

First Place

Frances Guo--Youth Category

Margo Wixsom--Adult Category

Forgiveness
by Frances Guo

*Sometimes.
Sometimes, I miss her.
Occasionally.
No—rarely.
But she's far away now
Dwelling across the seas.
Never to return;
The lady I once loved.*

Sitting here,
Uncertain as to what I am looking for
That one thing I have always been seeking for
But never identified.

Waiting, staring at that blazing sunset
Watching as the sun lowers his radiant head
And the night shakes her mantle
Darkly down.
The last cloud darkens
The world fades...
Lavender, amber, gold, gray, black
The shy moon is taken from her comfort,
Thrust away from the sun's beams—
He has left.

Now she becomes forlorn, cold, hostile—
A face as pale as bone
Dangling in the smothering black sky.
Shunning the golden light of the sun,
The moon now commands the darkness...
The night becomes heavy with sorrow.
She turns her baleful stare upon the earth—
I wither and flee.

I lie upon my bed
Tossing, turning,
Unable to escape those accursed moonbeams,
The tendrils of silver light forever reaching for me.
I cover my head,
Forcing myself into an uneasy sleep,
Plummeting into the realm of dreams...

A white orb surrounded by darkness,
A lonely soul wandering for eternity.
Then a voice, low and mournful.

In the dead of the night,
I awaken and weep.
The truth that I've been trying to avoid is laid bare:
You never ran from me.
You never stopped trying.
Yet in the end, your efforts were in vain...
It was I who drove you away.

Why didn't you lash out at me?
Torn by my actions,
So tattered and wrecked,
So silently broken.
Were you afraid to speak to me?
I remember now:
I never heard your goodbye.
I had thought *you* were the arrogant one.
What a fool I was.

I didn't understand how much you meant to me.
I know now.
I was so selfish, so cruel, so self-centered
I failed to recognize the sorrow in your eyes
Ignored you as pain crept in and grew like a poison, like a storm
Until it engulfed them.
I never thought to ask you what was wrong,
So nearsighted was I
I must have been blind.
I know now.

I'm sorry.
I'm so sorry.
I believed myself invincible,
I thought myself untouchable,
And in doing so destroyed those around me.
My hopes
My dreams
My desires
All fulfilled, of course;
I stole, I leached, I used,
Always...
From someone else.
Especially you.

I'm finally beginning to see
All the mistakes I made,
My faults, building up over the years;
Consideration for only myself.
I'm finally beginning to feel
Each wound I inflicted
Every heart I shattered—
I hear their elegies.
Or are they my laments?

Why didn't I realize it then?
I had found what I'd been seeking for:
Love, affection from a pure heart.
But I never recognized it.
All along, it was within you,
Patiently waiting for the day it would be discovered.

I never found it.
Not until now...
But it's far too late.

I do not ask you for your trust.
Trust is foreign, lost.
I do not ask you to forget,
To rewrite your memories,
To free me from blame.
But dare I ask for your forgiveness?
No, I cannot.
I will not risk hurting you anymore.

~Far away, she calls to me...

*“Open up your tearstained eyes.
Behold, the sun has risen
And with it comes the dawn.*

*Always, I will yearn for you.
Forevermore.
Though we are separated by many miles,
Not all is lost.
Have hope--
Know that you are forgiven.”*

FRANCES GUO: At the time of this contest, Frances was attending 8th grade at Miller Middle School in San Jose. “My inspiration for writing my poem actually came from looking outside at the full moon one night and watching as the sky began to darken.....”

Forgiving Ignorance

by Margo Wixsom

What filters through memory, all these years after that phone call from the ER in Berkeley, about the impending death of my oldest son, are the hypnotic patterns of sunlight playing across the parquet floor of the apartment in Manhattan. Late afternoon light flickers with the lazy delight of summer days, of the months spent in New York studying for the completion of my graduate thesis. This summer is to be the end of these long years of study that began with divorce and are supposed to conclude with graduation. But July has other plans. Another ending. One not nearly so happy; unexpected and devastating.

I set the receiver down in a trance, still transfixed by the multitude of dust specks floating in rays of sunshine slanting in from the 14th floor window. The doctor explained there'd been a fire in the apartment. No, my daughter who shared the apartment with her brother was not injured. An incredible sigh of relief! One safe. One hurt. He'll be OK. Hospitals fix people. That's their job: heal the wounded. Mentally I freeze at that impression, like a promise. He spoke in abbreviated sentences. Third degree burns covering most of his body. Ten hours to live. He's young and has a strong heart he comments. Ten hours. I look at the clock. It's 4:30. I tell him that I'll be on the next plane. I call Graham and explain. He calls the airlines while I pack, returning the call with my flight information. The last plane to the West Coast departs at 7:10. He instructs me to take several hundred dollars from his emergency drawer and take a cab immediately to avoid the worst of the tunnel traffic.

Numb as I stand at the airline counter at JFK, I muster a weak voice through tears. No, I didn't make the reservation, my boyfriend just called it in for me. No, I can't produce the credit card used. "My son is dying and I have to get to Oakland *tonight*." I mumble, adding, "I have ten hours, that's all. Ten hours." She frowns sympathetically and prints a boarding pass, then calls over an attendant who ushers me directly to the gate. Landing in Chicago we decelerate directly into the blood-red face of a rising full moon. I realize at that moment, that I will never see my son alive again. Transfer planes to Oakland. I'm shocked by my composure, close my eyes and tears come quietly, calmly. Summoning all the years of meditation and yoga, I envision him in my mind. Third degree burns cover your body. You must be in immense pain, and I know from what I have read of the dying, that you're hanging on to say your goodbyes. I need you to know that you don't have to stay. You don't have to suffer. You have my permission to leave this life, and know that we will always be with each other. You are my

child. I am your mother. There is no need for goodbyes. I say these things to comfort myself as much as I mean them for him. Months later reading his death certificate when it arrives in the mail, I realize that indeed, he died at about that moment.

My brother wraps his long arms around me at the airport in Oakland weeping. His towering frame heaves in great gasps, "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry!" Standing in the ER, I'm stunned by the overly bright lights against white walls and curtains. Everything is much too intense. The ER doctor is crying. He's never seen anything so bad in his ten years doing this work. He is so, so sorry also. I appreciate his compassion. A large black and white clock buzzes softly, its hands gliding slowly around its circumference, in the room where he lays covered with a white sheet. His feet stick out. They're blackened like logs from a campfire. His head, uncovered with a white folded washcloth draped over his eyes, is also charred. I touch his leg and it's hard, like stone, and cold. I withdraw my hand, turn, and leave the room. It's all I can take.

We sit and talk with the coroner. Leave the hospital with family members, exhausted at dawn. The brilliant beauty of the California sun dazzles as people drive blissfully to work along Telegraph Avenue, unaffected by tragedy. That day and those to follow are a blur of arrangements. Cremation. Newspaper announcement. A ceremony at the university's Interfaith Chapel. The diminished happiness and effort at my niece's first birthday party. The warmth of my brothers' homes, their care throughout the week. Clearing out the apartment after the fire. Transferring my daughter's salvaged belongings to storage. Memories stand out as detailed and stilted cameos through the bewilderment of a suicide. He set the fire himself. Immolation is the word I have to look up on the death certificate.

The experience in the ensuing years as people ask, "How did he die?" Suicide. *That* answer casts a pall. If I say "Cancer," I'd get sympathy. But watch how they respond to *suicide*. "Oh," and awkward shuffling. At first I'm embarrassed. Then angry. Someone asks the question, "Can you ever forgive him?" I'm amazed at my restraint. I don't beat her senseless there on the spot. "How dare you?" I stammer, and turn away, shaking. Here is what I still work to forgive after a decade. An excessively affluent culture that can afford trillions of dollars in arrogant and unjust wars, yet refuses basic healthcare to its citizenry. A greedy insurance lobby that denies treatment to countless people, and daily seals the deal on their death with lack of coverage. The refusal to treat mental illness with the same efforts, respect, and dedication that gets pinned on cancer or diabetes like a badge of honor. My own failings as a parent, and his, as a struggling young man afflicted with depression in an unforgiving world.

MARGO WIXSOM teaches Art and Photography at Palo Alto High School. She is a landscape painter and photographer with a passion for conservation. Holding an M.A. in Art and Literature, she's been writing since she won a prize for a short story writing in the third grade in Rochester, New York. Spending a summer on a Fulbright Fellowship in Australia, she designed student projects in Environmental Education that won the 2006 Fulbright-Australia Project of the Year. Suicide prevention and education are of great interest to her after the death of her son, Ryan, in 1996, which is the topic of a collection of essays called *Framing A Life*. This entry is an abridged version of that material. She is currently working on a book called *Picturing the Middle East*, to break down negative stereotypes, and plans to spend this summer in Jordan, Syria and Turkey photographing cultural perspectives.

She lives in Santa Clara with her family spending weekends gardening as they transform their suburban tract into a haven. They enjoy hiking the trails of the Santa Cruz or Diablo Mountains to savor a sense of the land.

Honorable Mention

Juanita Joy Baker

Renee Gimelli

Susan Gutrugianos

Renaë Johnson

Cindy McCalmont

Ashley Wu

Forgiveness

by Juanita Joy Baker

Forgiveness
Sweet release from bitterness.

Forgiveness
Grace given to me.
It is a type of amnesty.

Forgiveness
A form of reconciliation.
Resentment will be no more.
I will not help to keep the score.

Forgiveness
The hardest part
Is to forgive myself deep in my heart.

Forgiveness
An action you take
As you try to restore some past mistake.

Forgiveness
I'll receive my pardon.
Is that mark upon me truly gone?

Forgiveness
Now I am forgiven;
With my life, I'm free, I'll carry on.

The Blue Bear

by Renee Gimelli

Thomas looked down in astonishment at the red juice dripping from his hand. He hadn't realized until just now that he had squashed the tomato. It was the sight of the young mother pushing her grocery cart with the tow-headed young boy in the seat that had unnerved him. He didn't know why he was so tense. After all, this day had not been worse or better than the last 364. Now he stood in the produce section of the Safeway, embarrassed and ashamed.

He was ashamed of his anger at a simple request from Maureen, to bring home some tomatoes so that she could make bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwiches for dinner. It was one of Thomas' favorite hot weather meals. Thomas felt inadequate and sorry for the many ways he had failed Maureen in the last year. Maybe divorce would be the best solution-but he knew that Maureen loved him. Did he still love her?

Thomas left the store abruptly, abandoning the tomatoes. When he arrived home, Maureen greeted him at the door, tentative, ready to smile, but assessing his mood.

"Did you remember the tomatoes?" she asked.

"I'm not hungry," Thomas replied brusquely and brushed by her. He entered the den and closed the door. He knew he'd hurt her, as he had many times recently, with blame and accusation, stony silences, and angry outbursts. He was desperate for some relief from the jumble of emotions that was wearing him down. Maybe he should just kill himself and put everybody out of misery, his misery. He opened the desk drawer and removed a small pistol. He ran his hand over the barrel. Would it do the job? He felt the grip in his hand, tested the feel of the trigger, the position of the gun against his temple. His grief was slowly killing him, anyway. He considered Jerry's words of advice, delivered frequently in kindness and meant with sincerity, "You've got to shake it off, man."

In the morning, Thomas suited up for the day's work. It was going to be a bad day-the worst. It was the first anniversary.

He met Jerry at the yard. Jerry drove the garbage truck, while Thomas hung off the back and jumped off at every stop to dump the cans waiting at the curb. This morning Jerry greeted him with deference. Thomas snapped at him. "Don't tell me you know how I feel, because you don't!"

Jerry agreed. "You're right, man, but my dad always told me 'to err is human, to forgive, divine.'"

Thomas didn't know whom to forgive: himself, for bringing the damn airplane home; Maureen, for not watching more carefully; or the driver, for killing his son. Today was the anniversary of that day that had changed everything. He had tried to take Jerry's advice every day since, but had failed in misery and defeat.

"Yea, man, let's go!" he replied conciliatorily, and swung himself up onto the truck.

Collecting garbage was a pretty mundane thing on most days, but today Thomas was eager to be active, to keep his mind from thinking about his only son, now gone forever. The cans were easy for a robust 27-year-old to swing and when the weather was nice, he got some sun. Today was a day like that; like the day a car struck Michael, running into the street after the paper airplane that he'd given him. Thomas was in the sixth block of Archangel, tossing cans easily, lifting the lid on a can in front of a nice house. There, lying on top of the cleanly bagged garbage was a blue denim teddy bear. Thomas was struck insensible by the confluence of fate and fear. He considered, dimly aware that it was the first time, that they could have another child. Thomas picked up the bear and Jerry was mildly surprised when a fairly new, clean, blue teddy bear came sailing in through the window.

When Thomas came in that night from work, he could see that Maureen had been crying. He brought his hands from behind his back to offer her a smile and a blue denim teddy bear.

Forgiveness in Holland

by Susan Gutrugianos

I can forgive you German boy. You are just a soldier. You are a little older than me.
You are just following orders.

I can forgive you that your Army has taken over my town.

You push, bully and take what you want.

My name sounds too English so out of fear, I changed it. Now it is more Dutch.

I see the people's faces, the Jews you soldiers put in the cattle cars.

The families, sent to prison camps; I can smell the fear that hangs in the air.

I am a ballerina; I dance for people in secret. They never make a sound.

They give me money I pass to the Dutch resistance.

I walk past your soldiers on my way to school. I am a skinny girl with bits of information stuffed inside my toe shoes, notes for the resistance. I too help to defeat you.

My uncle and cousin were shot in front of me. They were part of the resistance.

My brother is in one of your German labor camps.

Remember I can forgive you.

The summer of D-Day is over. Living is difficult for all of us. It's the winter of 1944, your German army has taken our food; you burn our wood in your fires. My mother burns the wooden furniture in the fireplace. The bed I slept in is now ashes in the hearth.

This is known as the "Hungerwinter."

People are dying in the streets' they freeze and starve to death.

Tens of thousands of people die during this winter.

I am weak, I am tired, and I am always hungry.

Many of us now make flour from tulip bulbs and sugar beets, we bake cakes and biscuits.

We keep this food for ourselves. I suffer from malnutrition through this winter.

I watched people die.

These images haunt me.

I can forgive you German boy.

If I don't stop you, I cannot forgive myself.

Inspiration through Forgiveness

by Renae Johnson

In that moment it was all clear. In a heartbeat I understood everything. Shame sparkled in her eye as she turned my whole world upside down. One sentence was all it took for her to change my perspective on not only the situation, but on my life in itself. My mother, the one who brought me into this world, the one who taught me so much, the one who built up my world around wonderful dreams of the future, she was the one who let me down. She was the hero who flew away, and left me hanging from a burning building. All the years of bitterness for this, and all the years of hatred instantaneously melted away as she opened my eyes to the reality of how short our time is.

Surrounded by the unfamiliarity of her new home and the estranged faces who shared her pain, we talked. We spoke of life, and loss and starting over. We spoke without speaking; everything we said barely grazed the point of pain. All the things we wanted to say began to swell deep within our souls, and only if caught between our locked gazes could you understand what the true meanings behind our pointless words were. Unable to maintain the composure I kept, she suddenly burst with apologies and regrets. As it had happened before, I knew that every word she spoke was building me up for another let down. So I let her talk and continued to not have any false hope, when suddenly she uttered a single sentence that will forever be with me. She told me that she was sorry for making me grown up so fast, and that she regrets that she will never get the time back. I had seen her cry so many times, I had heard her apologize over and over, but it wasn't this that caught my attention. It was her reference to time. She will not have anymore children, and this idea that she didn't get to see us grown up and never will dumbfounded me. She doesn't get another chance. She will never get to go back.

When I was little I used to hate taking naps, because when I woke up I would feel as though I had missed something. Imagine waking up and realizing you had missed eight years of your life. Now imagine that all of our time that you missed you had two children who needed you, and suffered because you were not there. Imagine the haunting feelings and desperation to get that time back. Realizing I will only have a small amount of time on this earth I forgave her right then and there for all the years without her. It was then that I realized that I need to take advantage of the time I do have left, and not waste it on harsh feelings of useless anger. It was that split second that we started a new relationship, and never again will I take advantage of what is being offered.

In my time here I promise myself to do what she couldn't, and live the life that she missed. I do not want to wake up one morning to realize that I want to be proud of what I accomplished, and not

hold the same regrets that my mother will deal with for the rest of her life. I will live my life to its fullest not only for her, but for me as well. I can do anything I want. I can be anything I want. In one decision to forgive I gained enough inspiration to motivate me day in and day out.

When the Heart Has a Hole

by Cindy McCalmont

I

Momma ain't doin' so good.

I try to focus on the skillet supper article I'm reading in *Southern Living* instead of listening in on another woman's phone conversation. I can feel how tired the magazine is as I hold it in my hands, two years past its publication date with a casket shaped hole where a person's name and address used to be.

Create in me a clean heart, O God. The woman next to me has a smudged cross on her forehead, a cup of Starbucks in her hand, and a Bible in her lap. She's reading the words softly, but loud enough that I can hear: *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.*

Ash Wednesday in this hospital waiting room: and I wish that I could pray. But God doesn't answer my calls anymore. I can't say that I blame him, I've broken 9 ½ of the commandments. I figure what little credit I have left on my account is under the *Thou Shalt Not Murder* category since I didn't actually succeed in killing myself.

Honor your Momma. But how can I? When she dyes her hair that orange-tinted shade of blond, wears bright red sweat suits too tight across her ass, lies when she's asked if she's ever smoked cigarettes, and worries about what the heart surgery scar is going to do to her cleavage.

"No man's ever going to want to marry you," she screamed at me the day before I packed up and moved out. It was the worse thing she could have said to me, her nearly six foot tall shy, bookish daughter.

What mother tells her child she's unlovable?"

Twenty-seven years and I haven't forgiven her yet—only now she might die and I'll be left with nothing but my anger and the last words she whispered as they wheeled her off to surgery. "I sure have a taste for a pimento cheese sandwich," she said. As if she were taunting me with words she knew I would never be able to make into poetry cheddar cheese, globs of mayonnaise, and those long strands of pimento like an aorta before it is cut up.

The hospital-issued vibrator goes off then, a circle of red lights that tremble and flash. I toss the wilted *Southern Living* on the table beside my chair and walk to the waiting room desk. When I get there, an employee checks my number and then reads from her clipboard without ever looking up. "They're closing now. Everything went fine. Dr. Jeffers will be out to talk with you shortly. "I go back to my chair and massage my forehead. I don't have a cross on my skin. I'm marked only by the ache of having a mother that I don't know if I can forgive.

II

When I first see my mother after surgery, she's still unconscious, tubes like Eve's snake slithering from her mouth, nose and arms. I stand by the bed, but I can bring myself to touch her. Her skin looks cold and hard, like okra when you first take it out of the freezer. I must have seemed particularly awkward because one of the housekeeping staff leaned her mop against the wall, came close and asked, "That your momma?" I nodded but didn't stop staring at the inert woman in the bed in front of me. The cleaning woman put her hand on my back, rubbing the tight muscles.

After a while, she leaned over and whispered in my ear, spoke like she was Jeremiah's kin: "She's the only Momma you gonna get."

Over the next two weeks, I cleaned out bed pants, washed and dried orange-tinted hair, and laundered hideous red sweat suits. I made skillet suppers—some with okra and some without—and tried not to look shocked when my mother stood naked in front of me, spreading apart the great sea lions of her breasts so I could examine her chest scar to make sure it wasn't getting infected.

My sixty-seven-year-old mother is healing well—taking slow walks under loblolly pines, answering her cravings for pimento cheese, and telling everybody that her daughter has been an exceptional nurse.

Judas had his thirty pieces of silver. My mother has just one silver-dollar sized hole in her heart now patched with surgical Gore-Tex. I still feel betrayed but my anger is dissolving along with the sugar I put in her tea, along with the stitches in her chest.

III

I had my own appointment with the cardiologist yesterday. It turns out that atrial septal defects run in families. Dr. Jeffers tells me that I'm going to have to have heart surgery, too.

I'm strangely relieved.

I look at the thoracic priest, see the tired lines around his eyes, and make the closest thing to a confession I can manage: "So my heart's like Momma's after all."

The After

by Ashley Wu

Here: I'm here. Just here; not sitting or standing or anything in between. I'm restless. It's four o'clock in the morning, but I can't say I'm tired. I want out—in more than one way. When I close my eyes and turn my face towards myself, I see black in my veins, like anger, like frustration but worse. Black swallows all; any painter can tell you that. I breathe out a fog of darkness and watch it coalesce before me. If I imagine myself squinting a little, I can make out a nose, eyes, hair, and a familiarly condescending, shifty grin—someone I recognize, but someone I don't want to recognize.

For a while, I simply stare without words—and I think, because I can't help but remember. I pace. I turn and walk slowly away—then quickly. Finally, I whirl with mouth gaping. Thoughts stew, turbulent and hot behind my eyes, but although my throat works and twitches, I cannot find the words to say.

The anger courses from my blood and into my mouth instead—I speak a cry of rage that bursts into the middle of a thought, a pure ebony. I cry out:

“How could you? I trusted you. I trusted you, and then—and then—

The black: And then you left me; you left me with thoughts swirling around me like lost birds. So this is the black of “after”—that was all I could think. Those before-after comparison ads I used to see in the “before”—this must be the second panel, the panel that comes after.

And in the black of “after,” I sat hurting and wishing. You left; left me with the memories trembling as though to break. *You don't know what you've got until it's gone*—so true. So painfully true, now that *you* are gone, just gone. The contrast burns after so many years of having you there all the time, unconditionally.

And when I finally managed to paste over the hurt with medicine and salve, the anger started. First there was blame, covered up by excuses I made up for you because I thought I still cared, but all of that wore thin after a while. And then—then there was the night I was too tired to think anymore. When there are no more thoughts, true feelings emerge, and so on that night, the revelation began; on that night, I realized that anger numbs, works as an anesthetic. Relief, yes, bitterly sweet relief. So I let the anger grow wild, let it take over the garden of my emotions. I let it fill the empty space left when you went away, let it reveal every disappointment and hurt you caused me until your supposed perfection, supposed completion crumbled away.

Could I learn to forgive if you come back? Could I let you back in? Don't burn my anger, my garden; I don't want to start all over again.

You aren't perfect anymore, you know. You aren't even close. You are no god, no idol; you are only a human—and not a very good one at that. I don't want you and besides, there is no space anyhow; anger has

played your substitute far too well and for far too long. I have found that a fake can be just as satisfying as the real thing; more. You always did what you wanted—you *left*—but I know that with anger here instead, I will be caught if I fall, not abandoned, dropped.

The gray: forgiveness? I can't, won't let it happen. I can't let myself be hurt again.

Am I only being selfish, though? Like the protagonist in a story who has been terribly betrayed and turns on everyone—friend or foe—simply because of the pain; am I doing the same? Am I getting everything wrong, backwards? Should I be begging *your* forgiveness instead?

Oh, I'm confused, so confused. Was *I* the one who hurt *you*?

Should I be sorry? Why doesn't anything make sense anymore?

And I find myself *hurting* again, after all these thoughts. In doubt, uncertain, nervous, pained. Wasn't that exactly what I was trying to avoid? Pain turns animals savage—I am no different. Humans are only creatures, in the end. Pain can paralyze or galvanize, can still or electrify. At first, I was utterly unable to move, unable to function. When there is no reason to move, why should I? It was much more peaceful to remain quiet, to hope the threat would go away and leave me alone. But this threat didn't go away, didn't leave me alone, so I accepted the savagery, accepted the electricity of pain; let go of the paralysis. If others will not change to suit me, then there is no choice but to change myself. Some people curl up and whimper, and some people fight and kick to escape; they *roar*. Hear me roar—I will escape this. I will escape the absence of you.

And I find myself sulking again, after all these thoughts. Brooding, dark, sullen—and what right did you have to steal from me? What right did you have to take so much? That was wrong of you, terribly wrong, and so I was faced with how to respond. Two lefts don't make one right, but was anger really so bad? If I had let you escape without consequences, that would have been no good either; you would never have learned like I have. Things need to be fair, right? But who knows if you have actually learned anything...

And I find myself angry again at last, after all these thoughts. And I'm happy. Familiar, certain, friendly—people think rage is so one-sided, but it isn't. It isn't always bad, isn't always negative; it can be good, healthy. Why should I conform to other people's standards and forgive? Back off; I have my own beliefs, my own ways of handling things. So what if I'm different? What are you going to do about it? If I am going to hate and pace and fume, what are you going to do? I'm my own person now, not yours. I'm me, and I belong to no one else—and that is how things are going to stay. You will never have me again, trust me. I won't let you in; I know

better than to open the door once more. And then... and then there is nothing to say, because anger is my friend, your replacement.

The silver: but I don't find myself forgiving, after all these thoughts. I find myself back in the same place, the same mess. Why? *Why* am I still here, even though I know I'm trying to move on? Isn't anger enough to get me out, set me *free* from you? I thought I had managed to sever ties, but is forgiveness the only way?

Perhaps, though, I don't have to accept you or let you in again; I just have to... forgive you. Perhaps. Will that liberate me at last, at long, long last?

Maybe. Maybe I should try, just once.

Is this the silver?

The white: this is the white of "after"; finally, this is freedom. The door... the door stands ajar, unlocked.

Now: *And I tell the world—I'm here. I'm here, I'm free, I'm ready. I close my mouth and feel the blood pounding in my ears, still hot with agitation. When I look, I can see a sweet-sad smile instead of that arrogant smirk on his face, and I finally acknowledge just who he is; I acknowledge his kinship to me.*

Nostalgia—pain. The beige-cream of longing washes over me, followed by the smooth ivory of this newfound freedom. I breathe it in and feel the dark within dissolve, feel my blood pale to white once more.

I look at the ghost of my brother, the vengeful ghost of my memories, and I let him go. I let him fade away, and I understand at last that I am myself. I am only myself.

And after all this time, I open my eyes and the fog, the blackness, the anger is all gone; life with eyes open is so different from life with eyes closed. But I don't miss it; I don't miss any of it, not even the fog or the figure in the fog. I have learned to let go and let be. I have learned to forgive and maybe forget.

It's still dark out. The moon is still there; the sun hasn't risen yet. But I'm alive, I'm safe for now.

I dream myself into a new "Before."

Special Mention

Rachel Dukes-Schlossberg,
Our youngest entrant

Forgiveness

by Rachel Dukes-Schlossberg

When you forgive someone you are saying we can be friends again, and I am not mad at you. When someone does something that makes you mad they say I am sorry. Then when you have cooled off and are not mad at them any more you kindly forgive them and continue your day.

Sometimes I have to forgive my sister or my friends and family for hurting my feelings or other reasons that got me angry with them. And sometimes she needs to forgive me for doing something to make her upset for example annoying her and getting into her business. It is not very often I get into problems with my friends it is usually my sister.

I remember one time my sister got really mad at me because we were arguing about something and then she hit me really hard which made me extremely annoyed, so I hit her back. A few seconds later Sarah, my sister, was trying to hit me again, but as Sarah tried, I moved out of the way, and she tripped over something on the ground. I started to laugh which made her think that I had tripped her on purpose. For the rest of the day, I was trying to convince her that it was not my fault. The following morning Sarah was not mad at me any more. SHE FORGAVE ME! I was relieved that she finally forgave me because I was trying so hard to give her the message that I did not trip her ,and if I did, it was on accident and I am really sorry.

After I forgive someone or someone forgives me I feel extraordinarily good and happy that we are not mad at each other anymore. Before I forgive someone or someone forgives me I feel really guilty that it could be my fault too that the person I am mad at is in trouble and I am not.