

FREEDOM

THROUGH MY EYES

2026 WRITING & ART COMPETITION
ANTHOLOGY

COMMEMORATING AMERICA 250



McLean
Community
Center
The Center of It All

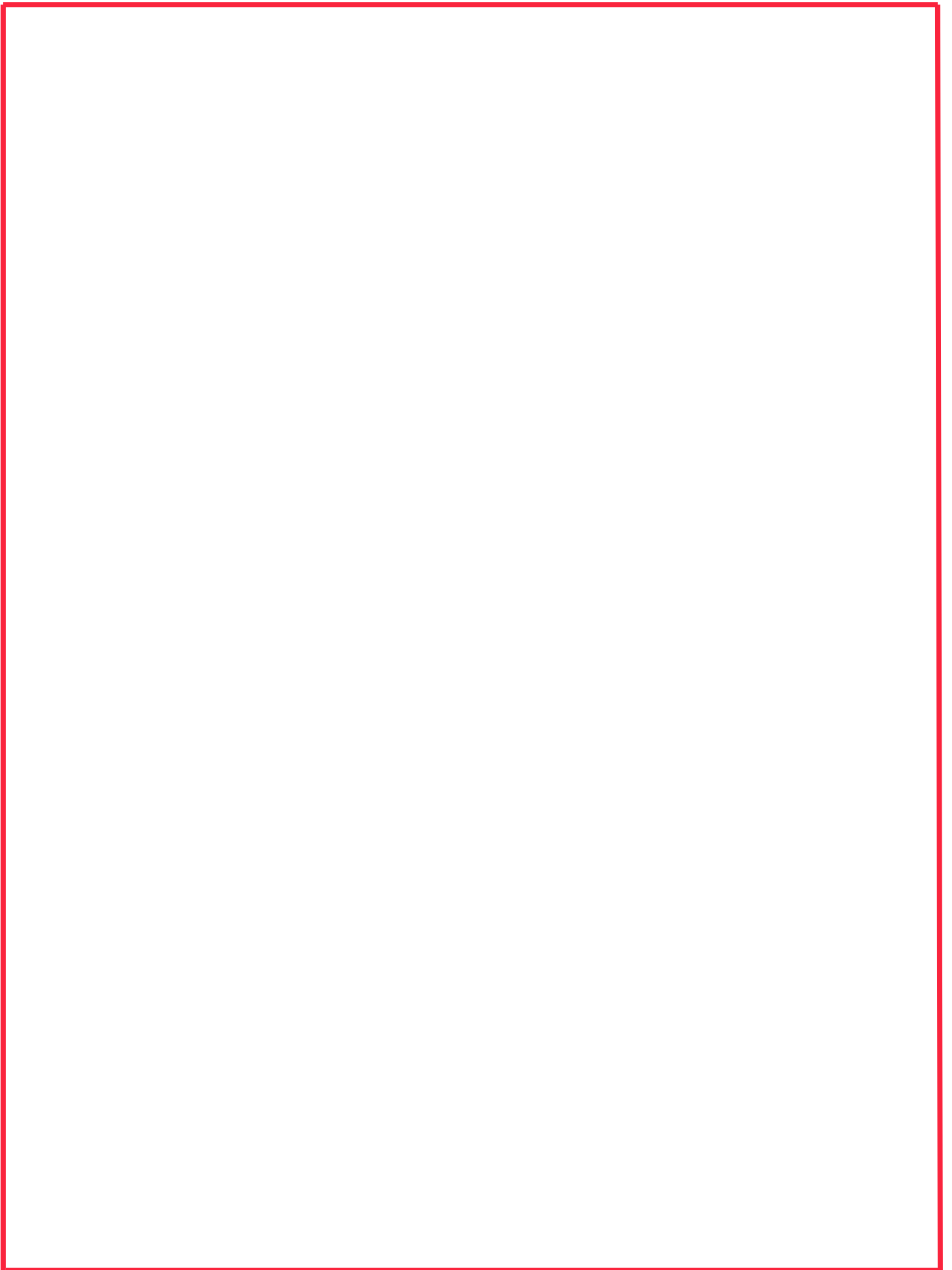


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Dear Reader,

The McLean Community Center and the MCC Youth Ambassadors are proud to present the submissions for the MCC Youth Ambassador Art & Writing Competition. This initiative reflects the Center's ongoing commitment to fostering artistic expression, civic reflection, and community engagement as we commemorate America 250. We are grateful for the opportunity to support and showcase the creativity of our community.

We extend our heartfelt appreciation to all the artists and writers who participated in this showcase. Centered on the theme "Freedom Through My Eyes," the program invited local high school students to share their personal reflections on what freedom means to them. We are truly inspired by the creativity, insight, and thoughtfulness evident in every submission.

We also offer our sincere gratitude to the outstanding MCC Youth Ambassadors—local students dedicated to volunteer service and community involvement. Each year, these young leaders develop a program that speaks to the experiences of their peers. This year, they partnered with the MCC Governing Board and staff to create a meaningful opportunity for teen artists and writers to commemorate America 250 and be recognized for their exceptional works. Their vision, planning, and dedication were essential in bringing this competition to life.

Lastly, we thank the dedicated jurors who generously contributed their time and expertise to review the entries and select this year's award recipients. Their thoughtful evaluation played a vital role in shaping this meaningful program.

Thank you to the jurors:

- Liz Lawson, New York Times Bestselling Author & MCC Governing Board Member
- Amber Taylor, Fonts Bookstore, Owner
- Jennifer Lillis, McLean Project for the Arts, Assistant Curator and General Manager
- Jordan Citron, FCPS Art Teacher and Camp McLean Art Specialist
- Betsy May-Salazar, McLean Community Center, Executive Director

Sincerely,



Betsy May-Salazar
Executive Director of the McLean Community Center

WRITING SUBMISSIONS

“Icarus”
by Jason Han

14 years old, 9th Grade

Langley High School

“Icarus”

I was born with wax on my shoulders,
a warning in my father’s hands.
He said, fly, but not too high,
and I nodded, already looking toward the sun.
The sky was larger than I imagined
blue spilling like a secret I wasn’t meant to know
I thought distance meant freedom.
I thought light couldn’t burn.

But the air surrounds me
hot,
trembling.
My wax melts in the sun.
The blue keeps going as I drift.

As a child,
I had a picture of that scene.
I thought falling meant failure,
but maybe it was flight’s second half.
Maybe the sea’s blue was the only blue
I was meant to know.
Now every flight
I’m not broken, only interrupted.
My wings smaller, steadier.
The wax still melts,
but I know how to swim.

“The Instance”
by Kaamyra Rasser

17 years old, 11th Grade

Langley High School

“The Instance”

(Note: intended to be read aloud)

I was at a 7/11 the first time I felt it; a divide, between him and I, that connection between history and time, I was at a 7/11. And coincidentally, the date was close to 7/11, so it was cold. It was cold and rainy and so my father was so bold as to leave me. Leave me alone, in his expensive heated truck in the rundown 7/11 parking lot.

There was a man. A black man, because that was the first thing I noticed about him at the ripe age of two and ten. The first thing I saw, the contrast of his skin to the pale sheen of his sports car. Funny thing, perception. To first see skin color and then see wealth.

The man did too, I suppose. His eyes followed my father’s footsteps into the store and they lingered on that little something more that was his skin and hair and eyes. And when the man looked back at me, I assume he came to the conclusion that my *brown* and *black* didn’t match my father’s *blond* and *blue*.

A funny thing, perception. My father went in to get his diet-coke-something or other, and the man offered me aid. ‘Blink twice if you need help’, he said, whispered over the car door. Something new, something I hadn’t heard before, and I almost laughed. Almost laughed until I saw his face, saw something serious in its place, and my ego shrunk. My body, too, sagging and shrinking down into the seat, so as not to be seen.

I didn’t want to be mean, but I didn’t want to speak, either. So I sat still and unblinking in my father’s expensive car and waited for the man to stop watching me. A funny coincidence, because it was in that instance that my father returned, jumping into the driver’s seat, swerving us out and away from the concrete plot where the man had sat in his car. His sports car, an expensive one.

I think I am allowed as much freedom as I should be, as much opportunity as I have been given, and I don’t often compare it to what could have been. But the instance had me wondering, how much different I would be, how different my life could have been. Were it only coincidence I came out like my mother and not like my father? If I identified that man as black and wealthy in the first few moments of seeing him, was I disregarding truly seeing him?

“The Instance”, Cont’d
(Note: intended to be read aloud)

I wonder, in that way, what my father first saw. Did he see my mother as just another girl in town, or did he first notice her black and her brown?

If I think in the latter, does that make me whitewashed? What does it mean, to be whitewashed? I hope freedom means these words cease to exist, a realization that we are joined at the wrist, that our blood mixes together as one.

The body as a whole, whether it’s mine or yours, is only a soul wrapped in patterned paper. My parents wrapped just Santa’s gifts in a different color; if I was more excited to open those, have I lost value in what is important, what is permanent against what will eventually cease to exist?

My freedom and yours, your aches and your sores, they’re all the same color when turned inside out. And when I heal from my clout, when I turn myself inside-out, then maybe I’ll know what it means. Maybe I’ll know what it means, to be seen.

“Religion or Choice”

by Rania Cheema

16 years old, 10th Grade

Langley High School

“Religion or Choice”

Growing up, my family viewed religion more important than anything. They prioritized prayers, pleasing Allah, and fasting during Ramadan. I never viewed this as a bad thing, in fact, I actually respected it; however, when it started to impact me, my decisions, and my freedom, that's when it affected me negatively.

I was a semi-religious kid, I used to go to Sunday school, do Quran classes, and never missed a prayer. I used to be scared of hell, and felt guilt whenever I did something that was considered a “sin.” But it also meant giving up what I loved, drawing, music, and soccer. As I got older, this had a negative effect on my individuality and confidence. However; I decided to start dressing alternatively, and got back into doing what I loved. I got major backlash from my family, and I took the judgement to heart. My family is against queers, showing skin, and minor inconveniences that God apparently hates.

I felt guilty because my family would manipulate me into thinking that this is rebelling against Allah; however, I still prayed 5 times a day and my “sins” would be forgiven, but my family didn't think it was enough, they wanted me to live for Allah so I could get into paradise. I feared displeasing the Lord because I didn't want to go to hell, so I had to tone down my interests and the things I loved. I came out as bisexual in sixth grade, which worsened my fear and guilt.

I also felt like an unlucky child growing up. My family would always tell me that God will make my problems go away if I just pray and fully rely on him; but no matter how religious I was, I never experienced a miracle, even when I did things myself. People would usually say that God gives you struggles because “he loves you.” which never made sense. If God is supposed to love you, then why make you suffer? My family would say it's because God wants you to have full reliance on him, which I did. I prayed 5 times a day, made Duas, read Quran, went for Umrah (which I think is a total scam), and even did things myself, but things only went downhill for me, ever since eighth grade, I lost trust in God and eventually gave up on religion.

“Religion or Choice”, Cont’d

As I grew up, I began to realize that religion is a choice. I secretly stopped praying, stopped reading the Quran, and anything that was considered “religious.” I began to pursue my own interests again; although it came with negative comments and my family telling me that this is an act of rebellion against God, it didn’t stop me from doing what I loved. Being an ex-muslim allowed me to see that there’s more to life than being religious and living only for God; when I pursued my own interests again and dressed the way I felt comfortable in without feeling guilt, this raised my self-esteem and individuality. I no longer felt guilty when I did things I actually enjoyed. I have no intention of hating God or trying to rebel, I chose to live for myself instead of pleasing a God that’s well... if he’s real. Navigating through this experience as an ex-Muslim allowed me to see the real truths in living: living for yourself, doing what you love, doing what makes you happy without feeling any sort of guilt due to the fear of God. Giving up religion was my ultimate goal to see freedom through my eyes.

“Lineage of Freedom”
by Bryn Smith

16 years old, 10th Grade

Langley High School

“Lineage of Freedom”

To my great grandmother, Leja, freedom meant escape. America served as a refuge from the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis. America served as a place where she could freely practice her religion. To my grandfather, Leon, freedom meant a better life. America served as a place where he could use his medical education to help others.

Leja had to work very hard for this freedom. She spent months communicating with the US government, convincing them that she could support herself and start a new life in the US. She almost did not become free. She was one of the last passengers that the MS Batory transported to America before the ship was mobilized for use as a troop ship in World War II. When she arrived in the US, she did not know any English and had very few relatives she could depend on. She had to start a whole new life for herself.

Leon also had to acclimate to his new life. The cold, cloudy Illinois climate was very different from Leon’s former home in Mexico. It was not just the climate that was different, but also the culture. He eventually settled in Arizona, a place where he could experience sunny weather and meet a thriving community of fellow immigrants.

I am very grateful for Leja’s and Leon’s perseverance, as it has allowed me the opportunity to experience the freedoms granted to me in the US constitution.

To me, freedom means the opportunity to practice Judaism. Whenever I light Shabbat candles, whenever I pray, I think of the journey Leja took and the obstacles that she faced so that one day, I could have this freedom. I think of the hundreds of millions of people around the world who do not have the freedom to practice their faiths, and I hope that one day, everyone will be granted this freedom.

To me, freedom means the opportunity to use my voice and to advocate for those around me. This freedom has allowed me to represent myself and others at my school and in my community. This freedom has allowed me to make a difference and has shown me the value of representation and leadership. This freedom has shown that when people have the opportunity to voice their ideas and collaborate with others, we can create amazing outcomes.

“Lineage of Freedom”, Cont’d

To me, freedom means that the law is something to follow rather than fear. Protections against unreasonable searches, self-incrimination, and cruel punishment allow me to know my rights and to respect the American justice system. These protections hold authority figures accountable while still allowing them to investigate crimes. These protections make me feel safe and secure.

To me, freedom means representation. Mandates outlined in the 14th, 16th, and other amendments mean that lawmakers will represent myself and my community, and have our interests in mind when constructing policies. This freedom means that regardless of my values, background, and walk of life, my voice will be heard.

Freedom means that I can live a happy, full life in America.

“Her America, Our America”

by Michelle Liu

18 years old, 12th Grade

The Madeira School

“Her America, Our America”

She tests the hopes gently nestled in our hands,
A melting pot of dreams.
We are greeted by thirteen red and white stripes,
Gazing up into fifty white stars.
No taxation without representation, she urged long ago.
But now, hatred divides through protest signs,
Silence speaks louder than words.
Mother Nature stands at a crossroad.
Her people against our people in streets packed tight,
A polarization we were warned to never invite.

Yet, within our cracked glass ceilings, we must come to understand.
Our story is stitched by challenges fought and ways we grew,
Her spirit stays alive with changes we constantly demand.
A pure type of freedom we are lucky to grasp,
Simultaneously subtle but fierce. Her people are our people,
Together we once battled adversities that now stand in our view.
Our humanity is sacred in her promised land.

250 years later,
Our ink to her paper.
Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness dance around freely,
Expression can live without fear.
A new light beams on the shining city on a hill.
Communities strung in unity - piece by piece together,
Each pursuing their own American Dream.
The meaning of her freedom may continue to evolve,
From our deep past, present, and slow glances towards our future,
But its value will always be constant.

Today, the fight should not be for us, not for her,
But for the soul at the core of all our collective hearts. A shared ground, a shared
voice, and a shared love in the nation we all call home.

“Freedom In My Eyes”
by Ananya Aiyer

15 years old, 10th Grade

Thomas Jefferson High School
for Science and Technology

“Freedom In My Eyes”

Freedom begins quietly,
in the morning light that spills across my desk,
in the pledge we recite,
in the way my teacher says, “Speak your mind,”
and I want to believe they mean it.

When I read the Constitution,
I see more than history.
I see a promise
that every voice, no matter how soft,
has a place in the chorus of this country.
That my brother, who doesn’t speak,
is still heard.
That his laughter, his way of being,
is protected by the same laws that guard my own song.

Freedom is the courage to be different,
to stand in a crowd and still be myself.
It is the right to believe,
to worship or not, to love who I love,
to walk down the street without fear
because justice is supposed to walk beside me.

I see freedom in the small things:
in the way my classmates debate without anger,
in the way we volunteer at the elementary school,
helping kids sound out words
and watching their faces light up
when they realize they can read.
I see it when my friends and I
sit under the bleachers after gym class,
sweaty, breathless, laughing,
talking about the future,
believing we have the right to shape it.

“Freedom In My Eyes”, Cont’d

Freedom is the choice to raise my hand in class,
even when my voice shakes.

It is the right to write poems like this one,
to tell the truth as I see it,
to believe that my words matter. I feel it when I sing in the car with my family,
windows down, voices rising with the wind,
the world outside rushing by,
and for a moment, everything feels endless.

But sometimes, I see the cracks:
families torn apart,
children crying in the dark,
people afraid to speak their names
because freedom does not always reach every door.
Somewhere, someone is losing what I take for granted,
and I wonder how a country built on liberty
can still let fear decide who belongs.

Through my eyes, freedom is not perfect.
It is fragile.
Shaped by time,
made beautiful by struggle.
Freedom is not just something we inherit;
it is something we must fight for,
something we must feel for those who cannot.

Because freedom is not just mine or yours, it is the breath we share, the open
doors.
And if one voice is lost, none of us are free;
freedom lives only when it lives in we.

“Am I?”
by Chris Woitte

14 years old, 9th Grade

Langley High School

“Am I?”

Breathless. I am surrounded by nothing.
Suffocating. I am drowning in the abyss.
The stars,
dark and distant,
are within an arm's reach; a shift
will churn the Milky Way.
Yet I am enamored by the canvas stretching below.
Gaping ever beneath Me,
it waits to be painted.
As I extend myself through the
lonely darkness,
the passing hours dawn on Me.
I, infinite, can barely breach this
openness.
Orange dye beguiles,
waking across the page.

Never has my movement seemed
so delicate,
so fragile.
Hauntingly, the sun sneers behind me;
I am restless staring at searing orange, thus I send forth blue.
Slowly the surface shifts through the spectrum, staining
expectantly with bold day.
Stunning sapphire dwarfs amber
and asks whether bronze was
ever there.
It's illuminated by the flame
revolving above, soon
to burn my eyes.
When it does, I'm done
and turn my back to the color,
its existence perhaps nothing
more than imagined;
my vision filled instead with darkness.
Bright specks glare
as if poked through dark plastic, twisting
all around me.

“Am I?”, Cont’d

I can't feel them, I push them with a well-meaning gesture,
but they keep Me trapped in their embrace -
infinitely close but never close enough
to touch.

Sometimes I wonder if they're really there, like the art so far beneath Me,
stretching Me that I am meager in its presence
and helpless in its wake.

I press towards it,
touch the fabric: grainy, rough,
but perfect, real.
And, for the first time,
I feel.

Onwards still, my
vapid figure tears through.
Weeping, I peel and peek into the
crevasse in the canvas,
there waiting a new shape.
A beautiful sphere, rigid and rumbling.
Mumbling, fumbling with magical life,
I find myself tumbling
as it pulls Me in,
almighty Me,
until I fall pitifully,
through I come,
and find freedom. Dazed on the raspy grass, I gaze up
towards the stars through the socket.
I imagine their jealous enmity:
no longer am I trapped in their prison,
contained alongside them in empty eternity,
but I hold them in the pocket
of my eye. And in a glance
they are gone, replaced by a bench and towering buildings,
so small, yet far larger than me.
So real, I know I can reach.

“Am I?”, Cont’d

I move,

I fall,

I sob,

with a smile.

The air around me is soft and thin,
the grass beneath me is sharp and firm,
the boundary between myself and the universe
no longer a whisper
but an anthem.

So I stand and stumble,
writing the lyrics,
the tune humming through me.

I sense now the stars from afar
no longer to be blanching
but gleaming

The notes, steady, speckle the skies,
and I feel the melody mingle with meaning.
Brushstrokes of breeze breathing across my neck,
skin prickling
like chiming bells
ringing in my ears the promise:
“you are.”

“Failure is Freedom”
by Edison Coles

17 years old, 12th Grade

Langley High School

“Failure is Freedom”

The chains are broken,
but their sound still haunts your footsteps.
They wait,
as snakes,
for the birds that fly.
We dared to call the birds free,
how foolish were we!
The birds may fly,
yes, they fly,
but they dare not land!
Their skies are haunted by chains,
and chased by snakes!
Anyone may fly.
But only the free may land.

. . .

To rest upon the chains of failure,
to sit in the jaws of snakes,
and live to fly again,
now that,
is freedom.

. . .

We were foolish to call the birds free!
They fly!
Yes they fly!
But only the phoenix is free!
A being beyond what the snakes had defined it.
Behold the never phoenix!
Praise be the myth of freedom.
Behold the snakes!
Praise be those whispers of sweet nothings.
Behold the chains!
Praise be the clank that echoes in shadows.

...

“Failure is Freedom”, Cont’d

Watch as the snakes do define me!
Watch as the chains do bind me!
Watch as I do fall.
But in this land,
I pray,
the chains have lost their teeth.
I spell nonsense to you.
And my world,
my words,
will someday fall.
But in whispers of forgiveness,
in the breeze of freedom, I know,
when snakes deem my reality fallen,
I shall fly.

“Freedom is watching you”

by Edison Coles

17 years old, 12th Grade

Langley High School

Note:

This is a blackout poem made from one of the final scenes in “1984.” Lines have been slightly moved around, but this entire piece could be replicated by blacking out words on a set of pages of “1984.” However, the word “freedom” has been added throughout the piece, thus changing the original work into something with a far different meaning. The blacked out lines included here are to show the blackout process but don’t reflect the lines that were actually blacked out (it would be very difficult to read if that was the case).

“ **Freedom** is watching you”

Terror, in the end, you will accept it.

Freedom would never endure.

defeated discredited

it is a dream. it is impossible!

always, we shall have **Freedom** screaming.

sufficiently bro- ken

that is the world we are preparing.

But always, there will be **Freedom**

constantly increasing, and constantly growing subtler

always omnipotent.

Always, there will be the thrill of a dream.

“Stained Glass”
by Elakshi Nedungottil

16 years old, 11th Grade

Langley High School

“Stained Glass”

Freedom does not insist upon itself. You must insist upon it first.

Freedom, for me, was viewed through hazy lenses. The first time I slipped on my glasses was the first time I saw sharply outlined stars on a blanket of deep blue. I lay on the gravel of my driveway, my arm tucked under my head. My glasses dug into the sides of my head, and my arms were scraped up after a day of attempting to climb the trees in my backyard. At that age, my freedom came from choosing to watch the night sky rather than grabbing at it.

Freedom isn't found in the blue sky or the bright stars. Freedom is founded on a white, blank surface.

In India, my father took off his shoes at temples. Cathedrals and temples are more similar than people think- their grounds are colorful. In the United States, he took his shoes off at the airport. At his age, being a man in his 30s, his freedom came from avoiding scuff marks on the grounds of the TSA. My father, despite being as muddy of a kid as I was, did not want to stain the only blank canvas he received in his life. Canvases are meant to be stained by the hands of artists. Some children were born artists, my father was born a tyro. That didn't stop him from practicing until his hands ached.

Freedom cannot become anything on a blank canvas. It must be created, it must be streaked with color.

I push my glasses up to read through textbooks. My mother leaned her head against the glass windows of trains and offices to will herself awake. Glass is not just for looking through. 250 years ago, American soldiers shot through the windows of churches to protect the sanctity of religion. 100 years ago, Emmeline Pankhurst smashed the doors of shops and ruddied her skirt. She flashed her teeth and straightened her navy coat and smashed another. She would have smashed a third, if not for the fact that there were no windows in jail. If the townspeople did not hear her sound logic, her plea for suffrage, they must have heard her kicking the walls of her cell. 10 years ago, Corey Menafee shattered a piece of stained glass artwork in one of Yale's dining halls. The window depicted slaves lifting bales of cotton over their heads. The grounds that previously echoed with anguish and toil were filled with a breath of relief.

“Stained Glass”, Cont’d

Freedom is something that must be broken and put together, it must be something that can be touched. Otherwise, there would be no blanket of blue or canvas of white or streaks of red on our flag. Folded flags are returned to the families of soldiers who passed serving the country, and a child may touch their parent’s flag and feel some ounce of understanding. The tears that stain the flag are something real. The pricking of Betsy Ross’s needle on her fingertips as she sewed the first American flag covered her hands with the same shade of red on the battlefield. The day she was able to hold the flag up high with her scarred hands for everyone to see was something real.

Freedom does not just allow insistence, it depends on it.

“FREEDOM”
by Rohan Packer

15 years old, 9th Grade

Thomas Jefferson High School
for Science and Technology

“FREEDOM”

I

Freedom means
accepting diversity
breaking bonds of racism
holding all to be fellow humans
despite differences
Just and firm rule of law
Freedom of religion for all

II

Freedom means
fair elections, graciously accepted
by winners and losers alike
freedom from a corrupt power
All people hold sway and
reason trumps force and power
The truth shall always come to light

III

Freedom means Martin Luther King Jr.
The man with a dream
Who fought and fought
Alongside other brave hearts
such as Rosa Parks
to end the evil of Jim Crow laws.
He inspired the United States
And went beyond,
Inspiring the entire world
Hastening the spread of democracy
And crushing injustice
worldwide

“FREEDOM”, Cont’d

IV

Freedom means Mahatma Gandhi
Great as his name
As the British returned peace
with violence
He was locked away
again and again
from the light of the sun
Yet still he fought for freedom for all
Hindu, Muslim, people of all faiths
His legacy longer
3and more everlasting
than any prison

V

Freedom means V.R. Kalappa
my great-grandfather
Leader of labor unions
fearless Visionary
tireless fighter
for freedom and justice
Working to overthrow
utter unjust rule and tyranny
of the British in India
fighting for democracy, freedom, peace
From blood and toil
To freedom and fierce joy of Independence
This is what Freedom means to me.

“Fighting for Freedom”
by Delphine Monroe

16 years old, 10th Grade

Langley High School

“Fighting for Freedom”

Freedom is defined as being able to use your voice to express your opinions with no restraints. Susan B. Anthony played a huge role in securing basic fundamental rights for people who were discriminated against, enabling growth and progress by inspiring women to protest and push forward. In 1872, Anthony publicly protested women's voting rights by submitting a ballot in the election. She was arrested and fined \$100, which due to inflation would be valued at much more today. A year later, in 1873, she gave a speech referencing the preamble to the constitution. “It was we, the people; not we, the white male citizens; nor yet we, the male citizens”

Anthony famously said. Anthony pointed out that the preamble says ‘we the people’ therefore exposing society had no right to shrink the standards to only allow white male citizens to have a say in elections. Anthony supported women being paid equally to men. According to womenshistory.org, men who taught at schools “received a monthly salary of \$10, while the female teachers only earned \$2.50 a month.” This unjust payment to women highlighted that people truly believed a woman's time was worth less than a man’s. Facing this prejudice, Anthony was encouraged more than ever to make a change for the women of the future. In 1851, Anthony met Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a woman who organized women’s rights conventions. It was there that she spoke out, providing the voice that was taken away from so many women. Together, Anthony and Stanton established the American Equal Rights Association, becoming editors of *The Revolution*, a newspaper which, “discussed suffrage, education, marriage and divorce, equal pay, eight-hour workdays, and labor and financial policy.” (womenshistory.org). *The Revolution* spread the concern and discrimination women were facing, and allowed more activists to be inspired. Susan B. Anthony significantly impacted the world as it is today by advocating for women's rights. She stood up for those who couldn’t, ambitiously working hard to enable women to have equal rights.

“Freedom Through My Eyes”
by Jah-la Vang

16 years old, 11th Grade

Langley High School

“Freedom Through My Eyes”

“I wish for world peace” I said as I tossed the penny into the fountain. “I hope I can become rich.” I whispered with my hands clasped, as I faced the clock striking 11:11. A wishbone. A lucky coin. A fallen eyelash. Every chance I had was an opportunity for a wish. Because not only did I want a pink Barbie Jeep at 10 years old, I wanted to make a change. At a young age, many of us do not understand the ways of the world. We simply are naive and hopeful, being guided through wishful thinking. But that ambition and innocence brings us to innovation and passion. In a society built on the ideal that you can be anything you want to be, a “child-like” mind is needed. They say “the world is your oyster” and as an adult we might laugh at the cliché, but as a child, we would wonder what that means. Freedom is not only the absence of restraint on oneself, but the permission to be passionate freely. Everyone is allowed to express themselves, not only through outward expression, but as a person with passions and interests. Given my fortunate circumstances, I am able to utilize the freedom upheld by America to chase what I desire. At school, I would read stories about young girls in other countries, unable to be educated simply because of their gender. I never realized that the building I rode the bus to everyday was a privilege, granted as a result of my freedom. Although I too was a little girl, I was provided a head start on a path that I chose to take, whereas others with the same goals were held back by barriers I never had to face.

Living in America fostered an environment where I was never doubted for what I wanted to pursue. I ambitiously chased rigorous jobs and male-dominated subjects like STEM. I studied fractions and decimals rather than how to be the ideal wife. I had only seen scientists in the movies, so in 3rd grade, I arrived dressed in a too long lab coat and comically large goggles. It was career day and I knew for sure I wanted to be a microbiologist. My friends were all dressed up as lawyers, coders, doctors, any job they wanted. No one was asked ‘Are you sure’ or told ‘You can’t.’ because we were free to dream and be interested in the things we wanted to. And because these young children’s choices were never doubted, they never doubted their ability to pursue. Their views stopped being limited to the walls of a classroom, but to an oyster with the possibility of a pearl. It is because of my fortunate upbringing and freedom embedded in this country that I am able to chase what I want. Through my eyes, freedom is the granting of an unknown future. The future I wanted was still up to me to decide, there was no set path planned out simply because of who I was. In my eyes, I am free to dream and be hopeful. I have the freedom to wish, for ‘naive’ things like world peace and money, and not for the basic right of survival.

ART SUBMISSIONS

“Leaning in the Wind”

by Victoria Yatsenko

18 years old, 12th Grade

Langley High School



“Juice”

by Dominika Loisha

16 years old, 11th Grade

Langley High School



“Reaching Liberty”

by Katherine Gu

14 years old, 9th Grade

Langley High School



“Freedom of Creation”

by Josephine Fatovic

15 years old, 10th Grade

Langley High School



“The Hands that Hold Freedom”

by Julie Zhao

14 years old, 9th Grade

Langley High School



“Liberty”

by Shoshana Broussard

16 years old, 10th Grade

Langley High School



“Flying Free on the Open Ocean”

by Kath Ji

15 years old, 9th Grade

Langley High School



by Yanai Wang

14 years old, 9th Grade

McLean High School



“Freedom to Become”

by Myra Khanna

14 years old, 9th Grade

McLean High School



“All We Have Gone and Will Go”

by Riley Losick

17 years old, 11th Grade

Langley High School



“The Heart of Freedom”

by Divya Duhan

16 years old, 11th Grade

Langley High School



by Hongyao Li

15 years old, 10th Grade

Thomas Jefferson High School
for Science and Technology

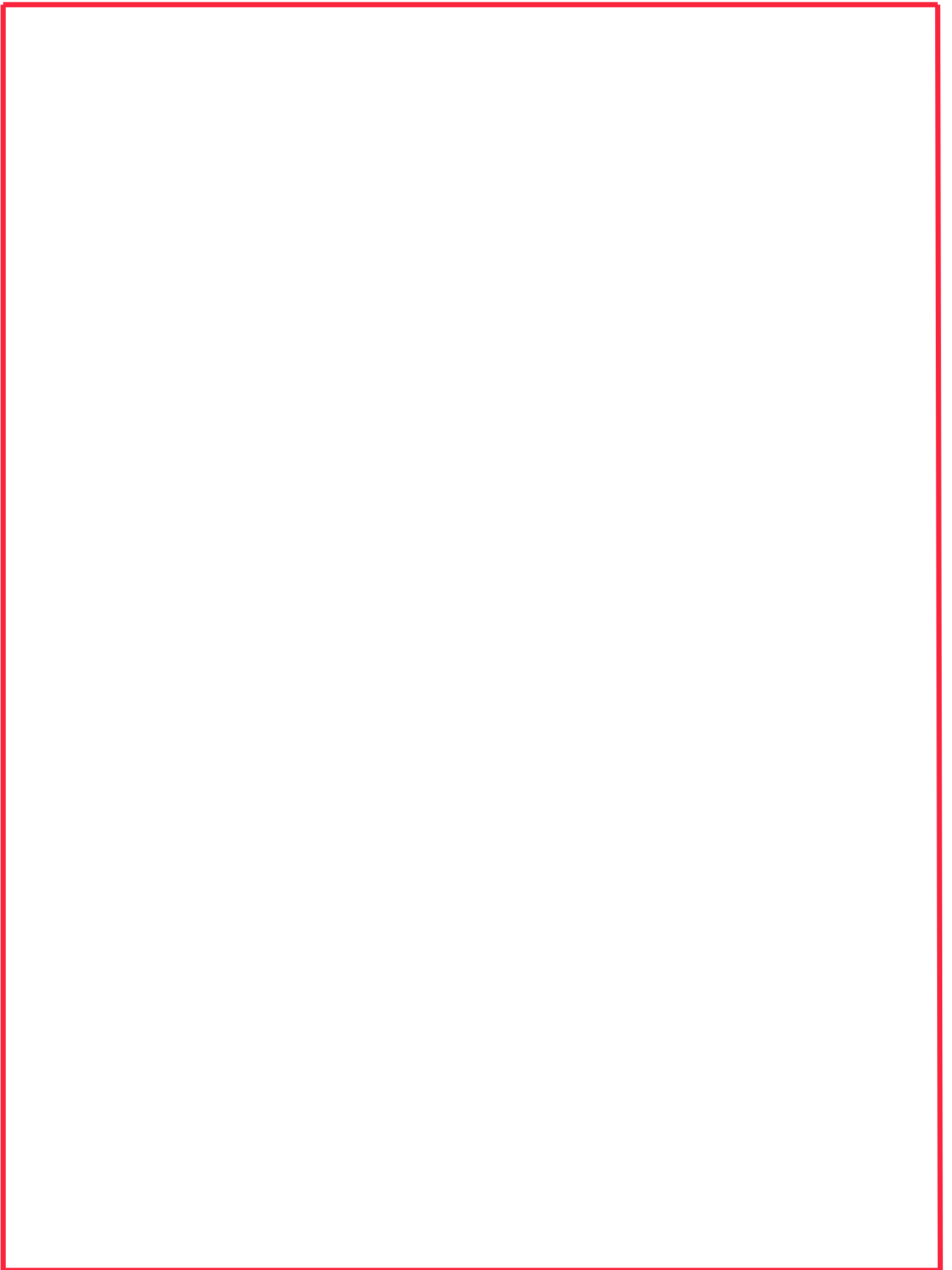


by Banu Kasamanli

14 years old, 9th Grade

McLean High School







McLean
Community
Center
The Center of It All