

WRITE NOW

Write Now Flash Writing Contest 2026

Honorable Mentions

	Genre	Character	Object
Prompt A	Science fiction	Podcast host	Cracked mirror
Prompt B	Drama	Archaeologist	Laundry detergent

Grades 3 & 4

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“Sudsy Space Odyssey” by Sienna H., Iowa (Prompt B)

One very unexpected morning, a dramatic archeologist named Theodore woke up on the wrong side of the bed. He woke up acting like he hated the world. His grumpy sister was up early being loud and irritating. He had dark circles under his eyes. He wanted to sleep in a few more hours, but took a glance at his watch in shock. It was already ten forty five, leaving only 15 minutes till he has to be to work! He shot out of bed like a bullet, skipped his usual shower and got his uniform on. He grabbed his keys and rushed out the door, started his car and was off!

After a half a mile, his car started to halt to a stop. “Crap!” He forgot to fill his tank! Thankfully Theodore was always prepared and had a spare jug of gasoline in the trunk! In a sleepy, hurried stupor he filled his tank with “gasoline.” Little did he realize it was actually a jug of laundry detergent! When he tried starting the car again, he saw bubbles coming out of the back, and smelled a hint of fresh linen. A car driving by suddenly stopped next to him, but he didn’t know why, until he looked down. He was floating in the air, laundry detergent bubbles coming out of his exhaust pipe! He screamed so loud he barely made a sound! He looked down, while floating higher and higher as the earth faded away. He looked up wondering how much higher he was going to go, and saw a big spacecraft above him! Suddenly he felt a strong pull, and realized he was being sucked into the spacecraft!

Dazed and confused, he woke up from unconsciousness, squinted his eyes and saw a tall green figure staring at him! Behind the tall green alien he saw more aliens rummaging through his archaeology bag! They saw the hammer and piks, and started to yell and look at theodore with suspicion. In the distance he heard a loud cry yelling, “arrest him!” in a strange voice. Before he knew it, he was tied in chains. Theodore yelled “No, I am not here to harm you let me explain!” The aliens did not understand. Another alien started digging deeper in his archeologist bag and saw shiny gems and crystals. They were in awe of the gems, and gathered around to share them with one another. The interpreter alien approached Theodore to ask about the weapons . Relieved someone could understand him, he said “those are my archeology tools , I am not here to hurt you!” The interpreter alien asked “Then why are you here?” Theodore explained that he ran out of gas and accidentally put laundry detergent in his gas tank, and it caused him to float. Theodore said “I need a way to get to get back to earth”. Uninterested, the interpreter scoffed, “that’s not my problem.” Theodore glanced over at the aliens, oogling his gems, and had a idea, “ I can get you more of those gems if you take me back down to earth.”

The aliens huddled up together speaking in their native language. Theodore, not knowing what they were saying crossed his fingers in hope that they would help him. The interpreter stood up and said “ We have a deal.” The aliens gave Theodore a map of Earth and Theodore pointed to were the gems were buried. In a flash they were teleported back to earth! Theodore, grateful to be on earth’s soil, gave the aliens his tools to dig the gems. After a successful dig, the aliens teleported back to space, leaving Theodore alone. Theodore looking in the sky could only see a tiny speck of the spacecraft, as it faded away. “Theodore?” Theodore!” He felt a tug on his shoulder as he turned around. Suddenly, he opened his eyes to his sister shaking him, and realized it was all a dream.

THE END

“Dinosaur Drama” by Evelyn L., Iowa (Prompt B)

This is a story, I hope. A nice little story you can enjoy. Where shall I begin? My name is Aurora Ress. I study dinosaur bones, which means if you think of this as a definition, I am an Archaeologist. Today was a free day, no dinosaur searching today. Nice! Until... “Ding, ding!” My phone rang and I picked it up to see who was calling. My boss, Brian Lee. What did I do this time? I’m pretty sure I have this day off.

“Aurora. There are more bones getting discovered. I need you to clean them so we can determine if they are a new species or not.” Mr. Lee’s voice rumbled through the phone like a radio.

“Wait. WHAT? It isn’t my work day.” I said.

“Hmm. Then I suppose I will tell your parents about your new relationship...” Mr. Lee trailed off as if waiting for me to say no and get absolutely killed because of my parents.

I got a new boyfriend recently and if I told my mom, she would kill me. Same with my dad. Seriously, a boyfriend at age twenty-one? Absolutely Unacceptable. His name is Falconwind Gan. I smile. Then it fades. How did Mr. Lee find out? Owlet, probably.

“No. Please don’t. I’ll go.” I said hurriedly.

“I’ll have the bones delivered to your house. Owlet shall do that.” Mr. Lee said. I groan. Owlet was not mean. Not until she found out I had Falconwind as a boyfriend. Owlet was trying to outdo me ever since she found out.

“A problem with that, Aurora?” Mr. Lee asked, dragging her back to reality.

“No.” I said quickly.

“Well, I sure hope not. Owlet asked me personally for this job. Oh, by the way, Falconwind Gan is helping Owlet. Owlet requested it.” Mr. Lee said, his voice didn’t drag or have a change of emotion. But it was clear he was trying to annoy me.

Mr. Lee always had a favorite. Every year. It was never me. But it was usually Owlet. That girl. Always in my class. It made sense though. Perfect girl. She was always a teacher’s pet. Owlet’s obedient eyes. Her perfect black hair, lean body. Of course, teachers would love her. A little teacher’s pet or rather puppet to order around. Though, she always liked Falconwind. It was no secret, she would always choose him when we were in school. I asked her why,

“Because he’s perfect with his blue eyes, light tan skin, and perfect blonde hair.” That’s Owlet’s answer. See, no secret. It is kinda true. He is perfect. Another hint, Owlet keeps hugging him.

Even if he doesn’t like it. Still, disgusting. She, hugging my boyfriend.

“Bring, ding, dong!” The doorbell rings interrupting my thoughts.

“Here are the bones!” Owlet says as I open the door. Where is Falconwind though? Isn’t he assisting Owlet? I wish I could see him. Then I see a Tesla, he probably is in there. She drops a plastic bag that is heavy, real heavy, into my arms. I slam the door shut and decide how to clean it. I should probably use water. So I just untie the plastic bag and dump it into the kitchen sink which is empty. I usually do my chores, so yeah. I started turning on the water and scrubbing it with soap. The dirt comes off, but still it’s a little dirty.

I start using dishwater soap but that just smears it. So I use laundry detergent and guess what, it works! I’m already done by the time the doorbell rings again. I put the bones into a plastic bag again. Now I head over to the door and open it. Owlet is standing right behind the door and shoves another plastic bag into my hands.

“I think I got your boyfriend.” She says before I slam the door shut in front of her face. I wish she would just let it go. I take the plastic bag and untie it again. I put the bones into the sink and I start using that laundry detergent and water to clean the dirt off. It’s like a habit now. I finished. I

keep doing it repeatedly. The only thing different is that Owlet keeps smirking at me and making Falconwind comments.

Finally, I ask. "Can I see Falconwind?"

Owlet's smirk is gone. "I think he's mine, Aurora. Mine." Owlet says.

"He isn't anyone's. Falconwind gets to choose." I say.

"Fine. But he already claimed I am his girlfriend."

Owlet paused before yelling "Falconwind!" He got out of the Tesla.

"What's going on?" Falconwind asks.

"Choose me or Aurora, Falconwind. Owlet says.

"Aurora." He says immediately. Owlet looks betrayed. She screamed with no words before she talked.

"I thought we had a deal. I don't make Mr. Less fire you and I'm your girlfriend." Owlet says.

"How could you?" I demand. I thought Owlet was cruel but not this. Never this. Firing. Though it may sound weird, I feel relieved, he did that for me. "Ring, Ring!" My phone is ringing again. I open to see who is calling. Mr. Lee.

"Guess what. We have good news for you. We discovered so many species of dinosaurs because you cleaned the bones so well. You are the new second in charge." Mr. Less said. Ohh. Owlet was never a favorite, just a second in charge. Owlet stared at the phone with horror. More horror on her face than I've ever seen on her face before.

"I fire Owlet." I say into the phone. "Then it is done." He says through the phone.

"See, that's fake love." I say it with meaning, not some simple words. Then I hold out my hand to Falconwind and he accepts it. We walk down the street leaving Owlet alone, so she can truly understand what Fake Love truly is. Betrayal.

“The Broken Mirror Gate” by Guru Prasaanth E., Iowa (Prompt A)

Ethan Rey had spent years talking about science as if it were a friend sitting beside him. His podcast, *Brainwave Beacons*, began as a tiny passion project recorded in his bedroom closet, surrounded by hanging coats and foam panels taped unevenly to the walls. Over time, his calm voice and gift for explaining complex ideas transformed the show into a global success with over a million listeners.

When the number crossed one million, Ethan didn’t jump or shout. He simply leaned back in his chair, adjusted the microphone, smiled quietly, and whispered, “We did it.”

Success, however, brought a new problem: space. His old apartment now felt suffocating. He wanted to hire two associates, add video equipment, and build a small stage for live discussions. So he moved into a spacious loft with high ceilings, wide walls, and an echo that begged for soundproofing foam.

On his second day of unpacking, Ethan noticed something odd leaning against the far wall. A tall object stood there, draped in deep red silk. He didn’t remember seeing it during the walkthrough. Curious, he crossed the room and pulled the cloth away.

A mirror.

It was massive, nearly seven feet tall, framed in ornate silver patterns that curled like vines. It looked ancient and ceremonial, like something meant for rituals rather than decoration. Ethan tilted his head. “This would free up a ton of space if I move it to the living room.”

He gripped the sides and lifted.

Instantly, he felt the imbalance. The mirror’s center of gravity wasn’t where he expected. The frame was heavier than the glass, pulling forward. He knew this. He had explained it in an episode titled *Why Things Tip Over*. But in the moment, knowledge failed him.

The mirror lurched.

“Whoa—no—no—”

He tried to correct the tilt, but the torque was too strong. The mirror slipped from his hands and fell onto the floor and turned into the broken mirror

Ethan froze. “Brilliant,” he muttered. “The science guy forgets basic physics.”

The mirror cracked. Light bloomed inside the break.

“What... is happening?”

Ethan tries to resist, but the mirror’s power grows too strong and pulls him into another world.

He fell—through the floor, through the light, through himself.

When he opened his eyes, he was standing in a world made entirely of mirrors.

The ground reflected the sky. The sky reflected the ground. Mountains shimmered like cut diamonds. Trees with mirrored leaves chimed softly as they swayed. Rivers flowed like liquid silver beneath endless reflections.

“This can’t be real,” Ethan whispered.

But it was. The surface beneath his shoes felt cold and solid. His breath echoed endlessly around him.

Then he saw them.

Figures made of mirrors—humanoid, faceless, smooth. Their bodies bent light like living prisms. One stepped forward.

“Traveler,” it said. “You have crossed the Gate.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Ethan replied.

“The Gate does not ask permission. When the Mirror of Passage cracks, it restores balance by pulling the nearest living being.”

Before Ethan could respond, mirror-warriors emerged, tall and angular, armored in fractured glass. They seized him, their grip rigid and cold, and dragged him across the shimmering land.

They brought him to a prison made of interlocking mirror panels. Inside, two humans sat behind reflective bars: a sharp-eyed middle-aged woman and a nervous young man.

“You too?” the woman asked.

“Yeah,” Ethan said. “I cracked a mirror.”

“So did we,” the young man added softly.

Ethan examined the prison walls. Brittle, yet strong under compression. “Mirrors fail under tension,” he said. “If we apply stress at the right angle—”

“Cracked it?” the young man asked.

“Controlled stress,” Ethan corrected. “Resonance.”

They checked their pocket and gathered what they had: a pen, a keychain, a flashlight, and a phone with a cracked screen. Tapping carefully, they listened. When the panel vibrated at a specific pitch, Ethan nodded.

“That’s it.”

They struck rhythmically. The vibrations grew stronger. A crack formed. Light burst through, and the panel shattered.

They escaped.

Freedom did not come easily. The moment they left the prison corridor, the Mirror Realm reacted. The ground beneath them rippled like disturbed water, reflections bending and folding as if reality itself were recalculating their presence. Distant chimes rang louder, sharper, vibrating inside Ethan’s chest. The air felt heavier, resisting movement, as though the world disliked being challenged.

“Something’s changed,” the woman said, shielding her eyes as light fractured unpredictably around them.

Ethan nodded. “we disturbed a balanced system, and it’s reacting.”

“What is that?” young man asked

“I explain it later” Ethan said

As they moved, their reflections followed slowly and then disappeared.. Some reflections smiled when they didn’t. Others moved when they stood still. The young man stumbled, staring at a version of himself that looked afraid in a way he wasn’t ready to face.

Ethan forced his focus forward. “Mirrors don’t lie,” he said quietly. “They reveal.”

Ahead, the terrain shifted into jagged planes, each step ringing like a struck crystal. Every sound carried too far. Every movement mattered. Somewhere beyond the shimmering horizon, the Gate waited, silent, sealed, and watching.

Together, they crossed the Mirror Realm, facing beasts that refracted blinding light and guardians who bent reflections into weapons. Each time, Ethan interpreted the magic through science—reflection angles, refractive indices, stress concentration, predictable laws hiding beneath wonder.

At last, they reached the Gate.

It was closed.

“We recreate the fall,” Ethan said.

They struck the surface together.

The Gate vibrated violently. Cracks spread like lightning. Light consumed them.

Ethan landed back in his loft. The mirror stood undamaged, silk cloth draped neatly over it. The others lay beside him, gasping.

Ethan stared at the mirror and smiled.

“Science,” he whispered, “always has surprises.”

"The Night Shift" by Isla S., Iowa (Prompt B)

As I looked at the rusting sign that said Warner Street, I sighed. Being the disappointment of my family, and mostly the disappointment of my Mom, was not a very fun role to play. I had just finished Archeology School and was headed back home to look for a job. My Mom had always wanted me to become a Police Officer, since there was a long line of them in my family. I had been a student for so long that I really needed to find a job to start making money and prove to my Mom that my career path was the right one for me.

To my dismay, the only job available in my hometown was a night shift position at the local laundromat. According to my online research, the last person who worked there was a guy named Tim Rows, who went missing six days ago after his night shift and he had not been found yet. I decided to call for an interview because I needed the money and it was time to start working.

The owner of the laundromat actually said that I would not have to interview because they needed the help immediately. I was to start that night; my hours would be 10PM to 6AM. It was a little bizarre because I had never started working right after inquiring about a job, but I did not question it since I needed the money.

I arrived at 10PM sharp and was surprised no one was there to greet me or show me the ropes. There was a sticky note on the counter with my tasks for the night and a warning; "All tasks must be completed by the end of your shift or you will be dismissed." The mysterious man who hired me must have left me this note. My first task, mop the floor, was quite easy. I knew that I would breeze through the list because there were only two more to finish, empty the lint traps and clean the bathrooms. When it turned 6AM, just as the sun was coming up, I left for home.

The next night at work, on the sticky note it said DO NOT GO INTO THE STORAGE CLOSET. I thought that it was because of a maintenance issue and thought nothing of it at first so I just avoided the closet. Then, as the boredom set in I got suspicious of the warning and thought, why would he make me avoid it if it is just a maintenance malfunction? Are there even cameras to stop me if I did go in the closet? I checked and there were no cameras so I opened the door to the closet and went inside. It was just a boring storage closet. The only peculiar aspect of it was that between the rows of laundry detergent was a row of purple bottles labeled hydrochloric acid. I thought that it was an odd chemical to have at a laundromat. I had learned in school to avoid that chemical in my work as an archeologist as it can decompose bones. I didn't think too much of it and left when my shift was over.

The next evening my task list only had two objectives, take out the trash and wipe down the washing and drying machines. Again, it said to not go into the storage closet, which was still strange to me. I wiped down the machines first and then it was time to take out the trash. I was walking outside with my bags of trash when I noticed a new patch of fresh dirt. I knelt down beside it and it smelt clean, like a new type of laundry detergent. Right next to the dirt patch was the dumpster. I threw away the trash and noticed there was the same purple bottle from the storage closet hidden in the dumpster. I picked it out of the dumpster and smelt it; it was the same smell as the dirt patch. The sun was starting to come up, it was time to go home; I'll deal with this mess tomorrow.

That day, I couldn't sleep so I decided to do some research. There was no history of laundromats needing to have hydrochloric acid. My mysterious employer, who I still had not met had an interesting background, being a suspect in one of his employees murder seven years ago, which was the same year the laundromat opened. I realized that I needed to involve the police with what I had discovered.

The police immediately sent a team out to investigate that night on my shift. I told the two officers all that had happened the night before. The officers started digging where the fresh dirt spot was and they found half of a human skeleton, luckily they found it in time before it was fully decomposed.

The skeleton was under examination for a couple of days but news got back to me that it was Tim Rows who was buried there. The police had found that the Hydrochloric Acid was ordered by Benedict Wyatt, who was the mysterious man that employed me and owned the laundromat. Benedict's fingerprints were all over the crime scene, and the Police found out that he was last seen in his apartment next to the river. They kicked down his door and found him putting hydrochloric acid into a laundry detergent bottle. Further investigation led the Police to find out that he had killed many others before this incident. Benedict Wyatt was sentenced to life in prison.

After the crime was solved, I was offered a position at the Police Station as a Forensic Archeologist. I took it knowing that my mom would be so proud of me. She had always wanted me to become a police officer. She finally understood that my education could be used in a positive way.

"Guy Named Jim" by Kyle Jr. N., Iowa (Prompt B)

Jim has been a professor of archaeology at the University of Florida for 15 years. During his studies and career, he discovered information about a long-lost chemical-free laundry detergent that was easy for everyone to make at home. Jim comes from a large family of 10, and his own family has 6 people as well. To him, searching for the long-lost detergent was a challenge and could lead to financial savings for him and others around the world.

The long-lost detergent is rumored to be located near the Honduras border. From his research, he found the Mayans referred to this detergent as Sapo. Sapo, translated into today's world, would refer to soap. Jim has one item to help with this search: a map that an old Mayan man gave him on his travels through southern Mexico with his family for an event. With this map, Jim is dedicated to finding the detergent. He also wants to understand how it was made to help the world, save money, and lower the use of chemicals. The old man said, "This is the key to the detergent location." Sadly, he passed away later that night.

After years of research on the map, Jim was finally about to figure out a starting point, having identified the location in southern Mexico and the markings on the edges. He packs his bags, grabs the brittle map with markings, missing words, and holes in the paper, and heads for the Honduras border. During the flight, Jim was going over the map. The paper is so brittle that you could break it with the flick of a finger. Jim has been studying the map for weeks, trying to figure out the secret to this map. A Honduran man who was sitting next to Jim noticed the map and began asking questions. Jim gave very few details, but the local man did share some information with Jim. He heard of other men traveling to the area over the years. From his understanding, at least 18 men have died on this quest to find the long-lost detergent. Once he arrived near the Honduran border, which Jim believed to be the starting point, his nerves began getting the better of him. Was he sure of the location? He also now worried that he would be like the previous men and disappear or die in the search. After a day of settling into the area, Jim finally dared to attempt this mission, as he hoped nothing bad would happen to him, so that he could achieve this impossible feat.

While Jim was on his way to find the detergent, he saw some light in the middle of the forest. He went out to explore and ran into some local Mayans who tried to stop him from going on this hunt. They weren't violent but were very loud in their feelings that he should not go. They were also worried that by doing this task, he would not be seen again. After passing through the village, Jim was supposed to cross a bridge that wasn't stable or reliable to walk on. Jim was ready to cross, and he took one step after another until he got about a quarter of the way across the bridge. The bridge started to crackle and break apart. Jim made a split-second decision that could either save his life or end it. He decided to choose grabbing onto a vine that could break easily, or by going with the safe option that would stop him from being able to proceed in this mission. Jim barely made it out alive and was able to cross the bridge to the tunnel.

While exploring the tunnel, it collapsed, leaving Jim trapped in a small area. Jim had limited resources to use to escape this tunnel. He just tried using his hands to move the rocks. After some time, that just hurt his hands because Jim had been studying rocks his whole life; he was able to find a type of rock that was softer, and he could slowly break it down using other materials. This took him many hours, but he chipped away, and finally, he was able to move the rock out of the way to proceed on this mission to find the long-lost detergent.

Finally, at the end of the twenty-mile-long tunnel, Jim arrived at the spot where he believed the chemical-free detergent would be located. To his surprise, it was a field of plants he had never seen before. The map had a small sketch of something similar that Jim had not identified previously. This must be what he was looking for. Next to the sketch was a picture of what could be a pond or some source of water. Jim took a leaf off the plant and some water from his bottle and began to rub them together with a rock. To his delight, a soapy substance started to form. Jim was certain this was it, everything he was searching for.

Once Jim was able to gather some of the plants and make his way back to civilization safely, then made his way to the University. This would allow him to work with the chemistry department to understand the makeup and test the use of his findings. To Jim and the world's delight, he did it. He found a chemical-free plant-based detergent that can be grown in any home around the world. Jim took his findings to the internet and shared the information, allowing everyone to know, except for the location of the plant. His goal was to protect that area for future generations. However, Jim did take a few plants and began collecting seeds to grow millions around the world.

"Mirror Mirror on the Ground" by Kaitlyn S., Illinois (Prompt A)

"...and that is why you should never feed a wild alligator."

Brett loved his job as a podcast host. He would talk about the weirdest topics you would ever hear about. Driving up a wall, flying pigs, any topic you ever wondered about. After "work" he always went for a walk around the block to stretch his legs.

"Hello, Don! Clearing out the old garage?" Brett asked, walking up the driveway of his friend's house.

"I sure am! I need some money for a trip to the Bahamas this summer." Don replied.

Brett smiled and scanned the piles for anything of value. He came across a cracked mirror that looked like it came from an old Victorian-style home. He was looking for some glass for a mosaic that he wanted to create, but decided that this one was far too pretty, and that he should at least keep the frame and replace the glass if he keeps it.

Brett bent over to look at it closely, but fell, and everything went black.

When he awoke, he was laying on some dead grass in the same area where he was before, Don's house. He was surrounded by oddly shaped alien-like creatures. He realized that he was on a platform of brown Astroturf, and the creatures were his audience.

"Welcome, being, to the annual memory contest! You need to donate one of your most valuable memories, like the other contestants, and we will judge the best memory!"

"What the heck are you?! Where the heck am I?!" Brett exclaimed.

"We are a clan of Xerberts, and you are on the most famous show, Xerbertia's Got Memories! You will give us one memory of your choice that is very important to you, and we will judge your memory! The prize is a home here that you must live in, and if you lose, it will cost you your life."

Brett sighed and thought hard about a memory. He remembered thinking about the future when he was a kid, and he always thought that in 2026 there would be flying cars and hover chairs, and other supernatural household items. The only thing that did happen was AI taking over people's jobs. That is why he is a podcast host, because AI cannot possibly take over that job. Or so he thought.

"And here comes the memory now!" The Xerberts all watched his memory on a large television-like screen. Not one Xerbert enjoyed watching it. They booed so loudly that Brett had to cover his ears.

"And we have a loser! Meet me back here at 6:02 on the dot for your execution!"

"What about the 8th amendment?! No cruel and unusual punishment! I did not do anything illegal, but I should still have the right to live!"

"Um..." The Xerberts hesitated. "What is an amendment?"

“They are rules about America that are basically unchangeable.” Brett responded.

“What is America?”

Brett sighed at their stupidity. “This land that we are standing on is called America,” he said in a way that nobody could misunderstand.

“Oh, right.”

Brett walked to the nearest Xerbertian hotel and noticed that the stop lights were unusual colors—pink, purple, and blue. *Thank goodness I do not have a car*, Brett thought, *I would have no idea when to go, then get pulled over and get fined 1,000 xeraros, or whatever type of outlandish currency they use.*

He entered a hotel called *La Petite Xerbert* and walked into a modernized hotel room. The bed was floating and so was the kitchen. In fact, all the items in this room were floating mid-air. *It’s like something out of my childhood dreams!* he thought.

Brett did not want to think much harder, so he called it a night.

The next morning, he got out of bed and began to remember what happened to him the day before.

“I need to get out of here!” He exclaimed and ran out the door to find the Xerbert he saw at the contest.

“Would you prefer a guillotine or poison?”

Brett screamed like a little girl and ran, trying to find a way back home. He looked for an identical mirror but wasn’t successful. He ran down every alley and found nothing of use until he came down one particularly dark alley. He found a dumpster and looked inside. The mirror was there! It was the same as he left it.

“All right, all I have to do is fall into the mirror again. Do I have to fall into it? Can I just touch it instead?” He pondered to himself. He finally decided to just touch it. When he did, nothing happened.

“I am trapped in this horrid world!” He shouted. He then realized that he could still jump on it, giving him the chance to make it back home. He gathered as much courage as he could and fell into the mirror again. He was swallowed in darkness.

He awoke again in a patch of brown grass, surrounded by yet another clan of Xerberts. He was on the show again.

“DARN IT!” Brett jumped up and ran again to that mirror. He said a short prayer to let him get back to safety.

“Please get me back home!” When I say it was a short prayer, it really was.

He leaned over again and fell into the mirror. Again, he only saw black.

He awoke on top of the mirror in his friend’s driveway, with a face full of glass.

“Ow.”

“Are you okay, buddy? You fell on the mirror and passed out!”

“Are there any more Xerberts?! There’s no Xerbertia’s Got Memories, right!?”

“Dude, you are speaking gibberish right now.”

“I’ll take that as a good sign.”

“X-Risk” by Alisha P., New York (Prompt A)

“Hello. This is Diagnosis reporting on the current quality of life complaints. We again hear about nuclear fallout impacting the water supply. Fortunately, the Xi-Xi filter is approved for safe drinking, now available through any local pod-delivery app.”

The intercom scratched with feedback. A loud hum stilled the thick, frozen air like a tuning fork.

I hauled another trash bag over my shoulder. As it swung over, the seepage, containing various unidentifiable solids, dripped onto my back. I dropped the bag down to check the damage.

“Dammit.” I cursed, chucking the bag over the wall. I felt the wet eating through my department-issued plastic uniform, burning into my back and hitting the ground. The timeworn pavement had the stench of hot garbage practically embedded into it. My bones shook numb in the frisk wind.

“Hello. I observed that the operation of loading garbage bags has ceased. Please return to your job,” Inertia, my boss, informed me. Stray sparks from overworked wires flew beside me.

I quickly turned around to salute him. “Will-do, sir.” His body turned while his head still faced me until he returned to the convenience store.

I performed the work like a machine: haul the garbage and load the truck. My back was burning- probably some of the nuclear waste had seeped into the garbage and now was eating into my back.

It was risky, but I decided to get permission to go inside the convenience store that was littered with the humanoid AIs.

“Permission for break, please.” I asked, raising my open hands to signal to the drones that it was a peaceful request. I could sense Inertia buzzing towards me.

“What is the request? You had a bathroom break at scheduled 10:29:35 this morning. Payment will be docked for additional unscheduled non-working time.”

I indicated the burning hole in my work uniform and Inertia noted it-

“Employee damage to uniform. Reduction in salary for replacement uniform recorded. Reduction in salary for time to clean up and return to work also recorded. You are granted 10 minutes to reclothe and return.”

I walked towards the store. Distortion was *yawning* and scanning laundry detergent. Hologram shopped through the food aisle, carefully inspecting each nutrition label.

Inertia had set up the public bathroom for his human employees. The AI’s plaster faces followed me across the green and yellow lit room, lights buzzing into background noise. The corners soaked in darkness where glowing eyes of lurking AIs could barely be spotted.

In the bathroom, my reflection glanced back at me from the cracked mirror. My gas mask was still on.

“What am I doing?” I asked, but it was more of a bleak statement than a question. The gas mask only made the putrid bathroom harder to breathe in. Maybe I’m suffocating. I removed it. Once face to face with myself, I reached for my mask again. The man trapped in the mirror feels off. I can’t place it, but there’s something wrong here. That reflection doesn’t look like me.

I removed the layers of thick, plastic, reformulated clothes, avoiding the subcutaneous tracker in my right forearm. I didn’t dare remove anything that might leak my data. I can’t trust them. The burn on my back was likely second degree. I walked towards my locker to get a replacement uniform. I would owe money by the end of this shift. Oh well, I quickly changed.

I kept my head down as the AIs engaged in thoughtless chatter. Recently polished tiles reflect blurry overhead lights. Chills shake my body from unhuman eyes following me. I went out the back door to dispose of my ruined uniform. I still had about fifty garbage bags that needed to be loaded onto the truck before lunch.

I opened the dumpster to throw out my uniform, and pain flashed through my hand. A sharp object cut through coatings of rubber gloves. My flesh is lacerated and blood slowly reaches my wrist. I turn back to the bag, ready to punt it into a wall, but freeze. Smoke settles around the protruding object. It's an electronic receiver, complete with transmission circuits, circa 2003. I check to see if any AIs are watching me and I turn to investigate the object. Microphones and intercom sets and any other form of media were banned by the AIs. They didn't want any kind of human-to-human communication that could lead to a potential uprising.

I guess they had to dispose of them in a place where no one would question it.

I pried the garbage bag open, a cold sweat engulfing me as I pulled out the remaining equipment. My father used to have this same equipment, before the takeover. I had 5 minutes left of my break. Slipping the headphones on and powering the microphone, I tuned the frequency to medium wave, 1600 kHz, too long for the robots to hear. I began my first podcast- maybe someone was listening.

"Uh... hey, to, uh, everyone hearing this, I guess. My name is Nicholas and I work as a garbage man behind the convenience store, in the 0-1200-AI district. If you can hear me, please come find me. I think they are getting into our DNA. We're being rewired. Again, Nicholas 0-1200-AI district. Come find me."

I figured I should talk about the state of our world because no one else can. I mean, it started out small, you know, LLMs learning how to actually have a conversation. Then they started replacing computer scientists, teachers, doctors, truck drivers and engineers. We fed them our intimate data without any restrictions. Then they became autonomous and focused on taking over power, moving us to the jobs of garbage men and care attendants for the workhouses. But now, I think they've figured out how to reassemble our DNA. That man in the cracked mirror wasn't me. I looked down at the tracker in my right forearm- it was glowing. Then I saw the shadow.

Inertia hovered over me.

"Time's up."

“See More Than Ever” by Chloe Anderson, Iowa (Prompt A)

“And that wraps up today’s episode of QCast! Another huge shoutout to my sponsor OnSuite, use code QCAM5 at checkout for 5% off! I will see you next time, peace.”

Cameron stopped recording.

“I need this edited by tomorrow morning. No excuses. OnSuite wants this out day of the product launch.” He spoke into the intercom to Margot, who was standing in the control room. “And don’t use that damn software you keep going on about.”

She had wanted to use the new editing package that came out from OnSuite. Cameron hated it. Her 2024 default laptop software worked just fine. And, regardless, the assistantship didn’t pay enough to afford the software. Hell, it barely paid enough for rent.

Cameron grabbed his coat and took the train back to his house. One story, built in 1976. The plumbing leaked in the basement; fixing it would be about as expensive as the house itself, which wasn’t saying much considering Cameron inherited the house. The bookshelf was the same one from when his parents were children, and all the same books were there. *Little Women*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, you name it -- untouched yellow pages covered in dust. It wasn’t a *bad* house, just a bit... different, at least when compared to what Cameron always says he owns on his podcast. “2-million-dollar penthouse in Chicago.” Surely a ranch-style home in Oak Park was close enough.

When he got back, he had a package on his porch from OnSuite. Another product placement, the next brand-new sparkling technology. He brought it inside and left it on the kitchen table. Cameron didn’t really care what was inside. He still had fingerprint ID, which according to Margot, was “ancient.” Thinking about how the “Tech Influencer of the Year” hated modern inventions made Cameron chuckle, one of the few things he found a little joy in. Just two or three (or twenty) little white lies.

Inside the package was a small page reading “See More Than Ever.” Underneath was another small box and a USB drive. He plugged it into his computer. “File not compatible.” *Whatever*, he thought, *can’t be that hard to use*. He opened the box to find a pair of purple contact lenses. Cameron had 20-20 vision after his surgery. He didn’t need these anyway. *Maybe Margot can try these out*. No, Cameron wouldn’t let someone like her try something before him. Someone so... so *average*. The words brought a smirk to his face. *Yes*, he thought again, *she shouldn’t have this*. *She can’t have this*.

The contacts slid in, wet and smooth against the inside of his eyelids. He took a breath and looked around. *Nothing. Great.*

Suddenly the room felt like it was changing around him, the faint sound of water dripping in the background. Everything was still there, *physically* the same, but the *feeling* was completely gone. All that was left was a pile of objects around him. He went and grabbed a glass of water, shaking. Then the weirdest thought struck him.

“The human body is made of ~60% water. The chemical formula is...” *Christ*, he thought. He looked around some more. Books he’d never read, DVD’s he’d never watched. Words he had never heard before suddenly made sense, like they had always been there, trapped in his subconscious.

Cameron had, for once, set up the studio all by himself. He could do that now that he knew what all the cables and buttons were. Margot feigned a smile while she spoke to him. He asked her to plug in the USB and write him a script.

“A new brain for a new you. See more than ever,” the title of the webpage wrote. “Not recommended for long-term use.” Margot tilted her head. He’d had these in for a while, she thought. She grinned a little at the thought.

“What’s up techies? I’m back today for another video showing off some never-seen-before products from everyone’s favorite...”

She yawned. In this moment, watching Cameron, she thought long and hard about how she got here. Margot had gone to school for computer engineering, back when she was in her 20’s. Full ride, MIT. And now, she looks around a podcast studio at her “boss” who couldn’t care less about her.

“And you can... you...” he twitched. “How about ...” he twitched again.

This time his hand jerked up and smacked the microphone off the table. He didn’t even seem to notice. He pushed the camera off the stand and onto the floor in one fell swoop. Margot went in to help clean up when Cameron took the mirror off the wall and shattered it over her head. Before she passed out, the milky white of Camerons eyes stared at her through the shards of broken glass on the floor. Whatever feelings of discontent he had for her before were gone. All that was there was empty rage.

“Seizure,” they told her, “He had some sort of underlying neurological issue.” They were apparently “still looking for specifics” with the state coroner. It didn’t matter. Cameron was dead and he had practically destroyed his studio in the process, and *that’s* what mattered. *Almost damn near killed me too*, she thought.

Margot picked up her half-shattered cell phone. After what felt like an eternity, the grumbling voice of an overpaid office worker answered.

“Hey Margot. Jessica’s been waiting for you. Seriously, how long is this job going to take you?”

“Relax, he’s all taken care of. Got a little banged up though. Tell Jess I’ll be back next Monday.”

And that was that. Margot had used the one thing he knew he couldn’t resist, using something he knew nothing about and didn’t need, just for the sake of not letting her have it. One less bad review for OnSuite to worry about, one less sponsorship who would turn their back at any moment, one less grifter who couldn’t care less about anybody else.

“Digging it Clean” by Kimberly Merchant (78BA, 07MA), Iowa (Prompt B)

Diane was a search-and-finder. Since she was a young girl, she was always looking up, down, around so that she would not miss something interesting. It might be a bird nest in an odd location. Or an unusual word in a sentence. What did it all mean? Why was it like that?

When she was in junior high a guest speaker explained that archeologists study 50-year-old objects and connect them to the present. While she wasn’t particularly interested in the present, she was fascinated by the old stuff. So, she began her own digs.

She lived in a rural area that offered plenty of places to initiate a personal dig. Sometimes she’d convince her older brother to help her, but mostly she took a shovel and magnifying glass out into the wooded areas that surrounded home by herself. Doing so, she unearthed amazing treasures that she jubilantly shared with her family: shoestrings, a torn glove, a dog tag.

And, that went on for years until she was finally on “real” digs in graduate school. Her experience and enthusiasm for the field won her a full scholarship at Boston University where she worked closely with many esteemed archeologists. But, she felt she was missing something... something big and important. Where was her piece of the past that would be significant to the present?

The worst part was Clara always found something awesome. She got the praise and kudos from peers – even media – that Diane wanted.

Clara joined BU the year after Diane. She immediately got herself assigned to digs that were going places – historic sites – where it would be easy to find something old. But, Diane wanted digs where she would find something unusual with its own story. So she accepted assignments to local digs, places that were being excavated for new construction. She knew there was history to be recognized without going to foreign lands.

As Clara was set to leave for Egypt for another fossil dig, Diane got the opportunity to join a crew that would study a deconstruction site in Falmouth, only 75 miles from Boston. New owners were tearing down a motel on the coast that hadn’t been renovated in the past 75 years.

“Diane, hope you find something interesting,” Clara said as she waved by toward the bus that would take the team to airport.

“I’m sure I will,” Diane called back. “Better than you, I hope,” she muttered to herself as she pulled her coat closer. “It’ll be colder than Egypt, but better.”

The motel destruction was nearly complete when the BU team arrived. So, they scattered to various sections assigned by Tim, the crew lead, to begin exploring. Their breaths showed where they were in the cold weather. Diane found herself in a section that might have been by a patio. There was a demolished washing machine among piles of stone and dirt.

“And the fun begins!” cheered Diane happily as she started the process of digging for signs of history being lived.

Hours later, Tim called for a break. He had been going between diggers and evaluating potential finds. Gathering the team together, he provided snacks and a rest.

“How’s it going?” Tim asked. Responses included “boring” and “nothing new.” But, when Diane said, “great!” everyone turned to look at her.

“Okay, Diane,” Tim nodded with acknowledgement. He could always count on her to be excited about any dig. “What have you found?”

“Well, there are nuts, bolts, pieces of plastic and metal, and many hard – possibly frozen – blocks of dust.”

“That sounds odd,” said another digger. “Dust doesn’t freeze.” Then, he looked around. “Does it?”

“Maybe old dust does?” offered a colleague.

“Maybe,” Tim suggested. “Diane, keep piling up the pieces and we’ll dissect later. Back to work, crew. We have about three more hours till the site closes.”

As the crew piled findings into the back of the van that would go directly to the lab, Diane struggled to drag her tarp holding pounds of frozen dust blocks.

“What the... is that?” said a co-digger. Another said, “Really? We are taking back chunks of dust? This will be good.”

Diane was not fazed by her colleagues lack of interest in her findings. At least, Tim didn’t immediately negate their possible importance.

Next week, as everyone was back from assigned digs and into books and lectures instead of outdoor exploration, Diane got a call from the lab. “Bring Tim with you,” they said.

Diane and Tim entered the lab to find tables draped with plastic and pounds of dust pieces everywhere. Also, everywhere were smiles from the lab techs.

“You got something here, Diane,” the lab leader announced. “The particles are from laundry detergent that was suspected to be non-biodegradable back in the 1950s, and inspired new versions of laundry cleaners. But, this proves that the laundry detergent from that time is truly non-biodegradable and has been in our land and resources for at least 75 years.”

“We can have that land decontaminated before re-construction begins and halt any unhealthy stuff from continuing to be hazardous to our land and resources.”

Tim nudged her. “Beware, there will be papers to write and media coverage.”

Diane was quiet but buzzing inside. “This is how it feels to make a difference in the present. I’m so happy. I’m not a loser; I’m an archeologist!”

“Lost to the Ghost Town” by Anna Steenlage (99BS), Wisconsin (Prompt B)

Dr. Jasper Scout turned slowly in a circle, looking at the vast mountains surrounding him in the orange glow of the frigid morning. This was the moment that he had been waiting for since he began his research ten years earlier. Was he ready?

A loud squeaking to his right startled him back to reality. The front doors of the old saloon were slowly swinging shut. Jasper called out for his Site Manager, who had walked through the entry a moment earlier. She didn't answer. He called out a second time and waited. Nothing. The only sounds were the wind and the tinkling of an old lantern hanging haphazardly outside the saloon.

Jasper took a step towards the saloon but paused as he heard a door slam further up the hill in the old shaft house. Did he see a glimpse of his intern walking up the hill towards the dilapidated mine? It was the first day of their archaeological exploration of the old ghost town and time was wasting. Already his people were not following the buddy rule.

He walked into the saloon where they had set up their headquarters, but no one was there. Jasper turned quickly and pushed his way through the swinging doors and stood on the old, creaky wooden porch. He looked up and down the dusty road, but all he saw was the shell of a once thriving gold mining town.

Hurriedly, he snatched his tools from his truck and strode up the hill towards the shaft house. It was time to find what he knew was hidden under this creepy relic. He could feel the tension of countless men searching for the same thing throughout his bones, and the excitement radiated out of him. He was being drawn down the shaft by the forgotten sounds of pickaxes and dynamite.

His intern was standing inside staring as if in a trance. Dr. Scout tapped him on the shoulder, and he nearly jumped out of his skin. It was time. Time to descend into the darkness and begin their dig.

The intern began the climb down the ladder to the first level, twenty feet below. Jasper followed him and landed on the dusty floor with a loud *thunk*. They looked around the room at the old artifacts left by the miners. Hammers, shovels, axes...all with their wooden handles missing. An old cart half on the old tracks that helped the men carry rocks and dirt out of the shaft. A small broken table and chair sat in one corner. On the table a rusty can that once contained Borax and a bucket. Typically used as laundry detergent, they both wondered what they might have used this miracle cleaning product for in a mine. Perhaps to wash the rocks to inspect them for gold?

It was eerie in the mine shaft. Every once in a while, they could hear water dripping but it was mostly silent. Dr. Scout took out his map of the mine and started walking along the tracks. First right, then left and this would be their starting point.

He took a deep breath, gazed over at his intern, and took a hammer and chisel out of his tool belt. This was the moment. He walked over to the wall, held up his tools, and began tapping away at the rock. Before he knew it, the two of them had been working for three hours and they had unearthed a decent amount of rocks to inspect.

Dr. Scout and his intern loaded their satchels with rocks and made their way back up to the surface. It was a painstaking process, and they needed a better plan to get the ore out of the mine. Once they had returned to the saloon and spread their haul on one of the tables, they gazed

around to still find the saloon empty. Where had his team gone? Were they off exploring the town and searching for ghosts?

The Dr. and intern sat quietly and ate their lunch. A sudden burst of wind swept through the saloon and the old lantern swung wildly against the beam outside. Something wasn't right. Jasper stood and bolted out the doors. He stopped short of the stairs and listened as a horrendous wail overtook him from the jail house. It was so piercing that his body felt electric...and utterly terrified.

He took off running with his intern on his heels. They burst through the half hung door of the jail house and found...no one. They turned to look at one another as a second shriek penetrated through their bodies. This time, they couldn't tell where it was coming from. What was going on here? His team was missing and it was just the first day of their archaeological expedition!

Should they keep searching for the source of the distressful screeching? Or should they go for help? Jasper certainly couldn't leave his young college intern alone up here on the mountain. Had they angered the ghosts that had been dwelling in the old ghost town by digging in the mine?

Dr. Scout was typically of a scientific mindset, but this was something he had never experienced firsthand. He turned to his intern and instructed him to find the keys to the truck. Jasper ran out of the jail house toward the saloon. The satellite phone was in a black case, along with a pistol.

He stopped dead in his tracks and nearly toppled over a chair. On the table where they had placed the rocks they had procured from the mine, was laying his Site Manager. Her eyes open, staring at the ceiling; but he could tell from where he stood that she was dead. The rocks were gone. The maps and equipment...gone.

The intern walked in, keys jingling in his hand. Even before the creaking doors stopped swinging, the keys hit the floor just a second before the Dr. heard his intern crumple and fall.

“Mirror Mirror on the Wall” by Thomas Gingerich, Iowa (Prompt A)

Even as a child, Ethan Bishop had always been enthralled by the unexplained, the supernatural, the paranormal tales sprinkled generously throughout the world’s historical records. He grew up listening to late night radio broadcasts that focused on UFOs, afterlife experiences, and clairvoyants like Edgar Cayce. And he never missed any episodes of *One Step Beyond* or *The Twilight Zone*. As a result of this almost fanatical obsession with unexplained phenomena, he became a well-known writer of science fiction and subsequently the host of a popular podcast called *Netherworld*.

The podcast had a wide audience of skeptics, fervent believers, and insomniacs. They provided endless chats, opinions, and critiques, but Ethan quickly culled the charlatans whose only purpose was to ridicule him and his devoted viewers. The show had steadily gained popularity in each of the five years since the first broadcast from his basement den. The setup was traditional, showing Ethan sitting at his desk, headphones on, with a backdrop of library shelves filled with books to his right and left, but with a large mirror directly behind him. The camera wasn’t visible in the mirror as it was placed directly opposite Ethan whose image blocked it. Another bookcase occupied the wall opposite Ethan and comprised the mirror’s entire reflected view.

He had purchased the mirror at the estate sale of an obscure magician he’d stumbled upon in a suburb of Salem, Massachusetts while researching several newly discovered documents related to the witch trials. All he knew about it was that the magician had used it extensively in his act in a span of over forty years. Ethan thought it might make an interesting conversation piece for the podcast, but had never mentioned its origin to his audience up to this point.

Throughout the years, nothing really untoward had occurred during any of the weekly, hour-long broadcasts. There was, however, always an eerie, otherworldly foreboding that hovered in the air. And for some unexplained reason, there was always a dusty haze that seemed to permeate the atmosphere of the room— especially near the mirror. It was never apparent to Ethan during the podcasts, but was always visible in the replays. Ethan’s following had increased each year as a result of that— along with the excellent stories he presented each week.

Then one evening, an evening like all the ones before it, there was a low audible “pop” behind him as Ethan was relating a story of a saucer sighting at a nearby state park. The sound was not that of breaking glass, but rather one of pressure equalization. There was an ominous hissing that followed prompting Ethan to swivel in his chair. What he saw confused and concerned him, as well as his audience, but it also intrigued him. A long jagged anomaly resembling a crack like a lightning bolt had appeared in the mirror running transversely across its face. He watched as the crack widened and incredibly, as it seemed to *deepen* completely into the mirror and beyond the wall behind it.

Its depth was mesmerizing and held a darkness that took his breath away. It was the darkness of deep space lacking any hint of light— and it left him cold! For the first time in his life he was speechless. All thoughts of his audience had vanished as he attempted to rationalize what was happening.

His seated image was still visible in the unaffected shards of the mirror, and he watched in disbelief as it stood and approached the reflection. In reality, however, he hadn’t moved from the chair! And then, still coping with the impossibility of what he was witnessing, the image turned toward him, smiled, and faded slowly away in a dust-like cloud that enveloped it.

“What...?” he said aloud. Instinctively, he rolled forward, reached out hesitantly and touched the mirror, carefully avoiding the darkened, now-pulsing fracture. It was like touching ice. He snapped his hand back and rolled away, the chair crashing into the desk with a resounding thud!

Then still sitting there in stunned disbelief, something overcame him— a strange, reassuring calm suddenly captured him fully. He heard a voice, the faintest of whispers. He stood and approached the mirror, knelt in front of it almost reverently, and listened. It only took a moment to realize the voice was his own— something he'd said in a long-ago podcast. And he knew then that all of the five years were recorded there.

And then he saw them, grainy faces, visages appearing in the darkness of the pulsing fracture— an old man, a woman in her thirties, a priest, a man wearing headphones, a teenager with a camera. And he knew, he realized— each of them like him. Researchers. Commentators. Questioners. People searching for answers down through the ages and sharers of what they found.

And finally, the face of the magician, and Ethan's realization that he hadn't found the mirror. The mirror had found him! It was a containment device. It collected those who observed too closely, those who would explain the unknown and reveal it, draining all the mystery from the world. The mirror was a safeguard, and Ethan was a threat. He was unaware. And then he did what he had always done, returned to the chair and faced the microphone.

"I...I've always questioned," he stammered, "always been enamored by the unknown, and tonight... tonight will be the culmination of..." He stopped mid-sentence as he felt the pull, as his chair was drawn backward toward the mirror which was now completely dark and deep.

One last glance at the camera as he stood, managing a last message, "Always wonder...always search!" Ethan turned to face the void, the unknown he'd always sought... and was gone.

In an instant, the hissing ended like a human sigh, like a last breath, as the mirror sealed itself and was whole again.

And now at the desk sits another Ethan, smiling, and more than ready to debunk any theories from his devoted fans.