

Junior Division, Prose

Brianna Russell, Clarke's Beach

### **Black Hole (an excerpt)**

He didn't waste any time. With his mother sprinting after him, Max ran down the street that he had always grown up on, through the trees that he had always wanted to explore, fourteen paces to the left of the oddly shaped berry bush, to the clearing where the black hole dropped off into the world, the way out, the *only* way out-

"Oh, Max."

Max stopped. His mother was waiting for him on the other side of the hole. How did she get in front of him? How did she know? Max couldn't figure it out.

Max's mother held out her hand. Palm up. Smiling her red smile, laughing her tinkling laugh. She seemed to think that the whole situation was funny. He did not agree.

"Come on, Max," she said. "Don't be silly."

Max did not move.

"Don't go, Max. Stay with me. Stay exactly where you are."

But Max could not do so, because in the vat of nothingness, at the very bottom of the darkness, Max could see streets of people chasing after something they could never reach, could see wolves that rip each other's throats out in the snow, could see someone laughing, someone *really* laughing, could see white hallways lined with paintings full of color, could see drumsticks pounding against sweating cymbals, could see blazes of fire jumping from roof to roof, could see tables of food that he could not name, but maybe someday he would, and he could see *Paris*. Millions of people in their tiny apartments, lamps burning through the darkness, wrapped around blankets, around pillows, around each other, whatever they can cover themselves in to keep the chills at bay.

"You are extraordinary," his mother had once said, after coming across his hidden notebook while changing his sheets. "You are exceptional." And Max had thought, for just a moment, that she would let him keep the notebook, would let him keep the drawings that took him to other worlds, into other lives. But as she pocketed the book, his heart sank.

"And while you may be exceptional," his mother said, patting his head, "you are not the exception."