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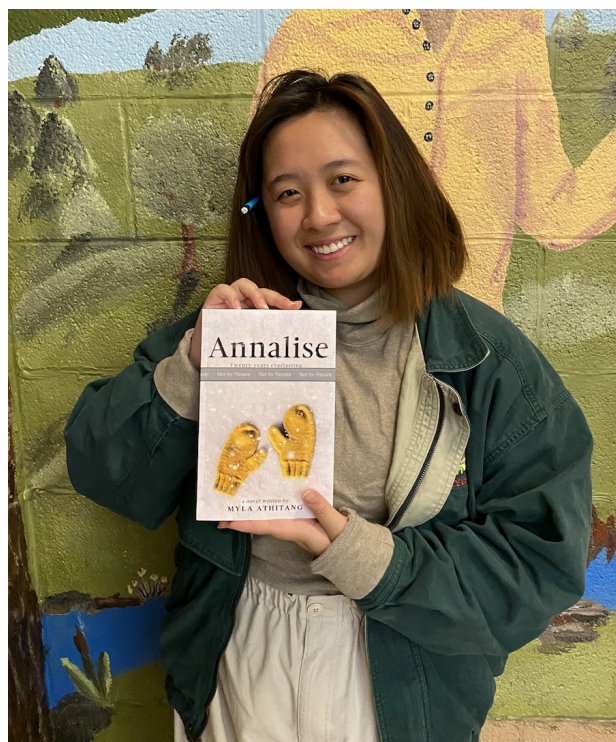
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May 5, 2020

Myla Athitang, of Shelby, N.C., Wins with Poem About her Parents' Escape from Laos

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—Myla Athitang, of Shelby, N.C., is the winner of the Foothills Poetry Contest sponsored by the Gardner-Webb University Department of English and GWU's Literary Magazine, the Broad River Review. She is a senior at Kings Mountain (N.C.) High School. The competition was open to ninth- through 12th-grade students in Cleveland, Rutherford and Gaston counties.

The theme for the contest was "Beginnings and Endings." Athitang's winning poem, "Sticky Rice," is based on her parents' true story. Her mother, Chanthone, was 9 and father, Sakhone, was 10 when they escaped Laos during the communist takeover of the country in the 1970s.



"Laos truly wasn't a safe place at the time," Athitang shared. "My parents still remember the sounds of the gunfire and bomb blasts, which I incorporated into the poem. I felt I owed it to my parents to dedicate this poem about their story. They made many sacrifices for me and my brother, so I wanted to show exactly that. Not only did they sacrifice their life, they sacrificed a home they once loved, and that's where the bittersweetness comes from. I chose sticky rice as my symbolic piece, because sticky rice can come in different forms and quality; yet, we cherish every grain in our culture. It also fit the (contest) theme of beginnings and endings by ending their life in Laos and beginning a new life in America."

Athitang is new to writing poetry. She also published a book this year, "Annalise: Twenty Years Everlasting," that is available on Amazon, Books-a-Million, Barnes and Noble, Walmart, and the Mauney Memorial Library in Kings Mountain. "The book is about a

young boy named Clyde Whittaker who meets a girl named Annalise,” she described. “The novel covers his coming-of-age story as an 8-year-old battling the world and how he copes with different situations.”

She has been writing stories for as long as she can remember, sometimes writing in class when she was supposed to be listening to the teacher. “I also remember using the extra paper they gave us during exams to write short stories, and frowning when they took up the scrap paper at the end of the exam,” Athitang related. “I carry around empty journals with me everywhere I go just in case I suddenly feel inspired. Writing really does help me cope with things outside of my control. I get to write my own stories, create my own characters, and design my own world. Storytelling is also one of the most powerful forms of communication and connection. Out of the 7.6 billion people in the world, at least one can connect with your story and make it meaningful to their own story. I want to one day have that impact on someone. I love connecting with people if it means I can make them smile and show they’re not alone with their story.”

Athitang plans to go to college and incorporate all of her talents into what she does in the future. In addition to writing, she is also a painter and plays the ukulele, piano and guitar. She writes songs and that’s how she transitioned to writing poetry. “I also love sewing,” she added. “I’m the head costume director in my theater group. I’ve been creating the costumes for my school’s productions since I was a freshman. I am currently incorporating my passions to help my community by making hospital masks for the local hospital. Every chance I get, I try to

Sticky Rice

By Myla Athitang

Dried white crumbs, crackle and bare,
Sticky grains in tangled, battered hair;
Red dirt crusted under beds of nails,
Where the gunshots fire and the river wails;
Rubber soles hang on the little girl’s feet,
Choked on humidity and scalding heat;

Sun-dried fish, salty and sharp,
Rainfall seeping through the tattered tarp;
A hunger that growls as loud as the hills,
Silent breaths and a mouth full of pills;
Tiny toes dipped into pitch-black shallows,
Distant patrol boats, floating gallows;

Knee-deep in darkness, blinded by the light,
Two distant worlds under the same night;
One foot stepped in front of the other,
And arms wrapped tightly around the mother;
The Mekong River, tar-like and deep,
Little child hushed, not a sound or a weep;

Breaking the surface, head bobbing the waters,
Surrounded by peers, parents, sons, and daughters;
Silhouettes of death, eyes dark and blind,
Their figures bold, uniformed, defined;
But, as our sacred feet return to skid the floor,
We escaped our prison, the land lost in war;

Soft and sweet; white and steamy,
Refugee camps with eyes so dreamy;
Kids with laughter, so innocent and pure,
Their eyes glossed over with promise and lure;
Distant gunfire ceased to exist,
On the land of hope, too hard to resist;

Yet, delicate fingers graze the dirt,
No longer scratched, scarred, bruised, or hurt;
Kissed the land that gave them life,
Conflicted by men who gave them strife;
Grainy, soggy mud that covered their hand,
Unable to let go of the home upon land;

Although, we’re patient people, who are grateful for our givings,
For a new home of freedom, our bright new beginnings;
When sticky rice comes cold, hardened, and filling,
We savor the bittersweetness our lives have been clinging.

use my skills to help those around me. I am also the editor-in-chief in my journalism class, so I'm very fortunate to be given the position to guide others. I hope I graduate high school impacting my community and peers in a positive way."

Athitang's poem will be included in the next issue of the Broad River Review, which is expected to publish in the fall. She also received a \$100 Amazon gift card and other gifts from the GWU English department.

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