

## Not as Picture Perfect as a Postcard

I was staring in the face of a monster. It has a massive frame, covered in rusted metallic scales. A network of pipes carries its thick blood throughout its body. It spreads its limbs across the hilltops, taking pieces of green with every touch. It belches its toxic breath into the air and, in its heart, purifies its blood for humans to feed their cars, planes, and trucks. Over 100 years ago, it anchored itself in this place, the once-green hills that are sandwiched between the San Francisco Bay and the City of Richmond, California. Perhaps even the monster knew of the juxtaposition of its home, or perhaps it just enjoyed the scenery. Once, this monster wasn't a monster at all. It was technology. It was innovation. It was progress. But now, the facade of revolutionary engineering has crumbled away, revealing an example of failed human responsibility to the planet we consider home. More terrifying than any Grendel, Godzilla, Charybdis, or Scylla, this monster is a petroleum refinery, and there are more than 135 across the United States just like it.

Richmond is a hushed city that bustles silently, filled with skin tones of deep caramel, chocolate, olive, and terracotta. A symphony of languages drifts through the air with every interaction, each foreign whisper bursting with colors of culture. Vibrant murals are painted around every corner, the history of Richmond represented in every sweep of paint. It is equipped with a tiny hospital, complete with an emergency room only capable of treating forty people at a time. The hospital stands alone in the heart of the city, like a toy soldier valiantly facing an army of thousands. A city too far inland to feel the cool bay-area breeze, the stagnant air is suffocating. The monster of a petroleum refinery sits in Richmond's backyard, the perfect complement to a recipe of catastrophe.

Plagued with the worry of providing for themselves and their families, the people of Richmond have learned to ignore the disaster chomping at their heels. Opening the door to corruption and discrimination, Richmond has become the postcard city of environmental injustice. “Greetings from the City of Richmond,” this postcard says in gold script, “where 110,000 people are continually overlooked by powerful, privileged men that can only see those with porcelain skin, a full wallet, and a native tongue.”

I saw Richmond ripped from the right to equality. I learned about Richmond’s struggle with environmental regulation. I also saw how Richmond stood as tall and strong as an oak tree through a hurricane of disaster. Richmond is not a princess trapped in a tower. Richmond is a warrior queen, fierce and determined. I see pride in the Richmond Museum of History. I see resilience in the chicken coop in someone’s backyard. I see hope in the Point Richmond Community Center. When I send postcards from Richmond, they will say, “Hello from the City of Richmond, where diversity is cherished.” Others will say, “Welcome to the City of Richmond, where people become stronger when faced with adversity.” But the most important postcard will say, “Greetings from the City of Richmond, where happy endings are just beginning.”

**2019 Scholastic Art and Writing Awards**

**Southeast Region-at-large Silver Key: Personal Essay/Memoir**