

# ConStellation 2020

## Writers Contest Winners

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### Editor's Note

*To riff on the LEGO Movie theme song, "Everything is ~~awesome~~ canceled!"*

*Well, not everything.*

*The global pandemic pushed the next [ConStellation](#) convention to 2021, but it didn't stop our writers contest from moving forward.*

*We had a record number of submissions this year across all ages and categories. (My thanks to our panel of volunteer judges—it was a heavy lift this time around.) We are pleased to feature a quartet of winners: two for poetry and two for fiction.*

*ConStellation Nebraska congratulates **Ell Kinsey** (adult, poetry), **Franklin Cosgrove** (youth, poetry), **Bradley J Nordell** (adult, fiction) and **Oliver Brassil** (youth, fiction). We hope to see them in Lincoln in April 2021 to offer our plaudits in person.*

*Until then...*

*I invite you take a some time to sit back and enjoy these worthy poems and stories.*

*I know for a fact you don't have other plans!*

Brian Hirt  
ConStellation Nebraska Writers Contest Chair  
April 2020

# No Right Turn

By Ell Kinsey

(Category: Adult)

In this empire of crows  
and dragonflies,  
I sprout a pair of wings from the  
blades of my back.  
The left emerges first, a dark and dewy down, but in  
the low light of dawn, blood shimmers on the tips of  
my plumage.  
The right soon follows, a fold of delicate webbing,  
a membrane tinged in pink  
of muscles torn clean through.  
They beat in different intervals, scraping my skin against  
brick and pavement,  
but once the rain picks up,  
what's mine peels away.

I'm an abomination,  
one that cannot die  
despite the gashes and bruises,  
despite the snap of hollowed out bones.

In this empire of crows  
and dragonflies,  
there are a thousand streets  
and a thousand avenues,  
and I survive as every intersection—  
shackled to a manhole  
with wings shredded at my sides.

In becoming the shadows  
I've forgotten the feeling home  
gave in sunbursts.  
But in this empire of crows  
and dragonflies,  
home cannot withstand  
a voice so strong.

# The Robot

By Franklin Cosgrove

(Category: Youth)

Walking down the darkened steps,  
A robot turns on,  
No time to fret.

The lifeless creature moving closer and closer.  
Tools and spare parts the robot rolls over.

Its shiny metal gleaming,  
The lifeless eyes seeing.

Whizzes, whirrs, beeps, and lights,  
A robot's song shining bright.

Soon the robot goes out of sight,  
But the mark it made in your mind takes flight.

# The Reaper Men

By Bradley J Nordell

(Category: Adult)

*(Content warning: Pandemic; violence)*

MAYBE TOGETHER, we can save the world.

The Reaper Men dispel this hope, but I won't let them take it from me. Not today, or tomorrow, or ever. The world once held nine billion humans, and now only a few million remains. Others, though, like me, they walk these highways of the dead, hoping to find a shelter, a cure, and hope. You are the hope, and that's enough to keep going. I think of those other highways and if there are a hundred me seeing the same thing, being judged by the Reaper Men, seeing friends and neighbors wrapped like mummies for the burning. The world is no longer separated by countries or governments or ideas but by graves of ash and dust and the leftovers of the Reaper Men.

I walk east along I-80, with the midday sun blistering the back of my neck with its unremitting heat. I need to get to the quarantine zone, and beyond the wall, before nightfall. I need to get to you. I need to get to you before the machine vultures cleanse these sick lands with radiation and fire. And before the dusk sits eternally upon the city that I once called home.

I've been walking for five days now and over seventy miles. My boots have already shown signs of wearing down and aging. How many more steps before they're nothing more than tattered leather? Threads of hope, torn. How long will I make it barefoot among this rough terrain? I think of my home, an ancient relic of a dream world. I will never see it again. I'm glad.

Along the way, I stopped to find shelter in various houses. Each one smelled like archaic mausoleums. A ghostly essence of the dead or dying. I didn't sleep in any of these homes. Nightmares flung me aside. Waking was always the hardest thing to do.

My knee hurts, and my limp is getting worse. I should have remembered my brace, but I forgot it again. You were always the one who helped me to remember it. I didn't have much time to pack, though. And the backpack seems more cumbersome now, though it carries fewer items. My food supply ran out a day ago. My water supply just last night. I hate myself for my horrible

planning, but I didn't have much time. The last house before the great highway leers at me with vulturous hunger.

I walk towards it anyways.

Like all houses along the way, the blinds were drawn, to keep out the sun and heat, which made the fever and splitting migraine worse for the ill. The brass door handle was cold and unlocked. I walked in. Sweat and decaying food made me cover my face. The sound, at first, was dead quiet, but then I heard the shrieking cough of a man. My heart sank, knowing what this poor fella was going through. Looking around, I find a picture of the family that once lived here. Three kids and a wife. I can tell by the sounds; they are no longer here. He must have buried them in the backyard. More coughing resonates within the walls of the house. He has a day or two at most now. He would cough himself to death and choke on blood that pool in his lungs, carrying with it the final breath. I pulled the .357 Magnum out of my bag and held it. Such a powerful key that slams shut all doorways. I clicked open the cylinder and moved it gently. *Click. Click. Click. Click.* I count the remaining bullets. Hope withers, and as my stomach twists, for only one bullet remains. My own scythe. And I need that one just in case things go south. There would be no mercy today for you, stranger. My heart is heavy as I walked out of the house and into the coming day.

That was only ten hours ago but feels like forever. I walk now, remembering days passed. Before the sickness. Before the world died. I think of you. I think of the mess we made, what we are doing now to clean it up. I think of those long nights in the lab with science and our relationship being studied. I think of the living, the once civility in men, with his laws and former morality. All that was taken in an instant. I walk and believe we can have it again. I know I'm foolish, but hope moves forward one step at a time. For what sits in my pocket, the information I'm bringing to you. Each step comes from that small sliver of hope that peers beyond the grave. The highway holds the memories of a lost civilization. And now I've come upon the present. I've come upon the Reaper Men and the dead.

The smell of bodies comes in waves of putrid aromatic shrieks. Farther along the highway, the smell gets densely suffocating. I vomit twice despite my empty stomach. I feel as if I'm I am Marley, come to show you the failed ways of the past. I am a man with no name, just like the scattered humans before me along the highway. I am a man of echoes, fleeing the clattering of chains resonating behind me. In this new world, there's no need for names and titles or jobs anymore. When civilization crumbles, so does our identity, and we become nothing more than the nameless, either the sick or the immune, dead or the dying, the survivors, or the Reaper Men.

They are the worst of us.

The smell is horrific. But I have no food left to vomit. Recently dead, I think to myself. Rotting eggs and decayed rats in a cellar, a stench of meat that sat in the heat for too long. I adjust the mask covering my nose and mouth, knowing it will do me no good, even in that macabre hell I've wandered into. Knowing deep down inside, the mask will not protect from the invisible monster that has stricken this world with a final whimper. It is nothing more than comfort. It is a sign to others that I don't carry the monster with me in my last breaths. To block out the smell of an ailing world and nothing more.

The Reaper Men watch me as I walk amongst them. They guard the highways with condescension and protect the walls from the sick and dying with a covetous thirst. With their ashen biohazard suits with a black circle where their face should be, that fades like spilled ink along the edges, connecting wires and black snake-like tubes that extend from their mask to the oxygen system on their backs. They look like aliens or demons. Eyes that watch and judge and wait like vultures for the living to become another thing to burn and cleanse. All they know is death. All they can do is purify the sick with fire and bullets.

My heartbeat accelerates the longer I stare at these once people. They point me along with lengthy reckoning stares and gloved hands. Their single eye, nothing more than a reminder of what our world has become. The blackness of what consumes us. The darkness of what waits for us now in the jaws of the future. The virus is king in these lands and the Reaper Men its henchman.

These dark shadows have become more than just the humans they burn, but a symbol for the next world. A world of cruelty and abomination. Hell incarnate embraced with hollow masks. The scenery is masked by the miles of bodies that sit like bags of soil on the highway. The Reaper Men work, covering the dead with a kerosene-soaked cloth to help them burn later. The facemask fails to block out the mix of rotting corpse with the bitter and sweet gasoline smell, as I walk by.

Miles upon miles, hundreds of thousands of bodies lay scattered at the edge of the highway. Those that didn't make it. Those the virus chose at its meal. As I walk seeing those rolled up corpses, I think of our once laboratory. Instead of the bodies, I see the test tubes throw hither and thither. Instead of the harsh aroma of kerosene, I try to smell the acetone and isopropyl. Instead of the Reaper Men, I see the mass spectrometers and machines. And instead of the ash, I see your papers like your wild thought napkins lying upon messy desks. Whiteboards filled with

notes and ideas and messages we sent as a form of flirtation. You would always claim that you were the organized one, yet you laid your breadcrumbs always within the lab.

I followed each of them every day. I follow them now along with the dead, my own road to Damascus, where my mind drifts with you and the living. I know you are there beyond the wall with others helping to find a cure. Maybe not today or even tomorrow, but soon you will see the way. And though the Reaper Men stand above, their pride will crumble at your mighty hands. They just don't know yet. I smile, pondering our secret that we kept from them. And with the data chip in my pocket and my credentials, I make my way towards you. Maybe I could help speed up the process. Our minds were always better together than apart.

There are no survivors here just shadows of the departed, and ash angels of the charred. Graves unfurled. The sick and the immune. The immune are not the lucky ones, though. Instead, they are the damned. The kindling for future fires. The Reaper Men wait patiently with their black eyes, searching for them. For the virus will mutate, we're told so by our colleagues. That was before they were silenced. But you and I still speak. It's only a matter of time before the immune become the dead. Just death in waiting. That's all life is now. Unless you can change that. Unless your voice can soar beyond the horizon of smoke to the minds willing to listen.

The endless trek across these hellscape highways from one zone to another. Soon they will all fall. Soon, the highways will be quiet and empty without the thumping footsteps of the desperate. There isn't much that separates us other than envy. God has left these lands for us to fend for ourselves. If there was a god at all. The virus is god now. It had proved its dominance and continues to do so. This is our way of kneeling before it.

As I walk, I think about other people. How many had they buried before the virus or insanity got to them? How could one go on after burying their children or wives or family? I don't have kids, always regretted that, but now I am happy that never happened. To watch them perish would be something I could never bear. All I have is you beyond the wall. And my love, I promised I would make it, and I don't fail my promises. Nightfall separates us, but hopefully not for long.

Ahead, in the distance, I can see my destination. The five-story steel wall and the Waiting Zone. I walk, with my head down, trying to ignore the Reaper Men filling the holes with the latest victims. Can this all be real? Have the ways of men truly stooped to barbarism? The callousness in the Reaper Men makes the bumps on my screen slither along my arms. I don't dare look them in the eye.

It takes me another hour before I make it to the crowd of people waiting anxiously at the wall, trying desperately to get to the entrance. It's their final lifeline. I can feel it in the air as if a storm was building. The Reaper Men stand guard, unaffected by the desperation before them. Women, children, men all stand crowded, bustling back and forth, pushing and shoving, screaming, weeping. Some are sick, coughing, and bleeding from their eyes. Some are starving or suffering from hallucinations induced by dehydration. Just looking at them makes me even more thirsty. But I know there will be no clean water for me here. I need to get to the city beyond the wall. I need to show them my credentials.

I make my way through the crowd, pushing and shoving and elbowing like the rest. I feel crushed by their bony shoulders and palpable fears. They will die here if they can't get through. This crowd is dangerous because of that simple truth. The Reaper Men, though, don't stir but stand stalwart with semi-automatic rifles at hand. They are trained to burn and to kill. They are not government or military but the immune who have decided to take up law and order for themselves. Neither law nor order is obtained without the killing. For all new worlds require their martyrs.

I've made my way now close to the front of the line. Families are holding out their medical papers to the Reaper Men at the steel door that blocks them from the quarantine area.

"Please, none of us are sick! Take them. Take my children and wife, at least. Give us a chance!" The man is saying, shaking the papers back and forth.

The guard doesn't move or look. His black eyes just stare, seeing nothing and everything at once. We aren't humans to them, but liabilities. Others follow suit, doing the same.

"Check us with your device for the love of god!" The people scream together in unison in all directions of the crowd.

One of the Reaper Men moves his one-eyed face and speaks. "You have to wait in line with the rest." His voice distorted, mechanical, and impassive.

"Go to hell!" someone screams. "I've waited for two days, and you haven't let anyone through."

The crowd stirs more now. Rage is boiling inside of me.

A loud scream erupts behind me. I turn to see the commotion. A woman has fallen in the back of the crowd. We all know what it was from. Another infected holding onto the rope of life with desolate hands. Most likely, she finally fell from the fever or pneumonia that suffocated her. She picked a perfect place to die.

The Reaper Men will throw her in the ditch with the other and paint her with flames when the sun falls behind the hills. They will light the highway with the vigils of fire. There will be no prayers for the fallen, however, just the howl of hungry flames feeding upon the past.

“Let us through goddammit! I’m a scientist! I can cure you all!” I scream at the guard. He doesn’t stir. Not even as I, too, show him my credential pass. I was a fool to think they would care. The days of hoping for a cure have long passed for these men.

I wonder if we bum rush the door if we could get through the foot of steel and barb wire. Some of us would die, that is true, but maybe, just maybe, some of us could have a chance at a life beyond the wall. I want to help to organize these people and make sure the woman and children are protected, that our future still has progeny that can make it if somehow humanity can survive this trial. But before I can speak, an overhead voice rises from speakers. Booming and thunderous. An ominous and omnipotent sound. Heartless, cruel, and repulsive.

“NOBODY GETS THROUGH!” An amplified voice says from above us. “STAND BACK FROM THE WALL OR YOU WILL BE SHOT!”

“I would rather be shot than die from that!” A man in the back screams, his daughter whimpers in his arms.

Most of us look left to see another man, who seems to be sitting, leaning against the steel wall, but we all know he’s not taking a nap. Dried blood streams down from his face, and pieces of what seems to be his lung sit in his lap and by his sides. He coughed his lung out, I think to myself, my god he choked to death coughing.

The crowd grows more unruly. I look up to see that nightfall is almost here. Another woman emerges from the crowd with a baby girl in her arms.

“Please!” She’s yelling. A quiet and desperate and heartbroken yell. “Save her. Please, she’s so sick, and we need medicine.”

“THERE IS NO MEDICINE! PLEASE STAND BACK OR WE WILL BE FORCED TO SHOOT!”

She either doesn’t listen or hear or care because she keeps moving. She’s at the door now, pounding and screaming for help. The roaring of gunfire is almost instantaneous, deafening amongst the panicked crowd. The woman and her baby’s fall like a house of cards. Their story ends here among the barren depraved lands of lunacy. The Reaper Men are not here to save or bring us a cure, they’re here only to burn and purify with flame. They’re here only to give death his final kingdom among the bones of humanity.

“This isn’t just!! This isn’t fair!” A man screams from the back. “Damn you, Reapers! You can’t stop us all!! What do you say?!!!” And the crowd moves forward like a herd of bison. They have no weapons but the blades of hate and fear. They have no plan, but the strategy of rage. It’s almost comical that they still believe they can win. That they respond with shock by the lack of law and order. Do they not realize that law and order and democracy and right and wrong lay in ashes in those ditches? The only order left is the dead and the Reaper Men. And their faceless grins could care less. Maybe they once desired a cure, but now it’s about purification.

The crowd of desperate souls continues forward, rushing toward the wall, towards hope. Behind us, the sun falls as dusk approaches. Less than half an hour and it will be night. A full moon and single eye will stare down at a soon-to-be-extinct race and wonder what happened.

I move backward, trying to flee the senseless crowd. The Reaper Men will make these people pay, and I don’t want to die by their hands. I don’t want to be the blood that washes these asphalt tombs.

I am being stamped on, crushed by the frenzy. Claustrophobic heartbeats and buzzing adrenaline fill my mind, tearing away coherent thoughts. I don’t want to die like this. I don’t want to be crushed by the mad and desperate. Oh god, not like this.

Gunshots ring out, celebrating death with steel instead of death with fire. The crowd screams as forty men and women and children fall. I can hear more screaming, and then I realize that I’m the one who is screaming. The horror of what we’ve become. The macabre nature of men without rules and desperation, when death and salvation lie between them, they will butcher their own without a thought or care. Are we so expendable to arrive at this callous nature? Was this us all along, waiting for this time to come out? In a way, beyond the black hole that sits in their biohazard suits, the Reaper Men enjoy this carnage, this power of death and life. They are hungry for it.

The people keep coming, and the bullets fly, finding their victims. Some stray ones miss but find an innocent target to consume. The nightmare won’t end until we are dead. And then silence. The red mist sways as a sonic boom roars overhead, and everyone, including the Reaper Men, looks up at once. The planes roar as if some giant black mechanical pterodactyl has ripped through the sky with their talons of bombs, carrying with them both the hammer and the nails to our coffins. We see with horror that during the frenzy, the sun had fallen behind the Western skyline, leaving shadows to cast us all in a trance. We’re too late. I feel it inside my trembling hands as I remove the gun from my pack. My other hand sits in my pocket, clasp the data that will never find you.

I made you a promise. But sometimes even the greatest promises are broken by the unforeseeable horrors of destiny. I look up, towards the west, and I see the dark blue sky lit by two vivid orbs of light. They take the form of a giant mushroom cloud as they grow and feed. It's as if a new sun had risen during the time when the other had fallen, and for a brief moment, the world is light again. It is a ruse, though. We all know. The crowd knows it. Behind me, the madness resumes. People scream and clatter and attack the Reaper Men, who hold the gateway to salvation. They only have minutes before the shockwave from the nukes rips them to nothingness. I will not go out like that.

Guns fire. People scream. Blood fills the streets and streaks the wall. Helicopters have left, carrying some of the Reaper Men beyond the wall. The others die with us. They understand the rules better than we do. And hope dwindles with each second. You can feel it as the last pieces of humanity dwindle out of the crowd. We are but beasts in the end when you strip away the technology and clothes and hope.

I put the cold barrel of the gun in my mouth as I think of you. I believe that one day a better world will come from this.

Where the Reaper Men have themselves been burned in the holes, they have dug, and the last survivors of humanity have organized together to create a new tomorrow. I know you will be among them. A light in the dark. A hope in a city that remains. The virus showed us our weakness, but never will it take the human spirit completely. The Reaper Men will not win in this war. And as I taste that metallic key in my mouth, I see glimpses of the future. It is healthy and bright and pure. The fires of today will warm instead of erasing. And as the shock wave hits us, I press down upon the trigger to control my own destiny, and I smile upon the final image of your laugh and know, tomorrow will be okay and that you are safe with a cure in your mind.

*End*

# Found on the Plains

By Oliver Brassil

(Category: Youth)

*(Content warning: Abuse to children)*

TADITA WAS SCARED. Not an immediate fear, but rather an imminent fear, one that starts deep in a person's stomach and crawls up their throat, choking out any other words or thoughts that that person has. Her father, Ruggord, smiled at Tadita and her sister Gwenice. He gestured to the chairs and said, "Sit down."

Tadita and Gwenice glanced at each other and answered in unison, "Yes, Father." As the girls sat, a sleek silver robotic arm slid three platters and a stein onto the circular white table. Ruggord took the stein and poured a yellow bubbling liquid into a nearby metal cup. Tadita's throat tightened. She was not scared for herself—*she* knew how to stay safe—Tadita was scared for her sister. Gwenice was still so young, she did not yet know pain. Tadita, Gwenice, and Ruggord continued to eat in silence.

When Gwenice reached for the potatoes her arm hit the metal stein. By now Ruggord had had many drinks, and the stein was much lighter. Tadita reached out and tried to grab it, but she was not fast enough. With a clatter, the stein broke on Gwenice's lap, and beer stained her red and gold dress. Gwenice's eyes went wide and her face turned red. "I'm so sorry," Gwenice squeaked out. When Tadita first looked at her father, she thought he would be okay this time. He looked so calm, almost as if he was sleeping. Or maybe he actually was asleep. That would be nice, if she could make a mistake and it would just be a mistake. The clattering of the stein falling to the ground roused Ruggord from his peacefulness. Tadita's attempts to hide the stein pieces did not fool Ruggord. What had been done could not be reversed. Tadita pleaded with Ruggord to not hurt Gwenice. Gwenice was too scared to speak. Ruggord ignored Tadita's pleas.

Abruptly, Ruggord stood and grabbed Gwenice. He struck her. Gwenice let out a cry of pain. He hit her again, and soon she stopped making a sound at all. Tadita ran to her room and started packing her bag.

It was a decision. A decision that Tadita had put off for too long. She knew she could not stay. Someday there would be an incident. Every day her father drank more, but it was never enough. He was never satisfied. Ruggord had started drinking when his wife, Amalia, died. Amalia had been kind, sweet, and gentle. She had loved nature and used to walk with Ruggord in Old Lincoln's Sunken Gardens. She loved the flowers and seemed to know the name of every plant. When the Nebraska Unicameral decided to adopt LIVED—Local and International Vittle and Estate Distribution—and replace cities with giant buildings to save space, Amalia protested. She did not want to say goodbye to all the plants, animals, and places in the world. She did not want to move, but she knew that people would die if she did not. So she gave up her world so that someone else may live in theirs.

Amalia and Ruggord lived on the bottom floors of the city building and never felt sunlight or a temperature change. Amalia would take the half hour-long elevator ride to the top floor just to see the sun and feel the heat. She could see the crumbles of old buildings and empty areas where there used to be trees. Amalia wanted to actually touch the buildings and run through the space. One day she sneaked through security to get outside. Amalia had felt so free. She kept walking farther away from the city building. Just as she came to the cavity where the Sunken Gardens used to be, Amalia started to cough. The pollution was affecting her. She had constantly been warned of this on signs in the city building. Amalia crawled over the barren soil to the city building, but she was not fast enough. Police outside the building saw her and rushed towards her, but by the time they reached Amalia, she had died. When Ruggord first heard from the police, he thought it was a joke. How could Amalia have died? She was always so strong and confident.

Tadita had packed her bag and exited the city building. When Tadita got outside with Gwenice, she could not think. Tadita just needed to leave. Run—no—that would draw attention. What was she talking about! *I'm outside now*, Tadita thought, *nobody's here anymore. Then she froze. Police. All she had heard were rumors. Was it actually possible for someone to live outside? It must be, people had been doing so for thousands of years before LIVED came.* They started walking and saw a grey building. Then they kept walking. The next building they saw was white. Tadita and Gwenice kept walking. The last building they saw had fallen down: the old capitol building of Lincoln. Tadita had seen maps before, but she thought maps showed what it looked like outside. She was wrong. She decided to walk in the direction the green man was pointing.

Gwenice had stopped walking. Tadita was confused, but then she saw a red sign with STOP written in white. She laughed. "You don't have to follow the directions anymore, Gwenice."

“Why are they there if they aren’t to tell people what to do?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they were used as propaganda to control other people.” Tadita’s feet really hurt, but Tadita and Gwenice kept walking.

“I’m hungry, Gwenice complained.

“Me too,” replied Tadita.

“Can’t we stop and order a meal?”

“No, we are in the middle of nowhere!” But Tadita had not seen nowhere yet.

That night, Tadita and Gwenice slept. The next morning they woke up. That day they walked. That night they slept. In the morning, they woke up. They only walked for a little bit, then ate grasshoppers that they found in the rubble of the building. Gwenice took a nap while Tadita went exploring around the area. Tadita walked, then tripped. She was surprised. In the city building, no one had ever tripped. When she stood up, she saw a molding billboard. The bottom of the wood had molded away, but Tadita could just make out the top part. It read:

“ el ome to

S wa d

*Ne r ska’s July 4<sup>th</sup> ity!”*

In the background were three different circles of lines all connecting in a central point. Tadita stood up and started running back. “Gwenice! I found something.”

Groggily, Gwenice awoke and stood up. “I was sleeping,” Gwenice moaned.

“I think I figured out what a map is for, Gwenice! They aren’t a picture of the outside, maps show the world in an abstract, shrunk down way.” Tadita grabbed a book out of her bag and opened to a map on the first page. “See,” Tadita said as she pointed to a small black dot labeled Lincoln in the bottom right-hand corner of the paper, “this says ‘Lincoln,’ and that’s where we came from. Now,” Tadita shifted her hand up and to the left and pointed to a smaller black dot labeled ‘Seward,’ “we walked here, to Seward.”

“How do you know that?” questioned Gwenice, “And what’s Seward? I thought the only places in Nebraska were Lincoln and Omaha.”

“Seward must have been an old town. I went exploring a bit, and it looks empty. This is an old book Mom gave to me when I was a baby. Dad said that I would look through all the pictures over and over again. After Mom died, I hardly even remember her, I started carrying it with me

everywhere I went. It's the only thing I have from her. The night she died, I was two years old, I didn't know why Mom was crying. When I walked into the room," Tadita was crying now, "I had my pajamas on and was holding my teddy bear. I asked Mom, 'Can I have a kiss goodnight?' Mom knew she might not ever see me again. I could tell that she was upset, but she just scooped me up, kissed me on the forehead, and said, 'Don't you worry Little Sunshine.' That's just what she called me, 'Little Sunshine.'" Tadita collapsed on top of Gwenice in a pile of tears. Both girls were quiet as they watched the sun set.

The next thing Tadita saw was Gwenice shaking her awake. "Tadita, can we stop walking today and look around Seward? Maybe we could try to find some food."

"Okay Gwenice. Make sure to bring all your things in case we need to leave early." Gwenice and Tadita began to stuff their blankets back into their backpacks.

"Ready?" Tadita asked.

"Yep, let's go," Gwenice said. Tadita showed Gwenice the sign she had found at the edge of the town. Gwenice touched the peeling paint and kept a piece of wood from the bottom of the sign and stuck it into her hoodie pocket. The girls followed a muddy gravel path that was next to the sign. Around them were miles of earth. There were no buildings or vegetation; all that remained was dirt. After walking for about 20 minutes the gravel road transitioned into a paved road and buildings slowly populated the sides of the street. Gwenice excitedly ran around feeling the old wooden houses and the brick street. Tadita loved seeing that the pictures in her book were true: there really were people who lived in individual homes outside. In what appeared to be the center of the town was a clearing with a larger red building. Over the door were white block letters that spelled out, "NEBRASKA NATIONAL GUARD MUSEUM." In front of the museum was a small triangle of dirt with a sculpture of six fighter jets flying away from each other in a circle. Two of the metal poles supporting the planes had fallen, so there were only four planes still "flying."

"Can we go inside?" Gwenice asked.

"No one is using it anymore, so if we are able to get inside, I don't see why not," answered Tadita.

"Do you think we will find anything useful?"

"I guess we'll find out." When Tadita pushed on the museum doors, she was surprised to find them open easily. The inside was dark and filled with different exhibits showing weapons and wars. Tadita listened to the way her voice echoed in the empty hallways. Soon Tadita and Gwenice were back on the trail. As they rounded a hill they saw they could see the blowing winds

over the prairie grasses. Tadita thought to herself, “This is Nebraska,” before running down the hill, her hair flying behind her.

*End*