

Winners: 2022 Poul Anderson Creative Writing Contest

Emma Wong
Poetry Award
2022 Poul Anderson Writing Contest

American or Not

When this American blocks that elderly Asian woman on the street
Who is hobbling her way down the streets of Chinatown,
Carrying bags of fresh groceries
With a mask tucked over her face,
She already knows what he will say.

She has heard it many times these past two years.

This American can claim he's done his research
From his trusty chosen sources:
“Those peasants in China are back at it again,
Eating bats and anything that moves—
That dreadful virus lives on the skin of every Asian in our town.”

As he hovers over the woman's tiny figure
He *could* see the deep crinkles from where she smiles too often
As she lifts her grandkids off the ground, beaming with pride,

And the tough calluses on her hands
From working countless hours to support her family in this new country.
He *could* see her smooth, silver hair,
Newly trimmed at the salon a few blocks down.

But hatred blinds the American from this.

Instead, he spits on her.

She flinches back,
Raising her hands as she steps away.

“Go back to your country,” he shouts,
Jabbing his finger as she questions him in Chinese.

Language—so powerful, isn’t it?
It carries the stories of generations,
Its words tossed back and forth like ripe dates at a market,
Flowing together over centuries.

When the disturbed old woman forms those words of *-ers* and *-shis* and *-shens*,
She mouths the sounds of a thousand years,
Of a thousand stories and journeys through dozens of dynasties.
She knows hundreds, maybe thousands, more words than him,

More stories, more tales of Chang'e, the moon goddess;
Of the turmoil and epics and legends of China
And its beautiful mountains and monsoon-drenched soil.

But he won't listen to these stories.

Instead, he'll call her things like a "dog-eater" and a "superspreader."

He'll tell her again to go back to where she came from.

To go home.

What he will never know

Is that Hong Kong is no longer a home for people like her.

Her birthplace full of bustling highways and speeding subways,

Where the smell of *bolo bao*, delicious steamed pineapple buns, and *cha siu*, sweet roasted pork,
permeated the narrow alleyways,

Where newspapers once proclaimed truth,

Is being crushed by the iron fist of authoritarianism.

She feels torn apart over who she is supposed to be.

Every day she turns on the small TV and sees a new incident where a woman just like
her is knocked to the ground; kicked, beaten, shoved. Shot.

Every day she feels a shard of her certainty that she belongs here fall away:

She has lived in this country for decades now,

Working, serving, paying her taxes, raising her family.

This is her country.

She is as American as the attacker.

The old woman hurries past him now,
Shaking off the insults as best she can.

She is stronger than she looks,
Seasoned by years of an immigrant's struggle.
The traces of spit on her face are gone,
No scratches or scars left by his words.

Instead, there is just this woman,
American or not.
Completely whole, though a little frayed at the edges,
Completely worthy, though a bit tense these days,
And completely, undeniably, irrevocably
Human.

Floating City

Once a normal man rushed out the doors of his gray, monotonous office building and fell. One moment his feet were on the doorstep, the next they were on nothing but the open air, and he was falling. He blinked and felt rather stupid as he watched the buildings recede above him. He should have just called a cab or driven or biked. He was still new to the city and forgetful of her ways, especially when he was in a hurry. (He was always in a hurry.) The wind swallowed his forlorn sigh and he hailed a cab, flailing his arm in hope that someone would spot him. An almost cute yellow cab glided down to him. He grasped for the handle and with a bit of effort yanked himself inside. He shook his head in self scorn, tried to pat down his windswept hair, and wondered why he chose to live in Void. Why couldn't he have just chosen an ordinary city like Chicago instead of picking the Venice of the sky?

"New here?" asked the cab driver with a laugh. She was a young woman with freckles and curly brown hair. She smiled at the normal man. He blushed.

"Yes, but I don't think I'll stay in Void for much longer. It just isn't my kind of place," he said.

"Oh," she said, a little sadder. The cab sank a little in the air, but the normal man didn't notice.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to it; I don't like falling," he said.

"But you always get back up," she answered, "you just have to call for a bit of help."

"What if no one comes?"

"Of course, someone will come. Void is a city full of people just like you, people who can't take a single step outside their door before gravity takes them; that's why we have the best public transit service in the world!" The man chuckled a bit then was quiet once more.

“No one gets used to falling,” she admitted, “or catching people for that matter. It’s harder to catch someone than it is to fall.” And then he noticed how tired she was. He wished he could help her somehow, but all he had to offer was conversation.

“I’ve always wondered, what do the cabs run on?” the man asked.

“Optimism,” she laughed, “optimism and kindness. That’s why each year the city gets a little closer to the ground.”

“Do you think Void will hit the ground and become like all the other cities?” he asked.

“Become like all the other cities?” she wondered. “It already has as much in common with the other cities as they have with each other.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” he said, a bit afraid of what she would say but resolute in his curiosity.

“I think Void will touch the ground, but I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that. Change is a part of life, like moving here. It might take some getting used to, but it can be a good thing. I think maybe when the buildings stop floating, the people will start to. Now, this is your place, right? It’s nice,” she said with a smile. The normal man blinked at it. It was just a quaint place with a little garden that he’d always worried would fall out from under him.

“Thank you. This is my number if you ever want to get coffee or something,” said the man gratefully and a bit awkwardly. The woman beamed, “I’d like that. Next time you fall, feel free to call me too. My name is Nora.” The normal man stepped into his little garden. The earth felt solid underfoot. He crossed the few steps to his house and paused in the doorway to look back. He smiled and his house floated just a little higher than it had before. He watched the cab drive away, and his smile broadened as he noticed that it was flying slightly higher too.

Eloise Anagnost
Short Story Award
2022 Poul Anderson Writing Contest

Chased by Darkness

Dawn is supposed to signal a new beginning. Hope for the future. But for us, dusk was constantly chasing dawn. Becoming closer and closer until dawn was synonymous with dusk. Until the dark had consumed the light and we were left grasping for any semblance of sun.

It was May 13, 1939. Despite the bright skies, there was no sun among us. Our once lively bustling city of Hamburg, Germany was no longer lively in the way that suited my family. Or was it that my family was no longer needed for the liveliness of the Third Reich. Forgive me, I'm being cryptic. Whichever way you choose to put it, my family no longer had a home in Germany. Our very bodies that we were told, as children, were special, are deemed vile. Atrocious. Wicked existences and a threat to the Master Race.

The city I had met my wife in, had my two children in, was shutting me out after 43 years. There weren't any bombings yet but it somehow seemed worse. German was no longer a critical aspect of my cultural blend, but a coarse sound that brought destruction and pain. I didn't know how I would tell my children — Maria and Abraham, both a mere seven years old — that home was no longer safe. That home no longer wanted them. That our lives would become a constant chase. That our religion was not sacred, but a curse.

I couldn't tell them. But I also couldn't show them. I couldn't show them that I was breaking down. That their father, the one who greeted them with a broad smile and called them neshama sheli, my soul, shook with immense sadness and fear as he bought four boat tickets. Just like I couldn't tell them that the "trip" I went on for two months wasn't a trip. So, like thieves in the night, we crept out of our home into the dark city. The electric

lamps were no longer a beacon of hope. They simply seemed to illuminate the coveted evil that forced us to leave. The evil that tore me from my family two months ago; the same evil that consumed all Jews in Germany, wearing us down until our eyes could no longer see light.

“Why are we so quiet Mommy?” Maria tugged on my wife’s long scarf. Despite the bitter cold pinching my face, despite the darkness that grew within me — spreading like ink spilled on a paper — I almost laughed at the sight of that scarf. My wife, Shelda, didn’t quite have a talent for knitting, yet being confined to our home, she didn’t have much to do. But Shelda always had to have a project. Something she would put her mind and heart into. However, she quickly learned that having fingers deft at piano playing did not necessarily translate to a deftness in knitting. Each time she ran out of a certain color of yarn, she had to switch to another as going to the store to purchase yarn was not a pleasure worth the risk. And so, the scarf was made of many different yarn colors and materials. It was a horrendous scarf really, patchy and fraying (even though she just recently finished it!), yet she insisted on displaying her accomplishment. It’s funny, in a way, the scarf was her one final goodbye to Hamburg. It told the story of isolation, of persecution. The scarf told the Nazis, “I am capable, you tried to leave me with nothing yet I made something.”

“We are being secret spies neshama sheli...” Shelda whispered tightening her grip on Maria’s small fingers. “Daddy is taking us somewhere very special, but it’s a surprise so no one else can know but you!”

“And you too,” she freed her hand from Maria’s grasp and brushed Abraham’s small nose, already red from the cold. I closed my eyes as I walked in front of them, suppressing an urge to scream and cry. The spies weren’t my children. The spies were the SS. The spies were lurking in the corners of streets, branding Jews with symbols. The spies were infiltrating businesses, breaking windows and peaceful nights. The spies were shoving us from Hamburg without even laying a hand on us.

“Right Max?” I faintly heard Shelda’s voice, tinged with worry, behind me. I tried to relax my tensing muscles because I knew she saw them. I opened my eyes. I needed to try to be enough for my children. I had already done enough damage letting myself be hauled away and dehumanized. I needed to try to be strong. Shoving my trembling hands into my pockets, I turned around.

“Yes, and you know what? We are going on a big ship!” I measured my voice, trying to add the right amount of enthusiasm despite the whisper.

“A ship!” Abraham ran to catch up with me, his wide brown eyes trying to pierce the darkness in order to find the boat.

“Yes, a big boat that will take us somewhere new and exciting!” Shelda whispered, knowing that I was unable to say anything else.

I hated it. I hated knowing that I hadn’t always been enough for my children. That I was weak enough to let Hitler’s henchmen drag me off. That I was selfish enough to not resist when they grabbed the back of my neck, their hands more confident than my body could ever be. I hadn’t been strong when I didn’t say goodbye when I left the house that morning because I believed I could continue to manage my store even though the buildings around me were broken and signs plastered across the shattered windows reading “schmutzige Juden.” Dirty Jews. I was stubborn, foolish even, to think that I would be exempt from the Nazi terror. That for some reason the Nazis would find it in themselves to spare my small grocery store. To spare my family. I had faith. But faith isn’t smart.

I stopped. I heard nothing, not even the hum of the electric lights. I knew we were at the dock. A silence that intense is the sound of hundreds of Jewish families walking without steps, praying without voices, and whispering without opening their mouths. I put my arms around Shelda, Maria, and Abraham, guiding them into the line of Jews filing on to the passenger ship the *St. Louis*. As we made our way to a section of the ship, I repeated the facts in my head. We would arrive in Cuba. We would use the visas to

get into Cuba and then wait for approval from the United States. And maybe then. Just maybe, we could stop being chased by perpetual darkness.

My memories of the journey are dim. I remember that I wanted it to be silent, yet my hands kept trembling I couldn't get a loop of words out of my head.

“Beenoughbeenoughbeenough...”

But I wasn't enough. I was silent while Shelda consoled Maria when she cried about being hungry. I turned away, huddled against the wall when Abraham asked why the nice man next to him had been asleep for so long. I shrunk into myself when they asked, “Why is Daddy not talking?” and my wife replied, “He is tired from the journey neshma shali. He will be all rested once we reach the United States.”

“What is the Unit—ed state?” Abraham asked, tripping over his words. I closed my eyes, easily re-immersing myself in the loop playing in my mind as Shelda began to speak of new opportunities, places, and people we would see once we reached America. That's how I tried to be enough while not trying at all.

My mind awoke at the sound of voices. I didn't know how long had passed, yet we had reached Cuba. And that is when I made a fatal mistake.

I allowed myself to hope.

I allowed myself to believe in a future.

I dug faith from the depths of my body, dusting it off.

I think Shelda saw the nascent light behind my eyes, because she reached for my hand.

And I let her hold it. I let her hold it because I finally believed that I was worthy to be her husband. That I was worthy enough to be a father.

I should have learned not to put trust in faith. While I repeatedly gifted it my trust, it gave me nothing but regret in return.

Cuban government officials greeted us at Dawn when we arrived, but I was blind to the fact that this was yet another sign of the Dusk chasing us. They spoke to the captain in rapid, loud voices — harsh to the ears of those who lived in whispers. The hundreds of us crowded at the door of the ship, waiting for the word that we could disembark with our visas. I held the hands of Marie and Abraham, Shelda resting her chin on my shoulder. Some might say “I wish that moment lasted forever” or “I wished someone had framed us standing there.”

But I don't want that moment in time captured. It already plagues my thoughts. It already reminds me of what I've done. Of what I lack.

I don't want to frame faith. It doesn't deserve it.

I don't want to frame me. I don't deserve it.

The captain turned around, his face stoic. “Will the families who have new visas come forward please,” he announced, his voice almost echoing in the silence. We all rushed forward, eager to see true light.

“No. No!” He raised his voice, his brow furrowing, the haggard lines marking his face more pronounced. “Only those who have new visas.”

We looked at one another in confusion. What new visas? We were given instructions to obtain a Cuban visa weeks before the *St. Louis* left. Several families pushed past us, holding papers that looked different from the ones I had secured for my family.

“Wait, wait, wait,” I touched a young man on the shoulder. “What does he mean, new visas?” The man looked at me in slight annoyance as the rest of his family moved towards the door of the ship.

“I don't know. All I know is my father had to get new papers because the old ones don't work anymore.”

He pushed past me, trying to catch up to his father and mother. Trying to reach a new life while we were left waiting. While we were left running away from darkness rather than chasing the light.

I pulled my hands sharply from the small ones that grasped onto me. I couldn't hold their hands. I couldn't protect them. I couldn't. I couldn't.

I couldn't.

I heard the captain raise his voice, trying to explain over the muttering confusion of the 909 people that remained on the boat. "...we will have to return to Europe..." he explained, his voice devoid of remorse. He stated it like a simple fact. Like an order at a restaurant.

"Why can't America just let us in? They have room!" a man shouted near me. Many shouted in words of agreement.

"The United States will not let you in." The captain stated frankly.

"Why?" my voice sounded foreign, different from the loop playing in my head. "Why?" I repeated.

"Why do you think?" he responded, spitting out his words. "You are, you all are," he looked at all of us, "900 something Jewish refugees. You are unwanted immigrants. Germany doesn't want you. Why would the United States want you?"

Maria began to cry, and Abraham buried his face in Shelda's scarf. But the scarf couldn't dry tears.

"Did you actually think that America would let you achieve their 'American dream?' Pshttt. You people are a whole bunch of dreamers. Wake up already." He turned back to the Cuban officials, briefly conversing with them, before forcing the stunned crowd back onto the ship. Wake up already. Be enough. Unwanted. Useless.

Dirty.

Never enough.

I couldn't be there.

Maria and Abraham couldn't count on me to hold their hands. Shelda would never trust me to be a father. She would never trust me to love her enough.

I wasn't enough for faith

I wasn't fast enough to run from Dusk. To run from Darkness.

But I thought I could run from life.

So I pushed and fought to the front of the 900 people. The 900 souls just trying to hold on to what I had lost a long time ago.

"IT WON'T COME BACK" I yelled, willing myself to be strong enough to tell people not to repeat the same mistakes I did. "FAITH AND HOPE. THEY WON'T COME BACK." I ran now, my voice reaching a shrill scream. "STOP SEARCHING FOR THEM. JUST STOP." I screamed until my voice was raw and my head pounded from the loop that played through my mind at the same time. And I ran.

I ran to compensate for when I didn't.

I ran faster than I had run out of the death camp. I ran from Marie.

From Abraham.

From my wife.

I ran because I hated that I would never, ever be enough for them.

I ran into darkness.

And I held my breath.

But I wasn't enough for the ocean either.

A New Homeland

I stare at the gray slabs of ice floating in a stained ocean. Murky oil has occupied the previously crystal blue water. Both of my flippers ache with exhaustion from swimming for so long, and the goal of finding a new homeland for my colony is slipping further away each day. I yearn for the comfort of home, but I've swam too far to return. Six months ago, some lanky creatures called "humans" wrecked their floating device on my colony's shores. The dark gray oil, which leaked out onto our home, has polluted our food supply ever since, making the fish and krill inedible. We have quickly gone from joyful Adélie penguins playing on the icy shorelines to starving scavengers, thin as a bone. Pathetic. In deep frustration, I yell out at the abyss.

"Hello!? Is there any new land out there for us to live on?"

"Who are you yelling at, penguin?" To my shock, I hear a grumpy voice answer in return. "...M-my name is Aqua, who are you?" I ask, my voice quivering on its edge.

"The name's Snow," a gruff looking albatross replies, descending from the sky. His pitch-black wings look immensely worn from flying, his feathers mangled and ruffled by the wind.

"Your land is also covered by oil, is it not? It's getting really hard to find clean rest stops, you know."

"Mr. Snow, I-I'm searching for a new home. Did you see any islands on your journey over here?"

“It’s your lucky day, kid. I happened to pass by a roomy white ice floe about two days of flight toward the north. Never remember seeing that place before...”

“An ice floe?” My eyes grow wide with anticipation. An expanse of frozen land just like my home! “I can’t fly, but can I swim there!”

“You can’t fly,” Snow guffaws. “What kind of bird are you?”

I bristle, but he continues.

“Just a tiny problem—the area’s infested with killer whales. Oh, and you do know about the plastic there, don’t you?”

“Plastic? Is it something like oil?”

“Plastic is just as dangerous. It’s shiny and stiff and comes in many forms. If you see a tube of it, that’s called a straw. If you see it in a square shape, that’s a box, and the round one with a short neck is a bottle. It floats around and looks like food, but it’ll definitely kill you if you eat it. The humans make these. Selfish and ignorant creatures, they are.” “Hu... humans again?” Selfish and ignorant indeed.

“I need to keep moving, Aqua,” Snow grumbles irritably, preparing himself to fly away. “Sorry to hear about your home. It’ll take a brave soul to reach that ice floe, you know.” Stillness surrounds me after Snow takes his leave. I am certainly not brave: the thought of even a baby leopard seal sends me into shivers. Now, killer whales and that ominous “plastic” in the waters ahead seem impossible to face. But I have to do this. My colony had been skeptical about my mission of finding a new home, yet this was their last hope. With our numbers dwindling, I am the only one young and healthy enough to go. They loaded me with what little food they had and watched me leave for the journey. How I miss them... I continue to swim north alone in the

endless ocean for what seems like days. The cloudy water slowly reverts back into the stunning cobalt it is supposed to be. So far, there are no signs of killer whales; I breathe a heavy sigh of relief. Whenever my legs feel fatigued, I simply let myself drift along. There are things that drift along with me. Stiff, round, and shiny, they float in groups. Plastic bottles. They look perfectly harmless until I see bodies floating around them. Sea turtles choked to death on these things. I frantically try to help a seagull choking on a straw, but he was too far gone. A helpless, empty feeling starts to consume me, no matter how much I try to keep a positive attitude. Was Snow confused? How could there be a new ice floe? What about the folks back home? What about me? I have no energy left to make the journey back...

Finally, just as my doubt starts to overtake me, I see it. On the yellow-orange horizon, there sits the white ice floe that Snow had promised. It is magnificent—a few miles in width and plain white, just as my home used to be.

“It’s real! It’s real!”

Even though my legs ache with pain and my lungs are exhausted, I surge forward, letting out a loud whoop of joy. My folks will have a new home! Jubilant, I jump onto the edge of the island, extend my wings, and let them embrace the solid ice. Instantly, though, I feel a chunk fall through my arms.

...What?

The piece of “ice” resurfaces right in front of me and I yelp. It is not compact and cold like ice should be at all, instead bobbing right back up to the surface. I look down at one of the mysterious blocks, brushing off a thin layer of snow that disguises something else underneath. The block is light and formed in a square shape, shiny and glittering in the reflected sunlight of the ocean. It is a texture that can only be described as...

...Plastic.

Plastic boxes! I cry out and look up, and there, to my horror, the giant ice floe is nothing but thousands of white plastic blocks. I lose the little calm I had and plunge into despair. Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I spot dark forms heading toward me. Someone else has sensed my fear. Watching the ominous figures move, I realize that my worst nightmares have sprung to life. Killer whales. Two of them. I cover my beak, stifling a scream, and immediately attempt to submerge myself. My body is exhausted and I overestimate my speed. This catches the whales' attention, and they surround me. Their gargantuan teeth sharpen their hungry expressions. I have no energy left to flee, but then, out of sheer desperation, I'm struck with a perilous idea: I'll swim *toward* them. I gather my courage and dash out between the two predators. They shriek in surprise, making way, and I'm filled with a fleeting moment of joy: *I did it!* But the whales whip back around in no time; they're skilled hunters, and they'll do anything to kill. This sends a shock of fear through my veins. Twisting around, I attempt the same strategy, surging back toward them. All at once, a sharp pain yanks me back. Distraught, I look down; there, my foot has been caught in a stringed, latticed object resembling a web... a fish net! Another human product! The dark shadows rush closer, but I can't wrench myself free from the net.

Spotting my struggle, one whale lunges at me. This is the end, isn't it? I will be eaten. I will fail my colony... but I can't! Letting out all the air in my lungs, I make a daring submerge, barely dodging a hit from the attacker. It releases a terrifying bellow, and I see that it has charged into the fish net itself—the trapped assassin has started a gruesome struggle to get free. I become dragged in as well, wailing and thrashing around, my foot getting further tangled in the net. My

vision is blurring. I have failed... Regret slowly floods me, eclipsing all other rage or hope... I find myself sinking, sinking, and sinking into a silent abyss.

Everything is dark.

A loud ringing in my ears breaks the silence. I snap out of my unconsciousness, shocked to find myself lying in a shallow, warm pond. Where am I? I see an abundance of food and a few bright lights. A group of figures waddle toward me: penguins! Not my species, but penguins nonetheless!

“Are you alright?” one of the penguins inquires gently. I am amazed to find that she knows my language, even through a thick accent.

I nod slowly.

“Am I... dead?”

“No—you’re in a wildlife center. You’re safe,” she replies, her eyes kind. “I am Arctic.”

“B-but what happened?” I whisper. “Why am I here? I should have been d-dead.” “Ah,”

she explains, “the humans saved you from the abandoned fishing net.” “Humans?”

Aren’t they the ones who’ve created all these problems?” I am bewildered. “Some of

them help us,” she answers simply. “The humans saved me, too.” “Oh, Arctic, please

tell me they can save the penguins from my colony!”

“I heard something about the humans tracking your habitat. You should ask the group of all-gray penguins who just arrived at the wildlife center.”

All-gray penguins?

“What? There aren’t any all-gray penguins, just like how there isn’t a new homeland!”

As I shake my head, Arctic points to a large group of, yes, *all-gray* penguins entering the

pond. I stare at them in awkward silence. In a flash, my eyes widen, and my beak drops. The gray is just oil. Underneath it lie the Adélie penguins from the colony! The humans found them! I dash forward, hugging them until we start to cry. I realize now just how grateful I am to these humans. They saved me from the net and my folks from the polluted ice floe. Why did Snow have such a low opinion on humans? These smart creatures could care about us, too! Who were the clumsy ones that created all of these problems, anyway?

Indie Lee
Honorable Mention, Poetry
2022 Poul Anderson Writing Contest

Smile, you're on camera

The person I live inside

is not me

I have more dreams, more desires

more stories

fewer fears

We don't think and feel the same way

Why does she smile without joy
Laugh at jokes that aren't funny
Grin after she trips and falls
Chuckle when she doesn't think her words are good enough

It's like a hundred cameras follow her around
our actions and our feelings
our reactions and our lack thereof
are recorded forever and the moments play back on repeat
in my head

I have to act accordingly because I can't mess up
on camera
I want to feel happy and when I look at the snapshots,
remember I was happy

But fear trickles in and happiness fades
Still, I can't stop smiling.
Confusion,
curiosity,
anger,
and sadness
hidden behind the curtain that is laughter

The voice inside my mind tells me to live bigger but...

Would I still be me?

I imagine one day I'd wake up brand new

People would tell me I'd changed

I might just stand there for a moment

and laugh it off

Chiara Sponzilli
Honorable Mention, Poetry
2022 Poul Anderson Writing Contest

Fake

I see the lives of others
portrayed on a screen

How amazing
their lives seem

Clean room, good grades, many friends

the perfect teen

Not thinking about
what is unseen

An anaesthetic routine

Rising early and being productive

Their trendy clothes
blue denim jeans

All the comments speaking of
their impeccable genes

Relationships with other perfect people

Always embarking Onward
towards the next great adventure

I find myself stalking
their facebook page,
watching the sequel

So convincing, yet
so deceitful

It's not true

No one's life is
as perfect as it seems

What's behind the mask?
If only we knew

We're scared that someone will see through

Our facade sewn with flawless seams

Jonathan Su
Honorable Mention, Science Fiction/Fantasy
2022 Poul Anderson Writing Contest

City of Blues

"I found it!" gasped the boy.

It was a true wonder that her scrawny friend was moving so fast. Of course, it must be the news.

"Really?" asked Liberty.

The boy's eyes scanned around the empty soccer field as if to check for predators waiting to snatch his prized possession. Then he plopped down on the blue grass and shoved the folded

flyer into Liberty's hands.

Liberty, realizing the urgency, peered down at the rainbow text: "Greetings Blues, we are the Capital. We will be sending traders to your city at 8 tonight. Open your western gates."

"So it is true," Liberty bit her lower lip, "Where did you find this Charlie?"

"My Dad's office. He's at the meeting with the High Committee right now."

Liberty jumped up and glanced down at Charlie, his skin almost blending into the light-blue grass. She stuck one hand out in which Charlie grasped it with a sigh. In one quick motion, she pulled the slender boy up with ease.

Liberty was born a free spirit. She was no animal; she refused to be leashed by society. From youth, she refused to believe in a world of blue. Is everything really meant to be so identical to each other? A community where the word diversity didn't exist? It sickened her to her stomach that everything was so bland, so blue.

Charlie tapped her right shoulder.

"7:55," he announced with evident excitement in his voice.

Liberty lay on the low roof of one of the broken-down homes near the western gates. The roof belonged to Liberty's grandparents, who were poor and forced to live in the outer ranges of the City of Blues. The gate itself was a giant blue arch. Stretching down its sides stood tall blue walls that were a barrier from what Liberty's teachers called dangerous Outsiders, who were known to be a society of low-intelligent animals.

Of course, while most blue-skinned children listened in terror and shock, Liberty could only imagine the day she would meet the Outsiders. From what she discovered from Charlie, the Outsiders resided in a place called the Unified City.

All of a sudden, her imagination had turned into a reality. The suspected Outsiders appeared as a dot behind the blue vertical bars twenty feet in front of her. This tiny dot had her buzzed with curiosity.

Though unable to clearly see in the pitch-black night, Liberty knew with certainty that Charlie must've been as thrilled as she was. With a groan, the vertical bars made a crackling sound and began to rise with a mechanical humming accompanying it.

Suddenly, the gradual sounds of a slow march near Liberty made her peer down the side of the roof. In the dark, she could still make out the glimmering blue armor of the blue-skinned soldiers.

“What are soldiers doing here, greeting traders?” Liberty turned back and asked

Charlie. Out of the dark, a quivering voice answered back, “They’re going to kill them.”

“Kill them? They’re going to kill the Outsiders?” Liberty asked in a panic.

“You don’t understand, Liberty,” Charlie whispered from the dark, “They don’t want citizens seeing them. Or even to know that they exist....”

At this point, Liberty spotted the electric carriage, or what the Blues call the Ele, arriving near the gate. It was nothing like she had ever seen before.

“Red, Liberty, it’s red. The color red is so close to us,” said Charlie.

“What is... red?”

“It’s the color of the Ele. I learned the colors from my Dad during a High Committee meeting.”

Before Liberty could interject, the blue soldiers halted at the Ele in front of the gate. At this moment, a pair of people stepped out of the Ele. Their skin matched the color of the dark. Even the bright blue lights from the top of the gate, now turned on and pointed at the traders, could

barely decipher the dark pair.

“Greeting Blues, we are from the Capital sent here to make a trade,” announced one of the Outsiders. Liberty could not tell if the Outsider’s mouth moved, for even his teeth were pitch black.

Two blue soldiers stepped forwards, and suddenly, two rings echoed out, followed by two rhythmic thumps. A scream echoed in a nearby house. A middle-aged mother stood on the front steps of her front porch. She was poor too, banished to live in the outer banks away from the heart of the city. Before the mother could take a step in an attempt to run, the soldiers seized her. Expecting another ring, Liberty squinted her eyes shut and covered her ears with the palms of her hands. However, she heard a camera click instead. She opened her eyes in time to see one of the soldiers releasing the poor mother and stuffing a blue rectangle in his armor.

“It’s a Reset!” Charlie hushed after scooting up to Liberty’s right arm.

“Reset?”

“It resets a person’s memory when used. They forget everything from the past 5 minutes. My Dad has talked about it once, but... I didn’t think it was real.”

Taken care of the witness, the soldiers torched the fallen pair and the red Ele and proceeded back

towards the city's center. Without thinking, Liberty climbed down and ran through the arch just as the gate began to inch towards the ground.

“Liberty!”

She frantically searched for something, a memory of the Outsiders that she could collect. Instead, her hand located a small bag near the burning Ele. Behind her, the gate had almost successfully hit the ground. Liberty snatched up the bag and slid back through the crack of the gate where Charlie was fuming.

“Liberty! What are you thinking?”

Unfazed, Liberty held up the Outsider bag triumphantly, “Look!”

Charlie peered at the bag in curiosity.

The High Committee was made up of 5 men, acting as the rulers of the City of Blues. As the son of a High Committee member, Charlie knew all about the truth behind the Outsiders, information that no ordinary blue citizen had even heard whispers of. According to his father, many different colors of men lived in the Unified City. Long ago, the High Committee decided that other colors were inferior, that blues shall rule supreme. According to them, the skies and oceans gave them superior knowledge and skill. And this is what Charlie told Liberty when they were 15. Now, at

his 5-story mansion, Charlie couldn't believe how captivating the Outsiders' bag stood out in the all-blue room.

"Open it," Charlie tapped Liberty, "Liberty, open it."

"Hold on. Why were the Outsiders killed? They didn't do anything wrong!"

"Haven't you heard the teachers? Outsiders are dangerous! Dangerous, dumb creatures planning to predate on our citizens. Why wouldn't the High Committee want to eliminate them?"

"They told us that they were animals. Did those two men look like animals to you? They're just like us!"

"They're not blue Liberty!"

"And?"

"They're inferior. Creatures that are waiting to predate on our citizens."

"And how do you know that?"

"Dad said so."

"And why is your Dad right?"

Charlie took a second.

“Exactly. You don’t know. The Outsiders could be exactly like us. Eating blueberries every day!” “Just open the bag Liberty, they’re dead. My Dad’s coming home any minute.”

Intending to finish her argument but the curiosity of the bag even stronger, Liberty glared at Charlie and pried the bag open. Inside, squares with an intriguing scent invited Liberty’s hand to reach in and take one out.

“What is it?”

“I dunno,” Charlie shrugged, “Smells good though. Maybe it’s food?”

“Taste it?”

“You do it.”

Liberty, the daring one of the two, plopped one in her mouth. It melted and transformed into a thick goo. The sweet, yet bitter taste carried Liberty’s hand in for another. Charlie, noticing her pleased face, followed suit. And soon, Liberty laid the empty bag flat against the table.

“What is that?”

Charlie groaned, satisfied, “Definitely not blueberries.”

Liberty had a particular sparkle in her eye and smiled.

Charlie noticed her mischievous grin instantly. “What?”

“Let’s get more.”

“Get more of what?”

“Let’s get more of this! Let’s go to the Unified City, the city where those two men came from!” Liberty said as she gestured towards the empty bag lying on the table.

“That’s where those animals live, Liberty! Those people without a hint of blue on them.”

“So? That doesn’t mean they’re animals. Seemed fine to me. Besides, who knows what else they have there!”

“Liberty. They’re unpredictable and dangerous! They have nothing good there...except for maybe those things in that bag.”

“Listen. My stomach is sick of just blueberries. Look...you have to see their city at least once.”

“My Dad will kill us! Think about what the High Committee will do, or do you not remember the Resets?”

“Not going to happen if they don’t catch us! Look, I’m going. Are you in or not?”

Liberty’s crossed arms and glare made it known that it wasn’t a question. Charlie knew that he would be a ghost to Liberty if he didn’t go.

His eyes elevated to something right above Liberty’s head. Noticing that Charlie’s eyes were no longer focused on her, she asked him again.

“It’s about nine right now. I tell my Dad I’m sleeping over at your house for the night, and we come back by tomorrow night. But that’s it. One day,” said Charlie.

Liberty, the implied winner of the argument, smirked, “Of course, one day.”

Glancing left then right, Liberty climbed into the passenger seat of Charlie’s blue Ele. Inside, the

blue leather seats provided warmth in the cold night. Charlie grabbed onto the support railing and flung himself into the driving seat. Fumbling with the keys, Charlie's gleaming sweat on his forehead was noticeable to Liberty even in the dark.

"Listen, no one is going to know. One day. No harm, no foul."

"I know. Just stop talking."

Taking the cue, Liberty zipped her mouth shut. At this, the Ele's two bright blue eyes blinked into the road in front of them. Charlie pressed a tiny button on the blue wheel, and two blue curtains, acting as doors, began their slow descend to hide the Ele's passengers. And once the curtains stopped rolling, the blue Ele commenced its uncertain journey.

Liberty's Dad was also a part of the High Committee. However, an unfortunate death brought Liberty to live with only her mother since she was 12. He always talked with an unplaced enthusiasm in his voice during the days preceding his death. He waved his arms around widely as he spoke of potential trades with people of different colors. Finally, eating foods that were not blue. Finally, talking to people that looked different. Finally, bring everyone back together. And it was these talks of 'finallys' that unnerved the High Committee as Liberty's Dad pushed them to tell the citizens the truth. And it was these talks of 'finallys' that finally put an end to Liberty's family.

Next to the blue arch, Charlie tapped his Dad's identification badge on the small flickering sensor. The bars grumbled and began to rise.

“Wait, you know how to get there?”

“If we keep straight, we'll get there. Our western fence faces the exact position of The Unified City.”

“Really?”

“That's what my Dad said. Long ago, we supposedly lived in The Unified City as well. But some of the Blues thought that they were too far superior. And thus, came the City of Blues and accompanied by seclusion.”

“And they think not to tell us that? It would be so diff...Charlie look! Look at the sand!”

Charlie lifted the curtain on his side, “Yellow. I can't believe it. The sand is yellow!”

As if the sand disagreed with his words, the sand changed to the color of white. Then black. Then green. And soon, along with the color-changing sand, the large city was noticeable in their sight - four times the size of the City of Blues. There were no walls, nothing protecting the city.

The passengers of the incoming blue Ele could see the entire city glow with colors in the night. The brown skyscrapers. The orange houses. The red Eles. And objects they had never seen before. The most noticeable, however, was that nothing was blue. As they drew closer, they remarked that the people reflected the city's colors – people of all colors except blue.

As the Ele pulled into the city, gasps echoed. Evidently, this generation had never seen the color blue before.

“Outsiders, Liberty. We're here. What do we do with these animals? You think they'll eat us?” “Don't be silly, Charlie; they're just like us. Come on.”

Before Charlie could protest, Liberty had lifted her side of the curtain and stepped down from their vehicle.

Following suit, Charlie rolled up his curtains and stepped down. Already, he could hear the large clamoring on the other side of the Ele. Liberty was making fast friends. Charlie stared at the Outsiders in front of him, and the Outsiders' eyes fixated on him like Charlie was a specimen to be studied. He didn't know how to begin.

“Um... me,” Charlie said as he gestured toward himself, “A blue. BUH-LOO.”

The Outsiders seemed even more confused now, slightly irritated by his patronizing attitude. “We

know who you are.”

“Oh. You speak,” Charlie swallowed, “Well, nice to meet you. I’m Charlie, from the City of Blues.”

“Greetings Charlie, I am Charlotte, from The United City,” one of the women in the front answered.

Surprised yet in awe, Charlie stuck his hand out. Charlotte took the cue and reciprocated his action. So far, these different people of color appeared to be just as intelligent as they were.

On the other side, Liberty couldn’t believe the Outsiders’ inventions. They used little hand-sized rainbow rectangles to communicate with one another. Indeed, for a city that was expected to be filled with dangerous creatures, it was even better than the City of Blues!

A series of sirens reignited another commotion. Coming in a multitude of different colored Eles, a group of people in rainbow armor swarmed around Liberty. Before she could protest, the soldiers handled her into one of the Eles. And a second after, a body was plopped next to her.

“Liberty? What’s happening?”

“I think they’re taking us,” she whispered.

In disbelief, Charlie could only reply sarcastically, “Oh really? They’re taking us?”

Before Liberty could answer, the Eles jolted forwards toward the center of the colorful city.

Lights stretched across the top level of the skyscraper. Each light was a different color, giving the room a rainbow glow. The pair of Blues were seated on one side of the long table, with a group of eight on the other. Together, all the colors of the people were present. On the table were various foods: the brown squares that the traders carried, some sort of red food half the size of a hand, and orange spheres with little green stems on top. Surrounding them were transparent windows, except for the one wall with the elevator. The windows gave the Blues a view of the entire city.

“Welcome Blues, to The Unified City,” the green man announced. His eyes were darting across the Blues’ bodies, observing their blue hair, their blue eyes, their light blue teeth.

The green man’s darting eyes made the Blues tense. “Um. We’re from the City of Blues.”

The green man’s finger drummed against the table, adding to the tension, “Yes, the place we just sent two traders to. Where are they, by the way?”

Liberty quickly spoke up, “Traders? No, we don’t know about that. We just wanted to explore! We weren’t even sure if you existed until now!”

The finger drumming stopped. “What?”

The end to the finger drumming made Liberty even tenser, “Well, at the City of Blues, no one knows about your city. They, um, hide your existence.”

“Really?”

Charlie took the turn now, “Because we thought you were low-intelligence animals. You aren’t even blue!”

“Is that what you think?” the green man questioned, looking around his companions, “Do we look like ‘low-intelligence animals’ to you?”

“Your ancestors believed that different colors could not work together, that the Unified City would collapse in the end. And your ancestors, thinking that the Blues are far too intelligent to fall with the Unified City, left and built their own city. But look around, does it seem like we have fallen? No, we have only grown. The colors in this room symbolize our unity. Look at the food in front of you. Chocolate,” he said as he pointed towards the brown squares.

At this, Liberty muttered to herself, “Cho-co-late.”

“Yes, chocolate. Apples and those are oranges,” the green man continued as he pointed towards the fruits. “The United City has far more than what your city has even imagined. Do you have this much variety of foods?”

And judging by the expressions from the Blues’ faces, he nodded, “That’s what I thought. Each color brings its own goods. Together, the people of our city have access to all that’s available. And now, through our partnerships with each other, we are superior to your city.” Concluding his speech, the green man looked satisfied. On the other side, Liberty appeared even more curious than before, while Charlie sat grumpily next to her, struggling to come up with an answer.

Back in the City of Blues, Charlie’s Dad opened the front door to his house. “Charlie?” he called out.

Prompted with no response, Charlie’s Dad looked around and found a small notecard: “Sleeping over at Liberty’s tonight, be back tomorrow!” Considered a typical day of the week, Charlie’s Dad turned to throw the notecard away. Before he let it escape through his fingers, he noticed a black bag with a foreign aroma escaping from its zipper at the bottom of the trash can.

