

Star

Noa Ní Aoláin Gross

PROSE, 1st PLACE (Grades 10-12)

He sat hunched over the kitchen table. The waning light from a nearby bulb barely holding onto its last charges was the only thing keeping him from collapsing right then and there. To be fair, the small bundle he cradled in strained forearms also stopped his otherwise inevitable slumber.

The hopeless search through the job openings was sure to break any man's spirit. For every unchecked circle, there were at least twenty or so large furious x's scribbled over the page.

A small, innocent hiccup drew his attention away from the soul-sucking (or so it seemed) page. Small, beautiful, and fragile, a lump reached toward his grizzled face. His comparatively gargantuan finger was willingly entrapped in a surprisingly strengthful grasp. Yet the thing which never ceased to amaze him was the smoothness of the hand which held his, often causing him to feel ashamed of the rough calluses which he worried would toughen skin it touched like some incurable disease.

But at half-past whatever unholy hour, he allowed himself this small break into paradise's eyes. Rising from the forever wobbly chair, which no amount of glue or tape would ever repair, the unlikely pair bundled up for their ritual nightly (some would say morning) stroll. He checked, rechecked, and re-rechecked to ensure that the multiple layers were still moving as relatively sparse early morning traffic filled the air with the lulling sounds of shouts and horns.

What had it all come to? Could he really manage? His mother had offered to take her. Was it selfish of him to keep her here, in this polluted city, with no fairytale ending in sight? But the mere thought of letting her go... He knew that it would all be gone. Whatever unnatural force that had so far been keeping their heads above the tidal waves, he knew it would surely vanish. He pleaded with the stars (or with where the stars should be) for some sign that they, no, she would come out all right. After all, what unimaginably cruel world must he live in if it could protect the little angel half asleep in his arms? Under the hazy skies, he thought back on the rollercoaster year.

The call had changed their lives. Hospital trips that had robbed the world of its most beautiful smile. Rainy skies and black clouds as nature mourned with him.

Dark spirals of pain and grief had taken him far away from anything and everything, dreams, hopes, life. Yet one thing, a present from the skies themselves, an attempt to balance the scales. Those eyes, even swathed and bundled in thousands of layers, were her mother's, concerned and loving. The Greeks talked about people being put into the stars, to remain there frozen for eternities to come. Yet, he knew the Greeks to be wrong, for her eyes, they held her mother in them, not some distant glowing orb. Here in his arms, her living breathing self made him hold on.

Rounding the corner, he unlocked the apartment and walked up the narrow steps, stepping carefully to avoid any creaks which would awaken the sleeping child. He skillfully unlocked the door with one hand and quickly removed all the thin layers which had kept in her warmth. He lay her down onto the makeshift crib and kissed her lightly on the forehead, slowly massaging his arm which had become stiff from the hours carrying her small frame. With renewed vigor, he settled onto the stool (no longer minding the unevenness). For you, he whispered, voice hoarse from lack of use. He nodded and returned pen to paper.

Noa Ní Aoláin Gross is in 10th grade at St. Paul Academy. Besides writing and photography, she enjoys hiking and backpacking in Minnesota and beyond, as well as debating and writing for her school's newspaper.