

Congratulations

In 2023, more than 740 talented teen artists, photographers, poets and prose writers participated in the 27th annual Our Own Expressions Teen Writing and Art Contest. These students demonstrated truly impressive artistic vision, technical understanding and passion in the work they submitted.

All entries were subject to a double-blind judging process. First, volunteer Pierce County Library System staff judges reviewed anonymized entries. The finalists of this initial round then moved on to a second round of professional judging.

In 2023, there were four professional judges. Artist Dave Sederberg and photographer Daniel Carrillo selected the drawing and photography winners based on composition, artistic skills, creativity and effective use of media. Tacoma Poet Laureate Lydia K. Valentine and author Ray Stoeve selected the poetry and short story winners, evaluating originality, style and general presentation.

The Pierce County Library Foundation awarded the winners with prizes worth up to \$150 and the winning entries are published in this book.

The Pierce County Library System gratefully acknowledges the contributions from the Pierce County Library Foundation to help fund and support the contest.

Join us in congratulating this year's winners, and recognizing and celebrating 27 years of creative teen talent, voice and vision!

2023

Winners

POETRY
DRAWING
PHOTOGRAPHY
SHORT
STORY



OUR OWN
EXPRESSIONS
TEEN Writing and Art Contest

Poetry Winners

Grades 7 & 8

1st	Ode to the Rain Dean King	Pioneer Middle School
2nd	About A Girl Samara Amstutz	Pioneer Middle School
3rd	Ode to Chess Jonathan Burket	Pioneer Middle School

Grades 9 & 10

1st	Gnomestradamus Samson BeSerra	Covenant High School
2nd	What was the point? Kaiya Whaley	Covenant High School
3rd	Feeling Yumiko Doi	Bellarmino Preparatory

Grades 11 & 12

1st	World of Noise Ian Fisher	Covenant High School
2nd	The Jazz Man Ashtin Roy	Curtis Senior High School
3rd	Icarus Jacob Lawty	Covenant High School

Drawing Winners

Grades 7 & 8

1st	Red Panda Alexis Rosendo	Glacier View Junior High School
2nd	Dusty Victoria Nozdrin	Other
3rd	Aztec Warrior Karime Briseno Iris	Pioneer Middle School

Grades 9 & 10

1st	Green Model Valentina Gutierrez	Fife High School
2nd	Dwell in Superiority Masha Skulskaya	Bonney Lake High School
3rd	Experience and Function of the brain Audrey Skipworth	Bonney Lake High School

Grades 11 & 12

1st	Enduring Support Iris Rogel	Bonney Lake High School
2nd	Close Community Charlotte Southworth	Stadium High School
3rd	Feeling Blue Evelyn Bang	Bonney Lake High School

Photography Winners

Grades 7 & 8

1st Blinding Lights

Miren Sansburn

Home School

2nd The Power Of Sunsets

Abigayel Hone

Key Peninsula Middle School

3rd Bridge To Nowhere

Kaeli Kinney

Gray Middle School

Grades 9 & 10

1st Me & Me

Rylan Carter

Foss High School

2nd Golden hour

Avelina Zhukov

Other

3rd Mystic Portal

Bryce Lovett

Rogers High School

Grades 11 & 12

1st Foggy Morning

Logan Hunsicker

Sumner Senior High School

2nd Luminescent

Lola Cordero

Steilacoom High School

3rd Beauty in Nature

Laila Fuqua

Rogers High School

Short Story Winners

Grades 7 & 8

1st **Barnacles and Beer Cans**

Lydia Smith

Lakeridge Middle School

2nd **أعطنا الأمل (Give Us Hope)**

Maya Holmes

Kopachuck Middle School

3rd **Purple Blur (Based on a true story)**

Lanaya Villaverde

Kalles Junior High School

Grades 9 & 10

1st **Brushstrokes**

Lyric Milligan

Tacoma School of the Arts

2nd **The Peril of Power**

Jonathan Taylor

Covenant High School

3rd **Memories Upon the Sight of Death**

Ava Carlson

Covenant High School

Grades 11 & 12

1st **February 5th**

Grace Adam

Covenant High School

2nd **The Dream Collector**

Rylie Wood

Covenant High School

3rd **Pool of Memories**

Pedro Call

Franklin Pierce High School

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Poetry

Grades 7 & 8

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OUR OWN
EXPRESSIONS
TEEN Writing and Art Contest

Ode to the Rain

by Dean King

First Place

Rain falls, making a rapid drip drap sound
on the roof.

It splashes down the gutter with a satisfying noise.
It soothes my exhausted ears after a long day
of teachers talking and students talking over them.
My window is cracked slightly open, so I can smell
the dampened, earthy, fragrance that the rain brings with it.
I reach out and touch a drop, and it rolls down my hand,
chilly and wet, yet comforting, as water always is.
Each raindrop exuberant and beautiful with the
moonlight beaming through it like crystals, casting fractals
of light around the room.

The drops land in the street and stroll down it like billionaires would.
It saddens me that tomorrow will be sunny, instead of
having these falling stars, these tinctures of beauty.
I wish I could be like one of them, so free and
uncontrolled.

About A Girl

by Samara Amstutz

Second Place

I imagine you on your thirteenth birthday.

Your mom is holding a new dress that she pretends is a gift for you,
but it's really just to answer all the questions she asked after I left.

I wonder if your smile is fake.

I wonder if you wear it for yourself or for her.

I imagine you on an ordinary day.

You're laughing with another schoolgirl who doesn't know your name,
or any of the things I knew about you.

All she knows is that you're pretty, and popular.

I wonder if your laughter is fake.

I wonder if you consider her a friend.

I imagine you on a night where the stars remain unseen.

You're laying in bed with tears in your eyes,
and thinking about all the things you wish to forget.

They writhe beneath your skull and sing bittersweet songs of things you want,
yet can't have.

I wonder if I'm one of them.

I wonder if I'm already forgotten.

Ode to Chess

by Jonathan Burket

Third Place

O Chess, your magnificence shames me. I am not worthy to be in your presence.
Everything about you dwarfs all other games.

Your shining board; 64 trigonometrically precise squares.
Your perfect pieces carved from fine wood, smooth to the touch.
The King, the triumph of the game with his capture.
The Queen, powerful and revered among all pieces.
The Castle, Bishop, and Knight, fearlessly charging into battle
to meet their counterparts of the other color.
Even the Pawns stand prepared for whatever may befall them,
ready to sacrifice for their King. They all stand, ready for the battle ahead.

You are all anyone could want for in a game.
Your pieces lay traps, they seize opposing pieces, and finally, they capture the King.
“Checkmate!”
The word travels across the battlefield, letting all know that the battle is over.

O Chess how may I describe all your wonders! You rule over all other games.
You keep many company on a dark and rainy day so that they may pass the time.
If not for you all of the world would be consumed by an apocalypse of chaos,
for you are the stopper of boredom.
Your superiority is too great for us to comprehend.

O Chess, King of all games, you never cease to amaze!

Poetry

Grades 9 & 10

POETRY
DRAWING
PHOTOGRAPHY
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STORY



OUR OWN
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TEEN Writing and Art Contest

Gnomestradamus

by Samson BeSerra

First Place

In the halls of CreedlCramus,
Lived a gnome named Gnomestradamus.
His every possession,made of gold,
Filled banks within the caverns old.
His beard was long, and gray, and course,
His voice was loud, and brash, and hoarse.
He saw the future way too clear,
For Gnomestradamus was a seer.
Men would flock from o'er the world,
To hear the fortunes he sees swirled.
In truth, He really didn't care.
They could find their fate to bear,
If they looked deep inside themselves,
So nestled with his books and shelves,
He'd roll his eyes back in his head,
And then pretend that he was dead.
But then he was, one frightful day,
They found his corpse laid the same way.
In the halls of Creedl Cramus,
Laid a gnome named Gnomestradamus.

What was the point?

by Kaiya Whaley

Second Place

An	arrow	pulls	me
under,	and	as it	does
I wonder	who	it	was
that brought	me	here?	My
death will bring	him no	tears.	Was
it for my family, who starving need me home? Are they smiling happily,			
now that I am gone? Was it for my country, as my king would claim,			
or was it for royalty, for my king's own gain? I'd sooner fight to be at			
home; for my heart is sore. Instead, I die in France, alone, and lay			
in her dirt forever	more.	I have	fought
for France's	land,	though	I am
but a farmer.	all that	came	from
France's	hand	has	served
to	make	me	poorer.

Feeling

by Yumiko Doi

Third Place

Knock-knock.
Someone knocks on my heart.
The past me whispers.
I look forward to grow up.

Knock-knock.
Someone knocks on my heart.
The present me whispers.
I'm afraid to grow up.

Knock-knock.
Someone knocks on my heart.
The future me whispers.
I don't know if I've grown up.

Poetry

Grades 11 & 12

POETRY
DRAWING
PHOTOGRAPHY
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STORY



OUR OWN
EXPRESSIONS
TEEN Writing and Art Contest

World of Noise

by Ian Fisher

First Place

Voices, voices all around
Drowning out the truth
Voices, voices all around
Piling on our youth

Drumming, raging, world of sound
Tearing at their souls
Howling, screaming, lies abound
Standing at the polls

Smiling, hiding, their real face
Pushing truth away
Running, racing; a disgrace
Lies are all they say

Voices, voices all around
Planting in our mind
Voices, voices all around
Splitting humankind

The Jazz Man

by Ashtin Roy

Second Place

today I saw a man
who plays the saxophone
sitting on the street corner
he was all alone
every day he throws a party
he invites everyone he knows
but he's still sitting on the corner
and he's always alone
sometimes I smile at the jazz man
sometimes I even wave
sometimes people yell at him
sometimes they walk away
sometimes I wonder how the jazz man
still has the heart to play
no one understands the blues
until they've lived them every day

Icarus

by Jacob Lawty

Third Place

They say: "'Twas pride that sent him toward the sun.
He plummeted, from hubris, to his death.
His hatred for the good left him undone.
He uttered one last unrepentant breath."
They tell their children: "Learn you from this tale:
You mustn't fly too high or reach too far.
Ungodly pride makes all your plans to fail.
Your aim: humility, just as you are."
I say: "Ambition was my only fault,
If it be fault to grasp beyond our race.
Humility is an oppressive thought
When we were meant to touch the stars and space.
My only aim: to lift us to the skies.
Does that make me a villain in your eyes?"

Drawing

Grades 7 & 8

POETRY
DRAWING
PHOTOGRAPHY
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STORY



OUR OWN
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Red Panda

by Alexis Rosendo

First Place





Dusty

by Victoria Nozdrin

Second Place



Aztec Warrior

by Karime Briseno Iris

Third Place



Drawing

Grades 9 & 10

POETRY
DRAWING
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OUR OWN
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Green Model

by Valentina Gutierrez

First Place



Dwell in Superiority

by Masha Skulskaya

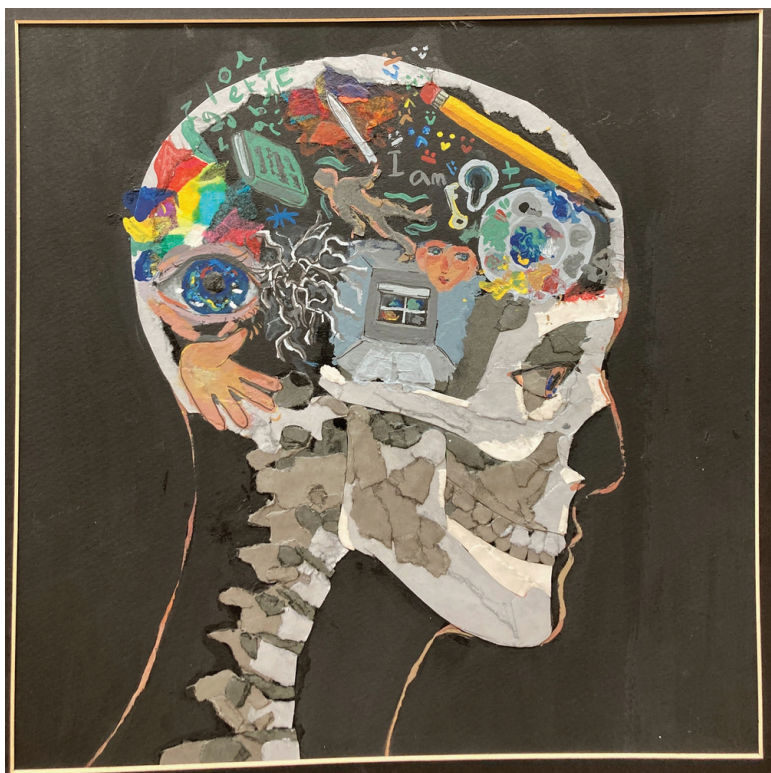
Second Place



Experience and Function of the brain

by Audrey Skipworth

Third Place



Drawing

Grades 11 & 12

POETRY
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OUR OWN
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Enduring Support

by Iris Rogel

First Place



Close Community

by Charlotte Southworth

Second Place



Feeling Blue

by Evelyn Bang

Third Place



Photography

Grades 7 & 8

POETRY
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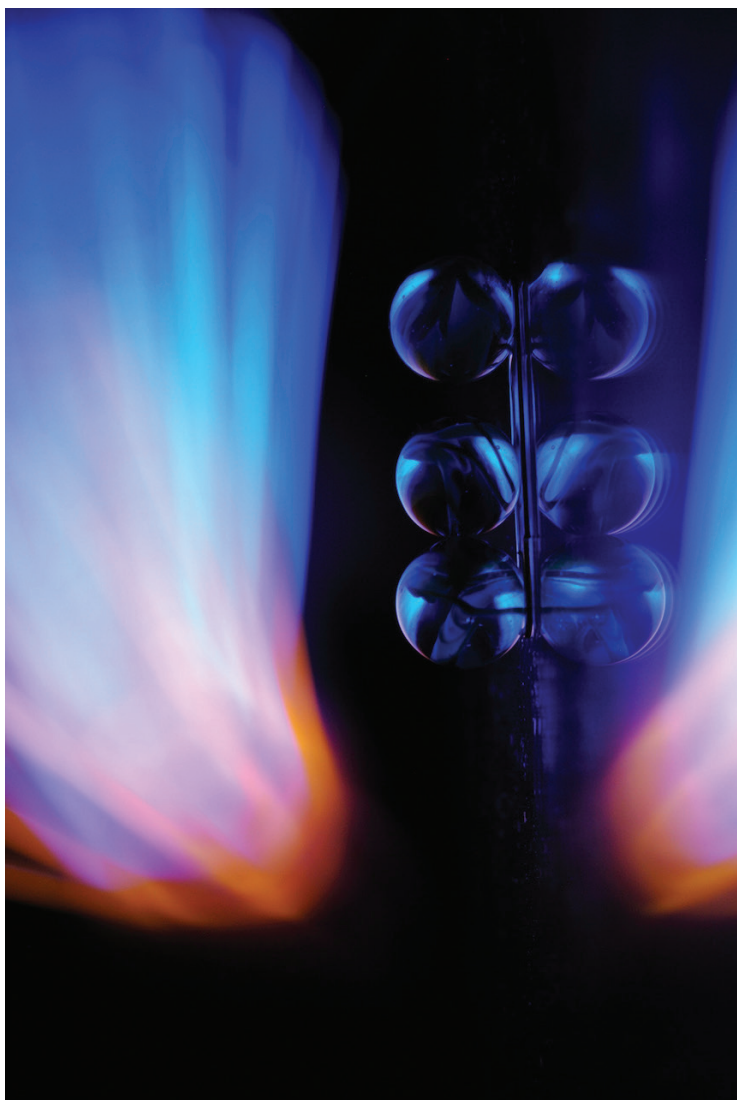


OUR OWN
EXPRESSIONS
TEEN Writing and Art Contest

Blinding Lights

by Miren Sansburn

First Place



The Power Of Sunsets

by Abigayel Hone

Second Place



Bridge To Nowhere

by Kaeli Kinney

Third Place



Photography

Grades 9 & 10

POETRY
DRAWING
PHOTOGRAPHY
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OUR OWN
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Me & Me

by Rylan Carter

First Place



Golden hour

by Avelina Zhukov

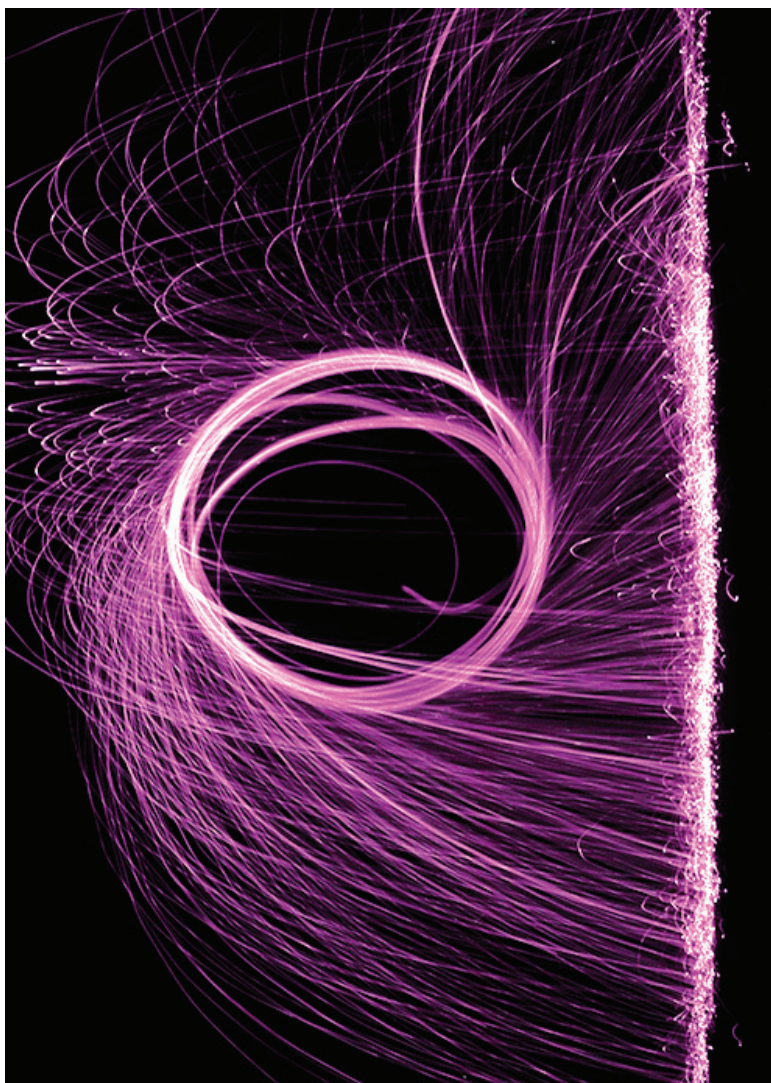
Second Place



Mystic Portal

by Bryce Lovett

Third Place



Photography

Grades 11 & 12

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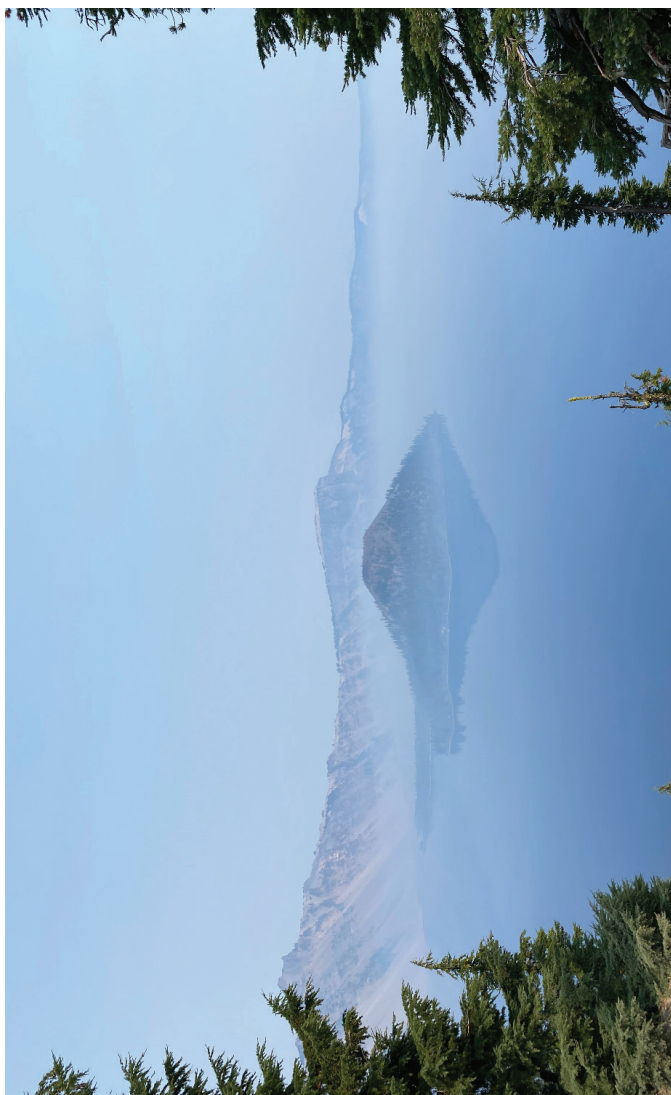


OUR OWN
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Foggy Morning

by Logan Hunsicker

First Place



Luminescent

by Lola Cordero

Second Place



Beauty in Nature

by Laila Fuqua

Third Place



Short Story

Grades 7 & 8

POETRY
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OUR OWN
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Barnacles and Beer Cans

by Lydia Smith

First Place

I feel like a superhero; the unbuttoned flannel I carelessly threw over my sweatshirt billows like a cape in the chilly breeze. My hood flies off, leaving my long curls to fend for themselves. The distant sound of pop music is barely audible as gulls and children squawk. I sit on a gravelly beach piled with large rocks. Since I was little, this place has changed a lot. The once clear fields are now encompassed by looming apartment complexes that cast sharp shadows over everything.

I miss the soft bunnies that hopped in the spacious fields, crabs that scuttled on the rocks, and fish that glided through the water. The only things left in the water are barnacles and beer cans. *God, I hate the beer cans.* Not only do the people ruin themselves, but they sabotage everything around them. *It's not as if it's difficult to throw away a can.* Here I am, too young to have ever sipped wine, yet I am picking up these disgusting tourists' drinks.

All they are is weeds. Weeds forcing people like Mom and me away from the pier we've forever called home. Weeds that suck all the beauty out of a place with their blatant disregard for others. And I hate how they look at me, thinking I am just a poor degenerate. And now, rent prices have forced us out because of the new museum. If we had enough money, I'm sure we would stay forever.

A metallic glint catches my eye, ending my train of thought.

I lay on my stomach and stretch my bony arm down through a crevice between two rocks. I grasp a small piece of scrap metal and shove it into my old plastic grocery bag. Lurching to my feet, I begin my final trip to the town's pawn shop. As a tightrope walker would, I put one foot in front of another while looking at my shoes. A year ago, when I first laid eyes on my yellow converse at the thrift store, I thought it was a blessing from the Lord above. I worked for weeks to get enough money, praying every night that the most beautiful shoes wouldn't be gone. Now, the high-tops are spattered with mud stains and peeling soles, but I still love them.

One piece of stained clothing isn't a big deal, but my lack of new clothes causes me to feel ill at ease. I direct my gaze away from everyone and walk quickly to the store where I can get rid of my cans, seeing I only have an hour until my final train leaves.

Pawn and Recycling Center reads on a flashing sign above the doorway. I step inside to find a small museum of junk hidden behind glass cases. The vaguely familiar scent of moldy, overly salted bread fills my nose. A few things catch my eye, but I head straight to the counter.

"Hey, Cecilia," the cashier, Rosy, says while sticking a seventy-five percent-off sticker on a container of KISS pins. "I'll have Elijah count those for you." I heave the bags over the counter. Rosy gives them to a man in his thirties who brings them behind a curtain.

"You know, Rosy, I don't think many people will be too pleased with garbage over the counter," I say. She laughs.

"I'm pretty sure most things here are trash," she says. There are old watches, instruments, bike tires, jewelry, etcetera. Amidst the junk, a dress catches my eye. It is a cream-colored sundress with brightly colored flowers woven into the fabric. And it looks about my size...but buying it is wasteful. A sticker reading "\$30" is stuck on the cloth.

"Fourteen dollars, fifty cents," Elijah's gruff voice shouts from behind the curtain. Rosy opens the cash register and shoves the crumpled bills into my hand.

"Since you're moving, I'll give you a seventy-five percent discount," Rosy gestures at the dress.

"No, I shouldn't," I say.

"Don't tell my boss," she winks. I count out the cash and grab the dress. "You can use the employee bathroom to try it on." I close the door and slip into the dress. Everything inside the bathroom is coated in a thick layer of crust, and the mirror is cracked. The soft cotton of the sundress flows over my curves, leaving a chill breeze brushing against the hair on my arms and legs. I slip my flannel on and shove the rest of my clothes in a bag. When Rosy sees me walk back into the shop, she grins and claps her hands. "It fits perfect. You look *amazing*." I smile back.

"Thank you so much," I say, "Maybe now I'll actually miss you." She hugs me.

"I'll miss you too, kid." After about a minute of smelling Rosy's strawberry shampoo, she lets go.

"Time?" I ask. She looks down at her watch.

"Two-fifty."

"Bye," I call, running out of the store. I hold my dress down awkwardly as I dash down the streets. The salty breeze batters my face and tosses my hair. I race past the water, the fields, and the rocks until I reach the train station. A stout, metallic building overlooks me. I grab the freezing, graffiti-covered door bar and run inside.

I push through an immense crowd to get to the ticket station, bumping shoulders with strangers. I swipe my ticket on a pad and shove the metal bar forward. I run to the other side of the building, a room studded with benches. I swerve my head back and forth, looking for Mom. I see her doing the same, her blond curls bouncing. We lock eyes. I run over to her and slide into her outstretched arms.

"Cece! That's the prettiest dress I've ever seen; where did you get it?" her silky voice envelops me.

"Remember Rosy from the pawn shop? The girl who always has a braid in her hair? She gave it to me for eight bucks. By the way..." I hand her the crinkled seven dollars I still have.

"Dang, girl, you must have picked up a ton of cans while I was here," Mom says. A smile creeps onto my face. I know today was supposed to be depressing, leaving my home of fifteen years to move into the city. But somehow, Mom has a way of making everything better. I hope someday I can be like her: selfless, reliable, and enduring. Since I was born, she's done everything she could to give me the best life.

"I left at six this morning."

"And it seems to have paid off," she says, rubbing her dainty fingers against the fabric of my dress. "A new dress for a new beginning."

I lean against her shoulder and smile, a tranquil warmth resonating through my gut. A new town.

"I'm excited," I whisper to her.

أعطنا الأمل (Give Us Hope)

by Maya Holmes

Second Place

I walk along the gravel path, knowing that beneath me there are empty caverns that were once rich with treasures of ancient kings, the night sky stretching above me, only the brightest star's light piercing the blanket.

My country's history lies in those caverns.

The legacy of Egypt is held in preservation of its mummified people, long removed from their tombs, treasures once beheld with glory were put on display in Cairo and all over the world, but now...

Lost.

Destroyed.

The once sprawling metropolis of my home in ancient times has been reduced to sand and rubble. Neglect is what started this camp of refugees, these survivors, these warriors.

A world that came and disregarded our history, taking our dead and removing their treasures, bringing them away from their place of rest and treating their corpses as if they never lived. Long ago, we closed our borders to keep our people and culture safe.

We cut ourselves off from the rest of the world in an effort to restore the beauty of our nation that was being polluted by those who came to take, and not to learn.

Even still, the remains of when we were once wonderful were damaged and broken. Our forces were penetrated and a plague swept this land like a raging habūb from the Sahara, burning a majority of our population in a swift movement.

Those who survived became our parents.

Invasion.

This was the first thought that our neighbors had when they realized how fast our culture, our country was fading.

A dead army cannot defend what is theirs, and so civilians tried and failed to prevent our neighbors from stretching their elastic borders into our home, wishing hopelessly that their bands would snap.

We were surrounded, forced to retreat to a sacred place, the last place anyone would look for fear of a false curse, exploited by Carter hundreds of years ago.

I stand at the doorway of the tomb of Ramesses VIII.

The doorway towers above me, rusted bars in crumpled piles at my side, and I put my hand up to the wall as I descended into the chamber.

I am a descendant of these powerful pharaohs.

Of their great people.

Of the gods and goddesses of ancient Egypt, as they believed themselves to be.

It is a journey to be near Ramesses, his tomb was concealed so expertly that the Valley of the Kings was declared empty without his place of peace being disturbed.

I walk for hours through the corridors, admiring the beautiful paintings and mosaics that cover the walls.

In addition to the ancient artwork, lines of neon paint spell words and paint pictures of symbols over the inlaid gold and glass.

They run across the stone in vibrant colors across the faded ones, words in every language and pictures from every part of the world were painted here.

They were not meant to be here, I know.

The graffiti is the ultimate symbol of disrespect to the ancient kings, but some way, somehow, as much as I resent how they treated us, it's beautiful to me.

A merging of two cultures coexisting on the same canvas.

The towering stone stands many times my height, the jackal, bird, and hippopotamus gods and goddesses looming above me in the limestone, along with engravings of the Ramesses VIII and his people.

It's a humbling reminder that the nation is not only of its king, nor of its people, but of the pyramid of support, topped with the intervention of heaven.

I continue on, through more chambers and corridors.

Shapes on the floor where dust was non-existent for thousands of years are testimonies of the wealth and treasures that were once stored here, then removed.

People will pay a lot to see an ancient king's wealth.

They'll pay even more to own it.

We call these people *سارقي القبور*, or graverobbers, because they are no better than the criminals who plundered the tombs of Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure.

I slip through the gilded doors with broken clay seals.

There are eight of these entrances, each more beautiful than the last, engraved with Ramses VIII's name in hieroglyphics.

At last, the burial chamber, largely untouched.

His coffin has not been opened, unlike every other pharaoh discovered by archeologists.

The face of the pharaoh is calm.

It is the way he was left, and it is the way he will stay.

The golden face stares up at the ceiling, seemingly aware that hundreds of feet up, through bedrock and sand and stone and a thick smog coating the planet, there is a brilliant galaxy of stars that this king would have once gazed up at in his life before his death, before Egypt fell, before the sky was coated with gray paint by plants, war, factories, unsustainable transportation and energy usage.

"أعطنا الأمل".

I whisper.

Give us hope.

I know that this man is dead.

The sphinx is headless, Giza is ten feet tall, and the treasures are gone. But its memories still survive.

The 200 people hiding in the Valley of the King survive with the tombs of the dead pharaohs, the engravings of Anubis and Osiris, and the bright colors of paint added to the canvas thousands of years after it was proclaimed finished.

Sealed.

Broken.

Plundered.

Preserved.

My name is Aya Gamal Ahmed.

I am seventeen years old.

I live on the line between reality and dreams.

Life and death.

Light and darkness.

Every day of my life is based on a hope that we will not be found and

we will persevere until nightfall.

Perseverance is all I know.

Perseverance and the empty tombs of these once great pharaohs,
my ancestors, my people.

Empires rise like mountains, gargantuan and solid, but even they can
fall as the Earth shakes.

Caverns hidden under layer upon layer of sediment, untouched for
centuries, will be found no matter what extent we go to in order to
hide them.

Sometimes, I think, peace is a myth.

It's not a real concept and it never will be as long as time goes on.

It's just a leaf atop a roaring river, an idea that's passed along from
generation to generation but will never stay long enough to make
a difference.

But other times, when I sit in the dead silence of these tombs that we
are forced to reside upon, I realize that peace is not always harmony.
It is not always silence.

I carry it with me in the memory of what this country once was, in the
hope of what it will be, and the beauty of its landscape and citizens.

I carry peace as solid as any object, finding it in the glimmer of the eye
of my loved ones, in their personalities and actions.

A nation is not made of a pharaoh, nor its people. It is a symbiotic
relationship where each person supports the other, and heaven above
permits the conditions.

It is a beautiful thing, and even as a storm rages in the world outside,
I find peace, deep in the Earth, surrounded by color and culture and
memories, alone in the physical form, but not in spirit.

Purple Blur (Based on a true story)

by Lanaya Villaverde

Third Place

Creativity can fly you anywhere! read the vivid, colorful poster that was taped on the cream-white back wall of the classroom. *Well, that doesn't make any sense*, I thought confusedly. *Maybe something light like a paper or pencil could fly, but certainly not me!*

I craned my neck back in front of me to blankly stare at my paper as soft shuffling and scratching of pencils grazing sheets filled my ears. *How boring*, I thought. *It's a simple assignment!*

My kindergarten class was learning about patterns and how to find the next shapes. My paper had been completed a while ago, each printed shape lightly inked, followed by the ones I drew; slightly uneven, drawn with bold, shaky lines.

As my classmates continued their worksheet, I began to zone out, slipping into drowsiness as my state of idleness melted with the familiarity of the classroom. Suddenly, I saw a flash of movement in front of me, and I snapped awake. It was my teacher, Ms. T, helping the other students. I briefly shifted my gaze to the right to spot my other teacher, Mrs. S, who also had her back facing me as she leaned over another confused student's desk, further instructing him on the subject.

Their backs—facing me!

It suddenly felt like a looming weight had been lifted off me. Though always unintentionally, my young, active self always seemed to magnetize, to draw trouble throughout elementary—especially in kindergarten. It was rare that my teachers *weren't* keeping their sharp, feline-like gazes on me.

My eyes began to dart around the classroom, taking in the familiar expanse. It was relatively still aside from the occasional shift of arm movement. Around the room sat my classmates at their desks, who were either staring vacuously at their splintery, chewed-on pencils in hand or diligently scrawling shapes onto their papers.

My juvenile mind couldn't stand the silence and lack of activity in the room. Time only seemed to drag slower, and the one brief gap we had for free time in class, Choice Time, seemed miles away.

My thoughts continued to buzz hopelessly in my head, yearning to do just something to pass the dragging time. My stubby legs sported in neon-pink leggings dangled past the cold, plastic chair, itching to flail around in a sense of entertainment. *It's cruel*, I thought immaturely, *to keep children in a boring, lifeless environment. Couldn't we play a game? Work on a new, fun project, even?* The AC that hung in an eclipsed area hummed inertly in a reply almost, monotone and chilling the once warm classroom air.

I continued to gaze at the smooth, speckled surface of my desk, partly obscured by the clutter of utensils and papers. As I continued to daydream, I picked up two yellow pencils by their metal lining. I set them parallel to each other atop the crate as I kept an eye to my teachers, who were still discussing with the other students. I could not make out their quiet murmurs, but I could tell that they weren't going to finish any time soon. *Can't we move on already?* My mind insisted desperately, side-eyeing my busy teachers.

Lost in my thoughts, I drew one of the crayons out from the plastic crate. I neared the crayon to my eyes to study the edges of the wrapper, observing the tears gave it the appearance of raggedy tops of a mountain range. Running my fingers absentmindedly over the paper, I felt each crater on the wrapper's fuzzy surface. The paper of the crayon rolled along my palm as I tilted it to read: Crayola, magenta. I placed the crayon perpendicularly along the green, metal design of the pencils. I lifted my head to admire my work and saw that the result resembled a boxy-C. I thought back to the beginning of the day at carpet time when we were learning about the third letter.

"This is the letter C, for *cuh-lcuh-!* calendar! Can you guess the word of the day?" Mrs. S asked in a high-pitched voice that stretched out when she pronounced the letter. It was the kind of voice people used when talking to puppies or babies.

The room filled with enthusiastic shouts of eager children thrashing their arms and swinging their hands in the air when Mrs. S

said, "Correct!" as she lifted a card, revealing an image of a catapult.

The intriguing device, I realized, resembled what I had made.
Maybe I could test it, maybe it works the same!

Without a second thought, I slammed my hand on the pencils' ends. The crayon launched into the air, but it didn't just go up—no, it proceeded to travel across the room! My mouth fell open in despair as my classmates' heads lifted to stare at the flying purple blur. It seemed to be traveling in slow motion. I was helpless—the crayon continued to rapidly propel with no fail, and I sat with absolute horror as I saw Ms. T finally stand up from her crouched stance. *Why now?* My eyes bugged out as I accepted my fate. My mouth was dry and bitter, unable to witness her slow head rising as the purple blur flew by, wind flinging by her cheek, *barely* grazing her ear. My stomach dropped. Years seemed to have passed when the crayon had finally dropped to the ground.

My teachers sharply turned to face me, furious glares of disbelief. It seemed that the crayon had departed with the sole intent to get me in trouble. My heartbeat pounded violently in my ears as they stormed to my desk. You're *gonna get in trouble!* taunted the ringing in my ears. I was completely absorbed in my own shame and regret.

The next thing I knew, I was sitting, staring gloomily with an hourglass in front of me. My punishment—waiting for the sand to fall before I was free. The moment I was looking forward to the most, was out of reach. I stared at the distant art station cheek-down on the table, desperate to leave and play. There my friends were, backs facing me, enjoying their time as if I didn't exist. I sighed. My impatience ruined what I had been waiting for. The time dragged slower than ever, feeling as if it had stopped completely. I glanced up at the hourglass in hopelessness to see that barely any sand had made its way to the bottom. At the top was so much sand that would take multiple handfuls to completely empty.

It felt like multiple lifetimes had passed before the final grain slipped through the miniscule gap. *I was finally free!* Filled with joy, I leaped up and dashed to the art table to greet my friends. I barely grabbed a fresh, new sheet of paper when a loud, dreadful alarm rang throughout the classroom.

“Alright, Choice Time is over!” Mrs. S sang out. I stood in utter shock. “Time to get our notebooks out!”

I was absolutely devastated. All the waiting, all that suffering had gone through the drain faster than the hourglass sand ever fell. I shuffled back to my desk, swearing that I would never let my impatience get to me again.

Short Story

Grades 9 & 10

POETRY
DRAWING
PHOTOGRAPHY
SHORT STORY



OUR OWN
EXPRESSIONS
TEEN Writing and Art Contest

Brushstrokes

by Lyric Milligan

First Place

The houses are beautiful in their crumbling. Vines, once trimmed carefully by paid gardeners and passionate hobbyists, now crawl across their windowpanes, covering them in a vibrant array of purples and pinks and greens. Shrubbery hugs their cracked walls and moss spills out of their chimneys.

This particular house has been struck by a telephone pole, notes the man on the sidewalk. He dips the end of his smallest brush into a dab of brown paint and begins to illustrate the precise way the roof has splintered, the tiles scattered across the ground and sinking slowly into the earth.

Beyond the cracked windowpane, barely visible through the grime, a teddy bear sits on a windowsill. Its plastic eyes are mournful and staring.

He never enters the houses. Their foundations sag with rotten memories, slowly dissolving into overgrowth and mold. He cannot hold on to all their stories, he cannot reckon with their ghosts. It is better to let them, at last, rest.

So instead, he paints the skyline, sharp against the clouds. The sweeping skyscrapers refuse to collapse, stubborn from long-forgotten success. Behind the sinking city, there is a mountain, looming, watching, wreathed in snow and sky at its summit. It is as if time has simply spared it.

The man, too, has been spared. He is quickly approaching his ninth decade, but his hands still wield the paintbrush just as deftly as they did in his youth, when his colors were the dirty gray of cement and the bloody red of splattered anger. But he has escaped only physically.

He finishes the mountain with a dab of ivory, an aggressive strike

of the paintbrush. He signs his name in the bottom right corner for old times' sake.

The swollen sun has begun to sink heavily behind the horizon, bringing a welcome respite from the heat. The man begins to move down the sidewalk, pulling himself forward on branches and the splintered remains of white picket fences. He can hear dogs in the distance, ravenous, no longer bound by any love mankind could offer them. It is a strange kind of freedom, and a dangerous one.

The man's house is small, but the foundation is strong, and it is not sinking. Inside, the light is muddy: He has run out of candles and now must rely on a dirty window. In the dim, the faces on the walls stand out like eerie gemstones, their imperfections masked by dust.

Meeting their eyes brings a smile to his face. Even as his memories fade like expired paint, he can witness moments of fresh vibrance: the sparkling laugh of the man with the mustache, the soft hands of the woman in blue. Tropical birds dancing on a television screen, crimson feathers and verdant forests. Unspoken sorrow. The smell of popcorn.

The man holds his newest painting up to the light. It seems blurry, but maybe that's just the dust.

He moves through a doorway and, shakily, down some stairs, past a visual timeline of fruitlessness. Oil, acrylic, watercolor, pencil sketches, whatever he could get his hands on. A bitter teen, a starving twentysomething with a worthless degree, a thirty-five-year-old waste of space. Their lines are jagged and crossed, their portraits twisted cruelly. He chuckles, now, passing by them. What did he think he would change?

Near the bottom of the stairs, there is a newer painting, less faded than the rest. Squinting in the dim, the man peers at it, struggling to parse out its meaning. There is flame, he is sure of that, and skyscrapers, those mountains of opaque glass. There is a highway, there, in the background, crammed with traffic, overflowing with it, as if the ground itself had come alive to flee. The sky is red, the air choked with smoke.

It was an apocalyptic scene if there ever was one. The weight of centuries of too-rapid growth collapsing upon an entire species, captured in hours on a dollar-store canvas. Or was it merely the weight of decades of pointless, pitiless struggle, collapsing upon a single (though decidedly unfortunate) man?

It was a question too heavy for his achy back. Such pondering could be done in the grave.

To the left of the painting, above the very last stair, a final nail is hammered clumsily into the plaster. It holds the canvas perfectly. The last man on Earth pauses, then, and looks again at his newest work. The colors, the smooth lines, the details poured into each and every vibrant leaf and crack in the fragile cement. It is, by far, the best he has ever made.

The Peril of Power

by Jonathan Taylor

Second Place

At last, after hours of hiking through the vast heavens and cautiously descending from the summit of noon, the white-hot Jenadian sun, by now flushed from his long exertion, slipped behind the horizon. The night swept like fog over the Tarylu river plains. Farmers trickled into their huts of savanna-grass and clay. Shopkeepers in the villages retracted their stands into their mud-brick cottages. Groves along the riverbank hushed as the evening breeze breathed its last through the swaying treetops. And the people gathered around fires in the calm of the dark.

One farmer, Marten, rested by his own crackling fire. His children clustered at his feet, hoping that tonight their father would narrate one of the great epics of Jenadia's history.

"Tell us the story of Jend and the First Jenadi," Stefan begged.

"No," Glorya retorted. "The tale of Neteron and Yuleda."

Shy young Filip murmured, "How about the tale of the arrival of the Strange-Tongued Foreigners to Mosath Tarylu?"

"It's been a long day for your father, children," Marten sighed. "The grain harvest was almost too bountiful to gather before it spoiled in the fields."

"Father!" His children, even shy young Filip, pleaded with him. "A story, please!"

Marten laughed. "Very well, my children. I will tell you a story. Sit, listen, and learn the dirge of Neteron and Yuleda." And Marten spun the threads of the tale.

Jenadia began at the death of our forefather Jend, who dwelt in the Elder Country. After Jend's death, rival clans desired his pastures, scarce in those lands. Facing war, Jend'seldest son, Otaryl, and eldest

daughter, Luema, fled the Elder Country with their siblings and their spouses. Jend's wife Myryn accompanied them, but she was elderly and died on the journey.

When the wanderers crossed the Myrynu Mountains, named in memory of Myryn's death during the passage, they beheld for the first time Jenadia's lush expanse. They were wonderstruck as they observed the bounty of the land. They first settled a city, later named Asluem after Luema, on the river named Tarylu after Otaryl.

From the beginning, we Jenadi always had two rulers. Otaryl and Luema were our first, and all our succeeding rulers have descended from them. Since Otaryl was male and Luema female, we had an Emperor and an Empress. Since Otaryl and Luema were siblings and each had their own spouses, the emperor and the empress did not marry each other. Since Otaryl and Luema died the same year, the emperor and the empress ruled for twenty years and surrendered their authority the same day. Since Otaryl's daughter and Luema's son succeeded their parents, the emperor passed his throne to his daughter, and the empress passed her throne to her son. It had always been thus since the beginning.

But one emperor, Neteron, handsome and ambitious, was discontent with occupying only Otaryl's throne. He also descended from Luema through his great-grandmother, and he strove to unite the two thrones.

"The throne's division results from the absence of a ruler credible to succeed both noble Otaryl and majestic Luema," he addressed the Jenadian Assembly of Bourgeois and Council of Nobility. "But am I not Otaryl's and Luema's child? The division is ended! Let our thrones unite as when our forefather Jend ruled."

"In the days of Jend," retorted beautiful and proud Empress Yuleda, "we were not a nation. Jenadia began when the wanderers departed the Elder Country. We have always had two leaders. I am Luema's co-ruler, and I will not let her legacy and our traditions vanish."

"Always trapped in history, Yuleda. Jenadia is now, and we must forge through today's reality! Strange new peoples threaten our frontiers. Our nation must be united to face them, not split in two!"

“Throw away our past, then, Neteron!” Yuleda swept her cloak and marched out of the assembly hall.

“Ah, Yuleda!” sighed Neteron. “If you will not peacefully exit, I must oust you.”

That night the emperor snuck into Yuleda’s bedroom. The moonlight danced through her window, traipsing off the cream- white stone walls and Neteron’s gleaming scimitar. He had drugged Yuleda’s bodyguards. The empress was alone.

Neteron froze over Yuleda’s bed. Her simple, austere manner showed even in the pallet and length of gauzy linen that was her mattress. She slept so soundly that she barely breathed.

Neteron plunged the scimitar toward Yuleda’s throat. But inches away from slaughtering her, he stopped, his hands trembling in fear. Would he kill Jenadia’s empress? Was power worth the murder of an innocent woman? Would this truly usher in Jenadia as Jend and Myryn would have wanted?

Alas, fear and conscience doomed Neteron. The empress’s eyelids fluttered open, and she screamed as she beheld the scimitar glinting in the moonlight. Swifter than a sparrow, deadlier than a dragon, she unsheathed the scimitar—her own scimitar— ather waist, and she slashed Neteron’s stomach as he gaped in shock. He recoiled and staggered toward Yuleda’s bedroom door. She would have finished him immediately. However, her scimitar caught in her blanket, buying Neteron precious seconds to hobble out the door, shut it, and lock it. Yuleda’s guards, still drugged, struggled after him, but he sliced their throats and escaped the palace as fast as he could while wounded.

Neteron, carried on a litter, fled with his allies in the Assembly to the Tarylu. They boarded the fastest clipper ship at the harbor, and embarked at full speed for Mosath Tarylu on the endless blue sea. Neteron had begun civil war, and nothing could stop it. He and his followers hoped they could mount resistance, but Yuleda, aided by the Council, mobilized the army. The troops arrived at Mosath Tarylu mere weeks after Neteron. The emperor, still wounded, went to battle, where Yuleda’s archers shot him down.

“The old system is dysfunctional,” Yuleda declared in Asluem after her victory. “It cannot stand in modern Jenadia. I have today wedded Tomas, descendant of Otaryl, and through us the two thrones are combined. Now when the rulers die the crown will pass to the eldest child, the new emperor or empress, and his wife or her husband will be the co-ruler.”

“But Father,” Marten’s children wondered, “Yuleda wanted the old system.”

“As you mature, my children, you will realize that people often mean differently by their words than is at first apparent. Yuleda resisted Neteron not out of her love for tradition but her love for power. Through this love she perceived how desperate Neteron was for power, and this fueled her own desperation. She carried the scimitar at her waist that fateful night because she knew Neteron would attempt assassination, and she would not relinquish her crown that easily. She understood that some would resist her grab at both thrones, so she married Tomas to safeguard herself. She did this for power, though she did truly believe it best for her beloved country.”

“Is power truly so corruptive?” wondered Filip, no longer shy.

“Indeed,” responded Marten.

“Can anyone resist it?” Gloria pondered hopefully.

“I do not know, my children. I do not know.” Marten and his children watched the fire die and snuff out.

Memories Upon the Sight of Death

by Ava Carlson

Third Place

Upon the sound of faint talking, and shuffling clothing, I opened my eyes and found myself inside of a sanctuary in an old, dilapidated church. Despite the grotesque appearance of the building, the interior was elegantly decorated with flowers and candles along the aisles and on the stage. Based on how the room was illuminated by sunlight, I assumed the time to have been around a few hours after noon.

Before I could examine the church any further, a piano began gently playing a beautiful piece for the prelude. A substantial amount of formally dressed people walked in, making the room somber. Their faces expressed great grief, and it appeared that some of them hadn't ceased from their tears in days. A wave of pain struck me while looking over at my two daughters, who had such devastated expressions on their faces as they received hugs from friends and acquaintances. However, even though their emotions were overshadowed with grief, I could tell that they felt a sense of joy and relief. They no longer had the burden of caring for me, nor did they have to watch their papa suffer.

After the piano faded out, the eldest of my daughters stood at the front, welcomed the audience, and said a prayer. After some scripture reading done by my pastor, the first hymn was sung. The peaceful emotion felt by the entire audience was displayed in their gorgeous singing. In those moments I couldn't help but tear up hearing the lyrics of the song.

As I shifted my gaze around the room, my eyes fell upon my dear brother, Howard. I immediately found my thoughts sorting through all of my life memories with my beloved brother. From childhood's hour we were the dearest of brothers. We spent every daylight hour playing together as children, and as we entered our adolescence and then our adulthood, we found ways to bond together through shared hobbies and adventures. It would be a lie to say that there weren't

periods where we were in conflict-in fact, we spent too much of our time in disagreement. I do admit that I regret those times. They were usually pointless, and it would have been wiser of me to have been a peacemaker. However, we grew from those arguments.

The funeral had now moved on to a reading of the obituary. As the pastor read the paper, he mentioned my marriage of forty-two years to my lovely wife, Irene.

We were married at only nineteen and twenty years old, which was rather common at the time. I had met her while we were both working as counselors at a summer camp. On the first day of camp, I was put into a group with her as well as two other teens. It was Irene's beauty that struck me first. However, within a few days of knowing her, I could tell that Irene was an incredibly kindhearted individual. We started dating later that year, and, not long after, we were married in a small church. There was no other woman as perfectly beautiful in the world that day-or any day after I met Irene.

Our marriage, though not lacking in disagreements, was sweet. Irene was the sunshine, caring and positive. I was the midnight storm-and now I wish I was more patient with her, more loving, more attentive. At the beginning of our marriage, I showered her with love, attention, and gifts, but once our children were born, and I had to pick up a second job to keep up with expenses, our marriage lacked positive qualities for long periods of time. It was mostly Irene who managed to restore us again, and especially after the children were grown, we got to enjoy the precious retirement years together.

Irene died from a complicated accident four years ago, and her death shattered my heart. I wept daily for months, and I felt lonesome most of the time. Building up my life again was difficult, but with my two lovely daughters, and their families, I was able to begin healing. My wound was never truly healed, but the stitches came with time.

I now watch my daughters, Justine and Laura, tear up as they listen to my brother's eulogy of me. I feel sorrowful knowing that they are now left as orphans, but I know that they will be able to move on.

It wasn't too long ago that Irene told me she was pregnant with our first, Justine. Within four years, we had Justine, Peter, and Laura.

Justine was shy and sweet; Peter was strong-willed and adventurous; Laura was quite the character: loud, and an entertainer. All of the children were a joy to raise, though; it was some of the best years of my life when they were young. They were able to bring out a childish side in both Irene and me. Their innocence was so pure, and the love they gave was so genuine. As they grew older, I enjoyed getting to know them more personally. Now they are all grown up.

I watched as my casket was carried out from the church into a small graveyard right behind it. In the midst of the graveyard, my eyes made out a young, scrawny man. I pondered who that could be for a few moments. Is that my son?

Peter is my estranged son. His mind fought harsh battles, and, to cope, he turned to drugs. Despite Irene's and my constant efforts to help Peter, we had no luck for a matter of years. Seeing our son struggle was devastating to say the least, and it made me feel as though I failed him. I was so busied that my priorities shifted from my children to my work. Maybe if I had only been more present, and available for Peter, he would have received the help he needed.

The last time I had seen Peter was two years ago, and it was only for a short bit. He was but a mere skeleton of the child I used to know.

Nevertheless, he is here right now-right in front of my casket.

In spite of his rougher appearance, my heart is still filled with great love and joy as I look at my son. I'm not sure what motivated him to visit my grave ... he didn't seem to care much for me while I was alive; but maybe that was a facade because he was suffering so much. I suppose I'll never truly know why my son is here today, but I am so glad he is. This will be my last chance to see him, and, though I can't say a true goodbye, this is enough to keep me content.

My casket is now being buried underground by my son and brother.

It's funny how quickly life passes by, the days last forever-but the years are short. Some things I regret: like wasting my time on work, worrying about money, and lacking love for others. However, life is beautiful, and I am glad to have been alive.

But now I am gone.

Short Story

Grades 11 & 12

POETRY
DRAWING
PHOTOGRAPHY
SHORT STORY



OUR OWN
EXPRESSIONS
TEEN Writing and Art Contest

February 5th

by Grace Adam

First Place

Attorney: Miss Burns, if you would please tell me the events of February 5th.

Winnie Burns: Of course. I was at Clara's house. Max texted me at 10:45am that Amelia was dead. And texted that a minute later Amelia was found in her dorm room. She had been strangled. That was it. At first I thought it was some sick joke. But then I remembered the manuscript. And...

Attorney: Could you tell us about this manuscript?

Burns: So earlier that day I was at Clara's house, Clara Williams. She's a... struggling author. She lives off campus in her parents' spare home, and Tuesdays we have tea together and catch up. She left the door unlocked for me so I went in and I wandered into the kitchen. I saw a sticky note on the table saying something came up for Saturday so she was having coffee with Veronica early, but wrote she'll be back in an hour. She usually gets coffee with Veronica on Saturdays. Anyway, I put a kettle on and settled into a seat around the kitchen island. That's when I saw the manuscript half shoved into the utensil drawer. Last week she told me her first draft was going well but I certainly wasn't expecting a 400 page book. I... well she wasn't going to be home for another hour... so I figured it wouldn't hurt to see what she had been writing. Just after skimming I saw that the story was a murder mystery. What was weird was that the characters had our names. Oh and by 'our' I mean our group, Veronica, Clara, Amelia, Max and I, but there were also a few other choice people, a coffee barista Veronica has a crush on, and a few professors we know. I skipped around the text a bit and found that in the story... Amelia was murdered.

Attorney: How and where was she killed in the story?

Burns: Her dorm room... she was strangled, just like Max's text.

...

Attorney: What is your connection to Veronica Wren and Clara Williams?

Chad Adams: It's not much of a relationship. Every Saturday they come into the cafe where I work. I serve them coffee. Veronica tries to slip me her number, I retreat to the kitchen, that's my connection.

Attorney: Can you tell us why you think you are here?

Adams: I'm told I'm the prime suspect in some stupid novel one of the chicks wrote.

Attorney: And what about what happened on February 5?

Adams:... I reported the fire. I was skipping my shift... It was a bad day. I was walking around in the neighborhood just outside of campus, when I saw a house on fire. I called the fire department. It was like 10:45. I can't be sure, I dropped my phone in a puddle and it died right after they got to the scene. Like I said, it was a bad day. Later I learned the house belonged to Clara Williams. It was a hot topic around campus because she went missing. I guess the flirty chick Veronica was the last person to see her.

...

Burns: Clara never came back. And- and I got Max's text. I ran out of the house because Veronica texted the chat and affirmed that Amelia was dead. I wanted to find them to figure out what in the world was going on. I forgot about the kettle. I left at 10:45 ish. And before you ask, no I did not see this barista guy. And the house was definitely not on fire when I left it.

...

Attorney: And what caused the fire?

Firefighter: we have traced it back to the stove in the kitchen. There is evidence of matches, which might have been stored near the stove.

Attorney: And you discovered something in the remains?

Firefighter: Yes. I discovered the remains of a manuscript and submitted it to evidence. It partially survived the fire, probably thanks to the young man who noticed it so quickly.

...

Attorney: What was your opinion of Amelia Gordon?

Max McLauchlin: Uhhh well we all loved her, I mean we were like- like family. I couldn't ask for a better friend. I don't know anybody who would do this to her. Uhh I mean, she did have Kleptomania, and that caused a little trouble. There was some huge drama about it last year when Amelia and Winnie were roommates. I guess Amelia stole something really important. That's just one example, but for the most part we got along well enough. I... just brought that up because I heard that it was in the manuscript, or something.

Attorney: You also saw Mrs. Burns leave campus on February 5th correct?

McLauchlin: Yah, she looked a little upset, but Winnie gets upset pretty easily. For all I knew it was something as simple as she was out of orange juice.

Attorney: Orange juice?

McLauchlin: Yah, she brings it to Clara's on Tuesdays.

...

Veronica stretched then scrunched into the padded, round, maroon chair. She picked up the manuscript, set it down on the coffee table, then up again.

"So do I get money for you using my name? I kinda feel like I should copyright my personality or something." She mumbles, scrunching her brow. Clara gave a light laugh. "If the book is a success, how about I buy your coffee for the rest of my life... So..." Clara pauses, eyes anxiously fixed on Veronica, "I know you didn't do an intensive read, and I just forced this on you, but what do you think of it?"

Soft jazz cafe music fills the seconds in between.

“Well it's a story written as a court case about a story about us,” Veronica starts slowly, “about a murder which happens in both stories... It's kind of confusing, but also... impressive. First of all, I can't believe you made Chad look like the bad guy!” She says with a frown and laughing eyes. She looks around, “What? He isn't here today?” Clara takes a nibble off her muffin, “No, I heard he's been skipping shifts recently. I guess he doesn't like Tuesdays. But please continue.” “Oh yah, I do think you need to research court reporter rules too. You know I'm also annoyed that you didn't give me the end of the story. I have a hunch on who the killer is but I'd still like to know-” “Sorry to interrupt! Someone is blowing up my phone with messages...” Clara interjets, peering into the bright screen. Her face goes slack. “Oh would you look at the time! I've got to go!” Her voice cracks as she frantically stuffs the manuscript into her backpack and sprints out the front doors. Veronica watches as her friend flings the door open, letting in the sound of police sirens and releasing the soft jazz that pooled in the shop. She lets out at audible, “What?!” which is cut short by dinging from her phone. Shaking off the fact that Clara ditched her without explanation, she accepts the distraction and swipes away the lock screen reading Feb. 5, 10:40, to see a text from Max. Amelia is dead.

The Dream Collector

by Rylie Wood

Second Place

The Dream Collector stood and watched. He waited patiently, checking his watch from time to time. Finally, as the early rays of the dawn painted the bedroom wall gold, she stirred. Now was his moment. Pulling on his intricate lavender gloves, he stared at the old woman, who was curled into a ball like a little girl. He was careful to follow protocol, as always.

Step one: activate receptacle. He turned the brass knob on his bin, and it opened, eager for another meal of a mind. Everything in him fought against it.

Step two: approach the client with caution, so as to not disturb the peace. He was as silent as an abandoned church in the dewey hours of the morning, even though he would have rather cried out in all the anguish he felt. He would have rather yelled, screamed, woken her up, but he did not. She continued sleeping peacefully.

Step three: inspect dream in order to ensure value of safe removal. This felt to him like a breach of confidence. Not that inspecting dreams necessarily was. That was just a part of the job; always has been, always would be. It was needed. But with her? She had been the one person out of infinite in infinite planes of existence with whom he had promised privacy. Night after night, job after job, he continually requested to not be sent to her. This job had many perks (extended life not being the least of these), but betraying the trust of the person he loved was not one. Normally, he enjoyed opening the curtain and peering into the depths of man's psyche, watching the subconsciousness romp and roil with emotion. But with her?

Still, he had made a vow. A solemn oath, seventy-five years ago, that he would aid 'the common welfare of man by removing and disposing of the most troublesome of dreams, no matter the personal convictions, backgrounds, or lives of the clientele.' Not that he had

had much of a choice. It had been either swear fealty to the river Lethe or let his wife starve. This way, his wife could survive, and he was blessed with the ability to do his job. He just couldn't do it to her.

But orders are orders, and he had been ordered to this home. Her- their home. He was not able to stop the process, or betray his master.

And so, reluctantly, he reached out a lavender hand and rested it gently on her forehead. Instantly, a vision flooded his mind and clouded his eyes.

A young man and a young woman, on a park bench. A flash of sunlight. Laughter. A baby pram and a tiny giggle. Hands holding hands. A chubby little fist reaching at the blue sky. Warm smiles. A young man's eyes, shining like caramel in the sunlight. Then cold. Abandonment. Despair.

His hand shot back as if he had been burned. He wouldn't see any more. He couldn't. He would die again rather than see her pain. Her pain. His face contorted-actually able to show genuine emotion for a moment-before forcibly returning to its corpse-like professionalism. He took a deep breath, attempting to steady his nerves, and kept reciting the steps he needed to take for his job.

Step four: remove the dream from the client's mind, being careful to scrub their memories as well. Place the dream in the receptacle. He reached out, yet again, with his lavender hands, this time making complicated, shadow puppet-like patterns in the air until she frowned, her brow furrowing deep within her as she slept. She whimpered in pain as the memory of the dream floated up from her forehead, golden wisps to match the colors painting the room from the rising sun. As soon as the last strand of the memory broke contact with her skin, however, her face relaxed into a vision of peace.

He fought great battles within himself. He had caused her pain. So much of it, too. She was old. Her memory was leaving. Perhaps the only way she could still picture him was in her dreams, the last part of her mind her age hadn't touched. Now, she was able to rest, but in removing her dream, had he removed all memory of himself? Not of him now, he prayed that she would never see him as he was now, all

ghastly and cold, a servant of the accursed river Lethe, but him as he was? Would she remember their days in the sun, before the vows were made?

He looked at the strand of memory. It was still in his hand. He could put it in the receptacle, follow orders, and avoid punishment. Or, he could hold on to it. Hold on to the last bit of her that he was allowed to have contact with. He was torn within his soul. Two paths stood before him, equally deadly.

He did not know what he should do. All he knew was, standing here in that bedroom, he loved her, and he missed her. And she would never know. She would wake with some vague sense of *deja vu*, and go about her day as normal. He missed her.

Step five: report back to location, leaving the client in a state of peaceful emptiness of mind.

Gripping the dream memory tightly, he stepped away from her, never moving his empty eyes away from her sleeping ones. He stepped out the window, and was gone.

Pool of Memories

by Pedro Call

Third Place

In a faraway land, there is a great field. As far as the eye can see, there is nothing but grass there. The only landmark is a pool, round as the moon and calm as the night.

There is a fisherman often found by that pool. He stays there so often that he is almost as much a part of the landscape as the pool itself. With a bent back, worn clothes, and shabby hat, he sits by the water, holding a fishing rod and patiently reeling in his catch.

One day the fisherman took an apprentice, and they went to the pool. He placed his fishing rod in her hands and watched her cast it into the pool.

“Show me your catch by the end of the day,” he said.

Three times that day the apprentice cast out her hook. Three times she felt something tugging at the line. Three times she tugged at her catch until she reeled in a memory.

By the end of the day, the fisherman was presented with three memories by his apprentice. He inspected each one closely, then felt the first one in his hand

This first memory was blue. It squirmed around in the fisherman’s hands, trying to escape him, but he held on.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“Whoever it belongs to probably won’t miss it.” the apprentice speculated.

The fisherman simply looked into the memory.

Inside the memory, a woman sat on a sidewalk. Her face was gaunt, and hunger clawed at her stomach. Pulling her legs up to her chest, she watched people pass by. She spotted a passerby with particularly expensive shoes walk by, and the woman suddenly felt a pang in her heart.

I am alone, she thought.

“Interesting,” the fisherman said. “But it won’t do.”

The apprentice blinked. “Why? I thought it was a good catch.”

“It was,” he told her, releasing the memory back into the pool. “Show me your other catches, then I’ll explain.”

The second memory was purple. It thrashed around, nearly hitting the fisherman’s face. Still, he kept a hold on it and watched.

In this memory, a boy was crying on the floor. In front of him was another, taller boy laughing at him.

“Give him back!” the boy nearly screamed. The bully dangled a toy just out of his reach and taunted him.

The fisherman also carried this memory back over to the pool and released it. His apprentice held her tongue. She couldn’t understand why he’d tossed back her catch, though. Wouldn’t anybody be happy to forget something like that?

The last memory was golden and glowing. As the fisherman cradled it in his hands, the apprentice saw the memory flicker. Then they both looked inside.

A middle-aged woman- a mother- was wrapping her arms around her daughter. The daughter was saying something, then she tried to pull back.

“I’ll always love you,” the mother told her daughter. “No matter what.”

Then the two of them embraced, and for a single moment, all was right in the world.

“This one we’ll keep for now,” the fisherman said. “Now let me explain.”

After slipping this final memory into a sack, the fisherman and his apprentice stood by the pool.

“I don’t understand,” the apprentice said. “Wouldn’t it be better if you’d returned those memories the other way around?”

“Watch,” said the fisherman, and he waved his hand over the pool.

The surface of the pool rippled, and they saw a new image reflected on it. It was the same location as the first memory, a busy sidewalk.

There was still a person sitting in the exact same spot, begging for money.

“What does-” the apprentice started.

“Shh,” the fisherman said. “Watch.”

As the beggar looked around, despair started to fill their eyes. It was almost exactly the same as the first memory. The apprentice nearly looked away, then-

“Hey,” someone stopped in front of the beggar. “You’re new around here.”

It was the first woman. Her face was still gaunt, but now she looked happier and well fed. Brighter, somehow.

When the beggar didn’t respond, the woman continued talking.

“I know a spot that can help. C’mon, it’ll get really cold soon.”

She offered the beggar her hand, and they accepted.

The fisherman waved his hand over the pool again, and the image shifted. This time the apprentice didn’t recognize the place or the people. The situation was once again similar, though. One child was bullying another, this time a little girl.

“Hey, you!” it took a moment for the apprentice to recognize the boy from the memory, now taller and older. He glowered at the bully, who suddenly seemed much flightier. “You wannasay that again?”

The bully looked around, then ran off.

“Are you okay?” the boy asked the girl. She sniffled, then nodded.

“Wanna go get ice cream?”

“Yeah,” she smiled softly, then the fisherman waved his hand over the pool once again and the image disappeared.

“I understand now,” the apprentice said. “At least, for the first two memories. But what about the last?”

“You saw it flickering,” the fisherman said.

“What’d it mean?” she asked.

“Not everyone makes it to the end of their life with their mind intact, and an unstable mind is no home for a memory. It would’ve disappeared, one way or another. Now, do you know what to do with it?”

After a moment of thought, the apprentice nodded.

An old woman found herself in a field. She looked around, seeing nothing but tall green grass as far as the horizon.

Where am I? The old woman realized she didn't know how she'd gotten to this place. She didn't recognize the area, she didn't remember what she'd been doing before arriving, she didn't remember-

"Hello," a voice behind her spoke.

The old woman turned around and saw a young girl holding a sack.

"Sorry if I startled you," the girl apologized. "I'm just delivering something. Do you know where you are?"

The old woman's silence provided enough of a reply.

"Oh," said the girl. "You just died two years after being diagnosed with Alzheimer's. I'm sorry."

Once again, the old woman didn't respond. After a few seconds, she felt tears running down her face.

"Hey, hey," the old woman nearly fell, but the girl caught her and hugged her tightly. "It's over now, okay? Just breathe, alright?"

The two of them stood there for some time. It might have only been a few minutes, it might have been an eternity. Eventually, the tears stopped, and she let go.

"This is yours," the girl pulled something out of her sack and placed it in the old woman's hands.

The old woman stared at the memory, golden and glowing like it had been made yesterday. Staring at it intensely, she cradled it, then gripped it firmly, then pressed it into her chest.

She looked up at the girl. "You look just like her."

The apprentice paused. "Okay, mom."

"It's been so long..." she trailed off.

"Come," the apprentice took her hand. "There's a long journey ahead."

And so, the two of them walked off towards the endless horizon, hand in hand, if only for a short time.