

Inside This Country

Carl Cherry Center for the Arts

Poetry Anthology

Edited by Patrice Vecchione

The Elliot Ruchowitz-Roberts

Monterey County High School

Poetry Awards 2026

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Introduction

*And when you think about it,
poets always want us to be moved
by something, until in the end,
you suspect a poet is someone
who is moved by everything,
who just stands in front of the world
and weeps and laughs and weeps.” Mary Ruffle*

*“The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked;
it has no choice. It will roll in ecstasy at your feet.” Franz Kafka*

To see into the depths of our country at this particular time you don't have to go far. Open this book where you'll encounter a range of experiences that speak to what it's like to be a creative, curious, smart and reflective young person right now. Here are the most personal poems, such as love for a younger sister, the bonds between children and their parents, a little romance, the experience of being left, and that of feeling welcomed. Here's a girl knows what it's like to both love her mother and to be embarrassed by her. Another young writer tells us that she wasn't born a poet but through reading her poem, we see her becoming one. You'll find intimate knowledge of nature, a love of the earth where beetles crawl and butterflies take flight.

Students proclaim what they stand for, who they stand with, and what they're willing to pledge their allegiance to. Maybe we struck me most of all is the recognition of and belief in the power of community alongside an unwavering demand for justice for everyone who resides here. Students' fear for their futures that will face the increasing dangers of our warming climate is written in these pages. What does it mean to be part of the global community, and how we take care—or don't take care—of our planet? Readers will find courage and dreaming, a level of determination that catches my breath and ignites my heart, and an equal measure of beauty. There's joy and surprise, a wealth of curiosity, frustration, and more.

The best poetry, as vividly demonstrated here, isn't abstract—it resides in particularities; it lives in the dailiness of our lives, the places we inhabit, the complexities and contradictions inherent in being human. Poems don't hesitate to hold contradictions with equanimity. Poetry is a way to transform what's got our attention into something awe-inspiring or challenging and confusing. A poem can transform life into art. The 35 poems included in this collection do all that. Selecting them from the over 500 submitted was no easy task.

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Yours in more than pencil and paper,

Patrice Vecchione

Carl Cherry Center Poet-in-Schools,

author of *My Shouting, Shattered, Whispering Voice:*

A Guide to Writing Poetry & Speaking Your Truth

patricevecchione.com

2026 Award Winners

First Place

“Fold”

Amy (Lining) You

Stevenson School

Second Place

“I wasn’t born a poet”

Dolma Cervantes

Rancho San Juan High School

Third Place

“I Will Nor Pledge Allegiance”

Namid Solano Ramirez

Carmel High School

Fourth Place

“I am a human too”

Valentina F. Villa-Pyle

Rancho San Juan High School

Fifth Place

“Whispers of a Warming World”

Ryan Chun

Stevenson School

Fold

I never thought reuniting would be like this: suitcase, like grief, splitting open, airport a mouth swallowing us into fluorescence, a country where I hold my breath, where I scrub the accent from my tongue like dirt from under the closet. Two steel bottles cold in my palms, like mirrors that reflect the wrong face. At Starbucks, my mother unscrews the tin she brought from China, and asks for hot water to steep the tea I begged to drink as a child, before I knew latte, before I traded the smell of home for assimilation. Pu'er leaves spill a stubborn scent into air thick with espresso & erasure. When mother yells out *waiter*, heat crawls up my neck, apologies multiply like a virus of shame in my mouth, overcorrecting every vowel into glass. I plead us in fog, sand down the rough music of her consonants, fold myself smaller and smaller to fit inside this country, At the counter, I translate my mother's wonder, asking for hot water — once, twice, three times — more water, more hot water to steep the leaves from a foreign land. Here I carry myself like a stale can of soda, laugh at jokes that don't taste like mine, and run and run in the mountains until my lungs burn. the Pu'er tin sits open, my mother in her chair, unashamed, waiting for what she needs, while I shrink, want to be smaller, and fold myself into origami cranes, into the kind of daughter she wants me to be — unembarrassed, one who fits in, one who won't disappear into the wallpaper. I want to fold her back into the suitcase, to teach her the language of silence, the grammar for less the way I broke it, the way I am made broken, crushed into something small enough to swallow. Call it survival. Call it love — the time she wanted to order ham but asked the waiter instead for a "fire leg," the time she grabbed my school teacher by her arm, and demanded, in broken English, to know where the classroom was, the burning in my chest spreading like hot tea spilled across the tablecloth. From the blue glass of the barista's eyes, I see myself refracted, foreign, too much & not enough, who scrubs the tea leaves from her own mouth, wondering why she still tastes bitter.

Amy (Lining) You
Stevenson School
First Place

I wasn't born a poet

I wasn't born a poet.

I was born
mi papi's niña,
la hija de mi mamá,
el bebe that *mi abuelita*
had asked *Dios* to be
sent and born in the U.S.
to form a life there.

I wasn't born a poet.

I was born
an only child, with a few
"specialities,"
with many cousins,
who *mi mami* would always say
Tu abuelita, Nena,
te quiere más a ti
y ellos te envidian.

I wasn't born a poet.

I was born with a passion
for singing, and maybe if *mis padres*
would've supported
instead of shaming,
that dream could've been.

I wasn't born a poet.

I was born to be the
friend everyone would rely on,
the one who's called
"mature" and "intelligent"
all said with love.

I wasn't born a poet.

I was born with the ability
to grip, and I grabbed a pencil,
starting to escape my reality
and become a writer on my own.

I wasn't born a poet,

but I sure wish
to become one.

Dolma Cervantes
Rancho San Juan High School
Second Place

I Will Not Pledge Allegiance

I pledge allegiance to the past-
to the names carved in stone,
to the struggles that shaped this country,
so someone like me
could speak my truth freely.

I pledge allegiance to the ones
who marched with worn-out shoes,
carrying hope and courage in their steps,
to the ones who sang freedom
through swollen lips,
to the ones who believed in a country
that didn't believe in them.

But not here.
Not now.

This...This is the Divided States of America,

Where the stars have dimmed,
and the stripes feel like bars.
Where children go to school,
and don't always come home.
Where the word "safe" only applies
when it's convenient,
and the word "control" only applies
to books, to bodies, to love.

Here, thoughts and prayers
roll off tongues faster than policy ever will,
spoken by leaders
who wouldn't help us if we were on fire,
unless there was a camera nearby.

I pledge allegiance to the republic
for which it falls,
one nation under the weight of injustice,
drapped in nostalgia,
unrecognizable in the mirror.

With liberty as an illusion.
With justice bought and sold.
With freedom rebranded as merchandise-
slapped onto hats, shirts, bumper stickers.

Tell me:
What good is freedom if you can't taste it on an empty stomach?
What good is justice if it expires before it reaches the oppressed?
Indivisible, they say,
but the cracks are canyons now.
The anthem rings hollow-
a melody floating above fields
with broken promises.

Within, I lower my hand from my chest,
because to pledge allegiance is to lie,
and I've told enough lies
just trying to survive.

I will not pledge allegiance to a flag that overlooks injustice,
to a system that values some more than others.

Our father who art in heaven
would not stand for bigotry.
He would not kneel to it,
and that is the difference between Him
and some of you who drape hate in scripture,
who call systems of oppression sacred.

If heaven exists,
it will not look like this.
It will not have borders
that block the poor from opportunity.
It will not silence voices,
and call it freedom.

America wants to pretend it is holy,
but it worships power
and sacrifices its people.

So no, I will not pledge allegiance.
I will not tie my voice
to a song that has lost its meaning.
I will not bow to a flag
that stands proudly over pain, over suffering,
over broken promises,
over injustice.

This country has always been breaking.
It's just very good at convincing you
the sound
is fireworks.

Namid Solano Ramirez
Carmel High School
Third Place

I am a human too

They taught her to fear her own body
Before she ever learned how to love it
Taught her that being a girl
Meant being watched, meant being wanted
In ways that felt like danger
Eyes turned her into pieces
Legs, lips, skin
Never a mind, not a soul
Just something to consume
Patriarchy is cruel
It takes a child
And makes her carry shame
For the hunger of men
It calls her beautiful
When it only means breakable
Calls it attention
When it feels like fear
Somewhere inside
All that silence, all that shrinking
A darkness grows inside of her
The kind that comes
When a girl realizes
The world never saw her
As a human first.

Valentina F. Villa-Pyle
Rancho San Juan High School
Fourth Place

Whispers of a Warming World

Heavy summer skies shiver with a heat too fierce to bear.
Rivers shrink to whispers, once rivers strong and fair.
The sun scorches rooftops, bending asphalt to its will
While forests catch in flames, and silent valleys fill.

Yet beneath this glaring blaze lies a trembling, fearful heart.
Will the rains still fall gently, or will storms tear us apart?
Will the lakes we loved still mirror the morning light?
Will the children see the rivers running deep and bright?

Glaciers sigh and crumble, shedding ice into the seas.
Polar bears drift on lonely floes, carried by the breeze.
The oceans choke on plastic, waves heavy with our waste.
Will the whales remember songs that once filled open space?

Fields once green are barren, crops shrivel under the sun.
Insects vanish from the air, leaving silence where there was fun.
The earth grows restless, shifting, trembling under our weight.
Will we heed her warnings before it is too late?

And yet hope flickers faintly, like stars in a darkened sky.
If we bend our ways, change our hands, perhaps she won't die.
If we care for ice and river, for forest and for glen,
Will winters come again, and summers bloom for men?

Countless possibilities imbue us with the courage to repair.
Myriad adversities rise as they knock on mother nature's lair.
With no verdict carved in stone, we can still write tomorrow's story,
To tame the fevered earth, to craft, to forge, to pen our tale of glory.

Ryan Cbun
Stevenson School
Fifth Place

To Be a Dreamer

i've been reprimanded for my agreeability,
blamed and mistaken for naivete.

my beliefs that there is still good in this burning society
scolded as i twirl
into an abyss of imagination.

is that all there is in this nation?
blood and war to hurt our creation
in my dreams there is a revolution.

there it lies, our solution.

to be a dreamer
is to cradle sparks in trembling hands
while others jump quick to call them ash.

to sing for rain
amidst rooms that worship drought,
to insist on softness
in a world that sharpens doubt,
because what is life without illusion,
without daring to believe,
in a broken nation?
it is our dreams that weave.

beg my pardon if i wander.
beg my pardon if i see.
if to be a dreamer is a weakness
it is one that makes me free.

Jewel Christine Coloma
Rancho San Juan High School
Honorable Mention

The Runt

When I was a boy my mom
would tell me stop crying or
I'll give you something to cry about.
I was told boys shouldn't cry.
I was a man so I should take the
hitting and discipline,
and stop
being a baby.
But in truth I was
a baby,
misunderstood, neglected.
Youngest boy in the family.
No good
memories with my siblings,
only with my friends.
But I am a boy,
and boys don't cry.
Boys don't shed tears,
and boys don't show
any emotions.

Avan Angelo Kalstrom
Rancho San Juan High School
Honorable Mention

The Way it Is

When she talks, no one listens.
But when he talks, he has the whole crowd hooked.

They tell her to be quiet,
be softer,
sweeter,
to know her place.

They tell him to be strong.
Don't cry.
Toughen up.
Be powerful.

No one questions it,
no one dares too.

They all just say, "That's the way it is."

But who are "they"?

Why do they dictate our strength?

Who we listen to?

Who has more power?

Were we ever taught these rules?

Or were we taught not to question them?

Pedro Orozco
Rancho San Juan High School
Honorable Mention

Blank

From my own mistakes,
I learned how to stay quiet.
Before I learned this lesson,
I could easily part my lips
and spit out strings of words;
all of which spun into the
background I saw as clean fabric
free of anything.
I spoke to fill it with any design I could;
it was colorful and striking,
to anyone who saw.

But eventually,
as I ruminated over my work,
looking for frayed edges
and crooked stitches,
the wrong color
or messy unravelings,
I took scissors
and destroyed it myself.

It's been left blank for years.
I now can barely stitch a straight line,
or see the patterns I once did—
the ones I made before
I learned how to stay quiet.

Elise Yi
Carmel High School
Honorable Mention

The Quiet

I learned to love from the quiet—
the quiet place I stood
watching and noticing.
“Take a walk in his shoes,”
“Spend a day in her mind,”
trying to understand pain
from another perspective.
The quiet place I sat
writing and notating.
“Dear Heavenly Father,” day after day.
Journal and pen,
why do bad things happen?
The quiet place I lay
writhing and neglecting responsibilities
and giving way to procrastination.
Scenario after scenario—
maybe they just need a friend.
The quiet place I walk
seeing serene scenery and striking sunsets
with so much adoration
for the creation, the creator.
The quiet place I exist
always analyzing, acknowledging,
appreciating, attempting to love,
attempting to cherish.
Because the quiet is safe,
the quiet is trustworthy.
To love someone out loud is frightening—
but thankfully
the sheltered shadows hide me.
The quiet taught me to love;
it enables me to be free.

Maggie Holz
Carmel High School
Honorable Mention

The Cliff That Never Was

There's always a voice telling you to stop,
To slow down, to be careful,
Warning you about something ahead.
It will sound real,
Like danger is waiting for you,
Like one small step could ruin everything.
But most of the time,
That fear isn't truth,
It's just something you've been taught to believe.
So move forward anyway,
Take a chance, a risk, a step,
And don't ever live life worrying about,
The cliff that never was.

Kealani Marie Sagin
Carmel High School
Honorable Mention

My Thoughts and My Water Under the Moonlight

(copy-change Anne Sexton, "Her Kind")

I have gone out, an angry listener,
haunting the advice I give, braver only at night;
dreaming of the day I don't cry,
I have lied to myself
under the moonlight, fight by fight:
poor thing, scared of the night, out of mind.
A teenager like that is not a kid, quite.
I have been her kind.

I have found the beautiful days concealed
in the cabinet for another time
filled them with notes, pens, band-aids,
and hair ties, innumerable goods;
fixed the problems for the patients and the families:
screaming, rearranging the appointments.
A kid like that is a fool.
I have been her kind.

I have listened in your car, mom,
my water, I drank it all.
My dim lamp in my room,
learning how to make you smile
faster than light,
where your tears still hurt my heart
and my new chair sits
where your shadow once stood.
A listener like that is not enough
to deserve your voice.
I have been her kind.

Yuridia Pérez Paz
Carmel High School
Honorable Mention

Loving Blue

Her Mind is Blue—
She Loves what is Blue—
The Girl with the Dress—
It is Blue Like the Sea

Blue Sea Like Blue Sky—
Swell Things in this Life—
Swell as the Leaves
Leaving the Trees—
In Her Gardens of
Blue Flowers Asleep

When She is Asleep
Her Mind is Blue Too—
Memories Blue, and
Blue Tears of Grief—
Holding Together
And Money is Glue—
Aching to Breathe
Only in Dreams

She Loves what is Blue—
All that is Blue—
She Loves her Blue Dress—
Blue Like the Sea

Anna Freeman
Pacific Grove High School
Honorable Mention

Addiction

Sometimes I wish I had an addiction
A rotten twisted and real addiction
One beside the one that plagues my generation
The one that rots and warps and is oh too real
I wish I had a terrible gross habit
that turned my teeth yellow and lungs brown
Instead of the slow rotting of my brain
From a force of dread no one seems
to be able to explain

Emory Teta
York School
Honorable Mention

Brown Eyes

There was this date, an unbreakable contract
I unwillingly signed the day God created me.

From birth to the day I would be buried six feet under,
A contract that was bound to me for life:
My race, my culture, and my identity.

This contract contained these three things
that separated me from my neighbor to the people
standing behind cash registers.

This contract would also separate me
from the people who identified themselves
as athletic, creative, or intelligent.

One thing I didn't know was a part of this contract
wasn't discovered until third grade,
when two boys miraculously discovered the way I looked.
They pointed at the way I had brown eyes and dark hair,
but they also didn't miss the fact that they pointed out that I had those eyes
which they could pull the corners of and call themselves Asian too.

In summer camp, I watched as some Asians were called "Bananas."
They were "white on the inside, and yellow on the outside."
I didn't realize what that meant at the time.
I mean, what would a six-year-old suspect
in being called the innocent name of a fruit?

Then again, I learned that apparently if I had the same hair color,
eye color, or even shared the same last name,
I was indecipherable next to my Asian friend
despite the differences from clothes to jewelry
to even our personalities.
But like my hair, it's something I've learned
will be stuck to me forever.

One day, I stopped counting the times I had been asked
“So which part are you from... North or South?”
I thought it would have been obvious... but clearly it was not.
I also learned that “questions” were now a frequent part of my life too.

Several months ago, I didn’t realize that vacations
could now be a dangerous place too.
Apparently being Asian was now worthy of being called out
on the streets as “f---ing stupid” or “inferior.”

Then at several points of my life,
I remember I became embarrassed about who I was,
like sitting out at the amphitheater
where pom-poms were shoved in faces,
as my club was now identified as that culture
who had people starving themselves to look skinny,
or having pale skin to fit the so called: “Korean Beauty Standards.”

I now realized that when this contract was signed,
I had accepted the ability to be broken so many times,
until I would bleed from words,
and build walls that would hopefully protect me
from the things that could be against me
in the hopes of also realizing that these three things
have allowed me to realize that God has given me a greater purpose
than just waking up with the same
Brown eyes.

Jeane Kim
Carmel High School
Honorable Mention

Self-Discovery

Who will I become
Influenced by what I see
Trying to find me

Emily Loreda Lopez
Rancho San Juan High School
Honorable Mention

The Shared Umbrella

To the people in my community,
hope is the shared umbrella in a sudden downpour.
It's the smell of coffee brewing
at the community center after a long night.
Hope is a young tree planted in a sidewalk crack.

To the people in my community,
hopelessness is the cold silence
when someone stops asking for help.
It's the feeling that tomorrow will just be
a louder version of today.
It's watching the windows on Main street
go dark, one by one.

And yet, we overcome hopelessness
by showing up at the doors
of those who have locked themselves in,
by passing down the stories
of how our grandparents survived
with nothing.
We overcome by nurturing the small, stubborn flowers
of joy that grow in the cracks of our hardships.

To the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren
growing up in my community,
I hope you look up from your screens
to see the birds nesting in the eaves.

Mayte C. Garcia Miguel
North Salinas High School
Honorable Mention

Hope Is My Ranchito

In my life, hope is working hard every day.
It's my family and where we come from in Mexico.
Hope is the life I want to build in the future.

Hopelessness is feeling far from home.
It's when things get hard and money is tight.
It's thinking about giving up.

And yet, I've overcome hopelessness
by working like a vaquero,
by remembering my roots,
never quitting.

To my children, grandchildren and great grandchildren,
remember where our family comes from,
work hard, stay humble,
and make our family proud.

Ashel K. Rosas Amaro
North Salinas High School
Honorable Mention

Where Is Home?

Salinas is where I live,
enjoying the weather,
walking in the skeptical neighborhoods,
looking behind my shoulder,
watching people work hard in the field,
studying at school,
writing in my journal,
searching for answers,
figuring out if this place is for me,
waiting for my time to flee,
hoping I go to the place made for me,
yearning for my dreams,
asking the same question every day,
repeating: where is MY home?

Jazmin Carranza
Rancho San Juan High School
Honorable Mention

Patience

I've learned patience from you.

I've learned patience peeling potatoes,
and kneading dough into bitesize thumbprints.

I've learned patience sitting on the hardwood floor,
watching bread as it rises
and cookies as they start to brown.

I've learned patience slowly folding
blueberries into pale yellow batter
and whipping cream until soft peaks form.

I've learned patience from you.

Emma Stiver
Carmel High School
Honorable Mention

Art

I learned art from my dad,
the simple shading of charcoal,
and the ways of imagination.

I learned by looking at his books,
the sketches strewn across the pages,
otherworldly creatures staring back.

I learned art from my dad,
and now I teach my sister,
how to spill thoughts onto paper.

Bentley Harrod
Carmel High School
Honorable Mention

Ode to My Dad

The dirt on your nails,
dust clinging to your shoulders,
your shirt smelling like a long day at work,
yet you still walk through the door smiling,
something small in your hand for me—
an onion, a cookie, a lemon.

It's always the little things.

You say you're going to retire,
but every morning you walk in again,
keys in one hand, coffee in the other,
living the same rhythm:
wake up, work, sleep, repeat.

Ode to my dad.

You come home slower now.
Your aching back and tired feet,
the weight of the day still resting on you.
I try to help you relax,
massage your back until it stops hurting,
give you your pills before you sleep.

Ode to my dad,
the one who built my world with tired hands,
who somehow always knows
when my smile isn't real
and finds a way to make it true again.

Mariam Khalil
Carmel High School
Honorable Mention

When the Music Died

There was always music at home in the mornings,
in the evening something special before bed.

It lived in the walls and echoed through the hallways.
Music filled my home and my heart.

“Dad was in an accident, and he didn't survive.”

It was like the piano lid slammed onto my fingers—
sharp, sudden, final.

The music was gone, and so was I.

“It's time for you to become the man of the house.
Your childhood is over; it's time to pull some weight.”

I remember the day so vividly.

I ran outside and prayed to god out in the pouring rain
that he would come back.

It felt like the whole world was crying.

I would give anything, everything,
even all my stuffed animals, my favorite ones too—James and William.

But the music left
as fast as my happiness,
and the house wasn't my home.

Alexander Willmann
Stevenson School
Honorable Mention

Freya

I learned to love from my little sister.
Her small round cheeks with her almond shaped hazel eyes
fitted into her face like soft clay,
a button nose with just one freckle.
Soon her baby teeth grew,
a tiny smile filling my body with overwhelming – love.
Her tiny legs and chubby arms grow longer
as we race on the shifting sand.
We slide down the steep dunes
and our little feet graze the water taking our breath away.
Our fairy house sits as a tower of sticks and pebble tile floors,
fighting against ocean's long blue fingers
reaching up the shore.
I pluck the strings of the ukulele
and she holds her teddy bear tight against her pink shirt
stained with McDonald's ice cream down the front.
Two more long hours till our sweaty feet
can run down the dusty path and dip into the icy lake.
The fishing pole swings dangerously over our heads.
Her long golden-brown hair
blows across her face and whips out of the window.
Words escape her mouth and the sound
is instantly drowned out by the wind,
but I can read her heart-shaped lips,
“Fire on the mountain,” she sings
into the sea of cars driving by.
Now she's in 6th grade, and sometimes
she comes home and tears run down her soft clay face
now dark and tan from the sun,
and I have to be the big sister and tell her it's okay.
We don't play barbies anymore.
We don't make fairy houses as often,
but she's my best friend,
and no matter how grown up she gets,
she's still my little sister
who taught me how to love.

Nicoya Ibsen
Carmel High School
Honorable Mention

A Daughter, Still Waiting

Oh Mother, you are like a passing scent in the crowd.
I know I recognized you,
but as soon as I turn, your face vanishes.
You left me with nothing but silence to discern.
Those memories, once treasured, now feel like a curse.

Oh Mother, how do I describe this fear?
This terror of longing for your presence.
I know this water will harm me,
but my thirst has learned to call it home.
It's all too insufferable, as I am still healing—
healing from the severance.

When did your voice become an empty hallway I keep calling into?
Oh Mother, if only you knew just how much I miss you.
Although you disregard me repeatedly,
I continuously reach out despite it all.
Please, call me yours again.
I've been wearing the silence you left behind.

Sabina Amba
North Salinas High School
Honorable Mention

Ode to William Winter

William Winter grew up rough and wild.
He was shaggy-haired, a bright blue-eyed child.
He was homeschooled on the ranch for his greater days,
passing time by letting his mind run off ways.
William Winter went to school, but not in normal places;
he learned from the best, mother nature's open spaces.

The ranch let William Winter run all free,
those open spaces let William Winter
be whoever he could be:
A fearless cowboy
on a bike, a horse, or a mule.
Wrangling in the dogs, or chickens, or real bulls,
an explorer in dinosaur suspenders,
digging mines deep into hills in search of a boy's dirt gold.
Wandering off into those mountains
through summer's heat and winter's cold.
He was even Daniel Boone, the trapper of all creatures,
with a slingshot in one hand and a lasso in the other.
He could kill those evil squirrels or tie down little brother.

William Winter grew up rough and wild,
and he grew up smart and strong
from that bright blue-eyed child.
He started working so young,
and has never stopped since.
He didn't go to school, but it made no difference.
William Winter is a man now,
with a job, a wife, and kids to show.
But when you see him spare a glance,
remember the wild boy from the ranch.

Hannah June Drew
Carmel High School
Honorable Mention

My Heart Would've Been Better Without You

At first sight,
your innocence is visible.
The closer I drifted, the more I unearthed.
I was friends with a dissembler,
was blinded by naïveté and hopelessness.
You took from me my pride and light, my spark,
watching my spirit erode everyday more and more,
making me question
whether I truly mattered or not.
I was an instrument to you,
was exploited by you, and utilized.
You probably never realized or cared.
Thanks to you,
I hold a permanent hearthache, a scar.
Thanks to you,
I can't love or trust right.
So I say,
my heart would have been better without you.

Edward Avila-Haro
Rancho San Juan High School
Honorable Mention

Upon Our Backs

It's in the little touches,
The here and there,
The quick bumps
And longing stares;
It's in the lingering questions
And long thoughts in my head,
The barely holding hands
And fabric threads.

It's in the little deeds,
The noticing,
The words we write
And on which we cling;
It's in the self-control
And deep respect
It's in paint-stained shoe soles
And honest tears wept.

It's in the pride we carry
Upon our backs,
The secrets we hold,
The information they lack
And finding yourself
Among the few
Who have smelled lavender
And thought of you.

Pride.

Sienna Jade Webster
Stevenson School
Honorable Mention

We Wish

I sit here writing and worrying about the dangers that lurk outside.
Not the gang activity that is sadly normalized in my community,
but raids that roam with confidence from a backing
that every citizen in the United States of America wished they had.

Wished. A hope that these lands were built on.

With wishes against wishes, man fought man,
and through war and the thought of freedom, we came to be.
The nation, still divided, even through the countless wishes of equality.
Persistent wishes from citizens who are supposed to be taken care
of under the flag that is so proudly waved; the flag that saw silver showers,
numerous piles of bodies, and glistening pools of blood.
The Star Spangled Banner who wished for our people to be free,
that spoke for equality amongst men. Men. White men.

With the hands of many purged peoples, this land was constructed,
and through trials and tribulations, prayers and wishes, we have come far.
We have come far and yet I lie in bed crying out of fear for my people.

And though I hold many wishes close to my heart,
the only wish I harbor now is to feel safe
within a country I was promised to be protected by.
By a country that was for the people.
But as I see public executions in city streets,
it seems that people of color are the exception.

My people.

Your people.

The people who help run this country and this world.
The people who proudly hold the title of the Salad Bowl of the World.
But like we've always done, we will persevere
with prayers on our lips for a future while we fight
with confidence from the backing
of the citizens of America who stand alongside us.

Like an interminable cycle, we wish.

Anastasia Anaya
Rancho San Juan High School
Honorable Mention

Remember the Past

We the people in a dystopian land;
land built from people not “Aliens.”
Injustice and lies, lay down to show the truth.
Do you need more proof?
Racially profiling...
while smiling.
Unconstitutional acts
in our seats take place.

We have no space for this.
Let me be honest
I see no point in wars and starting conflicts
with your friends.
It only pushes us apart.
Watch your tone—
we are all made of the same skin and bone.
We all deserve to have a home;
But for some, that's gone...

Power-hunger-selfishness-arrogance-greed
run our cruel world.

And they take out their feeling
on the ones who work on the fields.
The world needs to be healed.
We need to understand;
understand that we need to assemble!

No more Men vs. Women,
Black vs. White.
No more Left vs. Right,
Red vs. Blue.
The truth is shown.
Take him off the throne!
United we stand.
Stronger, together we fight longer.

We see the echo of the past.
If nothing is done,
history's shadow... will cast.

Zabdiel Antonio Lopez
Rancho San Juan High School
Honorable Mention

The Last Eagle

Cold fingers and hands of desolation.
The juncos chirp in a barren forest,
The product of our innate hunger,
Of mouths that continue to feed on lamented soil.
Sow what's due in apologies,
But we continue dawdling
And leave the onus to the kids.

Someone somewhere down the line will tell us,
"Our great-grandparents could have done it."
They could have salvaged what was left.
They could have, but instead
They were too busy whispering,
"There is nothing we can do."

Placing the blame becomes a tricky game
When it rests on all players' shoulders,
And fingers fly to the least guilty perpetrators
As we leave the dirty out of the equation.
Predators will sway crowds to an enemy
As they consume and consume and consume.

Nobody was keeping track
When the birds began falling from the sky.
I was there on Monday morning
When the last eagle fell onto concrete.
It splattered and struggled.
I counted all twenty minutes it still lived,
Before it looked at me and said,
"There is nothing to do."

But nobody was there on Tuesday.
When the wealthy swept the dead animal,
So we could speak proudly
Of our clean and sterile streets
That do not provide shelter for anyone other
Than the ones who shot the bird.

Empathy clings onto apathy,
Gnawing on its steel shell,
And clawing with the force of a rushing river
Refusing to leave.

Empathy knocks on every door locking it out.
It breaks in with scarred hands
And picks up the apathy inside,
Refusing to leave.

Amelia Quintana
Rancho San Juan High School
Honorable Mention

Ours But Not Us

Taco Tuesday, Drinco de Mayo, Vacations to Cancún.
People love our culture, until it come to our people.
Someone will say they love “tah-cos” and margaritas,
but turn around and say,
Speak English. This is America.
Go back to where you came from.
You don't belong here.
What do we have to do to prove ourselves?
To prove that, yes, I belong here too?
Go on, listen to our music, eat our food, love our culture,
but don't forget where they came from, who they came from.
I'm tired of fighting with people who genuinely believe
a Human Being can be *illegal* on land that was stolen to begin with.
Hablaremos cualquier idioma que queremos.
We will speak whatever language we want.
Nosotros iremos a donde queramos.
We will go wherever we want.
Nosotros pertenecemos aquí.
We belong right here.

Natalie A. Freytes
Stevenson School
Honorable Mention

Beetles and Butterflies

While most like to fly,
Shine their wings and their beautiful transformation,
A butterfly in flight.
Aphrodite has artificial feathers,
Every one manufactured and perfected
The same.
They're all the same.
I am a stag beetle, no not a golden one,
Just a simple reddish black
Crawling along the earth.
I do not have their view from the sky...
I feel small.
I am small.
I do not see as others have
Though I am similar to the ladybugs
And have vague friendships with the bees.
Worms, make no sense to me.
Are butterflies truly bugs, so beautiful?
Entomology is insects.
Etymology is words.
Words say both are bugs.
But while butterflies feed on nectar of the gods
Beetles feed on fungus.
I am a simple stag beetle,
No, not a golden one with an iridescent carapace,
Just a simple reddish black chitin.
I am chimera and I am the godstars...
And I am just a beetle.
Watch
Me
Crawl.

Milo Wecker
Carmel Valley High School
Honorable Mention

Mother Earth

Every time I go outside, it feels like a new world,
Somewhere I can be myself.
I walk on the trails, dirt everywhere,
Green leaves disguising as poison oak.
I get bright red rashes from it
That makes my skin itchy.
But then, I see a field of California poppies
Sitting on the fresh cut grass.
Blue jays swooping past, leaving feathers behind,
Redwood trees serving as their home.
I walk further, past the trail,
Spotting deer drinking water,
Lizards creeping through the plants,
Rocks scattered along the river,
Stepping on each
Almost like hop scotch.
At the other side,
a feeling of accomplishment.

Jeraldin Guillen Perez
Carmel High School
Honorable Mention

Out Here

Out here I belong to myself
So I don't leave
Because once I'm in
I belong to everyone else

I am what I'm seen as
Doesn't bother me
But I'm not anything else
That bothers me

Stained glass from abandoned churches
That kids with futures get high in
Broken vases thrown across a room
By a man whose memory of gentleness
Has been covered by a tarp in an attic
In a house he can't afford

Piece after piece is glued together
With something weak
That looks grotesque when it dries

What god do I pray to
To dispose of this disgustingly fragile girl
What fate do I comply with to become something else
To become unbreakable

Out here I'm left unperceived
Unhandled by a maker
Untouched by a destroyer
Uncalled upon by the destroyed

If you want to see me
I'll come inside
And you can take me to the attic
And pull the tarp off

Pepper Christou
Carmel High School
Honorable Mention