

2010 Winners

Pierce County Library System celebrates the amazing contributions from teenage writers and artists in the Our Own Expressions – Teen Writing & Drawing Contest. For the past 13 years, the Library offered a writing contest, Our Own Words, for 7th-12th graders. In recent years, the Library also presented a manga art contest. 2010 marks the first year of combining the writing and art contests into Our Own Expressions.

This year, students submitted 769 writing entries and 264 art entries.

Volunteers, including Library staff and Pierce County Library Foundation Board members, reviewed the entries. Noted author Lorie Ann Grover and poet Kevin Miller selected this year's writing winners, evaluating originality, style, general presentation, grammar, and spelling. Art experts Ken Murphy and John Munn selected the drawing winners based on composition, artistic skills, creativity, and an effective use of media.

Pierce County Library Foundation awarded the winners with cash prizes and the winning entries are published in this book.

Pierce County Library System gratefully acknowledges the support of the Pierce County Library Foundation, The News Tribune, and other community partners for continued support of the teen writing and drawing contest.



Our Own Expressions



Poetry Winners

Grades 7 and 8

1st	Little Sister Piper Kachman	Home School
2nd	The Secret Garden Morgan Hoff	Home School
3rd	Growth Spurt Wanted Maegan George	Pioneer Middle School

Grades 9 and 10

1st	Multiple Pants Disorder Rachel Sorensen	Bellarmino Preparatory
2nd	Gordian Knot Sangeeta Singh-Kurtz	Curtis Junior High School
3rd	In Memory of Alice Watson Aidan O'Neill	Gig Harbor High School

Grades 11 and 12

1st	Swing Dancing Nathaniel Shelden	Covenant High School
2nd	Skeletons of Progress Myralea Hansen	Lakes High School
3rd	Broccoli Sam Becker	Gig Harbor High School

General Drawing Winners

Grades 7 and 8

1st	The Blue Mosque Jesse MacKinnon	Home School
2nd	Afternoon Stroll Molly MacKinnon	Home School
3rd	Young Leonardo DiCaprio Xuri Dively	Kopachuck Middle School

Grades 9 and 10

1st	Leadja Corynne Dougil	Covenant High School
2nd	Miyavi Elysa Saito	Eatonville High School
3rd	No Title Rebekah Ho	Covenant High School

Grades 11 and 12

1st	Emma Claire Jesika Catlin	Bonney Lake High School
2nd	West Coast Jazz Rachel Brewster	Fife High School
3rd	Sun Dancing Fennec Fox Alyanna Castillo	Gig Harbor High School

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Manga Winners

Grades 7 and 8

- | | | |
|------------|--|-------------------------------|
| 1st | Kochoh (Japanese Butterfly)
Ayanna Jones | Cascade Christian Junior High |
| 2nd | Kuro Jutsh: Fire, Wind, Dark
Mary Prado | Cedarcrest Junior High |
| 3rd | Sweet Dreams
Stephanie Dinn | St. Nicholas |

Grades 9 and 10

- | | | |
|------------|--|------------------------|
| 1st | Think About It
Esther Lee | Curtis Junior High |
| 2nd | Shinigami Reject Cast
Elysa Saito | Eatonville High School |
| 3rd | Let's See some eyes
Elizabeth Yant | Home School |

Grades 11 and 12

- | | | |
|------------|--|-------------------------------|
| 1st | Luck of the Draw
Emily Baldado | Peninsula High School |
| 2nd | Lu Xun: Journey Home
Stephanie Salacka | Cascade Christian High School |
| 3rd | One and the Same
Taylor Hansen-Grimes | Curtis High School |

Short Story Winners

Grades 7 and 8

1st	Helium Tess Warren	Stewart Middle School
2nd	Sheer Terror Piper Kachman	Home School
3rd	A Perfect Harmony Emily Tomczak	Lighthouse Christian School

Grades 9 and 10

1st	The Quarter Mariah Bellamoroso	Home School
2nd	A World of Shoes and Humming Rachel Sorensen	Bellarmine Preparatory
3rd	Final Bow Sophia Taylor	Covenant High School

Grades 11 and 12

1st	Wolf Calendar Rachel Mason	Graham-Kapowsin High School
2nd	Drowning Perris Miller	Lincoln High School
3rd	A Story Eva Revear	Covenant High School



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Poetry

Grades 7 & 8



*Our Own
Expressions*



Little Sister

by Piper Kachman

First Place Winner

Sticky, sweet
Scent of cereal bars
Lingering
In her breath,
She wakes me
To play with little kid puzzles.
Hair curls rest
Like soft yellow
butter cream
On a porcelain
Doll face
Graced by sweeping
Innocence.
She looks at me
And tells me
I'm "cooler than
Cinderella"



The Secret Garden

By Morgan Hoff

Second Place Winner

I push my hand into my pocket
I grasp the tiny key
I hope upon my lucky locket
Is anyone watching me?

I shove the key inside the lock
I hear a rusty squeak
I push the door against a rock
A crow begins to speak

The door does open with one mighty shove
A secret garden is revealed
A quiet dream so do I love
A wish so long awaited

Spring does come with a world so bright
Tiny buds have pearled
I keep my secret with all my might
I love my tiny world

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Growth Spurt Wanted

By Maegan George

Third Place Winner

Some girls wish they were smaller

I simply disagree

My socks and my shoes

Two sizes too big

Slide around as I walk

My jeans are too big and

So are my shirts

Sunglasses slide off my nose

My hands, tinkly things

Have no diamonds and rings

They'll slide off my fingers and onto my toes

And with all these things

I really just wish that

I was simply much taller!

Poetry

Grades 9 & 10



*Our Own
Expressions*

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Multiple Pants Disorder

By Rachel Sorensen

First Place Winner

I look in my drawer and notice
I have a lot of pants
I have smarty pants and funny pants
Pants for parents and pants for friends
I have pants to play sports and pants to dance
Each pair is a different part of me
So maybe I have pants I wear just to talk to you
With all these pants I spread my personality thin
You could say I have Multiple Pants Disorder
I decided to take a patch from each pair of pants
With these patches I created the Master Pants
It took a lot of time and effort
But it was worth it
These pants are all of me all the time
I decided to try them on and no surprise-
They fit perfectly
So next time if I talk to you if I sound different
I'm not different I'm me
You knew a part of me
But now I can be my whole self



Gordian Knot

By Sangeeta Singh-Kurtz

Second Place Winner

Dear poetry, we need to talk
Come with me, let's take a walk
We're not working out, it's easy to see
I wish I could say it's not you, it's me

But your every word is like swallowing pain
And your melodrama drives me quite insane
You wish you had flow
You're no Romeo

Yet I'm crazy for you, dear poetry, it's true
I may need some space, but a meter should do
I'll learn to untangle, and then set you free
'Cause when it comes to knots, you have a degree

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In Memory of Alice Watson

By Aidan O'Neill

Third Place Winner

She was very sick, says the bed moved downstairs, laden with pill bottles and empty tissue boxes; She was very smart, say the books by her pillow, some brown and weathered, some crisp and new. She had seen the world, and loved it, says the Persian rug, the Indian puzzle boxes, and the African carvings on the staircase. She was loved by all, says the folding chair by the bed, Cards from friends and family, dangling from the wall like stockings; But she's gone now, say the folded quilts on the bed, the flowers at the door, Say the tissue boxes, empty in rooms not her own. Her clothes, hanging in the closet like leaves in November, reveal she's gone. The untended garden proves it, the trees stand solemn over the daisies, And the wind whispers it around the yard, Winding its way down to the stones of the beach and going away with the tide; Out into the ocean and across, encompassing all until Everything knows that she's gone, she is gone. But she is loved, says everything. And she knows.

Poetry

Grades 11 & 12



*Our Own
Expressions*



Swing Dancing

By Nathaniel Shelden

First Place Winner

At first I stepped upon her feet,
And could not keep a single beat,
We kept on spinning round and round,
So scared we'd end up on the ground.

But soon the moves were understood,
Some people said that I was good,
But I don't think the fact is clear,
My partner just knows how to steer.



Skeletons of Progress

By Myralee Hansen

Second Place Winner

Where nothing inorganic
ever rises from the soil,
and the air is clotted thick
with antique rust and tepid oil;
where water pools in potholes,
opaquely brown and slick,
and the hubcaps break like glaciers
on the mounds of broken brick.
Giants scale the twilight
with their bending, broken spines,
their bones of steel pulled downward
by the weight of passing time,
and their shadows fall like shrouds
upon the garbage in the streets;
the scaling rust and old decay
that must have wilted in the heat.
For industry! For factory! a waning metal grave:
goodbye forgotten progress, hello better days.



Broccoli

By Sam Becker

Third Place Winner

Vegetable stared down with silent, stringy-green tufts.

I sat, disgust,

with parents, frantic; brother, calm.

I chose my favorite tree: birch, no gumdrop!

Then. . . poof! Gumdrop, my broccoli had become.

Now, the truth stares down.

My brother taught me how to think

about broccoli

about music and bushes

and even Bush Doctrines.

About other things.

Brothers are good at that — at misleading you;

Though hurtful sometimes,

like when it ends in a fight

(his vigor, his stature, his heart and cerebrum win out),

I relish in the deception:

A broccoli transformed,

Now, see comprehensible, its brilliance.

Grades 7 & 8



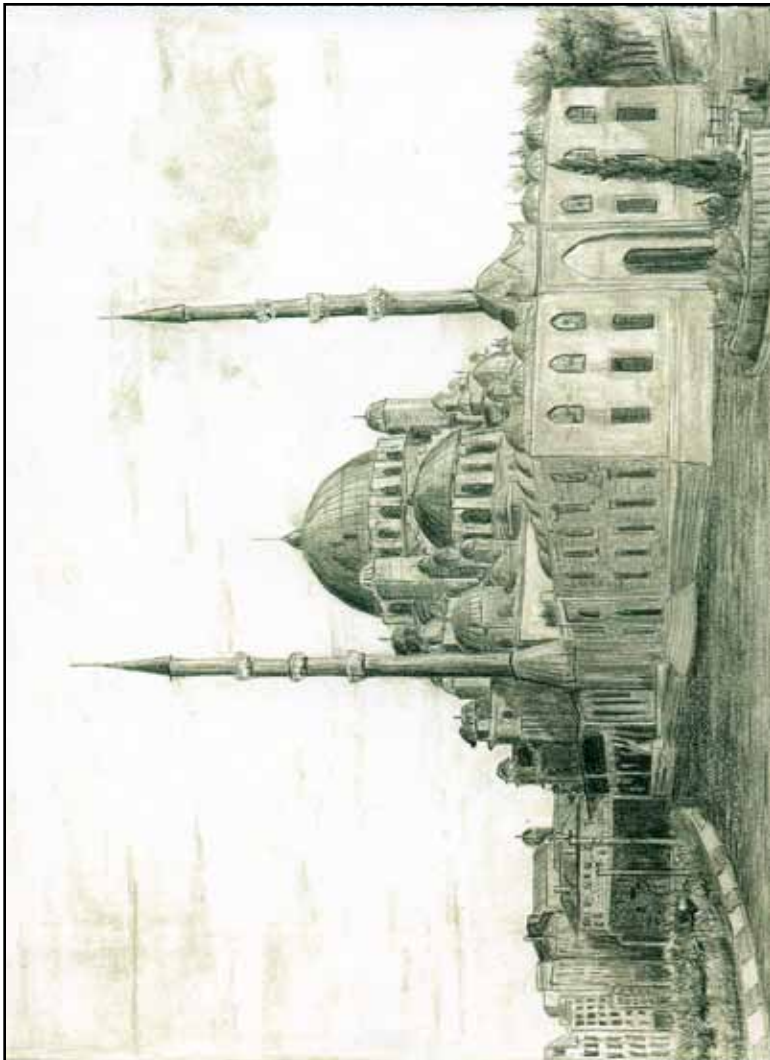
Our Own Expressions



The Blue Mosque

by Jesse MacKinnon

First Place Winner



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Afternoon Stroll

by Molly MacKinnon

Second Place Winner

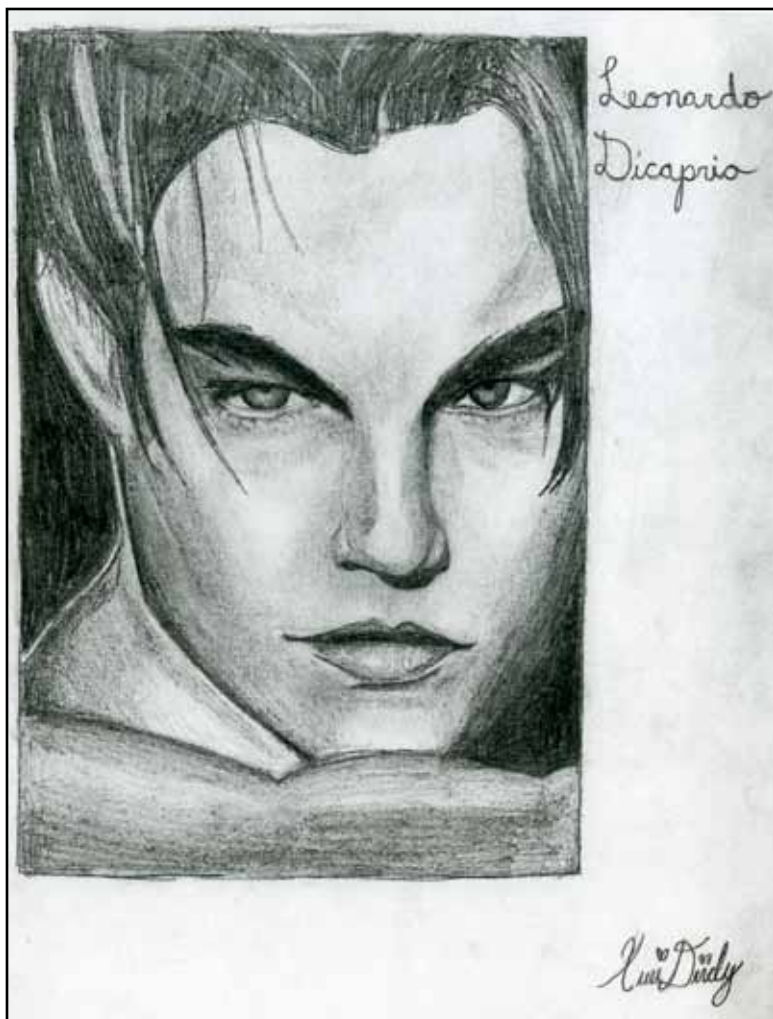


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Young Leonardo DiCaprio

by Xuri Dively

Third Place Winner



Grades 9 & 10



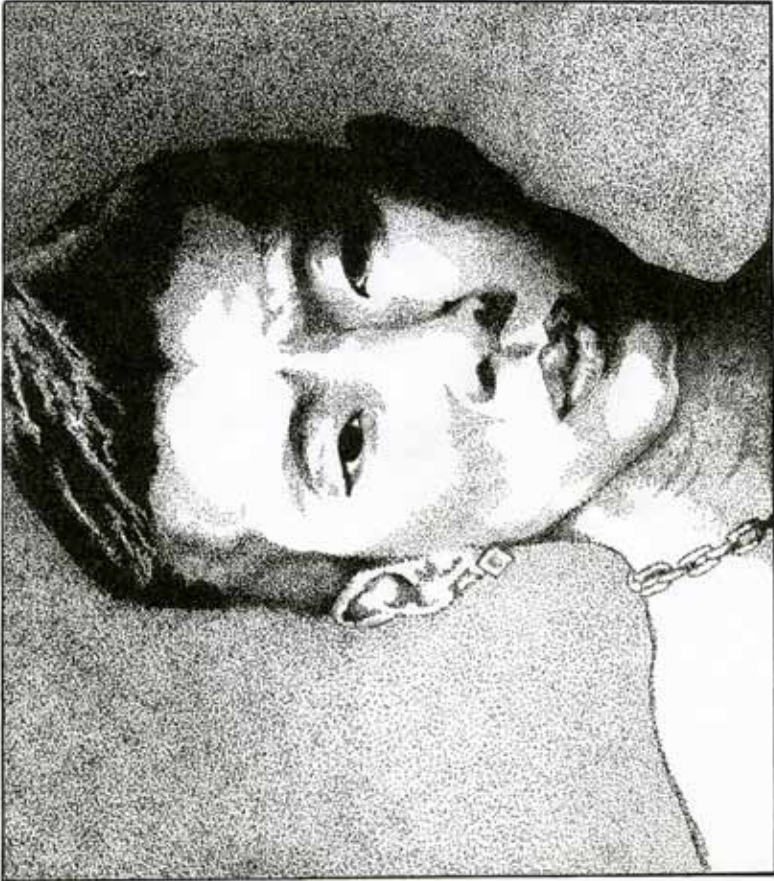
Our Own Expressions

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Leadja

by Corynne Dougil

First Place Winner



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Miyavi

by Elysa Saito

Second Place Winner



|||||

No Title

by Rebekah Ho

Third Place Winner



Grades 11 & 12



Our Own Expressions

|||||

Emma Claire

by Jesika Catlin

First Place Winner



|||||

West Coast Jazz

by Rachel Brewster

Second Place Winner



|||||

Sun Dancing Fennec Fox

by Alyanna Castillo

Third Place Winner



Grades 7 & 8



Our Own Expressions

|||||

Kochoh (Japanese Butterfly)

by Ayanna Jones

First Place Winner



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Kuro Jutsh: Fire, Wind, Dark

by Mary Prado

Second Place Winner



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Sweet Dreams

by Stephanie Dinn

Third Place Winner



Grades 9 & 10



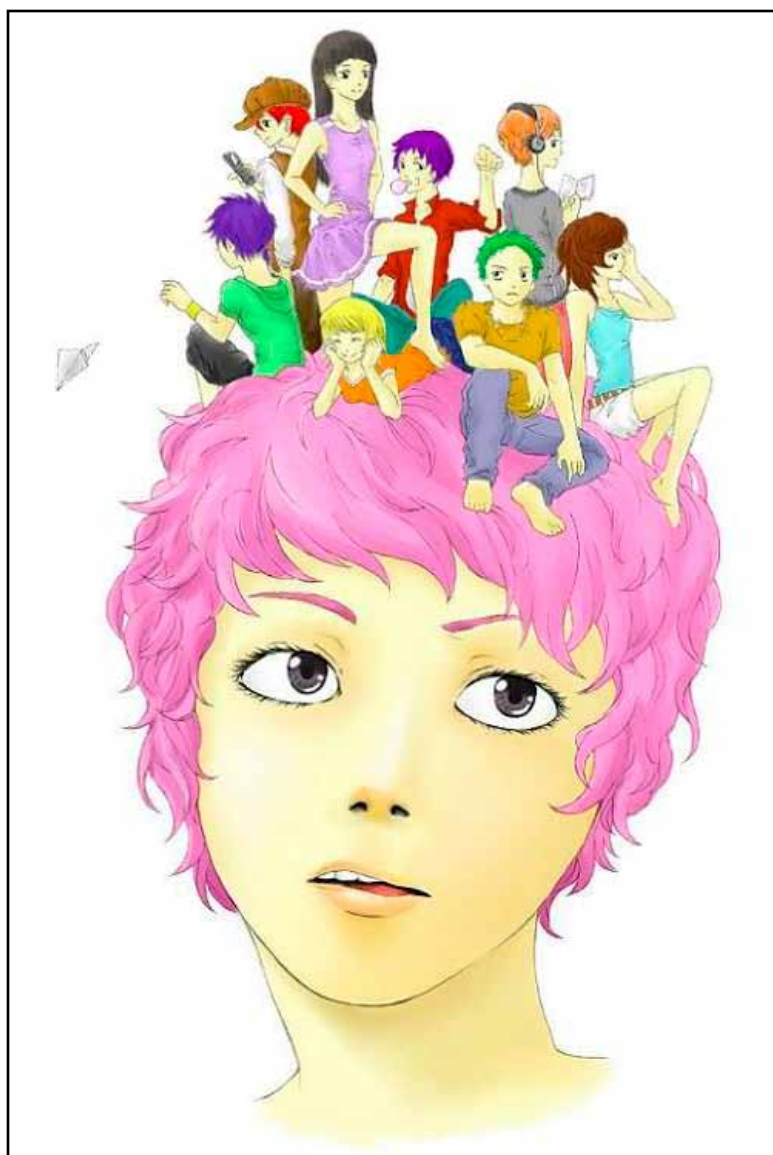
Our Own Expressions

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Think About It

by Esther Lee

First Place Winner



Shinigami Reject Cast

by Elysa Saito

Second Place Winner



Let's See some eyes

by Elizabeth Yant

Third Place Winner



Grades 11 & 12



Our Own Expressions

|||||

Luck of the Draw

by Emily Baldado

First Place Winner



Lu Xun: Journey Home

by Stephanie Salacka

Second Place Winner



|||||

One and the Same

by Taylor Hansen-Grimes

Third Place Winner



Grades 7 & 8

Grades 7 & 8



Our Own Expressions



Helium

By Tess Warren

First Place Winner

Every year, I was given a balloon; a balloon for every time I had to see my mom. She'd come to my grandparents' house and hug me, and gush over how much I had grown, and tell me all about her travels and new boyfriends. I hated it.

She'd sit down behind me like everything was fine, and braid my hair. That's another thing I hated - my hair... Long and blond, just like hers. The tension would thrum through my body like an electric current, and I would stare through the sliding glass doors, trying to ignore the fact that she was still talking. To me.

Every kid loves balloons. Colorful and pretty, and floating seemingly impossible in the air - what's not to love? After years of abandonment, and harbored feelings of hatred and inadequacy, how could a seventeen year old girl's problems not be resolved by a pretty, pink balloon? That's how my mother thought.

"Candice?" She asked me, on my eleventh birthday.

"Yes, Mom."

"I've missed you so much." She paused for a second, smiling her signature, clueless smile. "You know that, don't you?"

"Yes."

She hesitated, and then smiled even bigger, opening her arms for a hug.

You would not believe how heavy my arms felt at that moment, how tired my feet wanted to be. I stared at her through the fringe of my hair, throat closing up and my stomach trembling. As I stepped forward into my mother's embrace, every inch of my body screamed at the wrongness of it, of how I didn't fit into her arms at all. And that is something a girl should never feel, especially when she's hugging her mom.

"I brought you something," She'd whisper into my ear, her voice bubbling over with joy. She reached behind the door, pulling a balloon into sight. "Hawaii was so much fun."

And now, where am I? In a cemetery, watching my grandmother being buried. Dozens of people are sitting in front of her coffin, wrapped in black and showing the deepest respect. Sitting there, numbly, I wait through the whole thing, and then watch guests slowly migrating towards my grandfather, smiling and crying, sobbing and condoling. He would get through it - a fighter - Grandma called him. I watch as he smiles sadly, shaking hands with Grandma's friend Gertrude.

Looking up - not aware that I had been crying - I see a black stretch limo pulling up and parking at the curb. My mom stepped out, a black veil over her face. She's wearing a tight, stretchy black dress that starts too low and ends too high, her darkly tanned legs ending with leather black heels. A dark haired man at least ten years younger than her leaves the car and rushes around the front, taking her arm in his.

Shocked, as they strut towards Grandpa, I stare after them, a dark emotion welling up in my chest. They talk, and then I see her point to me. Noticing me watching, she smiles and waves excitedly. I glare silently until she turns around, then I walked away.

I'm surprised she didn't bring a damned balloon. A nice, shiny, pink one to cut through the denseness of the air like a knife, slicing through the air, coming straight towards me. I am honestly surprised. Walking quickly, I head towards the open gate. As I started down the quiet concrete road, that dark emotion that had stirred in my chest now spilled into my veins. And it was anger, hot and pure.

After years of loneliness, she'd torture me with visits - visits that she seemed to think absolved her of all obligation and responsibility as a parent. After *years* of wishing that my birthday wouldn't come, there she'd be, a smile on her face and a boyfriend on her arm. My mom thought that she was helping? God, no! I can honestly say that there is no shred of feeling in my body that holds tenderness for that woman; only broken glass. I hate her. I loved my grandma, and now she's dead

and my mom just comes parading into Washington trying to pretend like it mattered to her!

Shaking so hard my bones rattled, I jogged past the sprawling houses, trying to find a familiar road that would lead to home. Reaching a busy intersection, I pressed the button, impatiently stepping off the curb.

Suddenly, I hear the sound of singing, and I stop, trying to listen.

"Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you,

Happy birthday, dear Tanya...

Happy birthday to you!"

Giggles followed, and then a sea of clapping. Finally, my eyes find the house, where a group of kids are having a birthday party in the front yard. Tied to the mailbox, is a multitude of pink balloons.

Probably seventeen.



Sheer Terror

By Piper Kachman

Second Place Winner

Down the dark, sullen hallway I see four dimmed lights and make my way towards them, my sneakers dipping into the ground, which feels like sponge. I am afraid, not of the darkness, but that I will accidentally touch the walls, and lord knows what they are made of.

Finally I reach the lights. They are illuminating four paintings. I gasp in horror. The pictures are not terrifying in a logical sense, but they are disturbing in the core of my mind. They reach inside of me, grab my heart and twist back and forth, and back and forth, like a cynical, demented washing machine. For some reason these pictures are so distressing, I can not look away. I am afraid to for I do not know when I will see light again.

The first one showcases a young boy with overgrown hair and a swollen belly. Obviously, he is starving, his mouth open wide in a cry. In the background I see a thin willowy woman. Her face peers back at him, distant and pitiful.

The second a field, brown and old looking like a worn photograph. At first I think it is just dead grass and nothing else, but then I realize that in the grass lying deceased is a large flock of cattle.

The next one looks joyful as is possible in the dreary style - long strokes of dark, depressing color. There are women, maybe nurses sitting on a gilded bench, laughing as if they are in the middle of a very tantalizing gossip session. But then, in the back there is a shadow; it is obviously a man because he is wearing a large brimmed hat and his legs are square in trousers. The shadow throws a chill over my shoulders like a rotten moth bitten blanket. I know, without being told, that he is a bearer of bad news and evil intentions.

I hurriedly move on to the last, a party scene. All of the women are

dressed in finery and men in old fashioned domino tuxedos. Both are dripping with jewels and I can almost smell the stench of perfume mixing with the stench of dancing sweat. They have obviously been drinking a lot of the dark red wine sitting in a bowl with purple grapes floating in it. One woman is faint looking. Another clutching a chair back, is doubled over in laughter. Her male companion is looking amused, and I know she is the object of his aimed affections. Only one thing keeps it from being beautiful. The eyes of the women are scratched out. Finally, I gather the courage to pull my arms from my sides and touch the painting, waiting for something terrible to happen. Instead I touch a regular painting. The eyes are not scratched out, it's paint- supposed to be there. The effect is haunting.

Suddenly, a tear hits my face and I brush it away. *They are just paintings*, I tell myself. But they are there now, they are inside of me, a part of me, whether I like it or not. I believe I have found the hideous nature of art, the way it sticks to my brain the way I worry for the nurses because of the shadow. The wonder of the reason the eyes are not visible in these fine women. But I fear if I do not leave I shall never exit the hallway. I may die here, coiled up, enthralled with four viciously divine paintings which I come to hate as much as I love.

So I pick myself up and flail as I trip over the spongy surface - *what is it anyways?* Soon, the lights from the pictures fade away and I almost wish I could feel the glowing warmth again. But no, I keep walking tentatively, shaking from the uncertainty. If I could just figure out how to get out! Not even sure where I am, I am understandably scared. I don't even know how I entered, but it is real, ever so real.

There is a sharp turn. I notice when I strike my foot on the heavy wall. I follow the curve and turn to my right. Very suddenly I hit a wall, knocking my head. Putting my arms out I feel along the creases of the wall, looking frantically for any way to get out. My index finger hits a groove in the cool metal. It's a handle, I think, so I pull it.

The door swings open automatically with no force from me. A white light seeps in to the room and I feel like when I get up in the middle

of the night for a drink of water and face the kitchen lights. Blinded temporarily, I struggle into the room and the door closes behind me, clicking definitively.

My eyes finally adjust to the lights, but they are still very bright and they shine from all angles. The room is hexagon shaped and about the size of a small living room. In front of me on the walls there four mirrors. They look average enough, long, slender, glassy surfaces. I reach out and touch one. The touch triggers a reaction in the mirror and my image changes. I am suddenly a boy. It's me, my large brown eyes, my blonde hair, but I am not wearing makeup and my hair is cut short. I reach up to feel my hair. It is as long and curly as ever to the touch, but in the mirror it's reflected as a boy's hair. My mirror image is wearing boys clothes, but I look down and I am still wearing my skirt. I am happy that, I am definitely still a girl.

I turn to the next mirror in wonderment. Touching the glass, I wait for my picture to change. It does. My body inflates before me, growing rounder and rounder. I am obviously overweight. I look sad, and lonely. Once again, to be sure, I smile - nothing changes. I touch my hip lightly and I am as slender as ever. I turn away.

The next mirror scares me. I don't want to see myself another way. I'm ready to go back home and be myself, but I touch it anyway. I am thin. Anorexic looking. I don't like it.

The next mirror displays a horror. I am an Egyptian style mummy like the ones on the Discovery Channel. I am so scared now, and the whole experience has really tackled my nerves. I pull on the door to get out of the room frantically, but there is no escape. It's locked. No way out. Stuck here forever. I throw myself down on the floor and sob, and shake, and flail, pounding my fists over and over. I just want out. I want to join the real world with my family and friends.

"Miss Terafeild, miss, miss," someone is calling me by my last name. I flutter my eyes open, wide with terror. "Oh good, the sleep test is over," says a young nurse in soft white shoes, "the doctor isn't sure, but he thinks night terrors maybe the cause of your sleeping problems..."

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A Perfect Harmony

By Emily Tomczak

Third Place Winner

Rain fell noisily, slapping the dark pavement. Icy wind accompanied the torrential down pour, or in words I could only mournfully admit, the rain symbolized the tears I wasn't brave enough to shed. The rain's intensity matched the storm raging in my soul. In short, today had been a miserable day. Some integral part of me had been yanked out viciously, not physically, but emotionally. To me, that was worse—a physical injury could be cured, but pain within a soul could cause scars that not even the sharpest blade can etch. Today was a remembrance of exactly that—the pain—*her*. I usually didn't allow myself to think of her, for it caused the wounds to open up wider than ever before. But September 6th, 2004, rainy today, was an exception. I was giving myself permission to remember...

"Richard, did you find yourself a pianist?"

It was 1936. I was young, handsome, and musically talented. I wasn't arrogant, but I wasn't blind, either.

"Are you *listening*?" my music director inquired, an edge of annoyance in his voice.

"Yes, sir." *No. Of course not. What eighteen-year-old does?* I thought dryly. Mr. Collins had been hovering over me for longer than necessary to find a musical accompanist—a pianist.

"Never mind. Of course you haven't even begun looking. Dolores," he motioned to a beautiful lady, "you'll perform with Richard."

Looking at the youthful, glowing girl, I felt time freeze. It was as if Dolores and I were the only two people in the room, or rather, the entire world. I was irrevocably in love.

"I'm Dolores," she spoke so quickly that I knew she had caught on to

my lingering gaze. Her words were cold, her face like stone.

“Richard.” I eagerly shook her hand, but she didn’t smile. Not even once.

Even now, months later, I couldn’t believe I was still pondering that obvious brush-off. The constant rattle and shake of the train was beginning to cause my stomach to churn. I leaned against the rail, feeling lightheaded. Sitting next to me on the padded leather seat was my father, reading the daily news. He seemed content until glancing up, he caught sight of Dolores Sigmund. He recognized her, for he had seen her at my recital—which had gone well—and immediately understood my feelings for her. I never quite fathomed how he had known I was so deeply infatuated with the young pianist. Before I spoke to him about her, I was sure I had wiped the adoration off my face, or all joking aside, I had tried to act blasé. A lecture from my father about dating was the last thing I wanted.

Please, please don’t talk to her, I prayed silently.

“Dollllllyyyyy!” He acted so warmly towards her, as if they were close acquaintances, although they had never been introduced. Dubbing it a “parent thing,” I was mortified and acutely embarrassed.

“Oh, hello,” she politely replied, her eyes shifting from me to my dad. “Are you Richard’s father? I’m pleased to meet you.”

“No, no. It’s *my* pleasure. In fact, little Rich over here can’t stop chit-chatting about you. It’s always Dolores this, Dolores that. You’d think you two were engaged!” He began to ramble endlessly about my pathetic crush. I attempted to block out the embarrassing talk, but my dad spoke so blatantly it was difficult not to listen.

“Wow, I’m very... flattered, Mr. Tomczak,” she blushed, inching away from me, “but I think it’s time I sat down. My friend will think I’ve wandered off.”

She walked briskly down the hall, hips swaying in motion, hair blowing, so girly, so lovely...

“What a charming delight, Rich,” Dad confirmed.

It had been months—which because of my profound love, seemed like years—since I had last talked to Dolores. I’d been too busy cowering away from the obvious truth of my affection, yet I could no longer avoid the love of my life. Phone in hand, I dialed first for the operator, and then was directed to Ms. Sigmund. My heart did somersaults and cart wheels in my chest, although, in reality, I could perform neither.

“Hello?” Her voice was as tender as I remembered. Delicate, light.

“D-Dolly,” I stuttered quickly, afraid that if I spoke too slowly, I’d lose the flare and courage I had spent so long building up, “do you want to go out?”

Years blended seamlessly into decades. My home and Dolores’s was beautiful. Marrying in the summer of 1942, we eventually had four kids. She became my life, even though she always had been from the moment I saw her. I was fortunate—lucky—blessed—that Dolly had even given me a chance at this beautiful thing called love. Together, we were always in sync, in perfect harmony, a tune that could never be shattered.

“Sir? The service is over.”

My aged eyes opened after reminiscing. The sky was still gray, bitter, and unwelcoming. The face of the man who had spoken to me wore urgency; he was concerned for my health. I nodded solemnly, then asked for a moment alone. Gazing at the rain, which pounded its mournful dirge, wailed *strength* and *courage* to me in a rhythm. Confused, I looked up and noticed the black suit I wore. My reason returned and I felt more alone than ever. Directly in front of me, carved in a simple gray tombstone were the words:

“In loving memory of Dolores Kathryn Tomczak.

Beloved wife, sister, and mother.”

Dropping a white rose at the base, the wind picked up, sweeping through the cemetery, carrying with it the delicate flower and a few of my tears.

Short Story

Grades 9 & 10



*Our Own
Expressions*



The Quarter

By Mariah Bellamoroso

First Place Winner

He feels the cold deep in his joints, hands fumbling with the catch on the cracked, black leather case. Working quickly, he takes out the aged-guitar and sets it on his lap, twisting the knobs to force it into tune. As he works, he watches the ground before his eyes, studying the trash scudding along the dirty, gum-encrusted concrete. The incessant buzz of human voices pummels his ears, making it difficult to hear the small sounds produced by the quivering strings. The late afternoon breeze is chilly with the coming winter.

Most of the day-crowd has left. The sellers remain, standing watchfully behind their counters, hoping to make a few more sales off the dwindling shoppers. Everything is available here, at least for those who have the money to buy it: Fresh flowers, granola, tie-dyed shirts, sheepskin slippers, souvenir models of the Space Needle, CDs, and honey. It's all available, and just down the hall from the fish sellers, whose fragrant wares fill the entire area with the stink of decaying sea life, despite the brisk wind.

Someone shouts, and the smack of a fish carcass changing hands resonates through the market.

"Trout for James!" one calls, baring a set of rotten teeth as he hurls the dead fish across the aisle to his compatriot behind the cash register, who wraps it deftly in a sheet of white packing paper and sets it on a scale.

The customers moving along the aisle between them duck, trying to avoid the cold, fishy water scattered by the fishmongers.

He should move somewhere else. The fish-sellers are a spectacle by themselves, and the people are distracted, too interested in flying fish to pay any attention to an aging street musician. Still, the crowds here

are big enough that he has to try anyway. Setting out an old plastic cup for change, he begins to play a faint, melancholy tune that hardly penetrates the hum of voices.

The wind gusts again, scattering a pile of trash across the parking lot. Among the discarded water bottles and fast-food wrappers, one large maple leaf catches the fading light as the wind lifts it off the dirty concrete. A brilliant white stripe, formed by a carefully drawn line of paint, blazes a trail across the mottled yellow and red lobes. He studies it, wondering who drew the line, and why. Maybe it came from a ball field, or a park. He smiles, but then recalls where he is, with concrete high rises all around and little evidence of anything green, other than the cut flowers sold by the vendors. The smile fades as he realizes it's much more likely that someone painting lines for a parking lot marred the leaf.

He concentrates on the song once more, the swarm of feet blurring in front of his eyes. The plastic cup in the case is still empty. He spent the last of his change on breakfast, so he has no money to put in the cup to encourage donations. Now he has nothing to his name, save for the weathered guitar and his thoughts, neither of which are worth much.

The song trails off, and he stares at the endless procession of faces going past. They are all the same. Does anyone see him? Leaning back against a cement post, he wills someone to stop, to notice him. He remembers a time, years ago, when he played to larger, more appreciative crowds. That was before he faced so many raw winters on the streets. His rough, gnarled fingers just can't play right anymore. That was also before he looked like a cross between an average bum and Santa Claus, with his scraggly gray beard and red-rimmed eyes. He smiles to himself and gently, reverently, he places his guitar back in the ancient case, ready to pack up and search for a more receptive audience. Maybe he'll scrounge around here for a while to see which of the vendors might give him a free sample or two. The salted nut man is nice.

Plink!

Just as he's about to close his case, a bright silver quarter lands in the cup. Startled, he looks around in surprise. No one has stopped. Bodies move in an endless rush around him; no one is even looking his way. Who, then?

He looks up.

There is a flicker of movement, the flash of a young, pale face rimmed with short, dark hair peering at him from the second floor balcony. Then it is gone, leaving nothing but the quarter, still rolling around on its edge in the bottom of the cup. He lowers his gaze back to the shifting crowd and finds himself sitting up straighter, contemplative, but also strangely happy for the first time that day. He picks up the guitar and begins to play again.

A World Full Of Shoes and Humming

By Rachel Sorenson

Second Place Winner

I am the quiet girl, the girl whose name is always on the tip of your tongue, but not memorable enough for you to be sure that you have remembered it correctly. I keep to myself, which is fine for me and for you. I do not have much of a story to tell. It has nothing to do with the people at school. They don't know me. I don't know them. I am content with standing on the sidelines. I like watching and observing. Nobody expects anything more from me. Here's my story for what it's worth:

Everyday I walk to school in my grey Converse. I like them because they match the pavement I tread on. As I walk, I observe and watch. This is a constant habit for me, so I guess this isn't my story. It's me telling other people's stories through what I've seen. Anyways, I'm walking. I usually enjoy humming to myself while I walk. So does Mr. Green Nikes. I always hum the chorus while he hums the verses. I have never seen his face before. He could be Paul McCartney and I wouldn't even know it. I don't look at my subjects' faces. I only see their shoes. People change their shoes, so sometimes I never know whether I am looking at the same person. Nevertheless, Mr. Green Nikes really likes the Beatles. Sometimes when I am humming, I can hear him doing the drum solo. That makes me smile.

My next subject is Miss Black Prada Heels. Miss Black Prada Heels cries and she is very sad. I know because she is always in dark colors, and she carries a tissue in her left hand. I see her when I pass the Starbucks. She likes the jazz music they play there; she hums along. So do I. Occasionally I see another pair of shoes sitting with her. They are always a different pair of Mr. Italian Fancy Shoes. None of the several Mr. Italian Fancy Shoes have been sited more than once. I think Miss Black Prada Heels needs to consider Mr. Hunting Boots or someone with substance not money.

After the Starbucks comes the Irish Pub, Seamus' Place. There I see Mr. Sandals with Socks tending bar. He is very light on his feet. He also wears matching socks. I strongly approve of matching socks. They show strong character. Mr. Sandals with Socks wants a better job. He feels like he is a disappointment. I know because his feet always stop on the spot when they reach the blank spot on the wall where his high school degree should be. Let me tell you something, though. Mr. Sandals with Socks makes a lot of people laugh. Even when he is down he can make other people smile. Mr. Sandals with Socks enjoys Barry Manilow. He actually sings. I don't sing, unless it's Copacabana. Otherwise, I am a hummer.

Subject four is Mrs. Old Lady Keds. Mrs. Old Lady Keds was probably the most satisfied with her life of all my subjects. Now she is the least fortunate of any passerby I see. Mrs. Old Lady Keds always walked at a brisk pace when I saw her, so I would too. She also moved her arms in perfect time with her walking tempo. She didn't need music because she kept her own beat. She hummed songs from *The Sound of Music*. She took efficient steps, and she got where she was going. I could tell that Mrs. Old Lady Keds was happy because she always said hello to me in the sweetest voice. I didn't know her but that wasn't the point. She noticed me. Now the only time I see her is when she is Mrs. Old Lady Wheel Chair. It's terrible because she is such an alive person. Now every time I walk I try to appreciate each step I take for Mrs. Old Lady Keds.

My last subject can only be seen in a window, puddle, or mirror. Grey Converse Girl walks the same route every day. She knows people so well without knowing them at all. She doesn't have to say anything to make connections with others. People that she sees on her traveling route and reach out to her. They inspire her more than even she knows.

When I get to school, I always lose sight of Grey Converse Girl. She disappears into the pavement. I wish she could walk with me all day, and then maybe I wouldn't have to be the "Quiet Girl" or the

“Forgotten Girl.” I could just go on, make connections, and find the good in everyone. I think I will let the other kids do some observing for a change. They can take the time to learn things about me, and maybe they will see that I am someone worth remembering. Maybe someone will even learn what type of music I like, so they can hum the harmony for me.



Final Bow

By Sophia Taylor

Third Place Winner

“Beeeeeeeeeeep!” sounded her alarm almost immediately after she dosed off. Parker steeled herself to get out of her warm bed and pull on her skimpy tights and leotard. The bobby pins scraped her scalp as she fastened her thick hair into a tight bun. Hurriedly, she grabbed a pop-tart and coffee and ran out the door, her tiny figure buried beneath her school and dance bags.

An obnoxious tapping on Parker’s shoulder accompanied by a muffled voice snapped her out of a daydream. The voice became clear as her mother, who had picked her up after morning classes to take her to school yanked out her earphones. All she’d caught was an exasperated, “blah, blah, blah, are you even listening to me?” After fifteen minutes of her mom giving advice she wasn’t qualified to give, they’d pulled up in front of her high school. Leaning over the center console she gave her mom an awkward hug and jumped down from the high seat of the truck with unparalleled grace.

It wasn’t natural, the way she almost glided down the hall or how she could grow an inch instantly just by pushing down her shoulders. Parker had put in countless hours of work to attain this level of poise. Ballet had become her life. She had sacrificed everything for it, and in a little over a month, she would be the principal role in Swan Lake. This was the role she had worked her entire life for; the dream role of Odette. Not even her over-bearing mother could ruin it for her. Anything Parker did was never enough for her mom, all she seemed to notice were her imperfections. And her father, his presence in her life, or lack there of, was almost worse than her mother’s constant input. Nevertheless, Parker had determined not to let anything distract her from nailing this part.

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"Plié, and stretch," came her artistic director's voice matching the cadence of the music to which they were doing their first exercise at barré. Parker felt the twinge in her hip as she pulled up her psoas muscle to stay perfectly erect and bit her lip suppressing the urge to hold firmly to the barré. *Last class of the day, I can make it*, she assured herself. Another sound reached in Parker's ears, more subtle, but also accompanied by pain. Her stomach growled as a hunger pang reminded her that she hadn't eaten anything since her pop-tart at 5am. It was 7pm now, and although she had tried to trick her stomach into thinking it was full by drinking a lot of water, it hadn't worked. The cigarette she had smoked hadn't worked as an appetite suppressant either, her body too immune to the affects of nicotine for one cigarette to do anything. Cold hands pulling back Parker's shoulders temporarily took her mind off her stomach, but then returned it with a sharp quip.

"Pull up your stomachs ladies and gentlemen, I'd rather not send a company of elephants on stage," said her teacher. Sweat rolled down Parker's face, and with that drop she dropped another pound.

Arriving home later than usual due to a costume fitting, Parker made a bee-line for the shower. She peeled her tights off her limp body and let her long, dark hair hang loose across her back, the headache from her tight bun finally subsiding. The hot water burned her feet as it rinsed away dried blood. Stepping back under the faucet, she let the water run over her face, seemingly washing away the tension that was not only in her muscles.

Parker walked tenderly on her aching feet into the kitchen and popped a "lean cuisine" into the microwave. She ate the pasta with some salt, resisting the urge to pour on the alfredo sauce; unnecessary calories. Remembering the costume she had to squeeze into for the performance she dumped the remaining noodles into the trash and headed to the bathroom. Sweeping her long hair away from her face she pressed her finger to the back of her throat. Getting off her knees, she grabbed the edge of the sink for support, feeling lightheaded.

As she regained consciousness, she felt a searing pain in her arm, the culprit: a thick needle with a tube attached that was taped to her arm.

"What's going on?" she asked, looking around frantically for a familiar sight.

"You fainted," said a nurse, "...when did you eat last?" Parker began chewing her lip but the doctor walked in and saved her from having to answer.

"I understand you have a performance coming up, Miss Jameson," said the doctor making polite conversation while skimming over her chart.

"Which is why I can't stay here long," said Parker trying to sound calm, "I can't miss a rehearsal." The doctor's forced cheer fell from his face as he prepared to tell Parker what she feared was not an early discharge.

"It doesn't matter to me," said Parker, cutting in before he could say something. "This is everything I worked so hard for and everything I want in life. You can't take it away from me." The doctor had no words as he stared at the look of desperation stretched across her hollow face. Here was a girl who was literally dying for the thing she loved.

"Don't worry about that, sweetie," said her mother, cutting in as she set down her magazine, "we just want to get you better. What exactly is the problem, doctor?"

"Well," he replied slowly, taking a seat on the edge of the bed, "Parker has a condition called anorexia nervosa. Last night her body reached the point of starvation causing her heart to start pumping slower and her brain to begin shutting down, resulting in her collapse."

"But she'll still be able to dance, right? And she won't have to gain back that much weight?" said her mother with a winsome smile plastered to her selfish face. The doctor could see that much of the pressure put on his patient was probably coming from her mom.

"She will not be able to dance for a while without putting herself in serious danger. Her body has already been through so much."

A month later, a delicate girl with skin transparent under the stage lights brought an audience to tears with her heart-wrenching performance of Swan Lake. She, like Odette, knew what it felt like to fight for what she loved. With thick stage makeup covering the dark circles under her eyes, she floated across the stage to the tune of Tchaikovsky's music. A look of pure joy shined on her face as she took her final bow to a thunderous applause.

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Her frail body lay still in the midst of movement. For once she was still: no pain, no pressure, no life. Her mother wiped a sincere tear from her face as the pastor talked about a better place. Among the bouquets of roses were a pair of pink satin pointe shoes, seemingly out of place if not for the head stone that read:

RIP

Parker Jameson

1993-2010

Beloved Daughter, Friend, and *Dancer*

Grades 11 & 12

Our Own Expressions



Wolf Calendar

By Rachel Mason

First Place Winner

The bulletin board stares down at me. An array of cheerful neon green sticky notes, like little green frogs, deluge my eyes. Amid implorations to get a haircut and pick up some milk is one that says “Moving Day June 27th. Have everything packed.” There is nothing left in our boxed-up fridge, and my dirty-blond hair rests comfortably a few inches below my shoulder, but Moving Day is still tomorrow.

I cross off the last box on the wolf calendar that hangs above where my bed used to be. It reminds me that my eighteenth birthday is in two weeks; I try to ignore that fact. I extract the pins holding it up and gingerly place the pile into the nearest box, whose jaws gape open, waiting to swallow it. There is no point in a calendar anymore. The impending date is here.

Hours later, I close the tape on the penultimate box. The clock is gone, packed in one of these boxes, so I have no idea of the time, but the curtainless window reveals a landscape engulfed by night. Everyone else has left, and I momentarily feel as if I am a ghost haunting the remains of my house.

Leaving the final box to be closed the next morning, I trek to the living room. Here, instead of being scattered about, the boxes are stacked against the walls. The castle made of box-bricks wards out all reality as I slip furtively into the makeshift door. Carefully, I spread out a Pooh Bear sleeping bag. Blue and purple paint stains riddle it like bruises, and it smells like fingerpaint and preschool.

I snuggle into my sleeping bag, curling my head against a small pillow. Sleep creeps upon me slowly and eliminates all thoughts. For a moment, I can forget about tomorrow.

Sleep and solace evaporate with the slam of a door. Mom rushes into the house in a whirlwind of to-do lists and perfume.

“Wake up, Victoria! Your father’s coming with the van in ten minutes,” she calls as she comes inside. I groan and pull myself up into a sitting position and then stand up slowly. I rub sleep out of my eyes and roll up my sleeping bag and pillow.

Mom moves in and grabs them from me. Purpose hides all of her weariness, but her lined face hints at stress. She reaches up to touch my shoulder briefly. I lean down and kiss her cheek. We are fortifying each other.

I return to my room to reluctantly pack up the last box. The last box is always the hardest. As long as one box is still open, leaving is in the future; it is impossible. The moment that last box is taped up, it’s time to leave.

Mom carries my sleeping bag and pillow outside to wait for Dad. He will be late because he is trying to stave off the inevitable, just like me. Mom knows this. It is a well-choreographed dance, honed to a ritual through time and practice.

I trudge to my room, as though moving slowly will force time to bend and slow down as well. I grab the tape, take a deep breath, and seal the box shut. I have become immune to the irking suction noise tape releases when rolled out, and I ignore it. I focus instead on the two small drops of water that have fallen on the top of the box.

“Victoria, hurry up! Your father’s here!” Mom yells, but I know he’s not. He won’t be for another six minutes.

I cannot help looking around my room; like road kill, it draws my attention, although I yearn to look away. I do not want to remember it like this, gutted and exposed like a skeleton. I want to remember the posters on the walls and the books on the shelves and the clothes hanging in my closet, waiting for fashion shows in front of the mirror with my friends.

"Ready, Victoria?" asks my father, appearing at the door, his face understanding. There is no hint in his demeanor or his thoughts that at seventeen I should be less emotional during the moving process. He feels the same way I do. I shuffle over and lean into him. His head towers over mine and I draw strength from his formidable figure; nothing can go wrong in Daddy's arms.

"Ready, Dad," I resolve, and stroll out the door, deliberately not looking back.

"Howard, is the car still on?" Mom wonders solicitously.

"Yes, Caroline, we're ready to go," Dad assures her.

We leave behind rooms one at a time, first my bedroom, then the kitchen and the office and the living room, and finally the entryway. I try not to focus on the boxes and emptiness as Mom leads the way and Dad trails after me.

We all climb into the van. Dad is in the passenger's seat because he gets stressed driving; letting Mom drive avoids futile quarrels. I squeeze into my seat in the second row. The entire van is crammed with fragile and precious belongings that the movers can't be trusted with.

Mom asks, "Howard, do you have the directions?"

Dad predictably replies, "Yes, Caroline, they're on the dashboard."

I stare out the window. Plastic dry-cleaning bags appear in my peripheral vision. They hold Dad's Air Force uniforms, pristine and prepared for service.

I smile grimly and pivot my head to the front again. Mom is starting the car and reminding us all to go to the bathroom before we leave. Dad has the directions in his hands, looking them over so we won't get lost.

Mom starts to pull out of the driveway.

"Wait, Caroline," instructs Dad.

"What's wrong?" Mom inquires, pulling to a stop. Dad turns around.

"We should say good-bye," Dad declares solemnly. We all turn around and get one last glimpse of our home.

"Ready, Howard?" Mom asks a final time.

"Yes, Caroline. We're all ready," Dad agrees. Both of them turn to the front. After a moment I also turn to the front. I am facing the road and my new home, where I will hang up my posters and put new favorite books on the shelves and pin up my wolf calendar.



Drowning

By Perris Miller

Second Place Winner

My friend Corey Rainer used to say that I was bigger than life. Corey was one of those deep thinking types, and on the day he said that to me, Sheriff O'Connell had busted us for stealing the yellow Corvette Presley White always kept parked in his back driveway by the tool shack. We did it - well it was really just me - because we were bored out of our minds, and in a pintsize place like Lewistown, Oregon, there isn't much to do but kick the dust up at your feet while your walking down to the ocean to skip rocks into the wading sea.

My tolerance for small town life continued to diminish every day that I lived it, and once I saw the shiny Sunflower-yellow Corvette gleaming in the pale cold light of the afternoon sun, I just had to take it. I had to. I had to spice things up, and I would have done it whether Corey was with me or not. He of course tried to talk me out of it, but in the end he tagged along for the ride just like he always did. Robin never leaves Batman alone to have all the fun does he? Even if he knows the mission is suicide and will look bad from the public eye if things turn rotten.

In my own defense though, Presley White was the stupid and reckless one for leaving his car unlocked in the back yard. I mean *come on!* He was practically *asking* me to take it, and so it was really his fault for tempting such an...*eccentric* young man such as myself into stealing his unicorn (which he had referred to it as more than once).

I hot-wired that baby in no time at all (thanks to my uncle Freddy's teachings of course), and by the time Presley stepped out onto his back deck to have an afternoon smoke, his unicorn was M.I.A. and we were speeding off down the road laughing harder and more joyfully than we had probably ever laughed before in our entire lives.

Corey Rainer also told me this: Everything ends. . .even the best things. *Especially* the best things.

Of course he was right. Corey was right about most things. As the patrol car appeared from around the corner and we heard its siren screaming from behind us, both our hearts must have dropped into our stomachs and the smiles and laughs must have disappeared from our features like an ancient Egyptian artifact might disappear in the hectic winds of a sand storm.

We were just making our way onto the freeway when he caught us, but I had the mind to keep the chase alive. You know, for the thrills and all that. I figured, hell, if I took the time to steal the bastard then I should at least get something more out of it than just a slap on the wrist by some hick with a badge. I wanted to be on TV.

I guess it was thinking about Corey that stopped me. I knew that just because I didn't care what happened to me, it didn't mean that I should condemn my friend to the same fate. We were already in deep enough, and I knew that his dad would beat him until he couldn't stand when he found out. . .and he *would* find out. That's the trouble with small towns: there are no secrets.

When I thought about that, I pulled over to the shoulder of the road and waited. I began to wonder why Corey came with me if he knew this would happen.

Because you're his friend. I thought. *But your friends drag you down. . . there like drowning guys that are holding onto your legs. . .you can't save them. . .you can only drown with them. . .* I read that in a book once by Stephen King. I'm not much of a reader but I have to say I enjoy his stories a lot, and when I read that passage I liked it and understood it. What I didn't realize though - something that I didn't realize until I was sitting in a stolen Corvette with my best friend waiting to get hammered - was that he was talking about me. I realized in that moment, as we were waiting for the sheriff to get out of his vehicle, that Corey was going to get in a lot of trouble with his dad, and it was my fault. I was the drowning one. I was the one holding onto *his* legs

and dragging *him* down.

As I realized this, a sense of embarrassment and anger washed over me. Was there a feeling of helplessness there to? I don't know, but what I do know is that in that moment, as the realization of what was really what set in, I felt ashamed.

"License and registration please." O'Connell grumbled.

I jumped as the sound of his gravelly voice broke through my daze. I jumped then, and I jumped again when he slammed the cell door closed behind us and walked away whistling.

Corey rested on the cot for a while, lying on his back and staring up at the chipped ceiling. I sat pressed up against the wall by the cell door, resting my chin on my knees. It was silent between us for a long time, and I didn't like it...but I also felt like I deserved it.

"Bigger than life, man." Corey chuckled all of a sudden.

"What?"

"You," he had this grin on his face, like a grin you would have when you're remembering the good times of the past. "You're bigger than life, Jake...bigger than life."

That was the first time he had ever said that to me, and I didn't quite understand it at first. Now though, I think he meant that I was bigger than *our* life. Bigger than Lewistown, Oregon I guess. Sort of like the big fish small pond kind of thing, you know? Yeah, you know. You're a lot faster at getting things than I am.

I looked up at him, but he didn't look at me. He just kept staring at the ceiling.

"...I don't wanna drown, Core." I whispered hoarsely.

"No one does." He answered. I figured he already knew what I was getting at. He usually did. "It's easier...but no one really does."

I nodded at that. "I'm sorry, man."

No response.

"I don't wanna drag you down either...if I'm drowning I don't wanna drag you down with me. You shouldn't be here."

"If I'm here it's because I got *myself* here alright? I would've never got in the car if I thought the consequences were gonna be brutal."

"...Your dad."

"I can handle him."

"...I don't wanna drown, man."

He looked down at me for the first time, his face pallid and expressionless. It meant business. "Then swim." He said, and returned his solemn gaze to the paint chipped ceiling.



A Story

By Eva Revear

Third Place Winner

James pulled the papers toward him, staring at the dotted line. "Sign right here" said the man behind the desk. He paused and reflected a moment on the events that had lead him to this place.

"Crash", the newly placed glass shattered under his wrapped fist, and he felt the thrill that came with that crime-induced adrenaline rush. Some did drugs, some drank, he stole! He and his partner in crime, Jellyman, laughed as they plunged into the dark store. Suddenly he heard a voice behind him.

"Hey, wait up y'all! I wanna come!", said Mikey, his ten year old brother.

"What are you doin here, fool?!" he exclaimed angrily. This was just a game, but one his brother was too young to be a part of, even a world where thirteen year olds carried handguns. "Go home!" he yelled at his brother.

"Nah, man, I wanna stay with you" Mikey insisted, looking up to the man whom he admired most in the world.

"Fine," James gave in, not wanting to stand there arguing, "but wait out here."

"Wha'?!" James heard Mikey exclaim angrily as he ran to join Jellyman who was stuffing money into a bag. After grabbing more loot than they could carry, the two 18 year olds dashed out of the store leaving a trail of change and bills bouncing behind them. Mikey ran after them, and the rest of the guys in the neighbourhood watched the robbery with mild interest. Small compared to the other crimes that happened in the Tampa Bay ghetto, and just as widely ignored. Suddenly James heard a shout,

"Hey, stop!" behind him followed by swearing, "I'm sick and tired of you kids!"

"The shop owner! What's he doing here? Whatever, he can't talk to me that way!" James turned ready to beat the guy. What he saw surprised him, but didn't at first shake his cool. The shop owner was carrying a 9 mm, and pointing it right at him. When it was too late he realized it wasn't pointed at him, but at Mikey.

James tried to change the course of his dodge to a tackle, but he wasn't faster than the bullet. Mikey's body slumped to the ground. Loud expletives came from above him as he dropped to his knees. Two gunshots rang in his ear telling him that Jellyman had shot the shop owner. None of this mattered. Mikey was down.

"Call 911" he heard someone in the crowd yell. But James had seen enough shootings to know that his baby brother was dead.

Jellyman had been tried, convicted and sent to prison. In the following weeks James drove the streets feeling alone. All he could do was sit in his car with the music turned up all the way losing himself in the lyrics every time the memories of Mikey came. It was all his fault. He should have made his brother leave.

On one of these drives he saw Clara, his eldest sister, sitting on the playground watching a basketball game. He stopped his car sat next to her. Without any preamble she asked

"Do you ever think there's more than this?"

"Than basketball?" he asked staring with lifeless eyes at the muscular guys running around the sun drenched court. "Its just a game. This one's probably gonna end in a fight" he said as an argument over a foul call got heated.

"I mean more than this life" she said looking at him, a tear sliding down her cheek. He did not answer her. He didn't know. That she was afraid scared him. His sister was the toughest person he knew. Crazy Eddie, who had spent time in prison for beating someone to near

death with a hammer, was afraid of his sister. If she wasn't confident, no one could be. They sat in silence for awhile sweating in the heat. He finally got up, and began to walk back to his car. "where ya goin?" she called after him. All he could do was shrug.

"Come on, bro, you've been walkin around all down for two months, its time to move on!" The voice was growing steadily more annoying, and James was about ready to beat the guy.

"I ain't goin to no dance. If y'all go there its just gonna end up in a fight."

"That's why we goin! Man' you never used to back down from a good fight!" His friend whined.

The group from Ponce de Leon had decided to go to a school dance in Chapel Hill. This turf was ruled by the drug dealers. Anyone who went in there even just to visit the pharmacy on an errand had to run in and run out.

James didn't want to go, but he needed to get away from his brother who had alternated between hunting beer and begging him for anything of value all day.

"Fine, I'll go." he said.

As predicted the night ended in a brawl. The group had walked over, about fifty kids. They were on their way back when it started. Someone threw a bottle into the crowd and all hell broke lose. Tired of it James ducked out of the fray and headed home.

It was close to four o'clock in the morning, the house was quiet, his dad was in a stupor on the couch. He was watching a movie, but barely paying attention. Suddenly Jerry appeared in front of him.

"You got any more money?"

"Nah, man, you done took all of it!"

"I know you got some hid up somewhere! You best get it out!" suddenly he was staring down the barrel of his brother's gun. The

flickering light of the TV illuminated the man's inebriated gaze.

"He isn't kidding."

He wished he had a gun, but he never carried guns, only knives. He always had someone around to protect him, but not tonight in his own house against his brother. He gave him everything he had down to the last dollar, and watched him head out into the night.

As he walked the streets the next day plagued by the question. "Do you ever think there's more to life than this?" He passed the old men who sat on the street drinking. They had sat there drinking twenty years ago, and they would die there drinking. That's where he would end up. Then again he would most likely get shot first, and for what? A drug deal, a robbery, stealing a car? This life was pointless. But how could he get out, where would he go? He, unlike many, had no record, he had never been caught. But higher education was futile. As futile as raising a family here. Having sons who would end up like him. Locked in this prison without bars. He had to get out now.

"James, go ahead and sign it, son" the recruiting officer said, breaking him from his reverie. As he watched his hand scrawl his name across the page he realized he was taking control over his life. Despite the fact that he was signing himself away, becoming government issue, he had never felt more free.

"Welcome to the U.S. army, private."