

2015

Winners

Congratulations to the nearly 1,000 talented students who participated in the 19th annual Our Own Expressions Teen Writing & Art Contest.

Volunteers, including Pierce County Library System staff and Pierce County Library Foundation Board members, reviewed the entries. Writer Travis Prothro and poet Patrick Flores-Scott selected this year's writing winners, evaluating originality, style, general presentation, grammar, and spelling. Photographer Dane Meyer and Graphic artist Ken Murphy selected the art winners based on composition, artistic skills, creativity, and 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 gratefully acknowledges the support of Pierce County Library Foundation, The News Tribune, Pacific Lutheran University and Print NW to help fund the contest.



*Our Own
Expressions*

Poetry Winners

Grades 7 and 8

1st Artist at Work

Mary Holloway

Keithley Middle School

2nd Let Me Sing for Someone

Emily Saletan

Charles Wright Academy

3rd The Hare Who Lost the Race

Makaela Whalen

Cedarcrest Junior High

Grades 9 and 10

1st Estranged

Michelle Smith

Bellarmine Preparatory

2nd Swallow

Tristan Crawford

Glacier View Junior High School

3rd Heart Has Human Hate

Allison Moren

Covenant High School

Grades 11 and 12

1st Morning

Andrea Ueland

Covenant High School

2nd Vietnamese New Year

Bao Nguyen

Convenant High School

3rd Masquerade

Hannah Lawty

Covenant High School

Drawing Winners

Grades 7 and 8

1st Your Bones

Katherine Hunter

Glacier Middle School

2nd Michael Jackson

Nicon Moeini

St. Charles Borromeo

3rd January

Martina Preston

Other

Grades 9 and 10

1st Landscape of my Soul

Claire Defrancesco

Bonney Lake High School

2nd Savannah Rose

Katlyn Daniels

Bonney Lake High School

3rd Eyes On Target

Nathen Cutler

Kalles Junior High School

Grades 11 and 12

1st Oh, Honey

Katie Lasko

Bonney Lake High School

2nd Les Halles

Penny Rhines

Home School

3rd Deep Thoughts

Cole Maurmann

Home School

Photography Winners

Grades 7 and 8

1st **Water**

Bailey Apthorp Ford Middle School

2nd **Drop of Light**

Tajja PerryCook Home School

3rd **Dandelion**

Rebecca Hernandez Ford Middle School

Grades 9 and 10

1st **Simple Beauty**

Isadora Mattfeld Home School

2nd **Old Dirt Road**

Kamie Jovag Stahl Junior High School

3rd **Precious**

Miya McCarter Other

Grades 11 and 12

1st **Back on the Farm**

Sydney Paulsen Home School

2nd **What a Wonderful World**

Jonathan Ross Curtis Senior High School

3rd **Floral Solitude**

Rebecca DePalma Curtis Senior High School

Short Story Winners

Grades 7 and 8

1st Persephone's Winter

Annika Van Vlack Home School

2nd The Daydream

Abigail VanDoorne Goodman Middle School

3rd Two Minds, One Fate

Amelia Day Lakeridge Middle School

Grades 9 and 10

1st The Sunday Man

Finlay Adamson Gig Harbor High School

2nd The Colors of Time

Kaitlyn Lawrenz Rogers High School

3rd The Little Thief

Daniel Matsuda Covenant High School

Grades 11 and 12

1st An Epilogue for Gatsby's Flower

Claire Summa Gig Harbor High School

2nd Forget Me Not

Andrea Ueland Covenant High School

3rd Six Silences

Matthew Pfefferle Covenant High School

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Poetry

Grades 7 & 8



*Our Own
Expressions*

Artist at Work

by Mary Holloway

First Place

Crumpled paper, scribble, scabble
Torn up paper, lines within

Piece of work, window closed
Old art, recycle bin

Heavy sighing, heavy crying
Artist at work

Let Me Sing for Someone

by Emily Saletan

Second Place

Let me dream of flow'rs bending to the sun's bright rays,
Let me dance for those who need someone to light their way,
Let me walk with those who need another step to take,
And let me sing, because someone needs a song today.

For those who need a second chance, let me hope.
For those who need to find their peace, let me pray, let me pray.
For those who need happiness, let me smile, let me smile, let me smile.
And for those who need a song,
Let me sing, oh yes, let me sing, let me sing today.

For those who need a miracle, let me wish.
For those who need a tear to fall, let me cry, let me cry.
For those who need a lighter heart, let me lift, let me lift, let me lift.
And for those who need a song,
Let me sing, oh yes, let me sing, let me sing today.

Dream and dance and walk,
and hope and pray and smile,
And wish and cry and lift,
And sing, oh yes, help me sing,
Because someone, somewhere,
Someone needs our song today.

The Hare Who Lost the Race

by Makaela Whalen

Third Place

I lost, to a turtle
Why
I was being stupid
I won't go home
My brother will laugh
He'll say, "You'll never beat me"
But I could
Running in the morning
With the dew still on the leaves
Only the sun racing me
I am fast
I am free
No one judging me
Or racing me
Just me
Kicking dirt
Happily
Loving every moment
Try
Try to beat me then, dear brother

Poetry

Grades 9 & 10



*Our Own
Expressions*

Estranged

by Michelle Smith

First Place

stained garments: tattered throughout
brown flakes cover mangled hair
garbage scattered all around
small wet drops glisten across dirt-covered face

moans of desperation fill the cold damp air
frail boney hands reach out for help
pedestrians jeer as they pass
agonizing cries throughout the city

head buried in shame
hands precisely folded, longing for a better day
fear strikes like a fatal wound
eyes darken for hope is lost

Swallow

by Tristan Crawford

Second Place

We toil,
We slave,
We blister in the sun
To cultivate in the alleys of night
Blood and soul soft enough
To swallow,
And each morning, we awaken
With fresh trenches on our wings,
Staples in our knees.
It all reminds me of when
This city had trees
And you did not spend your time
Harvesting deceit.

Heart Has Human Hate

by Allison Moren

Third Place

The beauty lies in darkened eyes
Or hides around unhealthy tides,
A 'love you' seems a deathly scheme
And 'pretty' morphed as 'ugly' dreams.
To cut can only bring relief,
A sorrow between black and grief
No light can reach through murky ice
To warm the soul that rolls a dice.
But final breath to soon be past
A saving grace to come at last?
A pill slipped back into its case
For love has come and peaked its face
'I know the pain you try to bare,
For I have just been saved from there.'

Poetry

Grades 11 & 12



*Our Own
Expressions*

Morning

by Andrea Ueland

First Place

As the sun starts to rise a clock softly chimes;
So she fetches her paper, and wasting no time,
Hurried fingers move swiftly to comics within;
Then she reads with a laugh and a broadening grin.

Soon the coffee aroma, as mute as a mouse,
Gently wafts out the kitchen throughout the whole house.
Her serene hazel eyes gently close with a sigh
While “the world is at peace here, and now so am I.”

Vietnamese New Year

by Bao Nguyen

Second Place

Aunt boils meat, fries fish and watches the soup;
Uncle cut rice cake and set the fruits up;
I wipe plates and put the food nicely in;
Then we take empty bowls and chopsticks out.
Gates have been open, incense have been lit;
Pray we to ancestors who came to feast;
Wish them a happy new year, and for peace.
Outside the sun shines on new blossoms pink;
Winds sweet and soft stir a sense of homesick.
Old and dear are the traditions of Têt.

Masquerade

by Hannah Lawty

Third Place

A mask of beauty, love, or grace -
A fitting mask for any face
And as the garish smiles leer,
I cannot spy a single tear.

What does the mask strive to conceal?
A face unlike the world's ideal?
Your age replaced by tender youth
If this is true, then what is truth?

Your face is covered with a grin
Is it to hide the frown within?
I beg of you, remove the veil!
Or do you think your soul too frail?

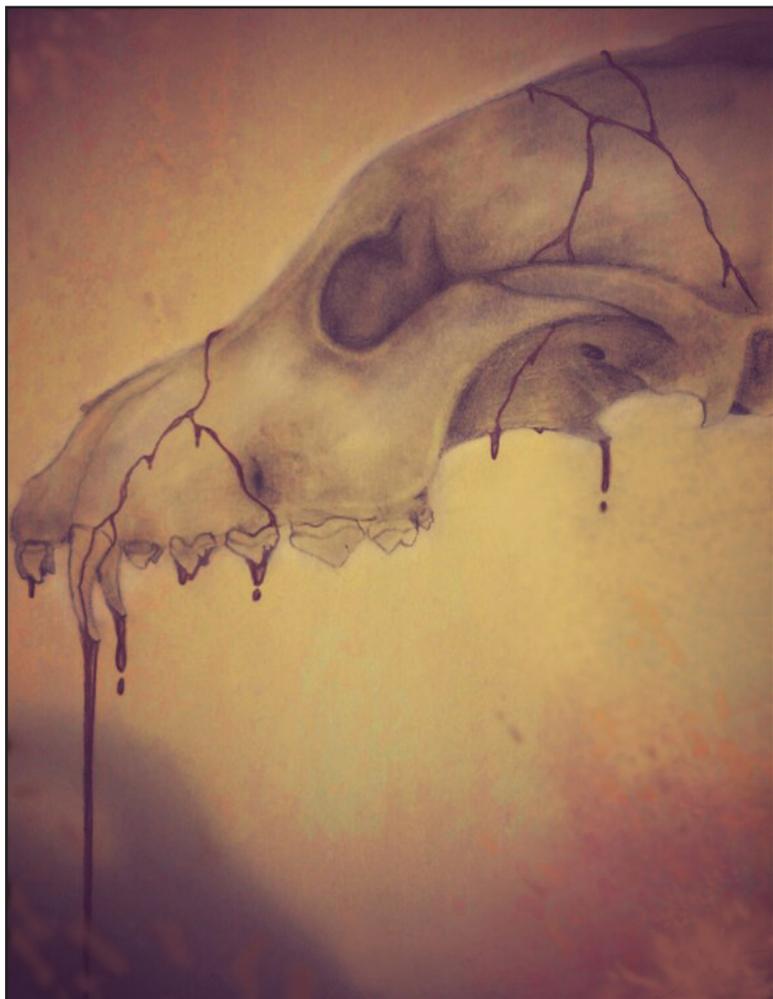
For I would rather see you true,
Although there's dark inside of you,
Because your frightful, mournful, cries
Are better than the blatant lies

I want to know the whole of you
And with my love, bring comfort, too
For truth will slowly, surely, fade
If we prolong this masquerade.

Your Bones

by Katherine Hunter

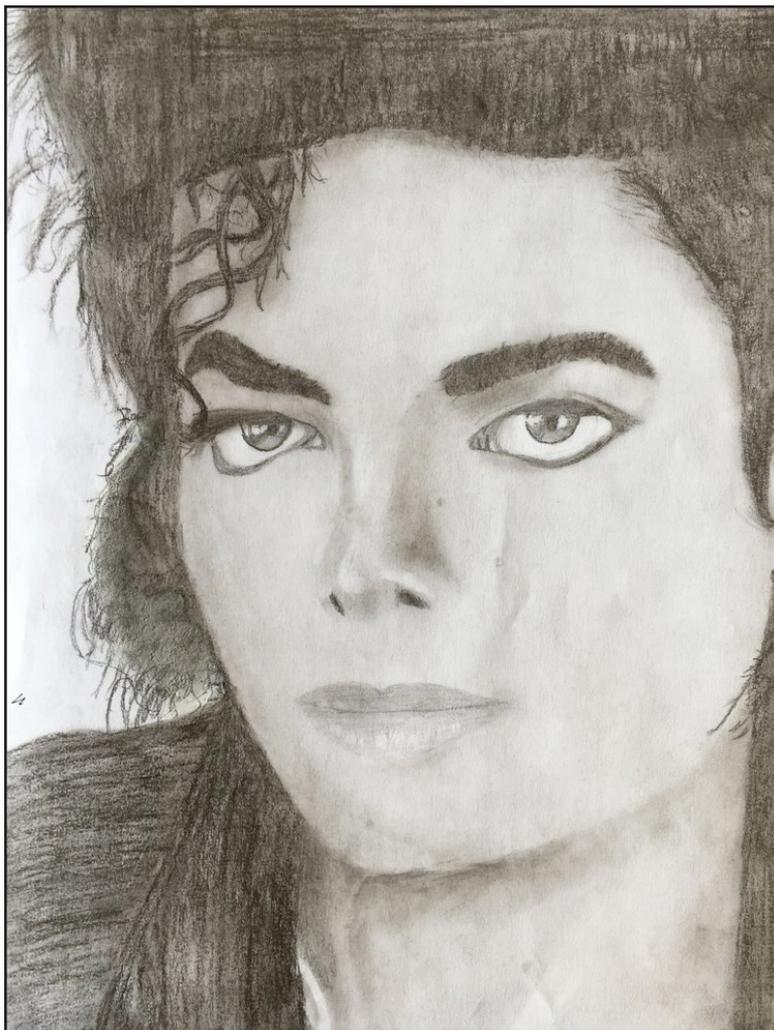
First Place



Michael Jackson

by Nicon Moeini

Second Place



January

by Martina Preston

Third Place



Landscape of My Soul

by Claire DeFrancesco

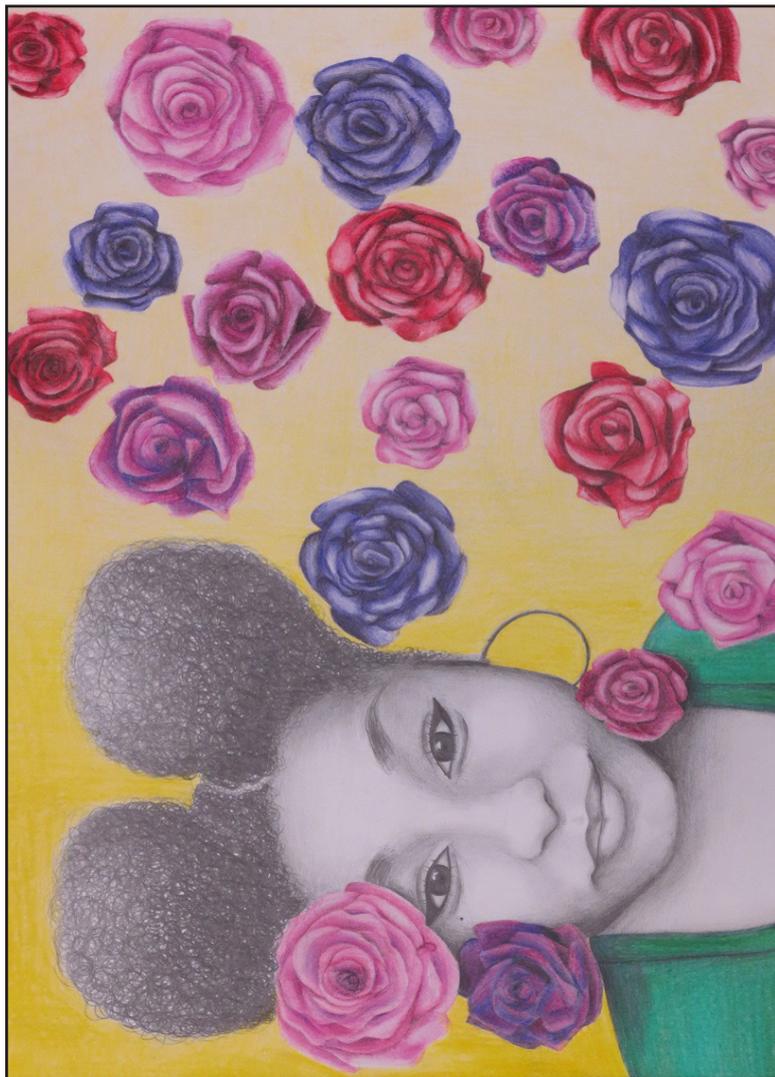
First Place



Savannah Rose

by Katlyn Daniels

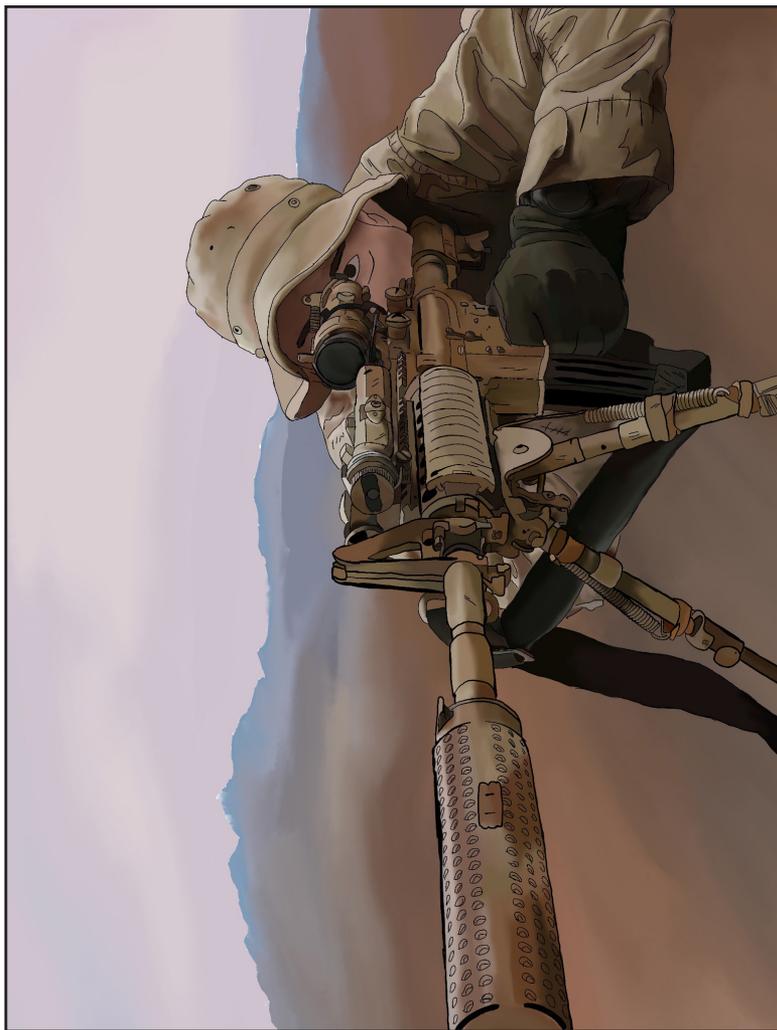
Second Place



Eyes On Target

by Nathen Cutler

Third Place



Oh, Honey

by Katie Lasko

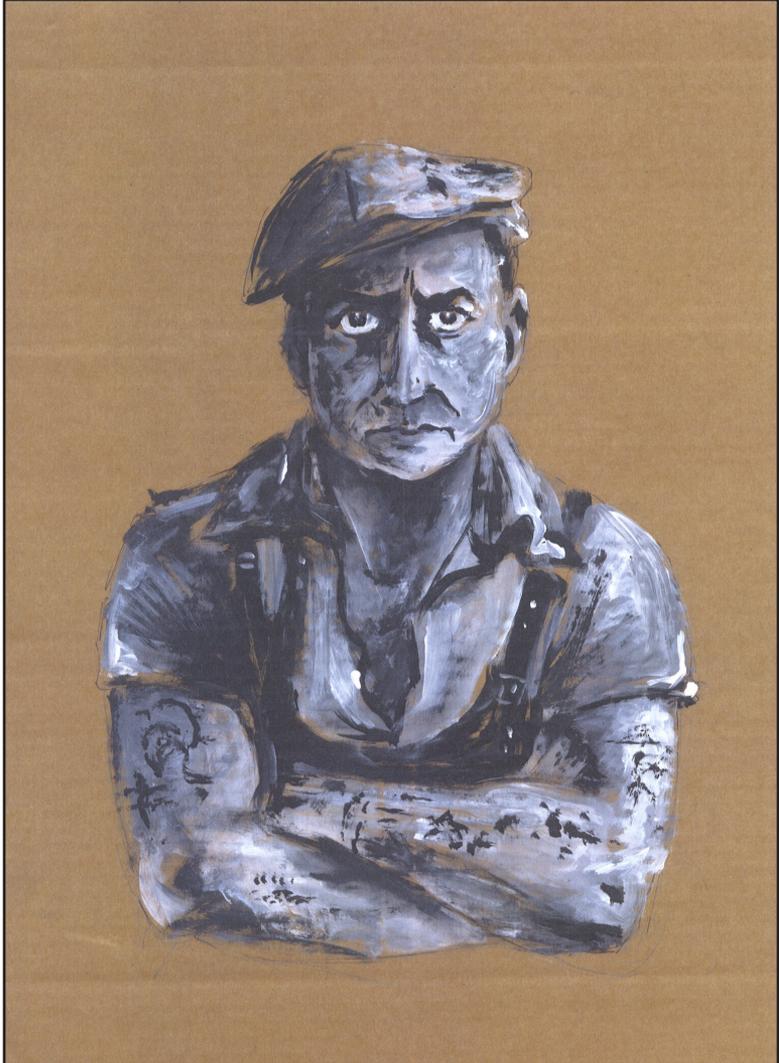
First Place



Les Halles

by Penny Rhines

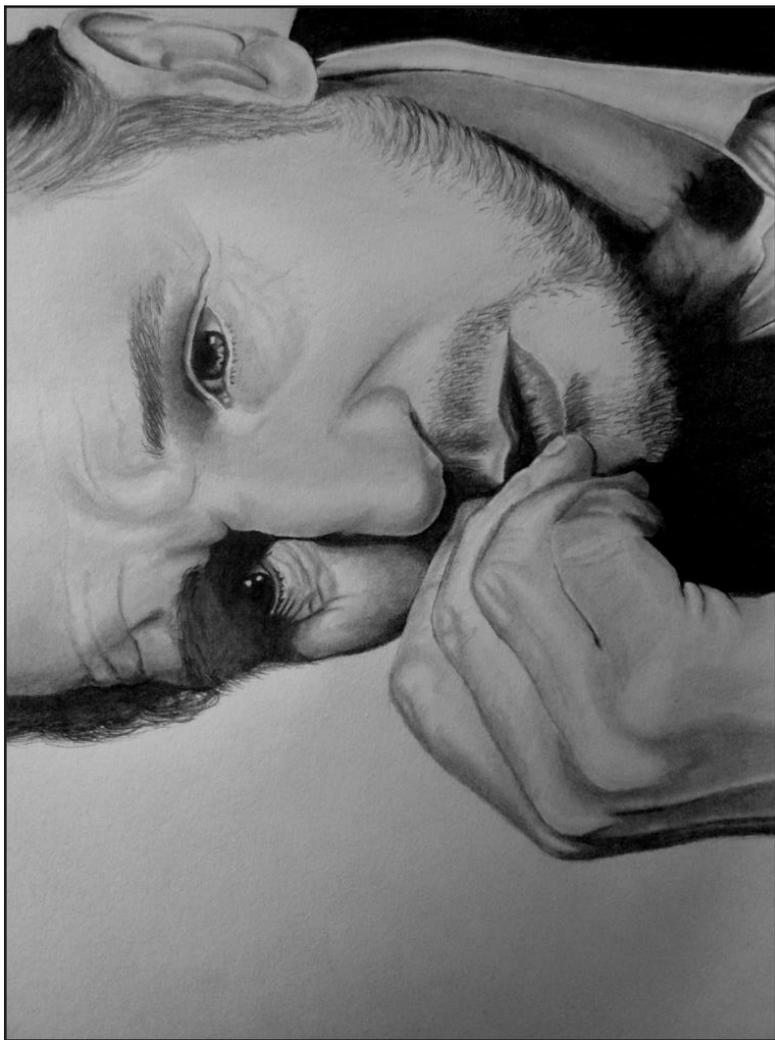
Second Place



Deep Thoughts

by Cole Maurmann

Third Place



Water

by Bailey Apthorp

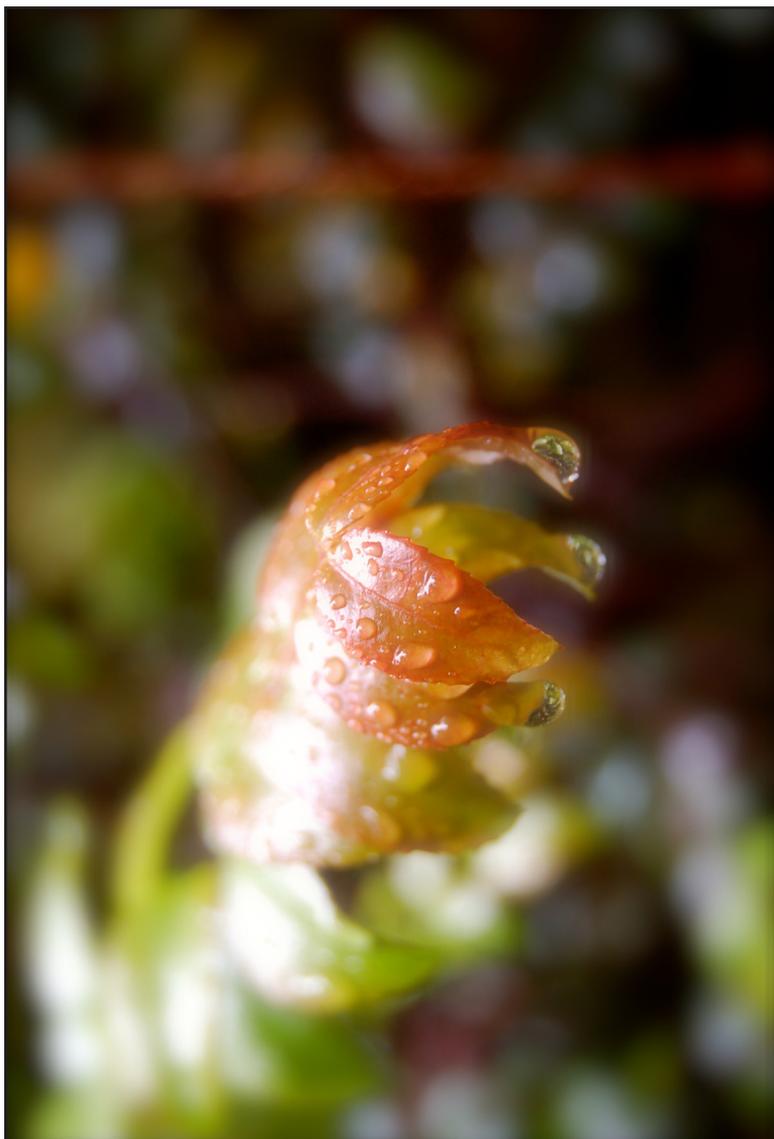
First Place



Drop of Light

by Taija PerryCook

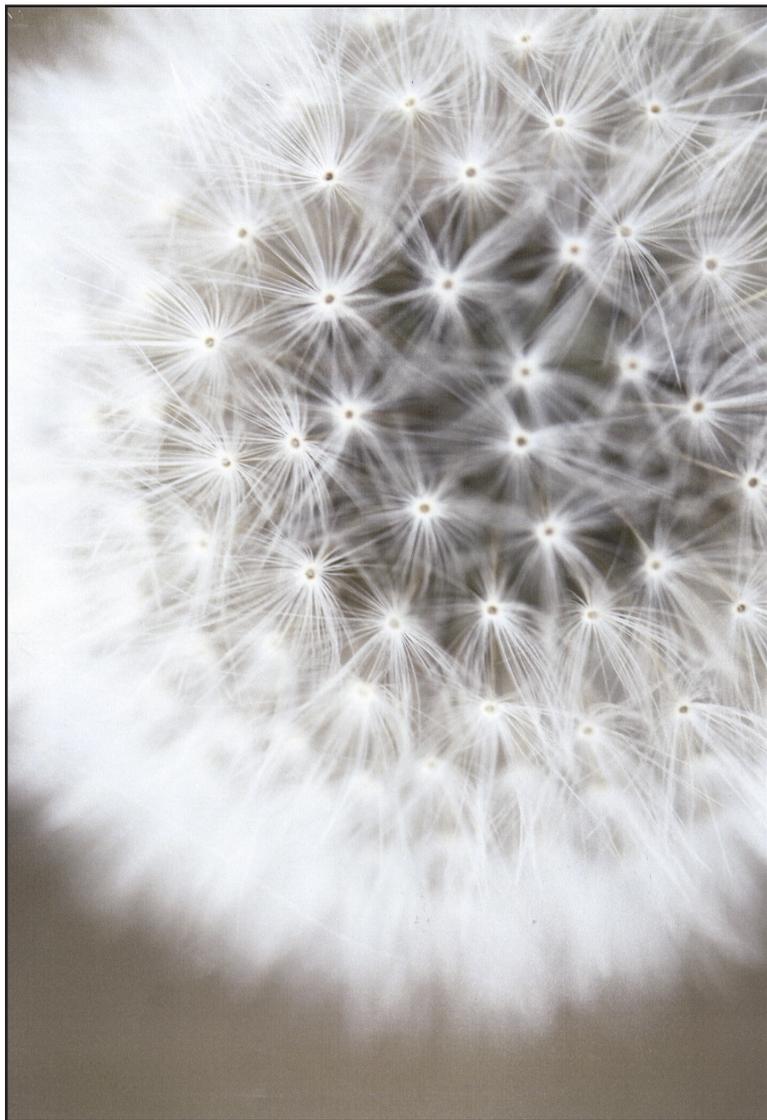
Second Place



Dandelion

by Rebecca Hernandez

Third Place



Simple Beauty

by Isadora Mattfeld

First Place



Old Dirt Road

by Kamie Jovag

Second Place



Precious

by Miya McCarter

Third Place



Back on the Farm

by Sydney Paulsen

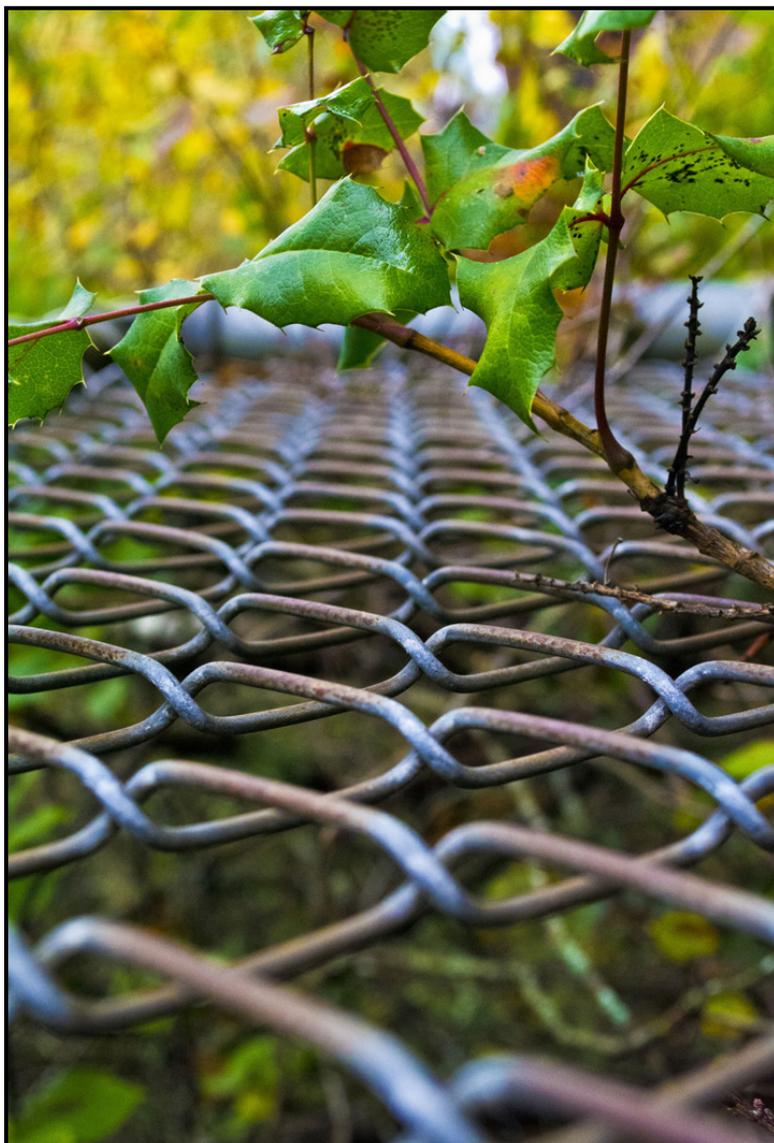
First Place



What a Wonderful World

by Jonathan Ross

Second Place



Floral Solitude

by Rebecca DePalma

Third Place



Persephone's Winter

by Annika Van Vlack

First Place

The wind whistles down an empty street, winnowing away dead leaves and litter. It slithers through the rusted chain-link fences that guard the abandoned warehouses and factories, past the smoke stacks that belched their last polluted breath years ago. With curious prying fingers, it glides down potholed streets, whispering to the patchy brown grass dappled with snow, ruffling the feathers of the murder of crows that perch in the leafless arms of a skeletal oak. It rattles the shutters of the shut-up double-wides, wafting the scent of mildew from the vacant houses.

The winter night falls fast, and with it the absolute darkness of an uninhabited place. The wind's relentless rattlings and rustlings and the scurrying of rats under the trailers are the only sounds. The light of a full moon is made milky and weak by the ever-present layer of thick clouds. Near the factories, silence is absolute. Eerie shadows slant across the pavement. Nothing stirs; nothing lives.

It was not always this way in the town of Persephone. Once, it was a just a junction where many railroads met. Then companies came to town, razing the collection of run-down farmhouses that clustered around a post office and feed store. They built factories and railroad depots and, with these, came the people.

They came from the city, from the surrounding farmland, from anywhere where there were people who needed jobs. These people needed places to live, so little cheap plywood houses and double-wide trailers popped up wherever there was room. There were mostly families, people who had many mouths to feed and hardly any money with which to do so. The factories paid decently for many years—not much, granted, but enough to buy food and keep everyone in shoes and clothes from the Thrift-E Stop in town. The schools were passable,

not that many of the past generation had gotten much further than eighth grade. Life had been even harder then, they always said.

Things looked good for their children and grandchildren, though, because here in Persephone, there was opportunity for everyone. Some people said it was the American Dream, but others would chuckle dryly and say it was just a way to stay alive. It hardly seemed to matter that they worked long hours with poor pay; Persephone was a symbol of hope and of plenty.

Nevertheless, it was a hard life for such abstract reward; single mothers worked all day at the factory and then took the graveyard shift at one of the fast-food joints in town. Battered and element-worn old bachelors with bad lungs and clogged arteries sat in one of the town's bars on Friday nights, chain-smoking and telling stories of their rough lives. Children of workers went to school in a drafty building that had been intended to be temporary. With cheap paraffin crayons, they made drawings of sunny locales and lush green trees that they could only imagine.

For a long time, people hoped. For a long time, people saved up and meant well and told stories. That was the best they could do, after all. In so many ways, they were all very different people from very different backgrounds, but they were all the children, or grandchildren, or descendants of dirt poor or persecuted immigrants. They were tougher than the nails and stronger than the steel that they worked with all day long.

Even unbreakable steel has its limits, though. Companies crumble and economies dip.

The rumors of lay-offs and pay cuts started as just that: gossip, but soon it became evident that there was truth behind the stories. Tens, dozens, scores of people lost their jobs, and the already lean salaries dropped. Maybe in the city, where there were other jobs to be had, it might have been fine, but Persephone relied on the factories completely; without them, it was just a collection of ramshackle houses and grimy businesses.

Those who had lost their jobs left almost at once, packing their families and belongings into little cars or beat-up minivans and hitting

the highway. They didn't have anywhere to go, but Persephone. Those who stayed lived hard-scrabble lives. The opportunity that Persephone had once boasted now seemed a million miles away.

The town stayed afloat for a few more years, but eventually, inevitably, the factories, which were already running on a skeleton crew, shut down, locking their great chain-link gates. The last residents of Persephone packed their cars and left. One by one, the businesses closed their doors and boarded up their windows.

When the last I-PACK moving truck rolled onto the interstate, Persephone was a ghost town.

The wind creeps down the dark, empty streets, past the abandoned Thrift-E Stop, past the gas station with the missing pumps, past the grocery store that sold its last package of ground beef or bag of bread years ago. It sneaks back through the factory yards and rattles worn-out warning signs—"No Trespassing," "Keep Out!" It moves down a wide industrial road, slithering past one last closed-up truck stop, across a jumbled junction of railroads, and out onto the highway, an invisible, barely audible whisper. It leaves Persephone and its silent streets, heading off, like all the others, without a backward glance.

The Daydream

by Abigail VanDoorne

Second Place

A time and place that cannot be fathomed:

"Please," the girl begs her father. "I have to go. Elden can't protect himself. He's the best fighter I know, but Father, he's too young! He cannot hold his own against seasoned warriors."

"I said no, Anara! You are even less of a warrior than that boy is. You could not hold your own out there either, and if you went you would die immediately. I forbid you to go. Are we clear?" her father, in his mail and tunic, says.

"No, Father. You don't understand. Elden and I can protect each other. We have fought together many times before. Why, we defeated Tolly Blackeye and his thugs with nothing but a knife each. We can come out alive," she argues.

"Anara, there is a dragon out there. A youth and a girl would never stand a chance."

"But your men will be fighting the dragon as well. Surely there's a greater chance with an army at our back."

"My men," her father explains, exasperated, "Will be fighting other men. You can't kill a dragon, Anara. It just isn't done. You stay, and that's final!"

He stomps out the door, toward the battle and his death by dragonfire.



Present day:

She loved daydreaming more than anything, even more than archery. Perhaps it was the fact that her parents were dreamers, or that she read so many books. Always longing for a different world, she walked through life talking to herself as she would another person, pretending that her favorite dreams were real.

Anara, named after a distant ancestor, is going out to the backyard with her bow when the dream begins.

She sneaks out of a small shack, her face covered by a dark cloak. There is a quiver of arrows on her back, a bow in her hand, and a sword in a dusty scabbard hanging at her hip. Looking left and right and seeing no one, she hurries towards the battlefield.

Anara halts at the end of the yard, across from the neon yellow target. She nocks an arrow. Her coat becomes a cloak, her yard an arena of war, the target a living, breathing dragon!

She fires the arrow at the dragon's heart. The beast is bigger than she had imagined, with wings as big as the wind. The arrow misses, sailing off into the surging sea of warriors. The dragon's mighty foot crashes to the ground, narrowly missing Anara the archer. When its foot lifts again, she runs to find Elden.

Her eyes narrow. The wind blows her hair back from her face. Each breath makes a cloud of steam in the air. The target-dragon leaps towards her-

She ducks a sword and rolls, up on her feet again in an instant. "Elden!" she cries, and a meter away, a head of shaggy brown hair turns.

"Anara!" he yells, running to her. "Behind you!" Hearing his warning, the girl spins and shoots at the muzzle of the great dragon bearing down upon them.

The arrow misses the target and thuds into the fence, her line of advancing enemy soldiers. She scowls and nocks her next arrow.

The dragon howls and spews fire as Anara's arrow meets its eye. Roaring with pain, it searches the battlefield with its one-eyed glare for the archer who had dared challenge the Great Wurm of the North.

Another enemy falls as her arrow smacks satisfyingly into a tree.

A ramrod stick of birch is her sword, flicking into the bushes like a spearhead through chain mail. She drops the stick as it catches on a branch and draws an arrow from her quiver. She pulls, releases, it flies-

She has only two arrows left. Elden has only one. The dragon has found them. Anara knows they are going to die, and there is only one thing left to do.

They will keep fighting.

The arrow hits the tree high up, where an axeman has jumped with a downward stroke. She reached for her last arrow-

It is gone. The dragon grins down at her with its terrible smile. "Anara!" Would Elden's voice be the last she heard? "Anara! Catch!" he calls. She turns, he tosses an arrow. Catching it, she nocks, pulls back...

She looses an arrow. It hits dead center in the target's bulls-eye, the dragon's heart. Her dragon is vanquished. As Anara goes to collect her arrows, she pauses.

The arrow embedded in the dragon's heart is killing it. Every heartbeat is pain. But it has the strength for one last kill. Anara and Elden embrace for the final time as the dragonfire washes over them.

Anara's father sees it all. He sinks to his knees as the dragon falls dead onto what once had been his brave daughter and her brave friend, and lets the fire take him, too.

She hears something. The sound is unnaturally frightening. Slowly, slowly she turns. On the roof of her house is a dragon, its wings as big as the wind.

Two Minds, One Fate

by Amelia Day

Third Place

I wake up to find myself shackled to the wall. I know why I'm here. Sometimes I feel as if I know too much. There are others out there like me, though for all I know they're dead or worse, subjected to the laboratory testing. We all share a unique trait, we all have tried to keep it hidden, but we all knew that eventually we would be found out. . . like I am now. The common trait we share? We can all think with two, for lack of a better word, minds at the same time. There is no scientific name for our condition, because for all the public knows, we don't exist. I can focus both of my minds on one thing, much like the average human can with their one mind, but that comes with a side effect, and not a bad one. I am able to use twice the brain power of one of my minds alone, and even one of the minds I keep in my head, is smarter than the average. Though I could have easily excelled in all of my classes, my parents warned me that I had to keep my intelligence to myself, so I wouldn't end up in a bad situation. . .the exact one I'm in now.

My mind has gone through countless scenarios in my head. All of my life I have feared the moment I step into whatever painful, torture they have dreamed up, and now here I am. Hours, maybe minutes away to finding out what I have wondered and feared about for all of my childhood, finding out what will happen. In a strange way, I am intrigued at finally figuring out the question that has plagued me my entire life, the one question I have yet to solve, but I know that the relief at solving that puzzle would fall away soon. Soon I will know, soon I will find out, and soon I will suffer like I have never suffered before. I am frightened beyond belief, but I need to keep myself in the present.

As I lay on the ground, I scan the room finding it desolate, clean, and without even one bit of furniture in the place, let alone a toilet. I

reason that without the means of a toilet and the cleansed condition of the room, they will not leave me in here long enough to force me to use the floor as a lavatory. No, they will get me, and bring me somewhere. I don't know where, but I'm sure that I will soon find out.

The door creaks open slowly, and a young man walks through. With my eyes, I beg him to help, but he won't meet my desperate gaze.

"Follow me," the man says in a deep baritone voice. I walk toward him slowly. Struggling will not help, only compliance. He leads me through the maze-like hallways. I blink constantly as I stumble down the corridor. Whatever drug they gave me must have made me unsteady and the bright white lights they installed here are certainly not helping. Suddenly, he stops at another door, numbered 415 and I nearly run into him. He says nothing as he gestures towards the door, but I can see the not-quite-concealed concern on his face. Maybe he's not entirely bought into the whole "researching" thing, but he says nothing, so I stay silent as well.

I place my hand on the sleek metal doorknob and glance over at the guard for confirmation. Seeing him nod, I open the door shakily, more nervous than ever. I had only heard stories from my parents, only myths of what these rooms really held, but I'm not sure I would even want to know the instruments of my pain, the instruments that would deliver my torture. Peeking into the room, I see a single woman clad in all black and adorned with a shining necklace. She is sitting in a chair, and is studying the walls of the room, though they are bare, but for one metal door. I shudder. What could be beyond it, sleek, metal machines, shackled medical beds? I shake these thoughts out of my mind. Only focus on what you know, I remind myself in my head. I focus my minds back on the lady in the chair. I wouldn't call this woman appealing, though I wouldn't call her ugly. She has a sort of cold power about her, stiff straight features, and just looking at her makes me feel a sense of fear. As I come into the room step after shaky step, her snake-like eyes flit across my body, judging my every feature.

"Abby, I've heard much about you," she said slowly, calculating. I don't know whether to thank her or demand what it was that she had heard, so I stayed silent. Rising from the chair (metal and white, as is seemingly everything in this place), she comes toward me.

"I know you may be frightened, but don't worry." she says, taking my hand. I felt a strange urge to trust her, though I knew it was just an act.

"Where is 'here' exactly?" I say forcefully.

"Here is where you need to be," she responds back coldly, as a warning. I feel a chill pass across my back. Clearing her throat, she continues on her mantra.

"You are a key part to our research facility, renowned for its study of newly discovered neuroscience, the study of others much like you."

"Like me in what way?" I defiantly retort, not thinking of the consequences it might bring.

"I think you know that answer," she said, before turning her back on me.

Carefully, she pulls a gun out of her pocket.

"I'm not afraid of using this," she says, slowly, her gaze focused on the handgun. She absentmindedly starts to spin it around the fingers of her hand in a carefree way that frightens me even more.

"No, we can get most of the information we need with you dead. Of course, having you alive would be much more valuable, though I'm not sure you'll want to even be alive once we get started." The curves of her mouth turn upward slightly at this, but soon drift back down into their normal position. Again my eyes dart to the door, number 416, but I quickly turn my attention back to her. I have the sense to ask no more questions, only follow this mysterious and deadly woman across the room to the numbered, white door that holds the answers to all of my current questions.

"Your turn Abby," she says menacingly, stepping away from the door, implying that I should go in. This was the moment I had feared. The moment of clarity, but yet, the moment of great sorrow. Taking a deep breath, I slowly grip the cool handle, open the dreaded door, and step into whatever awaits me.

The Sunday Man

by Finlay Adamson

First Place

It was January 25th, 1964, and every January 25th, 1964, the Sunday Man talked. Hardly anyone heard the Sunday Man anymore. Any unattended radio had long since ran out of power, and televisions were a thing of the past. However, there was always one household who listened to The Sunday Man, and this was the Mccarthys.

On this night, William and Susan Mccarthy sat in their warm, cushioned armchairs and the children sat on the floor. All attention was centered towards the radio sitting on the coffee table in the center of the room. It was expected to talk soon.

“Dad?” Robert asked. “Is he gonna be late?”

“Robert, you know very well that the Sunday Man is never late,” his mother gently chastised him.

“Your mother’s right, son,” William said, as he looked down at his watch. The hands of the device looked like they always did before the Sunday Man.

“I hope he says something different this time,” June piped in.

“We’ll see soon enough,” William rustled the young girl’s long, auburn hair and leaned back in his armchair.

Without warning, the ancient beige radio sputtered to life.

“We interrupt this program. This is a national emergency. The President of the United States will appear shortly over the Emergency Broadcast System.”

“This is Lyndon Johnson, the Commander in Chief of the United States of America. An unprecedented nuclear attack on US soil by the Soviet Union has resulted in widespread civilian death and destruction across the both Eastern and Western seaboard, and the damage of industrial facilities throughout the nation. The United States has attempted a maximum response counterstrike. Stay tuned for further information.”

The family stayed silent, their faces illuminated by the dim fluorescent lighting provided by bulbs hanging from the firm concrete ceiling.

The radio resumed its message. "It is currently 6:04 PM, on Sunday, January 25th, 1964. All citizens are strongly advised to stay in their homes. Government assistance is expected to commence within the near future, however, you must remain inside your homes to be eligible for the limited relief supplies currently available."

The radio beeped several times, and resumed its static.

"Well, nothing new, I suppose," William said. "Looks like the Sunday Man doesn't have anything important to say."

"Dad?" Robert questioned. "Have you ever heard the Sunday Man say anything different?"

There was silence as the McCarthys pondered. Finally, Susan spoke up. "My grandfather could sometimes make him say different words. He could twist those dials and make him say all sorts of things. But he died while both of our parents were very young, and none of the other families knew as much about the radio. They could get it to work sometimes, but then one of the dials broke off, and we didn't experiment with it much after that. Luckily, we can still hear the Sunday Man, or else we'd hear nothing at all."

"That's why we're thankful for the Sunday Man," her mother said. "He tells us what it's like up there, and how it's much safer in here." She thought about the other families, the ones who had left, and felt something resembling regret. She should have tried harder to make them stay, the poor souls.

"Before I forget," William interrupted. "The radio needs new batteries." He strolled to a nearby cabinet, where he noted the low supply of batteries. "Looks like we're starting to wear down our battery supply."

Shock registered on Susan's face. "We've used those batteries since my grandfather came down here!" She thought for a moment. "Well, I'm sure government assistance will come along soon enough like the Sunday Man said. We've been very good."

William relaxed, and returned to his chair.

June looked quizzically at her parents. “Do you have to be good for government assistance to come?”

Robert turned to face them as well. “We’ve been real good! Why hasn’t it come yet?”

Susan turned to her husband and prompted him with a nod.

“Well, children,” William began, “You’ve been very good. But a very long time ago, a few years after the radio dial broke and we couldn’t make Mr. Sunday talk as much as he use to, the other families who lived with us decided that it was safe to go outside. They said that Mr. Sunday would never say anything else, and that they knew better than him. They tried to make us come with them, but your mother and I locked ourselves away and wouldn’t come out until they were gone. They left most of the nutrition bars and water with us, and here we are.”

Susan continued her husband’s story. “If they’d all stayed, all our food would be gone right now. Since it’s just us, we can stay in here until Mr. Sunday tells us we can leave. But Mr. Sunday was very angry with our friends that left, and he was angry at us for not stopping them. They were punished when they went outside, but Mr. Sunday forgave us just enough so that he didn’t let anything hurt us. And that’s why we must listen to Mr. Sunday every January 25th, 1964, to show him that we thank him.”

Robert and June absorbed this information while Annie, too young to understand such complex matters, was playing on the floor.

“Does that mean that one day, if we’re real good, Mr. Sunday will say that we can go outside?” June asked.

“And Mr. Sunday will bring us food?” Robert questioned.

“Of course!” Susan smiled at her children.

“I don’t know if I’d want to go outside,” June confided. “I kinda like it down here.”

Susan thought of her mother’s mother and her father’s father, and how a very long time ago, they had escaped the wrath of war by hiding underground with an absolutely absurd amount of food that wouldn’t perish and an equal amount of water. She thought of her mother, who managed to keep her alive when the water was almost

gone, and had rationed the food so that it would last even longer.

She thought of her father, who had figured out how to extract water that fell from the sky and went into the ground and bring it into their shelter.

She thought of her sister and William's brother and the other people who left when her parents died and how they thought that clean water from the sky meant that Mr. Union was gone.

Most of all, she thought of Mr. Sunday, who was keeping them safe this very instant, and who one day would give them more nutrition bars and more water and whatever else they needed.

Susan felt so content with the world at this very instant that it would be hard to believe that anybody or anything, save Mr. Sunday, could possibly convince her that Mr. Sunday wasn't real, that his message had been playing on repeat every week for one hundred years. Nothing could convince her that one transmitter, uninterrupted by the war, was the basis of her beliefs. Nothing could convince her that it was really January 25th, 2064, and outside, the grass was growing, and the sun was shining.

The Colors of Time

by Kaitlyn Lawrenz

Second Place

A young girl races her mother up a hill, to a gnarled tree serving as the finish line. She reaches it just seconds before her mother, cheering and twirling, her crimson skirt fanning out around her as her voice echoes through the air, mingling with her mother's soft chuckle. They begin a game of tag, chasing each other around the large tree. When the girl trips over a root, her mother shushes her cries with stories that make her giggle. The entire world is full of their laughter as they begin to run and jump and play again.

She blinks.

She's older now, meeting her friend at the tree to swap secrets and gossip. They climb the straggly limbs, maneuvering to dangle upside down from two branches. The girl's orange sneakers swaying as her feet swing, back and forth. They discuss their dreams and wishes, and trade their fears, swapping every bit of information and imagination that they can come up with. They've created entirely new worlds in their heads that no one else knows about.

She blinks.

She's a teenager, leading a boy up the grassy hill, where they sit together under the canopy of leaves, her golden hair wound around his fingers as they whisper to each other. They close their eyes as their mouths open to reveal blindingly bright smiles. They talk of love as their smiles play across their lips and their foreheads touch. They're the only two people in the universe in this moment.

She blinks.

She's among the emerald leaves, pulling herself farther and farther up. When she reaches the highest branch, she grabs the camera from around her throat, snapping multiple shots of the view. She captures the rolling hills, the lazy river stretching across the

horizon, the vast sky that reaches to the heavens. She captures every last drop of the beautiful image before her, all in one single photo. She ignores the protests of her friend below her, telling her that she's climbed too high and that she might fall. Danger isn't a worry, because the scenery is well worth it.

She blinks.

The fabric of her sapphire dress catches on the bark of the tree as she presses her back into the trunk. A man jumps out from where he had been standing on the other side of the tree. He grabs her waist, making her squeal as he pulls her into a loving embrace. He whispers in her ear, then takes a step back and drops to one knee. The ring he produces from his pocket causes her to gasp, a hand flying up to cover her heart. She says one word that makes him jump to his feet, pick her up, and start spinning her around, overcome with joy. She whispered *yes*.

She blinks.

She walks up the grassy slope, watching her daughter run ahead. She remembers this day, a long time ago, when she was the child, climbing the mountain that was really just a hill. She sits down in the grass, under the shade of the tree, and begins picking the purple wildflowers around her. She threads them together, making a flower chain. As her daughter races past, she calls the little girl over, then places the chain on her small head, telling her she now looks like a princess, and that she's always been one, even without a crown. The girl, elated, starts picking more wildflowers from the ground. Once the bouquet was complete, she handed it to her mother, telling her that a queen needs something beautiful too.

Touched, she blinks away tears.

Now, when she walks up the hill, her pace is much slower, her breath is a little more ragged. It has been several years since she has walked up this hill, visited this tree, and she has forgotten how much it winds her every time.

Twisted around her gnarled fingers are six bright colored ribbons, each one long enough to be a necklace.

She takes the first one, a silky crimson ribbon, and ties it to a low-hanging branch. In her mind, she can clearly see the red skirt, fanning around her as she had spun around with her mother.

She ties the orange ribbon to another branch, remembering her old sneakers of the same color. She had kept those shoes long after they didn't fit her anymore, tucked away in the back of her closet. Of course, by the time she had finally gotten rid of them, they closer resembled brown than orange.

The yellow ribbon twists and turns through the air, dancing with the breeze, mimicking her golden hair, before it had melted into silver. Her hair had been her pride and joy. She recalls sitting before her mirror each night, brushing her long locks, even after she's gotten out all of the tangles.

The green of the ribbon blends in with the green of the leaves, becoming nothing but an extension of the branch, a thin leaf that bends and flows under the pressure of the wind. How many years had she been hiding in these same branches? She remembers picking up the leaves that fell from the tree, knotting them together to try to make a hat, but always ripping it before she could ever finish.

The blue ribbon gets caught on the clasp of her bracelet, clinging to her for one last moment before detaching. She can still feel the material of that blue dress snagging on the bark of the tree, before releasing her into the arms of her true love, releasing her into the best years of her life.

The purple ribbon is the longest, for it's the most important. It reaches to the ground, like the arms of a mother embracing her child. Those wildflowers her daughter had picked for her are all dried up now, flattened and stored in a photo album, along with the pictures she had taken from the top of this tree.

She steps back to view her work. Each ribbon clings to the tree, just as all of those memories had done throughout her life.

Now, she won't have to worry about those memories being forgotten. They'll stay with the tree, which will live far longer than she will. Each memory will live past the point when her life will be no more than a whisper of a tale. She, and everyone she knows, will be long

gone, but these few memories will still cling to these branches, these leaves, and this dirt.

They'll live on.

She blinks.

The Little Thief

by Daniel Matsuda

Third Place

As He entered his workplace He heard the alarm bell sound, and quickly He got into the elevator, and pressed the button leading to the back of The Head.

“I knew I shouldn’t have left for so long...stupid! Stupid!” He scolded himself, smacking his palm against his forehead emphasizing every “stupid”.

He was an older fellow, with a gray beard, and His once blue overalls had signs of definite wear, as it was apparent he had worn them for some years, now covered in grease stains and oil, but he was an honest fellow, and did his job faithfully.

As soon as the all too familiar “ping” of the elevator sounded, and the heavy metal doors rolled open, he briskly trotted in a half hurried manner, trying to keep his cool, to the end of the hall and quickly took a left, knowing this place by heart had it’s advantages. Down one more hallway and at the end was the Control Room, where he would be able to discover the problem. As He entered the Control Room and sat down in his leather chair, His eye was drawn to a little red flashing light, alerting Him something was amiss in the Emotions Sector.

“I have not been down there for ages,” He mumbled to himself, as he grabbed a flashlight and small daypack filled with utilitarian odds and ends.

Still muttering and grumbling about the bothersome inconvenience of that particular department, he made His way down the hall again and back into the elevator to see what was up with that (in His opinion) useless Sector. He was half way there when the powersuddenly went out and there he was, stuck in a stationary elevator with no light.

“Curses!” He yelled, “today is just not my day,” He groaned discouragingly.

Quickly, he clicked on his flashlight and clambered onto the side railings and popped open a ceiling tile to reveal the entire shaft, which was now a dark chasm, void of any luminescence whatsoever, save his little beam.

“One floor up there is a breaker box I can get to”, He thought to himself.

With flashlight in His mouth, He managed to climb His way half a floor up, when another problem presented itself: getting the heavy metal doors open. He positioned Himself with one foot pressed against the frame and both hands in the crevice of the doors, and began to pull with all his might. The heavy doors moved slightly, then with one last heave they flung open just enough for him to slip inside. They didn’t slam shut behind Him like He’d expected, but uneventfully remained in the same position.

“Now what was I gonna do?”

He often forgot the most menial tasks like this and reprimanded himself for doing so, and paused right there in the dark, and tried to remember what it was.

“Ah yes! That blasted Sector!”

Completely forgetting about the power, He absent-mindedly took the stairs down one more level to the Emotions Sector. Old and forgotten, yet not out of mind, He looked around the whole Sector to see what might’ve caused that red alert light to go off.

“Perhaps a malfunction? Not likely. My equipment is always top notch,” He proudly bragged to himself.

Then he noticed something odd. Dust was settled on the entire Sector except the panel covering the switches to that particular Sector, and the panel cover was swung open.

Someone had been here. Examining the crime scene in closer detail, He discovered that not only had they trespassed, but they had also stolen one of the key components necessary for the function of this entire Sector: a small screw, common, yet so invaluable it could not

be replaced for it was unique to that panel, and there was none other like it.

“Great. A screw loose in the Head,” He said almost despairingly.

Suddenly he heard the noise of quick footsteps behind him and a giggle. Whipping around with flashlight in hand, his heart began to race. He hadn’t ever heard another person before.

“WHO’S THERE!?” He yelled into the dark.

No one answered. Cautiously, He crept His way back down the hall where he last heard the giggling trail off. Someone was toying with Him, and he didn’t find it amusing, not in the least, especially in the Emotions Sector, of all places.

“When I find you, and believe me I will, you’re in big trouble!” He proclaimed in His best no-nonsense voice.

The hunt was on. Whoever stole that screw thought this was a game. A game He was not willing to play, but he was sucked into it, for He had to, to get that precious screw back. He could hear the innocent laughter of sweet adolescence echo through the Sector’s vast chambers. Still searching, He saw the small corner of a bright yellow dress behind some low level pipes.

Then a great idea came upon Him.

“Do you like games?” He said with a cunning smile, pretending not to notice her.

“Because I know the most marvelous and fun game! How ‘bout we make a deal?”

“Oh I love games! But. . .” She stammered. “What’s a deal?” Her tiny, high pitched voice questioned as she poked her small head from behind the pipes.

“It’s where you and I decide to do something for each other.” He explained. “How bout you give me that metal piece and I’ll play any game you want.”

“Mmmm. . .” She thought for a few seconds. “Okie. But I get to pick the game!” she exclaimed as she jumped out from her hiding spot. Her big blue eyes and her blonde curly hair reached a little past her shoulders. She looked like she was about five or six.

“Why of course! What would you like to play? But first you must

keep your part of the deal.” She handed him the screw with a smile.

“What would you like to play my dear girl?”

“Hide and go seek!” she giggled, brimming with mirth.

“Very well!” He said, and the two played for hours upon hours, and He didn’t even bother to fix the Sector’s circuit board, for it could wait.

When the two finally were tired out at the end of the day, they sat on the bottom of a flight of stairs and after a long silence He finally asked

“What’s your name by the way?” in a kind voice.

She answered with a smile after looking Him in the eyes for a few seconds:

“Love.”

An Epilogue for Gatsby's Flower

by Claire Summa

First Place

The lustrous car sped away from the overbearing house at dusk, leaving a trail of toxic gas in its wake. The equally overbearing driver gripped the wheel with an intensity reserved almost exclusively for a madman. His white knuckles threatened to break the wheel into two crippled pieces, which would be frivolously abandoned as they no longer pleased their masters. Just like their old life. Tom Buchanan set his steely eyes on Daisy's empty ones, and tightened his grip. His wife's decadently dressed body appeared lifeless, a corpse hidden under the flowers of mourning. Daisy's once bright and loving face was expressionless, the result of the mask of passivity she had worn for too long; now a permanent feature.

"It's gone," Daisy murmured.

"What is?" Tom muttered gruffly, drinking from his flask while aggressively leaning his cruel body forward over the wheel.

"Our home, our life, our everything." At the sound of that wistful whisper Tom slammed his foot on the brake pedal, causing the car to screech helplessly as the wheels spun wildly.

"Tom!" cried Daisy, clutching the side door as the car skidded to a sudden stop.

"Because that man has taken it from us. That filthy bootlegger! He cheated, lied, he put foolish ideas in your head. Hypnotized you with his lavish parties, long-winded tales of his fabricated adventures, and all of his presumptuous modern nonsense." Daisy stared forward hollowly as her husband raged on.

"He was a careless, nouveau riche, social climber whose sole aim was to dismantle the institutions that hold up all civilization. And look where it got him. Shot. That son-of-a-bitch is done trying to destroy our life, and Daisy-" Tom's voice broke slightly, the earnest expression

on his face disparaged by his frantic eyes. "We can start a new life together, you and I. I forgive you for what happened with that man, you didn't know what you were doing or saying, he took advantage of your simplistic nature." Daisy's mouth twisted as her spine stiffened sharply, as if surfacing for the first time.

"I love you, you've always loved me, and we will go back to a life devoid of corruption." With that he smiled paternally at his nodding wife, his conquest. Tom Buchanan leaned back, loosened his grip, and drove on towards the city in a self-satisfied silence.

They drove on through the forest, through the desolate landscape, to the valley of ashes. Daisy studied the grey world around her, and found herself staring into the bespectacled eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleberg. The all-seeing eyes peered down at her, and seemed to flash in the dim glow of the headlights. Daisy's mask shattered. The passivity was banished from her body, and passion permeated through her like venom. She realized the severity of her crimes, the saturated artificiality of her shallow life, and the circular path she was driving down from which there was no escape.

"I want to get out," Daisy breathed.

"What did you say?"

"I want to get out," she said.

"Out of what?" barked Tom, "This ashtray of a town?"

"I want to get out of this car, out of this marriage, out of this lie," answered Daisy. With a fleeting look at her husband's slack-jawed expression, she reached for the door handle. But Tom quickly awoke from his trance and yanked her back with his right hand, clutching her arm maliciously causing her to cry out in pain.

"I will not lose you now, after all I have done for you, you'd be a fool to leave me, and the money," Tom bellowed, his glinting eyes fixed on her while the car swerved.

"I'm not your fool anymore. I'm not a beautiful little fool you can use for your own pleasure and throw away when you tire of me. I've been silent for too long, and look at what it's done. I've married a madman, murdered his mistress, and killed my love," Daisy cried. "As for the money, keep it. It causes more destruction than hate, more pain

than hunger, more corruption than power.”

She lunged for the door handle, and Tom dove on to her. The car spiraled further out of control. Tom and Daisy shared one final moment of hollow, colourless repudiation as life and death hung in the balance. The car rolled off the road and crashed into a grey cement building, where it crumpled into a disarray of debris. Tom’s once powerful body lay on the hood, his wanting manhood now a contorted mess of murky blood and squelched flesh. The aggressive and dominating tension sapped in one final act of violence. Daisy was stretched over the front seat, her eyes once again empty. A wilted flower in the absence of light.

Forget Me Not

by Andrea Ueland

Second Place

I'd never seen a smile so enchanting. Something about it captivated me as he stood outside the business, fixing his blue eyes on me.

"You must be Amelia Parker," he said, and I shuddered at the cold hand shaking mine.

"I saw the Help Wanted sign, and I'd like to apply." Shifting from one foot to the other, I tugged at my long sleeves. I'd gotten this far, and there was no use losing a job because of a few scars.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "one of my employees is, ah, indisposed, and we're short-handed. By the way, I'm Rex Jacobs, owner of The Forget Me Not Shop."

"Well I can start any time—that is, if I'm hired." I was new in town and needed the job, but held back a smile. His smooth, thirty-year-old face made my crooked nose and plain features seem coarse.

"Let's take a look." He held open the door, and strong-smelling roses and carnations filled the room.

"We're having a special," he said, seeing my nose twitch.

Behind the wooden counter stood a woman of forty, glancing up from a magazine, frowning her brow.

"What's this one for?" she began.

"Amelia's our new employee," Rex said, "and I expect you to show her the ropes around here. Amelia, meet Sadie."

I jerked my head in greeting. But as I took a step toward a battered door in the corner, Rex stopped me.

"Oh that goes downstairs: best leave it alone."

I smiled to hide my discomfort and followed him to an office behind the counter, handing him my resume.

Leafing through the pages he said, "Everything looks fine. You start today."

I sighed my surprise and gratitude.

“Thank you sir. I look forward to working here.”

Smiling, he led me back into The Forget Me Not Shop.

“Good morning Sadie.” I’d only been working there a few days, but she continued to look at me like an oddity. Tugging my sleeves, I had begun arranging the window display when the doorbell tinkled.

“I need a bouquet Stat.” The man ran his fingers through his hair. “I can’t believe I forgot our anniversary. What’ll I say this time?” His eyes hopelessly searched the shop.

Sadie set down the magazine and walked around the counter.

“Tell you what: there’s a great restaurant downtown hardly anyone knows about. I’ll give you the address and ten percent off your flowers. How’s that?”

We both knew the flowers were overpriced and that the restaurant belonged to her brother, but looking at her smile you’d never have guessed the deception.

Breathing a sigh of relief, the man pulled out his wallet. “Gee thanks. I meant to do something special, but things got so busy—”

“No need to explain,” Sadie said. “You’ll be just fine.” Her smile showed a set of crooked teeth.

Without warning, a piercing scream resonated beneath us. Startled, my hand slipped and pricked on a rose. A drop of blood formed, and I groped for a towel as Sadie glared at my hand.

“Excuse me,” she said, and stormed to the corner door.

I hesitated for a moment, then strode over to the counter.

“Let me get that for you sir. And just between you and me, let’s make it thirty percent off.”

He smiled.

When she returned, Sadie said nothing. I’d learned long ago to stay quiet when someone looks angry. Perhaps it was survival instinct, some hope that perhaps the blows would hurt less this time. But I’d left that behind, I reminded myself. I’d moved on. So I said nothing in return, listening to that survival instinct.

Several weeks passed without incident. I even convinced myself it was silly to think something amiss.

It happened about halfway through the day. The battered corner door swung open, and out walked Rex, wiping sweat from his brow, his face green.

“Something’s wrong,” he said.

My hand slipped on a bouquet, and scissors thudded to the ground. Rex and Sadie turned on me.

“What’re you doing?” Sadie glared at me and, seeing the shop empty, hurriedly put up the Closed sign.

“Ah Miss Parker: you can leave early today.” Rex smiled apologetically. “You see I—I’m not feeling well.”

“Yes, Mr. Jacobs.” I reached for my purse.

Rushing out the door, I wondered what had happened. I knew it had something to do with that awful Sadie woman, but how had she dragged Rex into it? How could he, an honest man, be involved?

And so I decided to find out what was going on at The Forget Me Not Shop.

My window of opportunity came a week later. Rex was at a meeting, and Sadie had just stepped out for another magazine. I didn’t have much time and, glancing around, took a deep breath as I reached for the basement door’s brass handle.

Locked. I should have known. So grabbing a pin from my hair, I tried to recall the technique. It took a minute to find its mark, and I was in.

I turned the handle and, as I swung the door open, saw cobwebs reflecting light from the shop as the dark stairway’s musty odor greeted my nostrils. It was now or never.

Creaking on each step, I picked my way down to another door, this one of steel. I groped for the handle only to find it, curiously, unlocked. As the door opened, however, what I saw was nothing like I’d expected.

It was a sophisticated laboratory, complete with test tubes, microscopes, lab rats, and a human brain. I stumbled. But what disturbed me most took a moment to grasp. There, sitting in what looked like a dentist’s chair was a man, unconscious but still breathing.

I staggered back toward the door. There was something I needed to do, someone I needed to call. But my head was swimming, and I

couldn't organize my thoughts, let alone form cohesive sentences.

"Miss Parker." Rex appeared behind me. "I'd hoped my advice might keep you from doing something foolish."

"Let me go." I gasped. "I've got no one to tell."

"Well as much as I'd like to believe that, we both know it's not true." Rex calmly picked up a syringe.

"You see, everyone needs organs, and that's why they come to me. Don't worry, you won't feel a thing."

He plunged the needle into my arm, and I remembered no more The Forget Me Not Shop.

I woke up in the hospital days later. Doctors say someone found me lying in an alley and that I'd lost a significant amount of blood, most of my teeth, and one of my kidneys. Dad always said curiosity would kill me one day, and I guess he was right.

I asked about The Forget Me Not Shop, but it was as if it had never existed. They say I've suffered a concussion and that it's not unusual to make up stories to cope with the trauma. But there he is in my mind: I'd never seen a smile so enchanting.

Six Silences

by Matthew Pfefferle

Third Place

The story of my life is six silences long.

The first came after my parents heard the news from the doctor. I was sick, very sick; not the get-out-of-school kind of sick, the never-go-to-school-ever-again sick.

My mother is a professor, my father a plumber. Neither of them understood the doctor's words, or maybe they didn't want to.

Nerves are supposed to be a delicate array of thousands of miles of filaments, linking muscles to brain and brain to muscles. Nerves are supposed to line up cleanly and correctly, each sending a signal precisely where it is needed. Nerves are supposed to work.

Mine do not.

My nerves look like a high-velocity traffic accident, spinal signals crashing into each other, impulses slamming together and scattering neurotransmitters across my mind. Brain waves break apart on crags of withered neurons like ocean waves break on the beach.

The doctor didn't say that, of course. He said I had a neurological dysfunction in my primary motor cortex and a developing cerebromedullospinal disconnection, which is a blander way of saying the same thing.

I can only remember those words because they were printed on a coffee-stained piece of paper next to my hospital bed. If I squinted, I could read them. That was back when I was able to squint.

I was not silent when my parents told me. I cried, and sometimes I smiled in that twisted way you smile when you're so sad you don't know what else to do. But mostly I cried, until that island of neurons fizzled out some months later and I could neither cry nor smile.

I miss both.

No, the second silence came later, after they had left my room,

and I waited for the inevitable. I shouldn't have been able to feel it, not yet—the doctor said it would be weeks before the symptoms showed—but I knew it was coming. Imagine flinching from a punch, then imagine your entire brain flinching for days on end.

Of course, it doesn't help. Flinching doesn't stop a punch, and it doesn't stop a disease. *My* disease, actually. They named it after me. Theo's syndrome. I think my doctor won some award for writing a paper on it; I never read it. By then, I couldn't turn the pages.

I used to read, back when I still could. I hoped it would help me understand, help me see someone else suffering like I am.

It didn't. That's the problem with having your own disease; no one writes books about it. People don't compose poetry about cerebromedullospinal disconnection. It doesn't rhyme with anything.

The third silence was during the battery of tests they ran on me. Every once in a while, the hum of the scanning machine would break the stillness, but I stopped noticing eventually. I spent hours in that machine. I don't know if it helped.

The fourth silence was my speechless girlfriend, my phone giving off a dull crackle as I waited for her response.

Actually, "girlfriend" is an exaggeration. I had a friend who was a girl. Contracting a life-ending disease did accelerate our relationship considerably, though.

She came to my hospital room two days later, with bags under her bloodshot eyes. She had stayed up all night after my call. And stayed up the night after that. She was a nervous wreck in a wrinkled blue shirt and dirty glasses.

She was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

Her kiss tasted salty, like swallowing seawater when you're struggling to swim. I'm not sure if all kisses are like that, or if the nerves in my tongue had already failed. For that moment, it was fine either way.

Then came the fifth silence, simultaneously the most awkward and the least unpleasant. Our lips were wet, our mouths were still as she stood there, and I lay there, motionless and confused.

My father bumbled in a few minutes later, not knowing she was

there. He stammered an apology, she blushed, and I probably blushed too, unless those nerves were dead already. I tried to make a list to remind me which parts of my mind still worked, but I lost it during the move.

The move. My disease was rapidly outgrowing the hospital ward I had lived in for months. Each week, some new facet of my condition baffled the doctors there, so they shipped me to a facility outside the city. I spent the ride tied down to a stretcher to keep me still in case we hit potholes. We did hit them. Several. At least I could still feel them.

The first few days at the new place were a blur of activity, at least by my standards. I was used to quiet evenings watching television and trying to ignore the itches I couldn't scratch. The new doctors kept me up all night with new tests and new machines. They never failed to find new and interesting places to stick their needles. The nerves that let me walk and run and laugh and sing had died out long ago, but the ones that let me feel pain were a stubborn bunch and kept screaming at me till the very end.

My speech stuttered and slurred, and the stretches between syllables grew longer and longer as each neuron died. The remaining few tried their best to make up, which led to a list of medical problems I never learned how to spell. One of them was a fancy word for blindness. Deafness followed soon after.

This was the sixth silence, and the longest, and by far the worst. For years, I had felt like the walls of the world were closing in around me, but now I felt nothing, nothing but the rare stab of pain or flash of heat from some still-struggling nerve.

And so here I am. Running through my life story a thousand times, praying I don't forget, praying it doesn't slip through the cracks in my battered brain. I don't know how long it's been, only that it's been far too long, and far too quiet, and that with every day that passes, a little part of me passes away too.

That girl I kissed?

I can't remember her name.

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