

## 2024 HIGH SCHOOL ESSAY CONTEST – HONORABLE MENTION

### **The Tarnish that Remains**

By Joanne Fan

One day, I looked down and noticed the tarnish between the keys of my flute instead of its usual shiny luster. It seemed dull and lifeless. I can't recall when it exactly happened, but this darkness continued to resurface relentlessly like an uninvited guest at my doorstep until I felt I had no choice but to let it in.

This darkness became my reality, and in this new familiarity, I found comfort. After coming home from school, I hurried to my bedroom windows, closing the white shutters that drooped lazily against slivers of scorching sunlight inching their way through. I collapsed on my bed, wishing to be forever held in the quiet embrace of my bedroom. Confined to my own little world of serene blue walls and childish clutter, I closed my eyes in an attempt to turn day into night.

As a highly sensitive person, I often feel deeply. Sometimes, it is as if I am being crushed by the weight of the world, the planets and the stars while I stand helplessly still as a statue. In my family, I feel so much like the odd one out that I entertain the thought of being adopted. While everyone else is driven and practical, I am idealistic and sentimental. I can shed tears over a line in a book, a song or someone sitting alone in a restaurant while my parents furrow their eyebrows in confusion.

The pandemic was one of my darkest times. But Wednesday nights as a flutist in my new youth orchestra changed everything. During rehearsals, our passion sometimes prevailed over our technique. My conductor called it a "beautiful problem," his tone ever so optimistic. This phrase resonated in my mind, as even a positive adjective could be paired with a negative noun. Life isn't simply black and white; we can choose how we perceive and react.

On the concert stage, I felt the sorrow, the joy, and the emotions in between. But here, they became my strength as I poured them into every note I played. Our passion radiated like a hundred hearts beating as one, and the music washed over me like a rainstorm after a year-long drought. The mouthpiece of my flute transformed into a mouthpiece for my soul. It grew into a vessel for all the words that go unspoken. Through music, not only could I heal myself, but I could also heal others.

My flute and I shone upon hospitals, senior homes, concert halls and classrooms in China. Laughter echoed across screens on Sunday mornings as I taught elementary schoolers, relishing conversations about cat allergies and Squishmallow collections while celebrating new fingerings mastered.

One day after practicing, I looked down at my flute. Again, I saw the spots of tarnish persistently nested between keys. I smiled. Like old friends, my flute and I have journeyed across brightly lit

stages, towering concert halls and crowded warm-up rooms. Our scars don't make us less beautiful; they brighten the joy that eventually comes after.