

Essay Contest

Thank you to all who entered our third annual Creative Minds Essay Contest! We are thrilled to announce the winners here.

Our Creative Minds Fiction Contest is open now through March 15, 2010. Winners will be announced in the May/June issue of *Imagine*. Read submission guidelines and enter online at www.cty.jhu.edu/imagine.



ISTOCK

FIRST PLACE

Vault Forward

by Dalia Wolfson

Sit down, reader, do not fuss to finish this. This composition will be slow and gray, like the smell of new mushrooms in a Slavic forest after spring's first rain. We call that type of rain *gribnoi dozhdik*—mushroom rain, in translation, with a bit of a grammatical glitch. It's a funny term, because here the mushrooms are, yes, *possessing* the rain, as if, by some strange magnetic force, they have pulled it down to the soiled turf. This is the type of rain that falls on Tuesday mornings, when Galina visits our apartment for a weekly cleaning.

Listen to her footsteps, reader, wet Skechers slapping on the tiled floor as she emerges from the elevator. The old Estonian diplomat who lives in apartment 5K holds out the door for her—she is unaccustomed to such chivalry, tries to off-handedly hold the door for him instead. It's an awkward situation; eventually she ducks under his arm and takes out her keys, struggles with the lock and lets herself in. She used to be an award-winning gymnast, but now her movements are dulled, and her long limbs are unmanageable. When she came to America, there was nowhere to put her arms and her legs, so she set them to cleaning. Now, standing on the welcome mat, she stretches, arching her back like a cat, and sets her bag down.

This is where the process begins, *here, now*—Galina sighs with the relief of one settling into a routine.

When I return from school, I know Galina's here by the blue jacket hung over the dining room chair. A Brooklyn slum coat, you can tell by the quality. A tag that irritates her neck advertises a generic label, while the pockets are weighted down with the quintessential handkerchief—she hasn't caught on to the disposable tissue yet—patterned in an array of orange pine needles and garish rococo swirls, carrying within it bits of change and dry-cleaning receipts for her clients. The jacket, of course, will remain there for a few more hours.

As I enter the apartment I can already hear the sound of the vacuum—my brother's socks no longer adorn the couch, nor do the placemats, stained by grape juice and covered with a thin layer of cracker crumbs, lie haphazard on the oaken table. She's placed clean towels with picnic stripes onto the kitchen hooks, arranged the mail in orderly piles. The salt shakers and sugar bowl wait for a master of still lives to approach and add a sprig of daisies, and all the rooms suffocate in excessive amounts of air freshener.

Her words carry from the hallway: "Hello! Wasn't expecting you here for another hour." Her voice trips on the "g" sound in my native Russian tongue, skipping rocks over the surface, a slight pressured intake of breath forming a harried "h" that's sucked in by the vacuuming. The last time I heard that Belarussian accent was from a friend's babysitter. She, too, dressed in vibrant florals, bright yellows and reds splashed carelessly over faux-silk material. I don't remember her name, but she sometimes rides on the same bus, exchanging a quick "*Privet*" and then looking away, our hands perhaps accidentally bumping against the same spot on the pole for support.

Galina emerges from my father's office. She's got smile-wrinkles whitened by detergent,

and her hands are red from dealing too much with cleaning liquids. Her age is beyond fifty and beneath her gopher-colored hair are silver roots. When she reaches to stretch out her hand, the shirt straightens and a thin band of flesh is just visible above her jeans.

“*Lyalichka, kak dela?* How are things?” She calls me by my Russian name.

“Everything’s okay,” I answer, unwilling to offer up much information.

“Oh, then . . .” she replies, and then, well, you see those ellipses? There begins the tale of her two daughters—one divorced, the other a single student; of her granddaughters, Liza and Yana, blond angels that don’t want to speak on the phone; of her husband, Anatoly, who has again been drinking away the money for medical bills with beer. She will launch into one anecdote and then another, grinning all the way. I know by the sad chuckling that accompanies each story that today, the NYC-Belarus phone call didn’t connect, no one picked up. She will laugh nonetheless, laughter like the song of many hands clapping for heels that safely hit the ground—for wasn’t she a nationally-known athlete in her day?

I offer her tea in a glass, the liquid transparent and a warm red-brown that makes a brick-colored shadow on the table. Her mood changes suddenly. She sits, weeps. There is little pride to an immigrant’s life, when your family’s distant and America is an ugly, industrial, feral place of brutes and buildings. Last week, Galina lost an employer: she was hit on, then—upon refusing his advances—hit simply, slapped across the cheek and chased out with English words and dollar bills, a last pathetic salary floating in the air.

But she is laughing again, telling me about her granddaughter’s funny phrases and her daughter’s job as a secretary. “Marriage is a silly thing, *Lyalichka*,” she says to me, then stands up, finishes the tea, grabs her bag and coat and the small dignity regained that she pockets in her wallet along with 60 dollars in cash. She is revived, she is stepping, she is again the gymnast. The bleach on her hands is no longer a whitening agent but the chalk—*oh, glorious calcium carbonate*—and she is running again, because Belarus is waiting for her. The finishing line beckons, and the spring rain—first of the season, children, Lizochnka, Yanochnka, gather your mushrooms—that rain is falling on her shoulders and transporting her back to her home and forward toward some other world where the finish line is closer to her fingertips, and the crowd calls her name and she is beautiful, she is victorious, she is Galina, gymnast and queen.



Dalia Wolfson is a sophomore at Hunter College High School in New York City. She speaks English, Russian, Hebrew, and *un poquito* Spanish. In her spare time, Dalia enjoys intense hiking, trying out different tea flavors, drawing with charcoal, participating in school clubs, writing in notepads, playing tennis, and being a bookworm in the Big Apple.

SECOND PLACE

Other

by Julia Quintero, 16, IL

It is always that obscure little box asking the test taker to identify his or her ethnicity that causes my hand to hesitate and my pencil to linger.

The first few times I encountered this predicament during elementary school standardized testing, I spent more time scrutinizing the answer choices for this single personal inquiry than any other question on the test. Of three things I was certain: that my mother’s ancestors were both Asian and White, that my father’s ancestors were both Hispanic and White, and that the directions dictated that I choose only one of the available options.

Read the rest of this essay at www.cty.jhu.edu/imagine

THIRD PLACE

Elephant Feet

by Jessie Li, 16, PA

My mother called me clumsy, but I blamed it on my feet. As I tripped through those years, I remember wishing I could run. Running was my link to flying, the closest thing I could achieve that would free me from the ground. I imagined pushing my feet off the gravel, my legs pumping across the surface, so quickly my eyes couldn’t see which leg was coming first.

Read the rest of this essay at www.cty.jhu.edu/imagine



About our judge:

Angela Balcita is a writer and teacher who lives in Baltimore. Her essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Utne Reader*, and *Geez Magazine* and have been included in anthologies such as *Waking Up American: Coming of Age Biculturally* and *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers off/on Creative Nonfiction*. She is currently completing her first book, *Moonface: A Memoir*.