

Yu by Jessie Li

Fiction Contest

Thank you to all who entered our Creative Minds Fiction Contest! We are thrilled to publish the winning story here. Please visit our website at <http://cty.jhu.edu/imagine/creativemindscontest/contestresults.html> to read the second- and third-place stories in full, as well as those that received honorable mentions.

ABRAHAM. A triple threat of syllables. Abe. Rah. Hem. Three soft vowels against my tongue, sometimes merging into two when produced by my unsteady lips. To them you were christened in Chinese, Lei Feng, lightning and wind, subtle yet swift. But you would always be Abraham to me, that bittersweet melody lingering in my mouth, refusing to let go.

I met you two years after your family moved here from California, and two weeks before you moved back. Our mothers came across each other at the local Far East supermarket, where they shared dumpling recipes and stories of difficult children. Soon after, they arranged for us to get together.

On our first play date, I hid from you, diving under my bed when I heard your footsteps approaching.

L-l-lucy...

Your voice wavered as you called my name. I lifted the bed dress to steal a look at you, from beneath the silky cloth. You were at least a head taller than me, rather gangly. Your hair was horribly cut—I blamed your mother—a shapely bowl cut draped awkwardly on your head as though unwilling to cooperate. Your eyes widened when you saw me, and the comic book you were holding slipped from your hands. A gentle swish—the pages lay splayed on the ground as you crawled towards me.

Come on, you urged. Hide and seek. A smile played on your cheeks before you dashed off.

Find me—

Before ten seconds had finished, I was already running, my thick feet slapping the hardwood floors while my mother complained about the noise. Into the attic, behind the pantry doors, under the mahogany desk. Nowhere.

I opened the bathroom door. There. Flattened on the frigid tiles, arms and legs spread like those of a starfish, you were sprawled on the floor, eyes staring straight up and into the skylight window. I'm not sure you even noticed me at first. My body

stalled for a moment, struck with wonder.

Thin crystals clung onto the window, signaling the advent of a cold November. The surreptitious call of winter—deceptive sun-framed sky, ephemeral clouds—yet fragile snowflakes already spinning in arabesques, melting instantly once touching the skylight's glass surface. *Abraham.* My legs folded beneath me, and I joined you, watching the radiant purity embrace our microcosm of bliss.

In California, you told me, it doesn't snow. It only rains. Your voice stated this in monotone, as though the Californian rain had already captured you, stealthily threatening your voice. I imagined the pitter-patter of the droplets on windows in that distant place, far from here, where snow falls silently on windows. *Yu, you said. Rain.* I heard the melancholy in your tone. Carrying heartache and hunger, the burdensome rainwater framing your world.

A few minutes later, you stood up, and I followed. *Your turn, you said.* With that, we continued our game, the strange event already fading into the past, those beautiful moments, gone.



You moved to California soon after, and I would not hear from your family for another eleven years. It was only when my mother decided to take a vacation to San Francisco one spring that she found your mother's phone number in one of her various dilapidated address books, to ask if your mother wanted to meet.

I had forgotten about you by then—in eleven years, infants transform into adolescents, some

animals complete their lives, hundreds of generations of insects pass away. In eleven years, a boy and a girl who were friends become strangers, two families become foreigners.

When our families met for lunch in San Francisco, you were not there. *Belize*, your mother said, clicking her chopsticks together. *Mission trip*. She smiled wearily, her face slightly worn, the years tugging her skin out of shape. The seat next to me was empty, and I wanted to will you into presence. *Abraham*. A name, no face.

Your mother patted the seat next to her. *Come, see*. Her hand held a single, glossy photograph. Your arm was draped around your mother's shoulders, and you smiled shyly at the camera. You were at least a foot taller than your mother, yet you seemed diminutive standing next to her. Still so gentle in your ways, still so quietly alluring.

It was a sense of unreasoned nostalgia that claimed me then, a rush of infinite longing. Yearning the past—*huai nian*, they say in Chinese, those two sticky and desperate words. The term is sweeter in Chinese, as though it holds memories—images of you and me, watching the world with open eyes. Yet I did not know you anymore, would not recognize you even if our paths crossed.

When my mother and I arrived home, my mother placed the photograph haphazardly among various letters and bills clinging to our kitchen counter. As she opened the mail, she unknowingly pushed the photo off the table. I watched it tremble, then drift slowly to the ground, face down. I bent down to pick it up, but I knew you were already gone. My fingers loosened and I turned away.

You were nineteen years old, and I was seventeen. But in my mind, we were still eight and six, bashful yet eager, our eyes turned skywards, holding teardrops and clouds. *Abraham*. Your face blurred in my memory—*come on*, you said. Curious eyes, messy hair, playful smile. Remnants of when we were young. **i**



Jessie Li is a junior at State College Area High School in State College, PA. She is fascinated by language and speaks English and Chinese fluently, while also studying Spanish and Latin. In her spare time, Jessie enjoys writing, traveling, playing piano, long-distance running, and community service. Jessie loves impressionist music and art and is a fan of Green Pony Photography.

SECOND PLACE Carved

by Bronwyn Donohue, 13, Germany

White walls with gray-brown stains. Different size cupboards, as if a carpenter made them without measuring first. A stove that can boil a cup of water in just under 45 minutes. This is her kitchen—if you can even call it that. It's really just one corner of a long room that contains living, eating, and cooking space. Still she seems content.

Read the rest of this story at <http://cty.jhu.edu/imagine/creativemindscontest/contestresults.html>

THIRD PLACE Schoolgirl

by Kat Herron, 14, IL

She knew that she had never really had a chance. She knew that perfectly well. Jo realized that she was being silly. How silly of her to sit here crouched against the wall and holding back tears. Still dressed in her private school uniform, plaid skirt and all. She looked like some kind of schoolgirl.

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HONORABLE MENTIONS

“Aflight”

by Dalia Wolfson, 16, NY

“These Velvet Sheets”

by Nicole Foggan, 15, MD

About our judge:

Thirty years ago, Matthew Olshan and his wife, Shana, participated in the very first CTY talent search. Since then, Matthew has spent his life trying to live up to that early promise. He was educated at Harvard, Johns Hopkins, and Oxford Universities. A few years ago, he spent two hectic summers teaching writing for CTY on the Hopkins campus. He is the author of several books for young readers, including *Finn: a novel* and *The Flown Sky*. His latest children's book, *The Boxer Lalouche*, a collaboration with the illustrator Sophie Blackall, will be published by Schwartz & Wade in 2012.

His new novel for adults, *Marshlands*, was just bought by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

