

My heart began racing when my teacher pulled me into the hallway for my midterm speaking assessment. I watched her face as I spoke about ecotourism in Costa Rica. I anticipated her comments to offer corrections on my slow cadence or flawed pronunciations. Instead she smiled and offered the phrase that I didn't know was necessary. "You're extremely talented." With three words, my perspective flipped. I'm not perfect at Spanish, but perfection isn't necessary for progress.

# THE FINALISTS



## 9th Grade Finalists

*Kallie Stoeckel*

Judgment might be the most powerful weapon that a person holds. With something as simple as a stare, or as complicated as a comment, one person can disintegrate your self-confidence. The fear of receiving that stare, or that comment is something that controls how people live their lives. Every decision made is based on what other people are thinking about you. These small indications of distaste or disdain can take the outfit I find cute to the outfit I will never wear again. One person's opinion of me can change my opinion of myself. Their words will repeat over and over in my head with no stop. For this reason, I live my life based on the fear of judgment. The irrational fear of not being seen as perfect.

*Sophia Shiloh*

Geese. I am afraid of geese. They are bigger than ducks, smaller than swans, and terrifyingly aggressive. This is irrational--the odds being attacked by a goose are slim. But they have TEETH. (Not quite. They have teeth-like appendages called tomia.) I was biking at Washingtons Crossing with my dad. If you've ever been there, you know the trail is thin and it is enclosed on both sides by the Schuylkill and the Delaware. I was a few feet behind dad and approach a flock. The thing about geese is that they are easily aggravated. ESPECIALLY if their goslings are "endangered." Now, I don't know how an 11 year old girl biking at about 10 miles per hour is endangering towards a gosling. Regardless of what I think, five geese thought otherwise and started barreling towards me. Did I outrun them on my bike? Yes. Am I still terrified? Well...

*Sienna De Nicola*

Scopophobia, the excessive fear of being watched. The anxiety of feeling eyes on you constantly. The thought of everyone watching every little move I make consumes me when in public; my social anxiety at its peak. My vigilant eyes following everything around me, watching for other people’s gazes. The worry doesn’t leave me when in private; the mental thought of someone or something staring at me, whether I want them to or not, haunts my thoughts while alone, The inexplicable fret of someone unbeknownst to me seeing all of my embarrassing and weak moments. The need to cover my phone camera when getting dressed thinking that, through the screen, I am being watched. I know this fear is ludicrous, but ever since I have started feeling this, I haven’t been able to let it go.

## 10th Grade Finalists

*Vincent Valle*

Thanatophobia, or the fear of death, is a fear I recognize as irrational but still find unsettling. I understand that death is an inevitable part of life and that fearing something so natural is not productive. Yet, the thought of ceasing to exist, of losing consciousness and leaving loved ones behind, triggers anxiety. It's not so much the act of dying that scares me, but the uncertainty that surrounds what happens afterward. Despite logical reassurances that death is a part of the human experience, the preeminence of it feels overwhelming. This fear grips me because it taps into a deep-seated need for control and understanding, both of which disappear in the face of death’s inevitability. Even though I can intellectually separate this fear from reality, it still lurks in moments of quiet reflection, making it hard to shake off its emotional weight.

*Noa Stark*

Many people are afraid of the dark, I am not. When I was 6 years old, my parents told me that I was a big girl, and the night light in my room was meant for little girls. They took my pink and purple princess night light and gave it to my 2 year old sister for her new room with a regular bed, low to the ground, instead of a crib. The first few nights after that, I had a realization: I never needed that night light. People spoke about how they believed something would jump out at them from under beds or from inside closets, but not me. I felt perfectly safe. I knew nothing would get me in the dark. It became my friend, a safe space. Whenever I would play hide and seek, I would immediately go for the smallest, darkest place. I was never afraid.

*Tymur Biletskyi*

Skibidiphobia, an informal term describing the fear of the Skibidi Toilet meme and its associated imagery, reflects a deeper anxiety about the chaotic and surreal aspects of modern internet culture. For many, including myself, this phobia stems from the unsettling blend of humor and horror that these memes can evoke. The rapid shifts in tone and absurdity in Skibidi videos can trigger a sense of discomfort. As someone who values clear narratives and structured content, the unpredictable nature of Skibidi content makes it difficult to engage with. The surreal visuals and bizarre characters can tap into underlying fears of losing control over one's environment. Furthermore, the relentless spread of such memes on social media exacerbates feelings of anxiety, making it hard to escape from them. In this way, skibidiphobia reflects not just a reaction to a specific meme but a broader struggle with the overwhelming nature of digital culture today.

*Annya Heinzerling*

I'm always wondering if there's something lurking outside at night. It's not just a simple fear of darkness, it's all the neighborhood dogs barking in unison or the sound of a car slowly driving down my street at 2 am. I have my bed pushed into the corner of my room with my back against the wall, assuring myself I have all the possible angles of visibility and defense if an intruder enters my house. But knowing I'm safe is entirely different from feeling it, especially when the laws of logic feel like they're breaking inside my brain. I leave all the lights on and avoid looking out windows, afraid of someone climbing up the windowsill. I know I've checked and locked all the doors in the house, but, deep inside, the reason I cannot sleep is I know I will be preyed on in my one moment of vulnerability.

## 11th Grade Finalists

*William Kinsey*

I once played a game called FIFA against my friend Daniel Santos Matias. I used the worst team in the game, he used the best. Everything was going well, and my striker Aaren D'Silva was scoring loads of goals. But then, Dan passed the ball to my greatest fear, a player called Jude Bellingham of Real Madrid. I rushed my first midfielder out, Bellingham skipped around him with ease. "This can't be happening" I thought to myself. I rushed out my second defender, Bellingham slid past him elegantly. Every tackle I made, the ball bounced back. I couldn't stop him, he was too jammy. I came out victorious, but Bellingham scored 3 goals. Bellingham was the scariest, most intimidating player I've ever faced, he was unplayable. He has given me permanent trauma, and he scarred me for life. That was the first time in my life I felt true fear.

*Aiden Eckstein*

The first time I went snowboarding, I was horrible. I was trying a new dangerous activity; every twist and turn felt like a perilous journey. Yet it was nothing in comparison to the ski lift. I had seen people fall, fail to get on, and wipe out getting off. The first time I got on a ski lift I was scared of heights, scared that I would fail, and scared I would get hurt. The thing looked like a rusty chair of death. Yet I knew I needed to ride the lift up the mountain. So I built up the courage and got on. Once I had finished the trial of getting on; I talked to a friend on the lift. Getting on that ski lift let me see that my fears were blowing out of proportion, that it could be fun if you were safe.

*Melanie Michael*

Ever since I was a child, I had always been afraid of almost anything. Bugs, people, cars, school, pretty much any common fear. But I was never afraid of heights. I remember my first time being on an airplane, my mom wanted me to sit in the middle of the row so I wouldn’t get scared or sick. I ended up switching with my sister about halfway through because she got tired of me leaning over her to look out the window. I was captivated by the beautiful ocean of clouds that surrounded us, and I stared in awe for the rest of the trip. Ever since then, I’d do anything I could to get off the ground. Looking down at the world from a distance allowed me to put my life into perspective, and it reminds me that the world doesn’t end when I make a mistake. Life goes on.

## 12th Grade Finalists

*Abigail Kurtz*

I don’t like presenting, I’ve never been well-spoken in front of others. This has been a problem for some time. I wish I could be as confident as some others and present without a care what others think. When I am up in front of a classroom of eyes staring at me, I freeze. My heart aches and my speech is stumped. My body feels like it's about to collapse. I don't know why this happens to me. I don't see other people act the way I do. My vision becomes obscure. The words I so perfectly pieced together are now nothing but jumbles of tangled mess I find indecipherable. I stand there nervously with all eyes on me. I speak, projecting my ideas: trying hard not to focus on everyone. One slide becomes two, two become five, and then it's over. I sit down and I feel accomplished.

*Steven Belder*

There’s something unsettling about bridges, their steel beams and sturdy arches suspended over open water or empty air. Thousands of cars pass over them daily, weight and momentum seamlessly supported by engineering I know is sound. Yet, as I drive onto one, I feel a surge of unease. My chest tightens, my grip on the wheel firm, as if my own vigilance is the only thing keeping the structure from crumbling beneath me. It’s irrational, I know. The numbers, the physics—all point to safety. But logic falters when my tires touch the edge of that span. In my mind, the bridge feels fragile, almost precarious, as if a single misstep would send it plunging into the void below. The fear entraps me, reminding me that reason and emotion rarely travel the same road.

*Max Nepochatov*

A fear I’ve never really understood is the fear of spiders. People scream at the sight of a tiny eight-legged creature, but I see them as little acrobats—so graceful, so focused! To me, they’re just roommates in my home, doing their thing. I get that some people are freaked out by their sudden movements or their creepy crawly vibe, but I think it’s all about perception. I’ve always seen spiders as harmless, tiny engineers weaving their intricate webs. Plus, they’re great for keeping the house free of bugs, so I consider them allies. While most people freeze or flee, I just scoop them up gently and relocate them outside. I guess I’ve never been taught to fear them—more like to respect their space and admire their skills. In my world, spiders are friends, not foes!

*Anonymous*

To Become More than Ornamentation

There is no distinction  
Between myself and my surroundings.  
I have become stationary, melded, unimportant,  
And it seems that so much so,  
That I am as trivial as any other  
Furnishing of my home.  
My body seems to have given up,  
On being alive and lively.

I fear that I will remain this way forever,  
Stuck in the grave that I have dug for myself.  
I fear that there is no coming back  
From the life I have made myself  
And that even if I did  
It wouldn't matter anyway.

But it was worth it.  
I dragged myself back from a void  
Of despair and darkness and ornamentation  
I've become bright  
I've become colorful  
I've become more than ornamentation,  
All by my own doing.