

The background is a solid teal color with a repeating pattern of white line-art illustrations of books. Some books are shown as closed volumes, while others are open, displaying their pages. The books are scattered across the entire surface, creating a textured, literary feel.

Community of Stories

An Anthology of Young Writers

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An Anthology of Canadian Young Writers

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WAVES ACROSS *the* YEARS



Waves Across the Years

Saanvi Paradkar (Age 14, Ontario)

First Place

It was a grey Sunday afternoon, the kind where the rain taps impatient fingers against the windowpane. I was cleaning out Nana's old cedar trunk, the one that had sat untouched in the corner of the basement ever since she passed away last spring.

I was supposed to be finding old photo albums for Mom, but instead, I found a bundle of letters tied with a fraying blue ribbon. They smelled faintly of salt and roses. My fingers trembled as I untied the knot.

The first letter was dated July 14, 1961.

Dear Future Me,

I don't know if we'll even make it across. The boat is tiny, the ocean is endless, and my heart is full of both fear and hope. I'm thirteen, the same age you are, and tonight I leave my home forever...

I blinked, stunned. Nana had been my age when she left Cuba? I knew she had come to Canada when she was young, but I had never heard the full story.

I flipped through the letters. Each one told a piece of her journey: how her family whispered plans late at night, how they paid a fisherman everything they had for a spot on a battered boat. How they left behind the mango trees, the music, the neighbors who felt like family. How Nana pressed her little brother's hand tightly during the roughest part of the voyage, singing old lullabies to calm him, even though she was just a kid herself.

In one letter, Nana described the nights at sea:

The stars look so close out here, like I could pluck them from the sky. When I get scared, I imagine one is Abuela watching over us. Mama says stories are like stars—you can't always see them, but they're always there, lighting the way.

I swallowed hard. I could almost hear her voice in the rustling of the paper.

Another letter made me laugh through my tears: how Nana had to chase a stubborn chicken across the deck because it escaped from someone's basket. *Imagine that*, she wrote, *fleeing a country with nothing but the clothes on your back—and a runaway chicken.*

Finally, there was one letter different from the others. The paper was newer, and the handwriting was shakier.

Dear Lila,
If you're reading this, it means you found my little pieces of the past. I always wanted to tell you more, but sometimes stories are easier to share in ink than in voice. Our family's roots are strong, even if the

*tree grew in a new place. Never forget where you come from, mija.
And never stop telling your own stories.
Love, Nana*

I sat there on the basement floor, clutching the letter against my chest. My throat felt tight.

All my life, I had struggled with being ‘half’ — half Latina, half Canadian. I never felt fully one or the other. In school, kids would ask if I spoke Spanish at home. I only knew a few words. Abuela. Fiesta. Libertad. Freedom.

But holding those letters, I realized I wasn't half of anything. I was whole, made up of generations of courage, sacrifice, songs sung under starlit skies, and chickens chased across stormy waters.

That night, I brought the letters upstairs and showed them to my mom. We sat together for hours, piecing together the parts of Nana’s story we had never known. My mom translated some of the Spanish phrases Nana had woven into the letters, smiling through her tears.

A few weeks later, I asked my school if I could share the letters during our heritage day assembly. They agreed. Standing on the stage, my voice shaking slightly, I told Nana's story—the flight across the ocean, the runaway chicken, the dreams that refused to drown.

When I finished, the gym was silent for a moment—and then the clapping started. A boy in the front row, whose family had fled Vietnam, gave me a thumbs-up. An elderly teacher wiped her eyes. Even kids I didn't know

came up afterward to say my Nana's story reminded them of their own grandparents, their own journeys.

It turns out stories, like the ocean, connect all of us. And maybe, just maybe, they're even stronger than the tides.

Whispers of Goldengrove

Blake Aladin (Age 11, Ontario)

Runner Up

In the quiet town of Goldengrove, something strange happened one morning. The sky changed color. Not blue, not gray, but a little bit of both, like someone had mixed the paint wrong. People didn't know why but it made them feel funny, like something was about to happen.

Hannah was the town librarian. She was quiet and liked to be alone in her library. One day, while she was cleaning the dusty old bookshelves, she found a book she'd never seen before. It didn't look like much—just a plain brown cover. But when she looked closer, she saw the title: *You Are Not Whole Until the Stories Are Told*.

It was a strange title, but Hannah decided to open it anyway. At first, the pages were blank. Nothing was written. But then, after a few seconds, words started to appear. It was like the book was alive, waiting to be read.

That same day, the people in Goldengrove began to remember things. Things they hadn't thought about in a long, long time. Old memories, forgotten stories, and secrets that everyone had pushed away. It was like the book was making them remember.

But as more people told their stories, the town started to change. The weather got weird. Sometimes the sun would be out, and other times there would be thick fog. The river, which had always been calm, started to rise and turn dark. It was like something was waking up.

The book started to act even stranger. Every time Hannah opened it, new pages appeared. When she tried to ignore them, the words would change by themselves, like the book was telling her something important. *Tell the story before it's lost. A name forgotten is a life undone. Hurry, Hannah. You're running out of time.*

One morning, Hannah opened the book and found a page with no name at the top, just a drawing of a child standing by the river, talking to the water. A storm was coming, and the next part of the sentence was unfinished. It said: *There was a child standing at the edge of the river, whispering secrets to the water. A storm was coming...*

And then the words stopped.

Hannah froze. She knew who that child was. She felt the air in the room get heavier, like the world was holding its breath. And then, just like that, a name popped into her mind. Iris. Her sister. The sister no one talked about. The one who had disappeared when they were little. People used to say Iris had drowned in the river, but Hannah always thought there was more to the story.

The book showed her more pictures of Iris standing in the water, wearing a red ribbon in her hair, whispering like the river could hear her. She wasn't afraid. She looked brave, like she was doing something very important.

The book said Iris hadn't been taken. She had chosen to go into the river. There was something in the water. Something dark and dangerous. And Iris went into the river to stop it, to keep everyone safe. But when people forgot her, when they forgot the story, the dark thing started to wake up again.

Hannah grabbed the book and ran to the river. The sky had gone dark again, just like the night Iris had disappeared. The river was rising, quiet and still, as if it was waiting for her. And then, Hannah saw her. Iris. She was standing in the water, just like the drawings in the book, still wearing that red ribbon in her hair. She looked at Hannah, waiting.

Hannah opened the book and began to read. She read Iris's story out loud, telling the truth—how brave Iris had been, how she had saved the town. How it wasn't fair that no one remembered her. As Hannah finished the story, the wind calmed down, the water stopped rising, and the river shimmered with light. The book closed by itself, as if it was happy now. Iris smiled a little, like she was tired but peaceful. Slowly, she faded into the river, becoming part of it.

The next morning, everything was different. The sky was blue and bright. The flowers in the town started to bloom again, and the river was calm, just like it used to be. The people in Goldengrove began to remember things. Old songs, old faces, old feelings. Things that had been forgotten for so long.

Hannah kept the book safe in the library. But it never wrote another word. It didn't need to anymore. Now the town knew the truth. And sometimes, when Hannah walks by the river, she hears something in the breeze. A laugh, a whisper, a name. Iris. Not lost. Not forgotten. Just home.

Cashiers

Raine Hermosa (Age 17, British Columbia)

Runner Up

Two cashiers. Two check-out counters. A suburban grocery store. An eerie Saturday afternoon. Golden sunlight pouring in through the glass doors.

Zero customers and two teenagers nose deep into their books. Novels that they would leave under the counters, in case they needed to fill any downtime.

Each day, when the rush of customers died down and the store sank into a peaceful silence, the two cashiers would be reading. Never making eye contact. Never looking over at what the other person is doing. They alternated peeking over the pages to see if anyone was trying to get their attention.

Each time the automatic doors slid open, the wind forced its way inside. On an especially turbulent day, the wind blows the pages of the books. It can even cause a book to lose its place in the pages. And while one of the cashiers was busy cursing under their breath, searching for the page they left off on, the other quietly walked over.

“I know what page you were on. You had it open when I walked past.”

“Oh, thanks for showing me. I didn’t know you paid attention.”

“To be honest, I’ve been pretty interested in the books you have over there.”

The two continued chatting for what seemed like hours, comparing their shared interests, the kinds of stories they liked, and the kind of stories they wanted to see. Two completely different lives standing across from each other. Two teenagers who’ve never talked to each other until today.

The suburbs seemed to not carry many stories. Everyone seems trapped in their own bubbles, nothing bringing them together. People aimlessly go from errand to errand. No one is searching for anything that makes this part of the world special.

Weeks went past, and the two cashiers grew closer, regularly sharing their books. It felt like they knew a bit about who the other was, as a person.

“It’s about the history of wilderness exploration-“

“- and he caught the other one cheating.”

“There’s this part of the ocean that has never been explored-“

“-all three of them ran into each other!”

The stack of books behind the cash registers kept growing, populated by titles that would eventually be reached, but wasn’t the time for yet. Every

moment the cashiers were actually doing their job, they were just wishing to be back in another novel.

In what felt like a sea of nothing, their stories are what made this part of the world stand out. Stories were written by and about others, they also became a part of those who read them. And when only one cashier showed up to work one day, it felt like the ending was missing.

At some point, their schedules became misaligned. Each shift that was out of sync, another book would disappear from the pile, until both cashiers returned them all back to their homes.

They had never talked to each other outside of work. It seemed that the only thing that brought them together was coincidence. Yet if there was a chapter still missing, it would be up to our characters to forge their own path

So when another coincidence caused the two of them to see each other on opposite sides of a busy road, they couldn't ignore each other.

And they realized, it wasn't just other stories that they could share. They could share their own lives. The lives they lived so that they would have a story to tell. So they found themselves running together until they met each other at the same corner. And when they gave each other their phone numbers, they told each other the names they really wanted to be called, and the pronouns they really wanted to be called.

How many other friends could be made if there were spaces for them to find each other? How much better would you know your names if you could actually remember their name? If people were safe to truly be themselves, then their stories wouldn't be lost.

The Lantern Makers

Ryan Zhang (Age 13, British Columbia)

Runner Up

When the power went out in Shanxi, I thought I was going to die of boredom if the heat didn't get me first. We were staying in my mom's cousin's village in China. She said it would help me "experience the culture" more and see where my heritage was. I definitely didn't want to come here, with no Wi-Fi, no friends, or even a TV. The sun-scorched walls were cracked and old, and the people there felt listless, doing nothing all day.

One day, a thunderstorm knocked all the power out, and with nothing to do I wandered the house. In the attic, the air was musty, and it smelled like fresh rain and old grains. There were a ton of boxes everywhere, with clothes, junk, and random things I didn't recognize. As I turned to leave, something caught my eye. A rusty old lantern, with its skin almost completely peeled off, and the once elegant frame completely out of shape. The paint just barely clung on, almost like bitter memories. But as my curiosity got the better of me, I picked it up to take a closer look at it.

"You found it," said a voice behind me.

I jumped and turned around.

It was my grandfather, smiling calmly at me. He continued,

“This lantern was used to save lives during the wartime.”

I was astonished. How could a simple, tiny lantern do that?

He sat down, and said, “Let me tell you a story.”

“A long time ago, during the Japanese invasion, the people of Shanxi were hopeless. They didn’t have weapons, an army, or anything to defend themselves. But they did have their witty minds, their earnest hands, and their bravery. In the middle of night, a small group of villagers consisting of farmers, bakers, teachers, and even the mayor’s wife came together in an old tea house to plan ways to fight back against their invaders. They called themselves the Lantern Makers, and made lanterns out of iron, rice paper and bamboo. Each lantern had a specific message it was supposed to tell, and the villagers used this ingenious method to communicate secretly without any fancy technology. For example, a white lantern with folds meant that people could pass safely. A red one with five petals meant that danger was near, and that they had to be cautious. The Japanese might have had no idea, but travelers coming near or passing through would know, just by looking at the pretty, hanging lanterns.

“The leader of the group was a brave young woman called Xiao-Li. She was brilliant and rebellious. She led the villagers to make more lanterns, and to risk their lives to fight against this common enemy. Together, they banded together to survive this horrifying ordeal.

“But things took a turn for the worst, as someone in the Lantern Makers’ own inner circle betrayed them. That night, the Japanese abducted Xiao-Li, and set ablaze the tea house, destroying all of the lanterns. The air was filled with a burning, acrid smell. As the Japanese soldiers finally left, taking Xiao-Li with them, the other members shook with fear of the prospect of being discovered. Xiao-Li was never seen again. Yet, she never gave up the names of the other members, even when faced with certain death. She stood tall, even as the rifles were raised, and never let go of the lantern she had in her hands, in her final moments.

“After that, the group never made lanterns again, with the threat of being taken away from their families being too menacing, too dark. The people never completely stopped resisting the invaders though. Perhaps a red ribbon tied in a noticeable place, or a flower with 5 petals on a stone. The village persisted, always honouring Xiao-Li and her unforgettable legacy”.

When my grandfather finished the story, I simply didn’t know what to say. I looked at the rusty, old lantern in my hand, and suddenly it wasn’t all junk anymore. It was a memory of the bravery of the villagers who fought, a testament to their courage, an artifact of their small community.

My grandfather continued, “The lantern you are holding was the last lantern Xiao-Li probably ever made. It was found smashed on the ground, a gold-coloured beauty.”

I asked, “What did it represent?”

He said, “It meant danger had already come.”

When I returned to Canada, I had my TV, my electronics, and all my friends back, but I just couldn't get the story out of my mind. I tried my best to learn about the Lantern Makers, but there was limited information on them. I worked my hardest to create a lantern just like the ones in the story, and even brought it to show to my school.

My teacher asked, "Was this really a true story?"

I replied, "I don't know, it could be, but the story was important enough to pass on, so that's good enough for me."

Now, when I think of Shanxi, I don't just remember the stifling summer heat, or the frequent storms. I remember the courage that was once behind those cracked tea house doors, the proud village. I remember the lantern, not just some rusted old frame, but what it represented- the quiet bravery and strength of a village that never gave up. I used to think stories were just in books or movies, simple fairy tales about saving princesses, but in that attic, I found one that was lit by bravery and carried by people who never expected to be remembered. Xiao-Li didn't just make lanterns, she became one. A flicker of courage in the night, a light that refused to be blown out. And maybe that is what the lanterns were truly supposed to be - not just symbols or warnings, but a reflection and promise of the people who made them. A promise that even if the world is in darkness, people will still shine the light.

Contest Participants

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Anlon Lewis (10, British Columbia)
Antonella Ordonez (9, Ontario)
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ABOUT STORY STUDIO

Story Studio is a registered charity dedicated to inspiring, educating and empowering to be great storytellers, transforming lives and strengthening communities. Since 2011, we've worked with over 12,000 youth, and have won multiple awards for educational innovation and commitment to literacy and the arts. 80% of our programming serves 'vulnerable youth' and is offered at no cost, thanks to our fundraising efforts. Each year, we collaborate with dozens of schools and community partners, delivering in-person programs and online. Our alumni have excelled, winning short story contests, self-publishing novels, performing at spoken word events and more. More importantly, our participants have shown a commitment to their own education and a passion for sharing their unique voice with the world.

If you would like to learn more about Story Studio, or make a tax-deductible donation to support our work, please visit our website.

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This anthology presents the winning stories from the national “Community of Stories” contest, run by Story Studio in April, 2025. Almost 90 young writers submitted entries from across the country.

Story Studio is an award-winning charity that inspires, educates and empowers youth to be great storytellers, transforming lives and strengthening communities. We rely entirely on grants, donations and volunteers to keep our programs accessible - please consider making a tax deductible donation today.

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