

Fiction Contest

Thank you to all who entered our Creative Minds Fiction Contest. We'd like to thank CTY fiction writers Chuck Beckman and Ben Reynolds for helping us decide the winners.

Our Creative Minds Poetry Contest will open in July. For details, go to www.cty.jhu.edu/imagine.

First Place *The Washtub* by Ariel Pollack, 14, WA

"Violet—" More soapy water sloshes over the metal rim of the washtub, soaking the floorboards of the porch. The dishes clatter against the sides of the tub, ringing like bells. "Violet—listen—"

"I'm busy!" The girl shouts to the field, not looking up from her work. Her dress—her favorite, with the best feed-sack flowers of any other—is wet, but she seems not to care. Curls of dust lick at her feet, as if they want to claim this farm as they have so many others. But here, it is safe from the wave of choking dust, and whorls of water drown the rebellious swirls as suds spread across the ground.



The day dawns, sweet and yellow. The lilac tree outside the window releases its faint perfume, mingling with the smell of yeast. There is almost no one awake yet—it is silent, a rare thing in this house—and the woman works alone. She moves soundlessly, almost as if she knows that she is intruding on the quiet beauty of dawning.

The mother stirs a stick in the woodstove, raising fireworks from the burning logs. She clutches the cool metal closely to her, stirring the precious flour into the eggs until fluffy dough lies like a lazy cat in the bottom of the washtub.

She places it gently, almost lovingly above chattering coals. The metal absorbs the heat greedily, growing slightly as burning energy flows into it. But soon enough, sandpaper hands are removing it from the dancing flames, resting it on the table to cool. Bread hardens against the rim of the washtub.

The house awakens as the comforting smell of fresh bread overpowers the scents of spring, enveloping the home with warmth.



Bright green leaves rustle above their heads, inaudible over the sounds of sawing and hammering.

"Over here, Howard, help me—"

"Lily, come hold this—"

"Papa, I think we're putting this on wrong—"

The father holds the hammer at a perfect angle, driving the nail into the wood with seemingly herculean strength. The children watch him closely as he works, trying to understand the delicate art of carpentry. The water in the washtub sloshes slightly, almost but not quite spilling over.

"Are you sure this board is straight, Papa?" The child chirps, looking at the older man who, for now at least, seems to hold the answers to the universe.

He reaches for the washtub, holding it with calloused hands. "That's why we have the washtub," he says, setting it gently on the surface in question.

They wait for the water to settle within the tub, for it to fall into the clean line beneath the rim. But when it does calm, the children see the imbalance.

"See!" they shout, pointing at the way one side of the water is above the line and the other below. "It isn't straight! It isn't!"

And the father, smiling now, picks up his hammer. "So we ought to fix it then," he says, tool glinting in the summer sun.



The wind is building up again, rustling the tree's remaining leaves like nature's windchime. The rainbow of leaves breaks in an explosion of sound underneath hard-soled feet as the children run across the field, up the hill, shouting joyfully. The youngest boy hugs the faithful washtub against his chest, and his heart beats quickly against it.

"I'm going first—"

"No, you were first yesterday. It's my turn—"

"Let Howard go first." The oldest girl says this, surveying the group of children before her. "He had to carry the washtub."

Reluctantly, most murmur and move aside for the boy to pass. Flashing a grin at the girl, he positions the tub at the apex of the hill, clambering in carefully. He is too excited to notice the chill of cold metal against bare skin

as the girl gives him a gentle push.

Crackles shatter underneath him as he slides down, down, down. The sky is a brilliant cloudless blue, as autumn skies are sometimes, and for a moment it's almost like flying as he sweeps down in a soft arc toward the bottom in a spray of red and gold, wind caressing his face.



The snow falls softly, wafting down tiny mint-cold petals to collect on frozen green spears, paving a smooth layer over the field. Some of the flakes fall on the icy metal of the washtub, clinging to the mittens of the children tugging the tub toward the fence, but they don't seem to mind. They are focused only on the activity before them, where gentle curves of white slowly grow. The ground around this enterprise is almost scraped clean, naked grass shivering in the chilly breeze. White clouds of air puff in front of their reddening faces, almost as if their words are freezing as they speak.

“Lily, help me with the head—”

“Sterling, find some arms—”

The children are working hard, hauling and rolling freezing snow between their thinly mittened hands, but they do not tire. The sharp peppery snap of winter is in the air, and the world has been transformed into a wonderland, where energy is never-ending. Soft wool scoops snow from the washtub that has transported it to the construction site. The tub watches, in inanimate silence, the construction of another winter snowman.



The porch is again wet, bubbles sliding slowly across the scarred surface. A soft clink echoes from the washtub as dishes slosh within it, and the child sighs, plunging her red hands into the water again. The shouts of her brothers and sisters playing in the field tantalize her for a moment, like ambrosia, but she turns back to her work. The feed-sack flowers on her dress are somewhat faded now, clinging to her arms as they rise from the water.

And soapy water drenches the dusty ground.



Ariel Pollak is a homeschooled sophomore whose hobbies include reading, writing, and photography. She also enjoys studying foreign languages and spending time with friends and family.

Second Place *The Factory* by Mike Chen, 16, CA

“From a very early age, George showed a disinterest in memorization. When he turned fifteen, which was the normal age for employment, he refused to work at the factory. What he was interested in—singing and music—had no place there. By refusing to work at the factory, George essentially refuted all that his village stood for.”

Third Place *Brevity* by Kalliope Dalto, 13, NY

“Whoever was knocking had a fist as consistent as a jackhammer. I dragged my duffel bag over toward the exit and hauled the massive, cathedral style doors open, hoping my guest would be brief.”

Read these stories in their entirety and more about the authors at <http://cty.jhu.edu/imagine/creativemindscontest/ContestResults.html>

