First Place Winner, Level II
Lauren Kelly
Letter to author Natalie D. Richards concerning her book *We All Fall Down*

Dear Natalie D. Richards:

Maybe gravity is the reason why we all fall down. Or maybe it's our feelings. Every day is a chance to start over. A chance to begin again. But what if that chance was destroyed in one millisecond? What if suddenly the world fell apart? What if even though we may seem indestructible we all fall down?

Anxiety—the feeling of being trapped inside your own mind, without ever being able to escape. It's the feeling I face every day. For a long time, I was insecure. I was afraid of myself. I was afraid of not being good enough. Afraid of never fitting in. I felt as though nobody understood me or what I was going through. I recently read your book We All Fall Down. Like the character Paige, I often overthought things. Paige was often timorous, but in a way that comforted me knowing that I wasn't alone after all. Paige would imagine terrifying things that didn't even happen, and she had to take pills for her anxiety. I rarely heard people tell me that they understood where I was coming from. Paige seemed like her mind was keeping her from feeling how she wanted to feel—and how she actually felt. Even though Paige wasn't a real girl, I felt as though her sleepless nights and troublesome anxieties were becoming my own.

Paige motivated me to keep being strong no matter how weak I become during this fight called my life. I felt like I was paralyzed by a wave of fear that would never reach the exit doors of my brain. I pressured myself to be a perfect version of me. Every time I made a mistake, I immediately became disappointed in myself—regardless how inconsequential the mistake might have been. I would try to remind myself that I would do better next time, and that I had learned a lesson, but for some reason, I could never convince myself. I'm still trying to figure out why I worry so much. I've always understood that it is practically impossible for anybody to look or be perfect. Even though everybody has their problems and flaws, I tried so hard to conceal mine—like trying to cover up a pimple or blotch with makeup. I tried to be an unblemished and ideal version of myself because I was afraid of rejection. I was afraid of not being good enough. I was afraid of others ripping me apart, when in the end, I was trying to be strong when I just couldn't be. I was so afraid of others ripping me apart when in the end I was my only attacker. Some days I would look at myself in the mirror and be negative about the reflection I saw staring back at me. I would make myself unreasonably anxious over every situation that happened.

Knowing that Paige also had severe anxiety made me feel less alone in this lonely world. I waited so long for someone to understand how I felt every single day. People always told Paige that anxiety was a temporary emotion. Even the closest people in her life rarely offered true support to help her lesson her anxiety. Often, all they did was tell her she couldn't do it—that the anxiety would be too much for her. Maybe Paige would've been able to handle her anxiety better if people actually helped her. They believed she was making it up—or overreacting. Like Paige, everyone I told about my anxiety told me I was just being "dramatic." As someone who was diagnosed with GAD, or Generalized Anxiety Disorder, I can tell you that it's hard to function and pretend not to worry on an everyday basis. It's a challenge to do normal everyday tasks like talking to people and doing schoolwork. I felt like I couldn't talk to anyone about it because they would make fun of me. Paige made me feel like an ordinary person who could overcome her anxiety disorder. I'm now stronger than I ever was. I might have anxiety tomorrow, and I know I can't change that, but at least I know that I'll never be alone.

Although anxiety is horrible, friendship can also, at times, be just as abominable. Friendship is a word that can be so beautiful, but so utterly destructive at the same time. Friendship starts when you find another human being you can relate to. From there, you're supposed to become closer and closer friends. You're supposed to never have a falling out, right? Wrong. Very wrong. Theo and Paige were inseparable—as if they were two elements chemically bonded to each other. But even the people who seem perfect aren't. My best friend and I have gone through a lot together, but I can slowly see our friendship drifting apart like ocean waves carrying away seashells and secrets. People call us "perfect." Oh, what a lie that is! We are drastically far from perfect. I'm night and she's day. I think it's practically impossible to be perfect. No matter how much society wants you to be perfect, sometimes it just can't happen. I believe that everyone has faults, especially friends. Friends are supposed to understand each other, but what happens when one of them stops responding to your call for help? Like Theo and Paige, we felt fearless together. We believed that nothing would ever tear us apart. But life happens. Reality hits. I met one of my good friends in kindergarten. She welcomed me to the school when I was afraid that I wouldn't fit in. Slowly, over time, we became closer and closer friends. But one day, out of the blue, we got into a massive fight. We texted each other hurtful things and also said some rude things in person. After that, she and I drifted apart. I had to learn to forgive her—even though she never truly apologized. That's when I started to rethink the phrase "best friends forever." That's also when I realized that no matter how hard anyone tries to be friends, sometimes it just can't happen. No matter how hard anyone tries to never have flaws, it's truly impossible. I used to believe in the phrase "Best friends forever." But over time, I've realized a year can do a lot to a person—or two people. Theo and Paige had a huge falling out, and because of this, they're afraid of each other. At first, I didn't understand why Paige was afraid of Theo because punching her wasn't her intention. Theo tried to hurt Chase, the guy Paige was hanging out with. But when Theo was in the process of hitting him, Paige stepped in front of Chase and took the punch instead. I was so confused about why Paige couldn't move on—and in way I thought it was her fault because she got herself involved in the fight. But now I understand. Paige was afraid of getting hurt again. Theo was afraid of himself. I feel like I'm both of them. I feel lost and confused inside my own head. I don't want to hurt anybody—but at the same time, I don't want to shut myself away and hurt myself. But I've realized, no matter how hard you try for it not to happen, someone will eventually get hurt.

Unlike anxiety and, occasionally friendships, new beginnings are a wonderful thing. We all have regrets. We wished we would've picked up the phone. We wished we would've made this or that decision—or didn't. We wished we would've written little notes to make people happy. We wished we wouldn't have torn others down just to snag bricks for our own walls. But what if you had a chance to start over? To begin anew? Would you take the risk? Many years ago, I had to take the risk. I was in a very dark place in my life. My anxiety was at its worst point and I had to decide if I wanted help, or if I wanted to try to conquer it on my own. I decided to get help and it completely changed my life for the better. I am very proud of myself for how far I have come from that point in my life. I am happier and better than I have ever been, and I'm still making progress today. Although I was in a very dark place, so were Theo and Paige. They wanted to be friends, but their fear prevented them for a while from being comfortable around each other, from trusting one another. When they finally became friends again, they took a gigantic risk, just like me. They both just needed a fresh new start. Everybody says that children are the future. But what if children didn't forgive themselves for their mistakes and, out of grief and remorse, spent their entire lives dwelling on things they couldn't change? I believe that doing so would make the world a rather dull and harsh place. I also believe that everyone has a purpose in this life. Somebody's purpose may not necessarily be to make a huge, crucial world impact, but maybe just to brighten up somebody's life in such a way that they will never go into darkness again. Maybe all we need to do to be happy, to make the world a happier place is to forgive ourselves, forgive each other and be kind. Let me tell you, sometimes change is a good thing. I went from being a rude, anxious, conceited girl to someone who lives for helping others and being kind. I am incredibly happy that I had the chance to start over. I am incredibly happy that every day I have the choice to change someone's perspective of the world for the better, and if we begin by changing other's lives for the better, we're half way there.

Theo and Paige are just fiction. But to me, their story is so real. I spend most of my time thinking—wondering about the world. I think about how the world could be changed for the better. I think about all the "almosts" that were so close to happening. In your book, We All Fall Down, I found people with the same struggles I fight every day. I found truths and relations in your plot. I found reality in your imaginary world. I've become an altered reality of me—a better person. I've become someone who wants to fight for what needs to be changed in this cruel world. I've become someone who feels things so deeply, and understands the person who says they have nobody there for them. I want to change the sadness of my life, even if, in the end, we all fall down.

Sincerely,
Lauren Kelly