, uncertain.

The HUD guides us up a ravine no wider than a hallway. Every handhold glows pre-highlighted, optimal, efficient. I don’t trust it. I want to choose wrong, to fall, to feel something uncalculated. Instead I climb perfectly,

mechanically, while Henry's breath echoes above me.

We crest at dusk.

The mansion reveals itself below, three stories of stone, windows like empty eye sockets. Beyond it, a dock. A white dinghy bobbing. In my overlay, the fuel gauge glows gold: $\frac{3}{4}$ full.

We descend, knees pistoning. Slip through a shattered conservatory. Glass crunches, and the map updates room by room: pantry, silverware drawer, first-aid triangle. I notice Henry lagging, his gold pulse flickering higher—ninety-four, ninety-seven. When I look back, he's staring at a framed photograph on the wall. A sailing team. *MagPeptides: 1987*. Boys in blazers that could be our blazers, smiling the way we smiled on the deck three days ago, before.

"Don't," I say, but I don't know what I'm asking him not to do.

In the ballroom, the yellow dot we've been avoiding sits upright.

Not a skeleton. Not yet. A body in a captain's coat so mildewed it has become something else, something vegetal. The logbook clenched in finger bones. I don't want to read it. The HUD highlights it in urgent amber, *priority objective*, and I hate the map for being hungry, for treating this death as loot.

Henry reads aloud, his voice strange: "Fuel for one crossing. Storm cycle repeats every nineteen months. They always send the bright ones. They always eat the blue." He looks up. "What does that mean, *they always eat the blue*?"

I don't answer. The map is showing me something new—red blooms erupting outside, a dozen, two dozen, closing fast. Boars. Drawn by the canned beef we ripped open in the pantry, the beef I didn't need but took because the HUD marked it *high value*.

Exit corridor: blocked.

The HUD redraws. Balcony, pergola, slope to dock. Ninety-second sprint. No hostiles in the path, but the static—if we run together, we'll be blind.

"We have to split," I say.

"Ten meters. We'll lose the map."

"We'll lose more if we stay."

Henry's eyes meet mine across the ballroom. The static doesn't come. The map holds, flickering, uncertain, as if it too is waiting.

"I ate two," he says. "Yesterday. While you were sleeping."

The confession hangs between us. I wait for the map to show me something—his pulse, a new icon, a warning. Nothing. Just Henry, seventeen,

too thin, his hoodie finally drying in the humid air.

“What do you see?” I ask.

“Not predators,” he whispers. “Not animals. I see—” He shakes his head. “Later. We have to run now.”

We grab the med-kit, a tarp, the logbook. We run.

Leap, roll. Sea grape branches lash our shins with salt-crusted leaves, and every footfall is pre-lit, optimal. I want to stumble. I want to choose. The dock posts swell into view; the dinghy bobs, painter slapping wood in a rhythm that matches Henry’s pulse in my peripheral vision—one-twenty, one-thirty.

I slash the rope with a shard of conservatory glass. Henry yanks the cord—once, twice—engine coughs, catches. The first boar skids onto the planks as we gun away, its tusks clicking shut on empty air that smells of diesel and copper.

The island shrinks. The HUD flickers as distance dilutes the signal, and I watch Henry’s gold pulse stutter, stutter, hold. At two kilometers, the overlay winks out. Leaving only salt wind. The soft throb of the fuel gauge, analog now, untrustworthy. Eighty kilometers of range. Sixty to the shipping lane.

Henry meets my eyes across the thwart. No static between us. Just the Atlantic and the names we carry—Mr. Mehta, the *Meridian*, the sailing team of 1987, the *they* who always send the bright ones, the *they* who cultivate blue in tide pools.

“What do you see?” I ask again. “When you look at the water. When you look at me.”

Henry is quiet for a long time. The engine putters. The sun rises, gilding the waves we came from.

“I see the map,” he says finally. “Still. Under everything. It’s showing me where we are, but not where we’re going. It’s showing me—” He touches his temple, the gesture helpless, young. “It’s showing me that we’re already dead in some versions. That this is just the one where we made it to the boat.”

I think of the logbook. *They always eat the blue.*

“Do you believe it?” I ask.

“I believe we’re going east,” he says. “I believe we have sixty kilometers and three-quarters tank. I believe—” He stops. Looks at me, really looks, and I see the map in his eyes, the grid overlaid on iris and grief, calculation and hope all scrambled together. I believe I beat Mr. Mehta at chess because he let me. I believe we don’t get to know which version we’re in until it’s over.”

The fuel gauge ticks down. The Atlantic swallows our wake.

I take the tiller. Henry sits beside me, close enough that in the old rules, we'd be blind, close enough that I can smell the salt on his hoodie, the mushroom-sweetness on his breath. The map is gone, and with it the certainty that we were ever meant to leave. But we are leaving. We are steering by sunrise, by guesswork, by the weight of names we haven't spoken yet, the dead we will carry home, the living we might still become.

Guidance enough, maybe. To get us somewhere. To get us *almost*.

The title alone “The Cartography of Almost” catches the reader because of the contrast between cartography—a map’s indication of accuracy—and the then surprising use of almost. It starts with a *Lord of the Flies*-esque class of boys stranded on an island after a storm at sea with only two survivors. However, it diverges from the expected when the boys, out of desperation, eat mushrooms that unlock a psychedelic map—a key to uncovering much more than the island. It becomes a story not about survival, but about the incomprehensible number of possibilities that amount into the present moment by fate. It’s ambiguous enough to beckon the reader to keep moving through the piece while offering enough concrete detail to lay down bearings; it’s a chess game of a story. Congratulations to the writer on the award, but even more so, the work itself. There is much potential to be discovered here.

– Reese Plagenz, Back Judge, is an undergraduate at DePaul University pursuing a BA in Psychology and English Literature. She is a recent graduate of the CLHOF internship program.

Abecedarian Appeal

by Chloe Xu

Arrest the woman out of my
blood & I'll stay naturally
childless. I choose calcification.
Dropsy swells a lead stomach until its
erection on the scalp of Capitol Hill & we call this
fleshy tomb a battlefield. Hey—turn the century.
Geronimo Stilton dropped the same year Mama saw her first
hymenorrhaphy. Says rural China wanted her girls virgins.
I'm sorry—who are you? Listen, it was
just the '90s. Sex is different now. Mama's making a
killing and insists my father
loved her even after he raped her. At five, I wanted to
marry my mama because I thought she'd be happy forever.

"Nobody else was going to get that done but me, and we did it, and we did something that was a miracle." — President Trump

Or because I wanted her to survive forever. My defense against
pronatalists: I shouldn't pass down my broken attributes—
quick to temper, hysterical, ideological extremist, et cetera. Women,
right? God, I'm done with this world,
shitty government and all. Don't cut me up while I'm worth something. I pay
taxes. I'm law-abiding
until I die. I'm a Very-
Valuable-High-Impact-Contributor-to-Society™

"Without me there would be no 6 weeks, 10 weeks, 15 weeks, or whatever is finally agreed to. Without me the pro Life movement would have just kept losing. Thank you President TRUMP!!!" — President Trump

XY chromosomes would have made my resemblance irredeemable. I am
yet redeemable. By the 6:30 Evening News less so. Every day my hands marvel that
zygotes can blossom/whittle/rot into girls like me.

This powerful poem uses the form of the “Abecedarian,” a type of acrostic in which each line or stanza begins with successive letters of the alphabet, from A to Z, while also using found language to reflect on motherhood, the female body, and the legislation that fights to rule over it. The poem is both a personally artful and exacting proclamation of being and the right to be, as well as a mirror held up to our troubled society, reflecting the warps in leadership that continue to do battle with the female body. The word “appeal” in the title, then, works as an actual appeal and a somewhat fractured legal appeal to some “higher court,” be that to God, the government, or to society itself, from which the speaker seeks some sort of comfort, however doubt-ridden (the speaker clearly acknowledges) as that request and belief in said “supreme” court may be.

– Timothy David Rey is an award-winning teaching artist and author. His work has been presented at the Poetry Foundation, Steppenwolf Theater Lookout Series, and for decades around Chicago and elsewhere. His poetry appears in RHINO, Sixty Inches from Center, Obsidian, New City Magazine, After Hours Journal of Writing and Art, etc.

Seagull Yahtzee

by Liam Benham

Sometimes I wondered if seagulls slept
underground or just nestled in the sand,
perhaps the water their frail beds
ones just barely capable of being a nest,

maybe they have homes like us,
they lived in the mailboxes sandwich
scraps where they played board games
under the fields of streetlamps.

night seagulls became the gambler
rodents of the lake you couldn't see,
you can feel the manholes
an umbrella to the city of seagulls,

the hidden world beneath them
one night we'd walk down to the shore
to see the mantled moon similar to them
that sing the sewer vessels lullaby,

their eyes still like dice on a wooden table
just pawns to the beaches beauty,
down our drains and into the temples
where the seagulls play Yahtzee underground.

“‘Seagull Yahtzee’ exemplifies a fresh imagination and creative imagery. The personification offers a fun read about a familiar bird.”

– Emily Calvo, Back Judge, is a poet, visual artist, author and creative director. As a poet, she has been active in Chicago’s poetry community since 1994. Her poems are included in numerous anthologies including *Wherever I’m At*, *East on Central* and *American Gun*, as well as literary journals.

Bilingual

by Sofi Vargas

I want Spanish to be a natural habitant in my vocal cords.
The Spanish that glides out of my mouth instead of jumping and crashing to
the ground.
I feel ashamed that I don't know how to speak Spanish.
I feel like I'm alone in a family all related in blood.
Who share the same habits as me,
Same love and heritage as me.
My mother only uses Spanish when she doesn't want me to know something.
Like it's a spell in a language she doesn't know I understand
But even then I know enough to understand.
My father only uses Spanish with my grandparents, and even then,
I can see the disappointment when I tell them I don't speak Spanish.
It feels like my family's love shrinks a little and grows back,
Like a sponge with water and a crushing hand.
I've been told I'm not a true Mexican if I don't know Spanish.
And I've been told I'm not a true American if I speak Spanish,
or even understand it.
Either way I lose part of myself,
Like a coin that flipped and landed on its side.
As much as I try to learn it, It feels so slow.
Every vocab word is mixed with grammar rules and
accents that can't even form half a sentence.
I wish I wasn't judged for it.
Every conversation sounds like music in my head,
But every time I try to speak, the language trips over my teeth.
I just hope people know I'm trying.
Es todo.

“Bilingual” is a vulnerable poem that allows the reader into the mind and heart of the poet as she processes the complexities of being bi-cultural. The title is the personal wish of the writer who does a wonderful job of expressing an honest longing to speak her mother tongue. The writer also highlights compounding feelings of alienation at home and in the land where she resides, outside of her native culture. “Bilingual” describes the desire of the writer to be unconditionally nurtured and embraced by her parents regardless of any perceived shortcomings. It also parallels the contempt she uncovers in a world that focuses on opportunities to tear down instead of occasions to uplift and positively acknowledge differences that make us all mosaics of magnificence, no matter how fragmented, as we live and breathe.

– Ugochi Nwaogwugwu, Back Judge and CLHOF Board Member, has executive produced, written and co-arranged three album projects; her poems have been published in many anthologies; she has created an original pan African poetry form called, “Ike,” (pronounced EE-kay), paying homage to her Igbo heritage of Nigeria; and in 2023 she released her first book of poetry and prose entitled *Seasons of Separation (S.O.S.) An Igbo Family Tale*.

Mount Helicon

by Camila Ortiz

In times like these,
I think of the Great Basin,
gift shop turquoise and hot wind, mom and dad and the serpentine road.
Or the Sierra Madre from a train car window,
wild horses half imagined.
Or the hills of Montrnarte,
the haggling vendors, and the giggles that ensued.

That should be enough:
miles of outstretched land, at an elevation that thins air and
stirs a pleasant ache in the lungs.
Teasing remarks spoken kindly in boyish candor.
Mischievousness and sweetness and his neat handwriting.
Too easy to want, and for that, I do not.

Familiar slopes I hastily and comfortably scorn,
in search for the precipice
to needle into paper.

Forgive me, that is my way-
scratching at something beautiful until it is ragged,
until it is still beautiful,
but useful no longer.

Had I had gentle hands,
I'd write less fervently.
Had I had gentle hands,
I'd write less.

Muses, put beauty in my hands and let me press it to pulp.
Let me tear, rib by rib,
to reach the heart.

The fragile heart beneath my hands still beats,
a pulse that hums where ink has cut too deep.
Though torn, it holds a light the eye repeats,
and whispers I may bleed, yet still to keep.

“Mount Helicon” uses visual imagery to place the reader inside the hazy, fragmented feeling of memory. The poem unfolds almost like a series of images rather than a straightforward narrative, reflecting the way we tend to remember things in flashes. There’s a sense of movement through a desert-like landscape, which reinforces a feeling of distance and emptiness. The language mirrors this barrenness, creating an atmosphere that feels both sparse and reflective. At the same time, the reference to Mount Helicon, the mythological home of the Muses, introduces the idea of poetic inspiration. This connection suggests that even within emptiness, there is something generative, emulating the experience of transforming emotion into language.

– Anna Hyslop, *Back Judge*, is a Chicago native, writer, and author of *Bar Makeouts*, a poetry collection. She has served on the Associate Board of the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame for more than three years.

BACK JUDGES (POETRY)

Emily Calvo

Reuben Diaz

Anna Hyslop

Anna Jung

Barry Jung

Viola Lee

Kayleigh McNamara

Dipika Mukherjee

Ugochi Nwaogwugwu

Kirby Wilson

BACK JUDGES (PROSE)

Arthur Ade Amaker

Katie Corboy

Anushka Dabhade

Kelci Dean

Robert Loerzel

Jasminum McMullen

Carrie Muehle

Jarrett Neal

Reese Plagenz

Rachel Swearingen

SPECIAL THANKS

The CLHOF Associate Board, as a whole, spends a lot of time and talent to make this contest and ceremony a success. The entire AB listing, including RAYWA Committee members Kelci Dean, Reuben Diaz, Anna Jung, and Donna Montgomery, is elsewhere. You'll also notice that many of the AB members, including new addition Kirby Wilson, were part of our thoughtful crew of back judges. Anna Hyslop orchestrated the entire submissions process, and put a great deal of effort into making sure that every entry was properly evaluated and judged, and that notifications were timely and considerate. Katie Corboy and Adrian Hernandez worked tirelessly to get out notices to schools and libraries in the Chicagoland area, and took on other tasks that made it possible to reach the top of a mountain of ToDos. Carrie Muehle, to whom RAYWA owes a debt of gratitude for her leadership in making the contest and ceremony the high quality it is today, did our media outreach and also many odds and ends (like getting the plaques). Jasminum McMullen dedicated herself to outreach, as well as taking the frontline role in orchestrating the reception. Past CLHOF President Amy Danzer, one of the busiest people in our literary community, took precious time to help arrange some details. Reese Plagenz and Kayleigh McNamara, DePaul University undergraduate and graduate students, respectively, did SO MUCH to improve the way we notified and tracked young writers about the contest; over the course of their internship with the CLHOF, which just ended, they provided immeasurable value in a variety of ways, including in support of this contest, that will be felt well into the future. Eddy Finch and Annie Hazen, DePaul University sophomores whose internships just started, have already pitched in to help with proofreading and assist at today's event. There are many others—librarians and teachers and friends—who did their part in making this a true community effort. Finally, we're deeply thankful to our partners Barry Benson, Sheryl Johnston, and Calvin Magnan, as well as all the other donors—their contributions enabled us to put on a first-class celebration and produce this (relative to most like it) extravagant program.



The Chicago Literary Hall of Fame (CLHOF) honors, celebrates, preserves, and promotes the development of Chicago's great literary heritage—past, present, and future. CLHOF seeks to realize this purpose by annual inductions of selected great writers from the past; ceremonies honoring living writers whose lifetime contributions to the literary arts warrant the highest recognition; literary awards to young people; classes, panels, and other literary endeavors designed to encourage the development of writers at all ages. CLHOF also creates written materials that record the lives and works of Chicago's most important literary figures and presents these and other materials on its website, in exhibits, author events, public art installations, literary tours, and programming relevant to the organization's goal of promoting Chicago's vibrant literary tradition and culture. CLHOF formed as a project of the Chicago Writers Association in 2010, and splintered into its own nonprofit 501(c)(3) entity in 2014.

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UPCOMING CLHOF EVENTS

Sunday Reading Series: Chicago Literary Hall of Fame Edition

Sunday, May 17, 2026

7 p.m.

Hungry Brain

2319 W. Belmont Avenue, Chicago

Downtown Chicago Literary Walking Tour

Wednesday, May 20

2:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.

Palmer House

17 E. Monroe Street, Chicago

The Spiritual Essence of Storytelling

Sunday, June 7, 2026

11 a.m.

Harold Washington Library Center

400 S. State Street, Chicago

Newbery Film Festival: Chicago Style

Sunday, June 7, 2026

4 p.m.

Harold Washington Library Center

400 S. State Street, Chicago

Fuller Award: Ed Roberson

Thursday, June 18, 2026

6 p.m.

The Poetry Foundation

61 W. Superior Street, Chicago

Far South Side Literary Bus Tour

Saturday, July 11

10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

Third World Press

Induction Ceremony 2026

Saturday, August 1, 2026

2 p.m.

Woodson Regional Library

9525 S. Halsted Street, Chicago

South Asia Institute's Literary Festival

Saturday, August 22, 2026

Time: TBA

Location: TBA

Great Chicago Books Club: Elizabeth Marino's Asylum

Thursday, August 27, 2026

6:30 p.m.

18th Street Casa de Cultura

2057 W. 18th Street, Chicago

41st Annual Printers Row Lit Fest

September 12 & 13

10 a.m. - 6 p.m.

Printers Row Neighborhood

For more information on upcoming events or to register:
scan the QR code or visit our events page at
ChicagoLiteraryHOF.org/events



PREVIOUS RAYWA WINNERS

“I was really excited to win, and also excited to enter at all. I think it's been a great comfort to have this win with me as I move into the adult world of literature; I know it's going to get harder from here, but I know I'm a good writer and RAYWA was a big part of building that confidence. I'm currently in my third year at St. Olaf College, majoring in Creative Writing and English and working as a writing desk tutor. I'm almost halfway through my second draft of a psychological sci-fi novel, and with all the writing classes I'm taking, I'm still writing plenty of short stories. So, lots of words, all the time. I like it though!”

– **Analise Budziak, a 2023 RAYWA winner for her story, “A Trick of the Light”**

“[Winning] felt incredibly validating. We spend so much time trying to temper our hopes and not believing we can make it and we don't have any talent so for someone else to tell you that you've got a talent worth honing made all the work feel worth it. [I'm] preparing for the college application odyssey, hunkering down to write nothing but essays in the next few months.”

– **Ivy Lefebvre, a 2025 RAYWA winner in Prose for her story, “Directions”**

“Winning the award was a breath of fresh air. Being in the moment surrounded by such tangible and convicting iterations of raw creativity is a feeling I still carry with me. It was a huge turning point for me as a writer because this was the largest scale that my writing had been seen on. It is definitely a highlight for me to know that people could find themselves in the words that helped me find myself. It was a reminder that art is a pursuit of understanding both within the self and within the world, so having the room for that to intersect with this award still means so much to me. I currently attend the University of Iowa as an English and Creative Writing major on the Pre-Law track, so I still very much have writing as a focus of my college experience.”

– **Oluwatomi Ogundimu, a 2025 RAYWA winner in Poetry for her poem, “Sundance // opulence”**