

Nantucket Book Festival Young Writer Award 2021

Winner

Mushroom Soup: 9th grade

Anna Popnikolova

My mom used to make this mushroom soup. Cream based, with sliced mushrooms and homemade croutons. I remember our old kitchen table and my red pajamas and I remember a steaming bowl of mushroom soup before me, spoon in hand. I remember the old apartment in Bulgaria, my mom standing over the stove in the kitchen, stirring a metal pot, and the rooms filled with the aroma accompanying my favorite soup. It was more than a meal, it was comfort. A warm hug, a woolen blanket or the feeling of stepping outside on the first warm day of springtime. And I, as all children, couldn't wait to grow up and cook mushroom soup for my own kids. I could not wait to grow older and stand over my very own stove and stir my metal pot with a wooden spoon, ladle mushrooms into a bowl, wafting the same smell from my childhood.

Over the years, I guess my mushroom soup priority fell by the wayside. New friends, new schools, homework assignments, and the dramas of adolescence became more important. I couldn't find the same level of comfort and happiness in my mother's cooking as I used to. I guess I just grew up without even meaning to.

One morning, I realized there had been something missing from my life for years. I opened the refrigerator and stared at the plastic carton of button mushrooms with dirt speckling their white caps, and remembered the homemade croutons and red pajamas. When I asked if we could make mushroom soup again, my mom smiled and began looking for the recipe on the internet. I guess there wasn't a family recipe running through generations which I would inherit when I was of age and pass on to my own children. Yes, my mushroom soup wasn't any more special than everyone else's mushroom soup.

I stood over the sink, rinsing the dirt off the button mushrooms and their white flesh caps; I watched my mom follow the recipe on her phone as she mixed lemon juice and sour cream, and chopped onions. I thought about just how long it'd been since the smell of mushroom soup had

filled all the rooms in our house and enveloped me in its woolen blanket. I listened to the sizzle of onions against hot oil. I sliced mushrooms and watched the food I'd loved since before I could remember unfold before my eyes. I always thought of my mom's mushroom soup as magic. But now I was in the moment. I was being stirred in as part of the soup, too. Old enough to use a knife and slice mushrooms. Old enough to reach the tap and wash mushrooms. I was old enough to stir the pot just like I watched my mom do in the apartment in Bulgaria.

From that point on, the magic was ruined. My mother was not a magical being. She was human. She put a little too much flour into the thickener and we were both too lazy to make homemade croutons. By the time the soup was done, the excitement in my stomach faded. I suppose mushroom soup is better when you're a child.

I took a bite. It wasn't the same. It was tasty, sure; but it wasn't the mushroom soup I remembered. Maybe the lemon juice made it too tangy. Maybe it was the parsley. Maybe it was missing homemade croutons and red pajamas. Maybe I was just so involved with the creation of what should have been a masterpiece that it felt like a knock-off. Maybe I had grown too old for woolen blankets and a favorite childhood meal. Maybe I hadn't had mushroom soup in so long that it hadn't grown with me.

There was this sense of awkward mismatching. Like trying to fit into a pair of pajamas that you grew out of years ago.

Nantucket Book Festival Young Writer Award 2021

Finalist

What are you afraid of? 12th Grade

JohnCarl McGrady

“This is a terrible idea.”

“That attitude isn’t going to get you anywhere.”

I rolled onto my back, staring up at the canopy of stars overhead, my phone lying in the soft grass next to my head, my friend Riya’s softly chiding voice drifting from the speaker. I was sixteen, and exhausted, and my face was smeared with equal measures of tears and grass stains.

I’ve always been passionate about social issues, writing essays and editorials, arguing with friends and random strangers on the internet, even giving speeches when called upon. But I’d never organized a group event before. It was September of 2019 and a series of massive climate awareness strikes were planned for the 20th-27th of the month, to coincide with the United Nations Climate Summit in New York City. At the time, no one knew just how massive the strikes would be. Not that knowing would have solved my dilemma; I wasn’t concerned that the strikes would fail.

I was concerned *I* would fail.

Up to that point in my life, I had essentially specialized in one thing: writing. I couldn’t paint, I wasn’t athletic, and cooking was a foreign art. Most critically, I couldn’t lead a group. I was confident in this, terrified of my responsibilities as editor of the school paper, and totally sure I was the wrong person to organize a school strike for the climate.

Riya, of course, disagreed. “What are you afraid of?”

“You mean, like, the slow extinction of the human race at our own hands?”

“No, I mean with this, in particular. I know it’s not the idea.”

“Failing everyone,” I admitted.

“Well, you’re stupid.”

I frowned. “Harsh.”

“So what if you fail everyone?”

“Uh, it will be embarrassing. It’ll...well, I will have *failed*.”

“Why would it be embarrassing? Whatever you do, it’s gonna be better than if nobody does anything. If practically nobody shows up, then there’s practically nobody to be embarrassed around, and if enough people show up for it to be embarrassing, then it’s not a failure.”

“But...”

“What are you *actually* afraid of?”

I paused. She was right. It wasn’t about looking bad in front of other people. If no one at all showed up, I would still feel bad. So what was the problem? What was I afraid of?

Well, if no one at all showed up, there would be exactly one person standing there, holding a cardboard sign and watching the cars go by.

Me.

“I’m afraid of failing *myself*.”

“Yeah,” she said.

But if that’s what I was afraid of, then it was entirely an internal problem. It would be hard, but I could stop judging myself. As long as I didn’t expect perfection, what did it matter if the strike was small? If my paintings were bad? If I was a slow runner?

That night, lying in the grass and crying into my phone, was one of the most important nights of my life. I organized the strike. I would say how many people showed up, but that’s not the point. More people showed up than if I hadn’t done it.

I embraced my position as editor. I started to paint, and I learned to bake, and I started running almost every day. Don’t get me wrong, it’s great to be talented at something, and I love it when I genuinely feel skilled, but being bad at something is an awful reason not to do it.

Nantucket Book Festival Young Writer Award 2021

Finalist

Challenging Thoughts: 11th grade

Melanie Bamber

Sitting in a room feeling alone. Looking down at words on a paper while all the letters swirl around in my head. Wondering when it will all click. Will it happen in a minute? 10 years? The room gets darker and darker as I try to read these words. I feel more alone each second. I stare off trying to find the answers. Nothing. The words are swirling faster and faster in my head now. The voices in my head grow: "You can't do this. You are stupid. Give up." I feel my eyes starting to rupture.

At this moment, I learn I am different.

Growing up, I did not know where I fit in. I was not popular, not athletic, and definitely not smart. I learned that I had trouble reading because I have something called Dyslexia, but I never understood what that really meant until recently. Knowing this made me question many things in my life later on.

When I first started to read, I had trouble understanding what I was looking at; the letters did not form words. I would say to myself, "stop being so stupid. Just read the words." I remember sitting on my bedroom floor, balling my eyes out attempting to do my homework for what felt like hours. I did not understand why I had so much trouble and no one else did. I did not understand why I was different; why me?

In middle school, I was made fun of for having reading class and having special accommodations. I was embarrassed to say I had Dyslexia. I wanted it to just go away. I wanted to forget that I ever had it in the first place. This made me hate reading even more and hate all the people who were trying to help me. I pushed everyone away. I was even more alone then, back in that dark room wondering when it just go away. At that point in my life, I did not understand that Dyslexia can't just "go away." It will be with me forever.

I started playing sports to distract myself. I wanted to have a purpose to go to school even though I did not love the whole school thing. I wanted to feel how it would be to be good at something and enjoy it. I started coming out of this big dark room I was in day by day. I found a

purpose in life. I found me. I joined the field hockey team and instantly fell in love. I worked hard in perfecting this sport because I could not control anything else in my life. I overcame many challenges while doing this. I had to keep trying even when I wanted to give up. The voices came back one day, "Give up, You can't do this, either." It was the same voice that I heard when trying to read. But I couldn't listen to those voices; I had to be strong. I had to keep my grades up so I could play sports and this motivated me, even more, to prove myself wrong. I could do this.

After not giving up for two years, I was asked to join the junior varsity team as an eighth-grader. I was so happy and proud of myself. During that year I was even asked to practice with the varsity team. This was one of the best and scariest moments of my life. I did not want to go back into that dark room. I wanted to keep enjoying who I was becoming. On the field and in the classroom, I pushed all my fear away and just took it day by day..

Recognizing my Dyslexia didn't just magically make it go away. I still struggle with it from time to time. I still use audio books in classes to help me comprehend the words I am reading. Even when writing this essay, I had trouble putting my thoughts down. I will be fighting this battle in my head forever, but I have learned its weaknesses.

I have come to realize that having Dyslexia does not make me different; it's the way I approach it that makes me different. I have learned that taking a few more seconds to think is not a bad thing. When something gets hard, I tell myself to take a deep breath, and try again. I truly believe that everything happens for a reason. This makes me think I was born to have Dyslexia, to become more strong and the best version of myself. I am proud of who I have become and can't wait to see who I will be.

Nantucket Book Festival Young Writer Award 2021

Finalist

I Cut My Hair: 10th Grade

Olivia Davis

I had spent my adolescence with long hair. Never once had I cut it, had I thought about taking scissors to my locks and lifting the weight off my shoulders. I would always hear how pretty my hair was. Everyone admired it, much more than I think they would admire me. I was never insecure about my hair. Why would I be when it was all anyone talked about? It was my biggest source of confidence--as long as I had my ponytail, my braid, my bouncing curls across my back, someone would acknowledge me. I wanted more than anything for someone to acknowledge me. And as long as my hair grew, someone always did.

Of course they would notice other things. Throughout my grade school and middle school years, I had always maintained perfect grades and a strong body, one made for sports. I always had friends and an appealing face. People would tell me I would never need makeup. I received the praise every little girl wants. I was looked up to by my siblings, the pride of my family.

During my freshman year of high school I thought about cutting my hair. People still watched, but the praise I gathered didn't feel the same. It was shallow, empty. My hair was pretty but my body was wrong, my face was splotchy, my grades were dropping. I quit the sports I was good at, and my friends drifted away, along with my confidence in the topics I had been most passionate about. Something wasn't right. I did like long hair, I still do, but I started to realize I didn't like it on me. Girls look so pretty with confidence, with their hair like mine was, all long and flowy. Flowy like their summer dresses, grazing smooth skin. I adored the lip gloss-coated smiles, the rants of passion, the dangly jewelry. Girls were so pretty, but I didn't want to be pretty like them.

I stared at my chest in the mirror. The curves in my flesh mocked me; they were a reminder of what everyone wanted me to be, what I am still expected to be. But what I am expected to be isn't who I am. One day I slid a binder over my head. I stared at my chest in the mirror again. The mountains along the plain of my body were smaller now, hidden within my

top. The slight pain of compression was a hug, it gave me comfort. I was no longer acting the way I was expected to, I didn't look like the girl I was shaped to be. But in that moment I felt more like myself than I ever had.

What would everyone think if they knew I wanted to cut my hair, if they knew I liked both boys and girls, if they knew I didn't like my breasts? Whatever the outcome may have been, would it have been all good? I couldn't take the chance. Head down, I kept working, but the thoughts stayed the same. I didn't know who I was, all I was familiar with was the foreign face in the mirror. She looked like me, sounded like me, but I never wanted to be her. I hated her, who she was, what she stood for.

Late September of my sophomore year I cut my hair. My mother said I wouldn't like it. I sat in my salon chair with anticipation, black leather scratched at my thighs. I eyed the scissors in the reflection in front of me. I listened to the snip of the shears. There was no going back. As the last of my long curls dropped to the floor, I realized that I could finally recognize the person looking at me from the mirror. My mother said I wouldn't like it but she was wrong. Hair shortened, chest banded, I could finally see myself, the real me, for the first time. I don't have to be afraid to like girls and their flowy, floral dresses, and I can stare at the person in the mirror and love them, truly, deeply love them.

Nantucket Book Festival Young Writer Award 2021

Finalist

Not Just a Drill: 11th grade

Maclaine Willett

The question told me to find the amount of energy when the two chemicals combined, or something like that. I was twirling the pencil in my hands, thinking about the fact that that particular chemistry test was the hardest one we had taken yet. I thought that about every test. But still, this one made me feel the gut-wrenching fear of a possible D looming in the gradebook that would immediately plummet my overall average. Little did I know of the deeper and darker fear I would feel within the next 10 minutes.

30 seconds ticked by as I stared at the same problem with my pencil hanging over the paper, almost like a void held it there. Then I heard it. We all heard it. The humming, almost clicking sound that the speakers of the high school project when faculty from the office make an announcement. I thought nothing of it, I mean why would I? I was sure it was someone's parent dropping off their lunch that they so regretfully forgot, or the summoning of a troublemaker to the principal's office. My thoughts were wrong, it was much worse.

“Lockdown, this is not a drill. I repeat, lockdown, this is not a drill.”

My heart felt as though it fell to the floor where classmates, peers, and friends of mine had already taken their hiding spots. I think during those first few minutes after hearing that announcement, my thoughts completely shut off. I was conscious, but felt as though I wasn't, as though I was distant from my body, watching the scene unfold. The scene of a frightened teacher, who was just worrying about the amount of papers that needed grading, wrangling even more frightened students. The scene of a girl, who I was just conversing with about the football game that night and what we planned to wear, that already had tears rolling from the tips of her eyelashes, ruining her mascara. The scene of another girl who immediately thought of her younger brother just a few hallways down, probably just as paralyzed as the rest of us.

While I squeezed into a tiny space behind the teacher's desk with a few other students, I didn't question who the intruder was, where they were, or how they got in. I simply questioned

why. I had never thought that on our tiny island, which always seemed so secluded from any dangers of this extent, there would be a situation where I was worried for my life just because I showed up to school. Just because I was attending the one thing that us kids *have* to attend, the one normality of our jumbled and evolving teenage years. Why? What would be one's motivation to threaten the lives of innocent children, who must hide like sitting ducks while peering at the windows for any signs of movement in the halls? I had never understood what that felt like for students who had gone through such a traumatic experience as this. The feeling of tears building in my throat as I shared long stares with my classmates was unbearable, considering I was unsure if there would be a tomorrow to see them again.

I hadn't begun crying yet until I thought of my friends who were in different classrooms. I thought of the possibility of hearing their screams swallowed and muffled by the thick walls between us, although at that moment, the walls felt much thinner. It was then that I questioned something much bigger than the situation at hand. I questioned humanity.

I was so unsure, and still am, of how a human being could possibly commit something so terrible, taking the lives of brothers, sisters, daughters, and sons. Of friends, classmates, teachers, and students. Of kids, like me, who once thought that a bad grade was the most dangerous and frightening thing high school had to offer. I wish there was an answer as to why people do such things, but there isn't, so us kids continue to feel unsafe in our helpless innocence. And although this had all ended as a technological malfunction, meaning there was no intruder to begin with, I still question humanity.