

# YOUNG WRITERS 2021



HUNTSVILLE LITERARY ASSOCIATION



## Acknowledgments

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**Huntsville Literary Association's  
Fifty-third Annual  
Young Writers Contest**

**2021**

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**Huntsville Literary Association's**  
**Fifty-third Annual**  
**Young Writers Contest**  
**2021**

The purpose of the Young Writers Contest is to encourage, stimulate, promote, and reward outstanding creative writings by students in grades one through twelve in public, private, and home schools in Madison County. We wish to thank the teachers and school administrators for their support and assistance. Thank you, WLRH Public Radio for your continued support of this contest.

No awards ceremony will be held this year due to social distancing for COVID-19.

**Dedication Page**

**The Huntsville Literary**

**Association**

**dedicates**

**the 53rd Young Writers Contest**

**to**

**Carol Ashburn Roach**

**HLA Young Writers' Coordinator**

**And**

**in memory of**

**Nancy Compton Williams**

**HLA Judge**

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Upper Back Cover: <i>Encounter</i> by Perrin Larkin	
Lower Back Cover: <i>Witch</i> by Danica Vu	

# WINNERS

## Lower Elementary Poetry Division

First Place	Zayna Killedar, Second Grade Madison Elementary School Teacher: Lori Hellums
Second Place	Isaac Fuerst, First Grade Williams Elementary School Teacher: Amy Martin
Third Place	Kylie Zou, Second Grade Horizon Elementary School Teacher: Terri Leary



## Upper Elementary Poetry Division

First Place	Jon Thomas Macri, Third Grade Asbury School Teacher: Jennifer Macri
Second Place	Anjana Raman, Fifth Grade Rainbow Elementary School Teacher: Omri Davis
Third Place	Winnie Pace, Fourth Grade Hampton Cove Elementary School Teacher: Sonja Parker
Honorable Mention	Cora White, Fifth Grade Whitesburg Christian Academy Teacher: Karen Denman
Honorable Mention	Weston Trefry, Fifth Grade Whitesburg Christian Academy Teacher: Karen Denman
Honorable Mention	Anna Taylor, Fifth Grade Academy for Academics and Arts Teacher: Maynard James

## **Junior Poetry Division**

First Place	Miley Fitzgerald, Seventh Grade Liberty Middle School Teacher: Kassidy Hutchison
Second Place	Alexander Beaudry, Sixth Grade St. John the Baptist Catholic School Teacher: Anna Glosemeyer
Third Place	Laurel Howard, Seventh Grade Mountain Gap P-8 School Teacher: Laurel Field
Honorable Mention	Bella Garcia, Seventh Grade Liberty Middle School Teacher: Kassidy Hutchison
Honorable Mention	Ceilidh Sprinz, Sixth Grade St. John the Baptist Catholic School Teacher: Lynda Fulks
Honorable Mention	Crishawn Willingham, Eighth Liberty Middle School Teacher: Maria White

## **Junior Short Story Division**

First Place	Amelia Rathz, Eighth Grade Mountain Gap P-8 School Teacher: Leslie Graham
Second Place	Alexa Sears, Eighth Grade Mountain Gap P-8 School Teacher: Leslie Graham
Third Place	Cidne Rhodes, Eighth Grade Mountain Gap P-8 School Teacher: Leslie Graham
Honorable Mention	Miley Fitzgerald, Seventh Grade Liberty Middle School Teacher: Cassidy Hutchison

## Senior Poetry Division

First Place	Bryan McNeal, Senior Huntsville High School Teacher: Hannah Wylie
Second Place	Colby Meeks, Senior Lee High School Teacher: Michele Sisson
Third Place	Mo McCann, Senior Bob Jones High School Teacher: Brandy Panagos
Honorable Mention	Louise Block, Freshman Lee High School Teacher: Michelle Sisson
Honorable Mention	Jillian Naylor, Sophomore Lee High School Teacher: Michelle Sisson
Honorable Mention	Katherine Tanner, Junior Bob Jones High School Teacher: Brandy Panagos

## **Senior Short Story Division**

First Place  
Madeline Rathz, Senior  
Grissom High School  
Teacher: Ashley Rice

Second Place  
Donald Williams, Junior  
Bob Jones High School  
Teacher: Brandy Panagos

Third Place  
Madison Tanner, Sophomore  
Bob Jones High School  
Teacher: Brandy Panagos

Honorable Mention  
Joshua Lin, Senior  
Bob Jones High School  
Teacher: Nicole Schwartz

## Artwork Category

First Place  
(Front cover)

Georgia White, Senior  
Bob Jones High School  
Teacher: Brandy Panagos

Second Place  
(Upper back cover)

Perrin Larkin, Junior  
Bob Jones High School  
Teacher: Brandy Panagos

Third Place  
(Lower Back cover)

Danica Vu, Junior  
Bob Jones High School  
Teacher: Brandy Panagos

Honorable Mention

Analeise Wasenius, Senior  
Bob Jones High School  
Teacher: Robin Lakso

Honorable Mention

Brandon Clark, Senior  
Bob Jones High School  
Teacher: Brandy Panagos

Honorable Mention

Emma Hardy, Senior  
Bob Jones High School  
Teacher: Brandy Panagos

## Lower Elementary Poetry

### Travel

I pack up to go,  
Ready for a trip,  
I am so excited,  
I could do a backflip!

I get up to explore,  
So many places to see,  
No school, no homework,  
It's time to be free!

Goodbye covid,  
welcome fun,  
time to travel,  
There so much to be done

*First Place  
Lower Elementary Poetry  
Zayna Killedar*

## Stars

Stars are different colors  
Like these here,  
Betelgeuse, Rigel, Pollux.  
We're not near.  
Betelgeuse is red,  
Rigel is blue,  
Pollux is white,  
Easy to see in the bright,  
Bright night.

*Second Place*  
*Lower Elementary Poetry*  
*Isaac Fuerst*

## Floating in Space

I'm floating in space  
I feel very light,  
If I look around,  
I'll see starlight!

It's just once in a lifetime,  
You'll soon see.  
Cause space is  
So out of reality!

I wish I can stay  
Every single day.  
And that's all I can say!

*Third Place*  
*Lower Elementary Poetry*  
*Kylie Zou*

# Upper Elementary Poetry

## The Beast of Monte Sano

Gather 'round, I'll tell you a tale  
that'll make your hair curl and your kitties wail.  
way up high on this here mountain,  
for years far more than I'm countin'  
a beast lurks atop old Monte Sano.  
Listen up, it's a fright and I'll explain so.  
Deep in the woods where the sun can't shine,  
Past the ends of the trails, in the oaks and the pine,  
Where the birds don't sing in the deer don't go  
Lives is the mysterious BobTurtle of Monte Sano.  
If you hear a rustle don't turn away,  
It will be gone in a flash, before you can say  
Did you see a huge shell? Was that a furry tail?  
Were those really fangs? With glowing eyes and claws like nails?  
Reptilian feline, part turtle part cat  
Its shell-like armor and built for combat.  
If you go looking, you won't likely find,  
So scarce, it's rarely seen by mankind.  
Hearing so keen with those big, pointy ears  
and sense of smell that will leave you in tears.  
It will smell you and run before you come near.  
You wonder what was the BobTurtle really just here.  
If you don't see it, don't stare, just run...  
Once provoked, it's fierce. Your life could be done.  
So next time you're hiking near the end of the path,  
Turn around. Don't bring on the BobTurtle's wrath.  
Turn around quickly when you get to the end,  
Go back home and warn all your friends!

*First Place*  
*Upper Elementary Poetry*  
*Jon Thomas Marci*

## **A Land Unknown**

Far away, a land unknown,  
Lies, waiting to be found.  
In it a camouflage creature creeps,  
Without making a sound.

Ready to stalk its prey,  
Blends in with the snow  
It's so beautiful, but keep it in mind,  
Where it is, nobody knows.

This land is the Arctic Circle,  
Where polar bears hunt,  
And seals and otters and the puffins play,  
How much ever they want.

And the camouflage creature is an Arctic fox,  
Lemmings and insects it does stalk,  
This makes it seen it quite unseen,  
Quite unseen, but just as deadly...

Far away in a land unknown,  
Lies waiting to be seen,  
Temperatures drop and do not rise,  
Fish swim in the icy sea.

At nighttime, cold winds blow, and animals huddle in dens,  
A winter storm is raging, it should be over soon, but when?  
Food is scarce, not enough to eat,  
Where is all of our precious meat?

Then, just as it all seems hope is lost,  
The sun pokes out of the clouds and shines across,  
The Arctic Circle, where catastrophe did strike,  
And all life seemed to shatter, because of the storm in the night.

But although life can be harsh,  
And the weather can be too  
There is a thriving ecosystem,  
In the place which nobody knew.

Life changes every day,  
For everyone, far and near.  
And especially this land unknown  
Very far from here.

*Second Place*  
*Upper Elementary Poetry*  
*Anjana Raman*

## Growing into Me

When I was younger, I stood on boxes to be heard  
My voice was as loud as a baby bird  
As I grew older, I hoped to be brave  
But with each day that passed, I became more afraid  
Why is it me that cannot be  
Am I not worthy, am I not free to be me  
Let me stop the chatter inside my head  
I am going to be the best me instead  
I am powerful, I am loved, and I am kind  
I will not let my dreams be left behind  
An artist, a singer, or maybe a vet  
No matter the dream, it will be met  
You will see my name in blinking lights  
As I grow into me, I will bring forth my might  
I will change the world in the blink of an eye  
I lift and support others until the day I die

*Third Place  
Upper Elementary Poetry  
Winnie Pace*

# Junior Poetry

## Ode to Amusement Parks

Cheers of people from young to old  
The weather perfect, not hot nor cold  
I see rides and Ferris wheels go up and down  
Amusement parks are truly the best places around

Aboard the roller coaster, slowly creeping up  
Then out of nowhere we go down in a duck!  
I holler out with my arms touching the sky  
My eyesight is blurry, I feel as if I can fly

Walking around my joy is at its tip  
As we pass great rides, like the pendulum and the ship  
I start to become dizzy as they go to and fro  
My heart is happy, as my worries let go

We play little games, trying to win a prize  
But sadly, no dice, we lose every time  
No need to fear! The show must go on!  
We didn't need the prizes anyway, who cares if we won

Delicious smells of food surrounded my every side  
Sweet delights everywhere only here could provide  
As much as I wanted to go and pay for some snacks  
I knew if I went on a roller coaster, no doubt would I yak

People from all over came for the fun  
No one wasn't happy under the shine of the sun  
We get bumped into by a running gleeful kid  
We had almost hit the burger sign, stopping in a skid

After going on millions of different rides  
Like Ferris wheels and carousels, I couldn't hate if I tried  
We sat down and ate some Dippin' dots  
The cold treat soothed us in our shaded spot.

Night time approaching, we fit in our last rides  
Anything we can get on, from spooky to waterslides  
We look up to the sky and hear fireworks making great sounds  
Amusement parks are truly the best places around

*First Place  
Junior Poetry  
Miley Fitzgerald*

## Ode to the Periodic Table

There's a tool that I've seen and that I once realized.  
It's the Periodic Table, and it keeps things organized.  
The Periodic Table has a special shape-  
a shape that many scientists appreciate.  
Their placements are organized by electron shells.  
They relate to the row in which the element will dwell.  
Rows are called periods and columns are groups,  
but some types of tables are arranged in a loop.  
The groups are arranged by elements that are related,  
and this has often been demonstrated.  
When you look closely, you'll see a diagonal in the table.  
It determines whether or not something's a metal.  
Now, the ones in the diagonal are the many metalloids.  
These ones are shiny but fun to destroy.  
There's an extra box at the bottom which I haven't talked about.  
They wouldn't fit in the table, so they have to be moved out.  
Now you may be wondering, "Well, who's its inventor?"  
Mendeleev was the one whose dream it did enter.  
His table was different from our table, though.  
Back then, there were only 63 he did know.  
Now the number of elements is 118,  
and there are many new tables from a wall to a screen!  
It is possible now that you have realized  
the Periodic Table, which keeps things organized.

*Second Place  
Junior Poetry  
Alexander Beaudry*

## **The Birds**

A cacophonous clamor resounding  
Birdsong compounding to form a treetop symphony  
Strikingly vibrant  
Beautifully bold  
The colors flash before me

The Saffron Finch like lemon zest  
The nest of Great Tinamou eggs  
As bright and blue  
As tranquil seas  
The Ibis's ruby-feathered legs

They rise where the forests are falling  
Constantly calling for peace in a world filled with hate  
They fly where we fell  
They cry and they yell  
To awaken our hope to create

They build where we have discarded  
Since we've bombarded their homes for our sole benefit  
But those who remain  
Will pick up the refrain  
Till we listen and stand from wherever we sit

They soar in the winds of the storm  
In near-perfect form they are all united in song  
With backgrounds diverse  
But the same destination  
They fly, they keep flying along

And when we've failed to find common ground  
One thing we've found is that beauty is seen everywhere  
And those beautiful birds  
Wherever they are  
Are one more little thing we can share

And standing in a rain of feathers,  
Into the ether they vanish from me.  
But restrained on the ground  
I have found that I may  
Look to the birds and be free.

*Third Place  
Junior Poetry  
Laurel Howard*

## Junior Short Story

### Future Nova

*Clink!* Evony's tools flew through the air as she finished adjusting her latest invention. It was no longer a far-off fantasy-- she was holding a time machine. Evony had made it in the portable form of a belt to satisfy the year of 2322's popular trend of compact devices, so it was surprisingly heavy for its size. With a vain smile, Evony flipped her long pink hair out her face and imagined her friends Arina, Roman, and Ven's reactions when she showed her device off at their weekly invention club meeting today. Just last week Roman had bet Evony she would never be able to complete it. Of course, he was just joking. Roman wouldn't hurt a lightfly. But, Evony never backed down from a challenge, and when she got to the club meeting today, her friends would be showing off their silly, useless little contraptions while she showed them the most incredible thing they would ever see in their lives.

Not that she'd let them use it. No, Evony intended to go back in time and fix all her past mistakes with the time machine belt. She would be a perfect human being -- not that she thought lowly of herself in the least -- but Evony was still thrilled by the idea. She planned to stop wars and become an honored queen for millennia to come. Perhaps she could even-- with an expression similar to that of a wet cat, Evony realized she was late for the invention club meeting. She grabbed her bag and went to dash out the door when a strange whirring sound made Evony practically jump out of her skin.

A girl who looked exactly like her was standing in her living room. Evony screamed. "*Who are you? An imposter?*" Evony growled at her double.

"No, you idiot. I'm you," the girl said, "I'm Evony, and I know you're Evony too. I don't have time for this. If you need some explanation..." She held up a device identical to Evony's time machine belt.

"How did you?" Evony scrounged around inside her bag until she realized what the other Evony had done. "You used *my* device?"

The girl sighed. "As I said: I'm you from the future. You can call me Nova for now since *clearly*, you can't understand that I'm you and you're me and all that. Look, I need to tell you something." Evony closed her eyes and took a deep breath before deciding that this was for the best. She could just bring Nova along to the restaurant for the club meeting, and then she would have perfect proof that the time machine worked. This realization also made Evony remember that the club meeting would have started exactly fifteen minutes ago.

"Fine. Tell me. And be quick about it too." Evony snapped.

Nova blinked, took a breath, and uttered two words:

"Roman's dead."

There was silence. Evony didn't know how to react to this news. Her friends were the only people she cared about other than herself. Evony wanted so badly to believe that Nova was lying, but here the facts were, laying themselves down in front of her.

"How?" was all Evony could manage, her arrogant smile gone.

"I don't know. I left the restaurant to go get my bag and the time travel machine from the vehicle, and when I came back... he was gone. I didn't know what to do, so I used the belt." Nova was ghostly white recalling the nightmare of an experience.

"Wait." Evony gasped. "You said the restaurant. As in tonight's club meet? We can still save him from whoever killed him. It had to be someone at the restaurant, right? If we can keep an eye on Roman the whole time we can stop the murder before it happens."

Nova nodded. "If we can save him in the past, he'll return to my future, but there's a catch: If I don't return to the future before the time here ends up at the time that I left at, I'll disappear. There can't be two of the same person when the times converge. We have to stop the murder before eleven thirty-two."

"Great. As if we needed any more pressure." Evony rolled her eyes, and the two ran out the door.

Evony and Nova arrived at the Eternity Diner five minutes later and slipped in through the revolving door. Inside, a group of three teenagers was loudly chattering at a high-top table. The hanging decorations in the Eternity Diner shone with sparkly light, and the tabletops glowed like the moon. Arina, the girl with the long purple hair and the orange dress turned around and spotted them. Evony ducked behind a chair, realizing she needed to figure out how she would explain the copy of herself to everyone in the restaurant. They had left so fast that she and Nova hadn't even thought of putting a disguise on one of them. Confusion wasn't something else they needed right then. Arina waved over Nova who reluctantly went over to their table with a glance back in the present Evony's direction.

Nova sat down across from Ven, the awkward, quiet kid who was fiddling with a little button he must have invented. Nova stared at him suspiciously, before turning her eyes to . . . Then, Nova saw him. Roman was sitting there next to Ven and was talking to Arina about the small bracelet teleportation device she had made. His bright blue hair was hard to miss as it clashed with his yellow eyes and his blue washed-out tee. Nova's eyes filled with tears at the sight of her friend.

*Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry.* Evony prayed from the next booth over where she was silently watching her friends like a hawk. But, the worst part was that Evony knew herself too well. She couldn't even imagine how awful it would be to see a friend who had died just a few hours ago come back in someone else's world. Although normally she would never cry in front of others to spare her ego, Evony had a hard time holding in her feelings when something bad happened.

Nova stood up, lying that she had to go to the restroom, and slid into the booth with Evony. Wiping her eyes, Nova looked away from her past self in embarrassment. Evony pushed down the feeling of shame at her future self nearly bawling her eyes out and ruining everything.

"We only have about ten more minutes, and I haven't seen any weird behavior so far," Nova whispered to Evony, nervousness now adding to the grief written all over her face. Evony agreed, looking equally panicked. Nothing out of the ordinary had

happened. And they were cutting it really close at this point. As if on cue, a horrible sound like a siren mixing with a scream from Arina filled the room.

Nova and Evony both jumped up, but Nova, remembering that one of them had to stay hidden, quickly dove back down and peeked around the side. The teleportation bracelet device was glowing with a bright light and seemed to be emitting the noise. Arina covered her ears and backed up from it.

"What's happening to it?" Evony shouted over the noise, though it seemed to be getting a bit quieter. Roman and Ven looked terrified, and they too had to raise their voices to be heard.

"It was just lying here and then..." Ven started, but he trailed off not knowing what happened, and looked at Arina confused.

"I must have wired it wrong. Or when Roman and I were playing with it, a wire must have snapped. If it's making this noise that must mean it is going into manual mode. Th-that basically means that if someone doesn't put it on, we'll all get teleported into nothingness by the time the sound disappears. Basically, we all die." Arina frantically explained.

"And if someone puts it on... what then?" Evony asked, dreading the answer.

"If someone puts on the bracelet, then they will disappear." Arina's voice wavered. Roman hung his head ashamed. He was visibly shaking from head to toe.

"I should put it on. It was me who broke it. I snapped the side wire when I was looking at it the first time." As a pale-faced Roman went to put on the bracelet, to disappear from reality forever, Evony suddenly realized what had happened to him in Nova's timeline. He hadn't been inside because he'd been teleported into nothing. It wasn't murder. Roman had sacrificed himself to save his friends.

"*NO!*" shouted a voice. Everyone turned to look over at Nova, who had appeared from her hiding place. Roman froze.

"Wait, why are there two Evonys?" he asked, confused. The noise was steadily getting quieter. It was now about the sound of a whistle.

"There's no time to explain," Nova said. "Evony, I have to do this. My time is only one minute away. If I try to go now, I know I'll regret it." Evony stared back at her in astonishment, all dislike of the other girl vanished.

Suddenly, without waiting for a response, Nova snatched up the bracelet from the table, which was now barely audible, and slid it around her wrist.

"*Nova, why?*" Evony screamed, her eyes filling with tears, as a light as bright as the moonlit sky surrounded her future self.

Nova gave a small, sad smile and said, "Because, Evony, I live on as long as you do. We are the same person."

Then, Nova was gone.

*First Place  
Junior Short Story  
Amelia Rathz*

## PREY MADE PREDATOR

Cold. Freezing, biting, numbing, boreal cold.

That's all I could think of while trying to keep my kits warm and safe. Six shivering balls of damp, snow-white fur huddled beneath my underbelly, trying to evade the falling snow. Sulfu, my mate for life, had his paws full scrounging for rabbits that had recently burrowed their holes to secrete themselves from the storm. This blizzard was definitely the worst one this moon.

*Crunch, crunch, crunch...* the snow gave away my presence to any nearby predators... but I had no choice. Our den collapsed, almost taking Nym to the stars in the process. Nym was the runt of the litter, struggling to lift her paws out of the thick, wet snow. She trailed behind, barely having any protection from the sharp wind and snowflakes.

I scanned the landscape desperately for any form of shelter. I could've sworn there was a small, abandoned cave more eastward. *Where is eastward...?* I thought faintly, looking towards the sky for help, but only a broad, white sheet of winter greeted me. I fixed my gaze forward once more, flitting my lightning-blue eyes from evergreen to evergreen, only to find dangerous icicles hanging from the multitude of branches.

I shivered, shaking ice from my pelt, as snow landed in my eyes, blinding me temporarily as I took step after step through the rough terrain. I heard the muzzy coo of a snowy owl, its call muffled by the weather. I rotated my ears towards the sound, which was coming directly behind us. I urged my kits faster, a wave of fear crashing over me.

*Crunch, crunch, crunch...* Nym attempted to catch up with her siblings, bounding over a rock that was frozen solid, but her claws lost their grip, and she tumbled to the ground, whimpering a low cry. One of Nym's sisters, Indel, the strongest one of the litter, rushed to her aid as I surged forward in an attempt to grab her by the scruff. Instead of finding Nym, I found Indel and whirled around and tossed towards her siblings.

Nym shrieked in fear as I went back for her and I simultaneously yowled for my other kits to shelter under the evergreen trees. *Hoo! Hoo! Reet!* I could make out the snowy owl amidst the flurries, its orange, piercing eyes fixing themselves upon my little Nym. Fiery, passionate love coursed through my veins and arteries, melting the snow off my back and leaving scorch marks on frozen grass. I was only a few bounds away from her - a few more steps and I would wrap her in my protective grip, never to be released.

The snowy owl extended her claws, unsheathing deadly daggers that would kill my Nym in a heartbeat. Nym tried to get back on her paws, yipping in pain when she slipped again and landed in the sopping snow.

"Miaow," Nym cried weakly before being cut short and replaced with a yawp of pain.

Bloodstained claws sank into Nym's fur, the owl staring into my eyes with a look of triumph. I screeched a noise that would've made any fox's fur stand on end, snapping wildly at the owl. In my rage I clipped a few feathers off her wings, but nothing more. Nym was gone. She blended into the snow... and she was gone. Forever.

“Nym! Oh, Nym!” I yelled into the abyss, my heart shrinking into a pebble and guilt overtaking all my senses.

I seemed to forget I had any other kits. I forgot about Indel, Drayce, Kyana, Ievos, Alimar. All I could think about was how I failed Nym and how she died because of me - because of my faulty actions. I should’ve helped her. I should’ve been fast enough. I should’ve ripped that snowy owl apart limb by limb and fed her to my kits. No, even better, I should’ve plucked every feather of hers while she was still alive. Yes, that’s much better. A slow, painstaking death. Then I might find her nest and take her children away from her - see how her mate likes it.

Sulfu. I need to find him. He’ll start searching for her once I get my other kits to safety. They were huddled under a looming evergreen tree, staring at me with wide, terrified, striking blue eyes.

“Come, kits,” I called to them, trying to steady my shaking, raspy voice.

Indel helped me herd the other kits eastward once more, where we would hopefully find the abandoned cave.

...

Nightfall came, the snow settling down. The blizzard was subsiding, even though I could still make out flurries floating around outside of our cave. Sulfu had come back with a shrew and some berries. Not much, so I let my kits go to town on it.

When he’d heard about Nym, he immediately set out again, trying his best to track down the owl’s nest. I had to stay and protect the kits I had left.

As if on cue, the sound of dragging against frozen snow met my ears, gradually becoming louder and louder. I ushered my kits behind a crevice in the cold stone as I stood protectively by the entrance, baring my fangs. I sniffed the air tentatively, searching for a familiar scent.

Nym! No, it can’t be. I saw her taken away.

Or, Sulfu was outside, dragging her dead body.

No, I smelled something else... like a bird....

Without another thought, I hissed at my kits to stay put while I rushed outside, unaware of anything else but the dragging sound.

“Nym!” I cried, bolting up to her chilled, wet form.

I began to groom her face furiously, thanking my ancestors for delivering her safely. I looked at her through narrowed eyes in the night, trying to clearly make out her form. Only minor wounds. She was standing up tall enough; nothing seemed to cause a limp.

“What happened, Nym? How are you here? Alone, of all things?” I asked her in rapid-fire fashion, the words spilling from my lips with no warning.

“I’m not alone,” Nym replied, her eyes sparkling with both pain and effort... and was that... a little bit of glee? Triumph?

She glanced behind her, pointing with her tail towards the figure in the dark. The snowy owl, frozen now, with claw marks on her eyes and bloodstains on her feathers. I felt a million emotions assault me at once. Pride, relief, joy, excitement. I may have felt tears prick my eyes. I may have felt guilt reach my soul.

“Let’s get you inside, Nym, we’ll be eating well tonight.”

*Second Place  
Junior Short Story  
Alexa Sears*

## The 72nd Floor

I wake up to the smell of coffee and eggs. Once again, I've slept through my alarm. The clock on my bedside table reads 6:06. I wobble to the kitchen table where I see a steaming cup of coffee at my spot and my fiancée Dani cooking eggs in an iron skillet. Her long dark brown hair is up in a messy bun, complementing her blue eyes and pale skin. She's wearing a grey t-shirt and a plaid pair of pajama pants, which I'm pretty sure I bought her.

I take a sip of my coffee and look around the kitchen. I feel a sudden chill and realize Dan opened the window. It's nice, since it's getting to be Autumn, and I let the breeze rush over me into the rest of the apartment.

Dani walks over with two plates of eggs and sits down next to me with a peck on the cheek. "Good morning dear." She says calmly. Considering the fact I'm not fully awake yet, I mumble "Good morning Dan." With a small smile, I grab her hand. She knows me well enough to know I'm not a morning person by any stretch of the imagination. Our wedding is in about a month, and I can't wait. Dani knows me better than anyone, and I know her better than anyone.

After finishing the eggs, Dan and I share a small look before racing each other to the shower. I win of course. Dani's 5'5 and I hover over her at 6'2. We're only 25, and I just stopped growing. I take a five-minute shower, quickly scrubbing my hair with shampoo, and go to the closet. Dan's clothes take up about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the closet but I'm ok with it. I don't own too many clothes anyway. I grab a grey sports coat with a matching pair of pants and a pale yellow button up. I go to my tie drawer and grab a random one. Navy blue it is. I hear the shower running as I go to the door to grab my shoes. Dani works at a bakery in town, so maybe I'll stop by during lunch to surprise her. I grab my worn-in, brown leather bag Dan gave me a couple of Christmas's ago and I'm ready.

I go back to the bedroom as Dan gets out of the shower. She's got one towel wrapped around her body and another around her hair. I pull her in for a hug before I go. We promised each other that I'm not allowed to leave before I say goodbye. On the

way out I make sure I look decent in the mirror. My hazel eyes still look slightly tired, and my light brown hair is getting a little shaggy, but I look fine. I call out “I love you” to Dani as the door to our apartment shuts behind me. I glance at my watch, which has been an heirloom that’s been in my family for decades. It even has our last name engraved on the back. “Henrickson” stares back at me until I flip the watch over. 6:47. I take a brief moment to decide whether to take the stairs or the elevator and eventually decide on the stairs. About halfway down I start regretting it, considering the fact we live on the 11th floor.

After finally reaching the bottom, I say a quick goodbye to our doorman, Tony, and walk outside. The breeze that I felt this morning is even better now, and I take a deep sigh before beginning my commute to work. I walk for about a block until I get to the sweet spot as I call it. Taxis are hard to call down, but they seem to notice me when I’m in the sweet spot. I’m lucky I was born in New York. I stick my hand out and wave, and soon enough, an empty taxi approaches me. “Where ya heading?” The driver says in a very heavy Jersey accent. “World Trade Center.” He nods, and I take my hint to get in before he leaves.

The drive is pretty quiet, at least as quiet as it's going to get. There’s a lot of tall buildings pretty much the entire way and a lot of noise. I’ve gotten used to it though. The blaring horns and occasional screaming are therapeutic at this point. I also make sure to never leave past 7, because with all the traffic we have here, I’ve learned not to risk being late.

I can tell I’m almost there because I see Duchess Bakery, where Dani works, and it’s only about two blocks from my building. After a little bit longer, the driver parks and looks back at me. With his thick accent, he says “16.10.” I give him 17 because I’ve always been too lazy to break my change.

I walk to my building, and honestly, I get excited every time I do. I’m so lucky to work in one of the twin towers. There’s always a lot of commotion in the lobby, but I weave my way through until I find a semi-full elevator. A man is leaning against the back wall, pilfering through a large briefcase, looking for something apparently urgent. There are two other people, two women are wearing almost identical black skirts, with some sort of

blazer over a button-up. I've never really understood women's fashion, but Dan does.

The elevator ride is a long one since I work on the 72nd floor. Most of the people from the bottom floor have already gotten off. It's just me until the door opens on the 37th floor to an older man, slightly bald on the top wearing a black sports coat and pants, with a white button-up and a red tie. There's some light elevator music playing in the background while we share a small smile and wait until one of us leaves. He rides until the 65th floor and gets off. Not long after, the elevator dings as if telling me I'm here. I check my clock. 7:56. Not a minute too soon. "Hey B," I say to Bianca as I slide into my seat, which is right next to hers. Bianca has been my best friend since we were 11. Bianca was always an attractive girl, with dirty blonde hair and green eyes. When she got married a couple of years ago to her husband Jay, I was a groomsman at the wedding. They come over for dinner every Sunday. "Hey Josh," Bianca says.

I whip out my brown bag and start pulling out all my paperwork, and soon everything is sprawled out on my desk except my blackberry. I like to keep it in my pocket so I can feel it vibrate. I have to feel my phone vibrate, or I won't know I'm getting a call.

"What's the date?" Bianca asks with a small smile. "It's the 11th," I respond automatically. Bianca always had trouble remembering the date, but I never had a problem with it. "...September 11, 2001..." I hear Bianca mumble to herself. I cut in, "It's been 2001 for 9 months now and you still can't remember?" Bianca looks confused, so I grab my calendar from the wall. "See?" I ask her. "What would I do without you?" She says as her face lights up. "I don't know B. Not get the date right for sure." I say jokingly.

After working for a few minutes, Bianca looks at me and says, "I need coffee. You want some?" "Always," I reply. I look over at my wrist to take a look at the time. 8:23. I can already tell I'm going to get bored today, so I try to focus for as long as possible. That only works until Bianca comes back with the coffee, and I'm distracted again.

After attempting to work some more, I take a slow sip of my coffee and check the time, flipping the engraved "Henrickson" out of my sight. 8:46. Maybe around noon, I'll see Dani at the bakery. I share a quick smile with Bianca and look down at my work.

Someone starts screaming, "Look at the plane! It's coming towards us!" I look at the window and I can feel the blood draining from my face. A giant plane is headed towards the building. I see some people running towards the stairs, and others making phone calls. There's screaming echoing through every floor of the building. I'm completely paralyzed. I'm so trapped in my thoughts until Bianca grabs my hand. I see a tear fall from her face as she puts a hand on her stomach. "B, this has got to be a mistake," I say to her but more to myself. I squeeze her hand and hope the plane is just making a massive mistake. My vision goes dark.

When I wake up, I'm on the floor. There's smoke everywhere and my vision is slightly bloody. I don't know what's happening. Suddenly I think about Bianca. "B!" I call out. "Bianca!" I hear a hoarse voice call my name followed by a lot of coughs. It's gotta be her. I army crawl towards the continuous coughing, and it's hard to hold back tears when I see her. She's on the ground, with a trickle of blood coming from her temple and her nose and she's covered in soot.

"Oh B..." I say when I see her. "B, don't worry. We're gonna be okay." My voice cracks. Bianca says in a whisper with a fit of coughs following every few words, "Josh, we're too high. There's no way down." "No! We'll be fine," I interject. She continues, "Josh. I love you. I don't know if I'm gonna make it. Josh, you've been my best friend since middle school. I need you to make sure Jay knows I love him, and our son." I gasp, "B, no! You're pregnant?" Bianca sighs, "We wanted you and Dan to be the godparents. Tell them. I love Jay. I love you. Forever-" She winces in pain and coughs.

Then she doesn't cough anymore. I begin to sob. "B, no! Please wake up!" I know she won't wake up. That's the worst part. I lay with Bianca. I hugged her one last time. When I move, I feel something poke my thigh. "The blackberry..." I realize.

My eyes sting from all the smoke, but I manage to keep my eyes open. I pull it out and find Dani's number, and while I do, I find myself coughing. The smoke is filling up the room. I don't have much time left. I click on her contact and don't even hear the ring before she picks up. "Josh! Are you ok? Please just tell me you're ok?" Her voice breaks. I can tell she's been crying. I need her to understand and it's getting harder to breathe, so I speak slowly, "Dan, I love you so much. Bianca is dead." I hear her sobs, but I have to keep going. "Tell Jay she loves him and her son. You would've been the godmother." She interjects, sobbing, "She was pregnant?"

I continue, "Baby, listen. Dan, I love you" I put the phone down as a hacking cough comes out. "You are my soulmate. My love, promise me you'll stay strong. I promised you I'd never leave without saying goodbye. Now promise me this." "I promise," she whispered. I put the phone down as I cough more.

I can feel it in my lungs. My eyes are teary. I lay down, with Bianca's hand in mine and the blackberry in the other. I hack out another couple of coughs. I look at my watch one more time. My eyes are blurry, and the glass is cracked, but it gives me a sense of comfort. I close my eyes and hope Dani will be ok. I never imagined this is how it would end. On the 72nd floor.

*Third Place  
Junior Short Story  
Cidne Rhodes*

## Senior Poetry

### Escapade with Poseidon

For days,  
We called that house home.  
Soaked bodies in salty brine  
And made the sun kiss our supple skin.  
These were moments where serenity  
Revealed his face to me.  
Moments when I couldn't distinguish  
The genesis of the joy that blossomed  
In the chambers and capillaries of this red fruit.  
Maybe it was the way the music of the sea  
Accentuated the sand between my toes,  
Evoking memories of nereids and sea gods.  
Maybe it was the way he glowed,  
Body like a bronze Adonis,  
Every little river in the world running down  
His skin, water droplets fragmenting light  
Into a halo around him.

I thought of him as an angel.  
No, I thought of him as a god.  
And if you saw him, you'd agree.  
One day, we decided to dive together.  
Air heavy in my chest as we swam beneath  
The waves. I watched him carefully,  
In awe with the way he called the water home,  
The way with how he seemed to belong here,  
A beauty among the fish.

I called him a mermaid, once, and he grinned  
At me, saying that maybe the stories are true.  
On my escapade with Poseidon, I let this god's  
Name resound on the folds of my tongue.  
Let this god's glory rock me like the waves  
Of his crystal blue kingdom.

*First Place  
Senior Poetry  
Bryan McNeal*

## right on I-81

you do not love me:  
a fact -- empirical and undeniable,  
i know this. i know this, but  
i try to forget; try to pull the  
memory from my skin that  
is shedding, aching, begging  
for that dry, raw touch of  
cold december lovers. waiting  
for that vocal-fry whisper  
*come back* to cut the crisp air in  
that whiplash sort of way. waiting  
for our bodies to wade spring-chilled  
river waters up to our collarbones until  
we are drowning in one another again.  
still, though, you do not love me.  
because the sun is so hesitant in  
sinking west these days and  
you loved me in the dark, cold  
gully of solstice when i was the  
refuge from the hills of snow that  
you loved but you could not stand  
damp boots and i just thought it was  
all so beautiful and we were so beautiful  
but, the snow is melted and the river banks  
are brinking bloodroot and your fingers  
do not curl into the shape of mine in  
cold winds and late nights and when  
you hear my name. you do not love me.  
but, please, forgive me, for when i repeat  
your name and my promises and the sound of  
lapping river rapids like mantra. because  
you do not love me, but somehow,  
after all this time, and all this empty,  
i cannot make my body remember  
it is alone,        now.

*Second Place  
Senior Poetry  
Colby Meeks*

## friends i could have had

I. had i been kinder

she was very near and very far at all times,  
and at one point stirred some undeserved hate in me that  
burst into flames at any mention of her name.  
once i felt as close as i ever had to her,  
backstage and behind the flicker of stage lights,  
and told her in a haste and a daze that  
i once abhorred the illusion of her i dreamt  
as though she would know what to respond.

she never deserved that pure envy.

she was subject to it in every ring, every faction,  
and every mouth knew her name like it  
was their second.

she fit into any stranger's rib and

never seemed to know failure;

if i had known her close i could have loved her flaws  
but instead i scorned her goodness from a distance.

II. had he been nearer

he was a friend in the purest sense of the word  
and gave my shoulder a tap when it trembled,  
cupped the back of my head in an embrace  
that warmed the chill of my nerves.

but he was not my friend,  
he was only everyone's,  
and though he shared with me his kindness it never  
belonged to me alone.

i took that small affection and bundled it in my hands  
and stored it in my pocket  
and he crossed the room to give his attention  
to someone else.

III. had she stayed longer  
i never got the chance.  
i don't know what i would have done with one, but  
i once saw her beam from across the classroom and  
knew she was a slice taken from the sun.

it's because she burned so brilliantly that she  
lost the time past fifteen;  
i had waited till tomorrow to greet her but  
tomorrow had dropped her hands from its grasp.

*Third Place  
Senior Poetry  
Mo McCann*

# Senior Short Story

## Skywatching

The sun dipped beneath the plane of the horizon, the sky awash in a gradient of gold, magenta, and navy. The higher Diana's eyes wandered, the more densely concentrated the first stars of evening became – twinkling grains of salt on a canvas of darkness. The afternoon clouds had dispersed into cotton wisps, and Archer and the twins leapt about capriciously, chanting “the stars are coming out! The stars!”

Diana tucked her mittened hands into the folds of her coat as an icy gale whipped across the plain from the snow-capped mountains behind. Her thermos of tea had long since gone cold, and it sat at her feet, untouched with her sack-dinner. She traced a line in the tall grass with her boot sole, enjoying the crush of the velvet soft blades. Of course, they sprang back within moments. She dragged her foot across the same line, forcing them down again.

“Twins! Ryan! Come help me with this tent!” called Mama A, the affectionate name that all four of the Arnold children, even Diana, called their mother. Mama A's long, dark ponytail whipped around in its scrunchie as she turned to face the kids, and her dress – black and patterned with constellations and their corresponding names – was plastered to her legs as the wind tore through its skirts.

With a clamor of excitement, Stella, Ryan, and Archer, who was the oldest of the three at nine-years-old, bounded over to help Mama A stake tent poles in the ground. Diana sighed, plopping down on her sleeping bag, and watched them work, the kids all enthusiastic, clumsy hands as they fumbled with the poles and Mama A directing with all the zeal of a chorus leader. Even in the smallest pursuits, she was relentless.

Soon the tent transformed from a heap of green nylon to a dome resemblant of the picture on the box. The children clapped, applause for a successful performance. Mama A spread a worn blanket across the ground for the four of them to watch the stars,

and Diana burrowed into her sleeping bag to ward off the brisk autumnal chill.

The sky had turned a silky midnight blue and thousands of stars shone against the celestial backdrop.

“I can see so many!” Archer exclaimed, diving onto the blanket and wrinkling Mama A’s handiwork. The twins leapt after him, and they were a pile of squirming limbs in the darkness as the situated themselves for a night of stargazing.

“They’re beautiful, aren’t they?” Mama A mused, unruffled by the commotion and the complete disaster he and the twins had made of the blanket. “Out here there’s less light pollution to obstruct our view of the night sky.”

The twins’ eyes darted from her to the whorls of stars across the sky, their expressions rapt. Even Diana had to admit that she’d never seen an evening like this.

“Light ploo-shion?” Stella struggled to sound out the unfamiliar word.

Mama A smiled and her eyes lit up like they always did when she got the chance to share her passions with her children. Only she could keep two rambunctious six-year-olds engaged in an astronomy lesson.

She sat down on the edge of the blanket and crossed her ankles, looking more relaxed than Diana had ever seen her. Though she always tried to maintain an optimistic façade for the children, Diana knew that working two part time jobs and raising four kids as a single mother was no easy task.

“Each year when I was younger, my parents would take my siblings and me to this exact spot. And each year they told us stories – about the constellations and the myths that inspired their names.”

“Like Per-see-us?” Ryan sounded out, tugging at Mama A’s skirt where the letters were printed in white beneath the linework image of the Greek hero.

“Yes, just like Perseus!” She laughed, and in the silence that followed, Diana could hear the echoes of her melodic voice mingle with the gentle soughing of trees and the burbling of a distant stream. She had heard these stories once when her mother had taken her here, just the two of them, before Archer was born.

Still, her ears perked up despite herself, and she found herself leaning forward in her sleeping bag, drawn in by the smooth cadence of Mama A's voice.

"If you look just there—" She pointed toward a cluster of stars overhead, forming a sort of boxy shape. "That's Perseus's head. And there—" she traced her finger down an invisible line. "Is his body."

"That doesn't look like a person, Mama A," Archer said, rolling his eyes and curling up in the blanket.

She laughed again, the musical sound ringing through the clearing. "No, it doesn't quite, does it? But try to imagine—" She raised her hands high. "A tall and mighty warrior, bearing sword and shield—"

"Was he handsome?" Stella interrupted.

"Aww Stella, that's gross!" Ryan leaned over and tried to tug her hair, but she wrestled out of his grasp and fell across Archer.

"Get off me!" he grumbled.

"Don't you want to know what happens?" Mama A teased, and with no further prompting the three younger siblings scrambled back to their original positions. When they were settled at last, she began.

"Our story begins long ago, in ancient Greece with the birth of a baby boy. He was the son of a beautiful princess—" She traced a finger around the top of her head, an invisible crown. "But his grandfather, who had been warned that one day this child would grow up to kill him, locked him away in a chest and threw him in the river."

"How mean," Stella muttered, gazing up at the gleaming cluster of stars.

"Yes, it was . . . but thanks to the sea god, Poseidon, he survived, and a kind fisherman raised the child who eventually grew into a man. It was then that he was challenged." Her voice took on the deep, dramatic inflection of a performer. "The king of the island ordered the young Perseus to slay the Gorgon Medusa—who had snakes instead of hair and eyes that turned her victims to stone."

Mama A's eyes were exaggeratedly wide as the twins shuddered.

“And then, for everyone knew that the young hero's task was hopeless, the gods, Hermes and Athena, appeared from the sky, and they gave him gifts: Hermes – a pair of winged sandals, and Athena – a mirror and a hat to make its wearer invisible.

“With these gifts in hand, Perseus journeyed to Africa to find Medusa's lair in a dark cave. Entering, he held out his lantern, and he told the Gorgon ‘Beware thy foul snake-headed beast!’”

Archer and the twins laughed as she mirrored the shock on Medusa's face, her hands pantomiming the mouths of snakes at the ends of her hair.

“Medusa tried to force the hero to meet her eyes, but with the winged sandals, he flew above her snakes and flashing eyes. And at last, in a stroke of inspiration, he put on his cap of invisibility and drew near to Medusa and held out the mirror to reveal her reflection. And then –”

“She turned to stone!” Archer exclaimed.

“That she did.” Mama A tapped him on the nose. “And so Perseus returned to the island victorious, with the Gorgon's head in hand.”

The story now complete, Diana pressed her cheek into the warm flannel of her sleeping bag and closed her eyes. When Mama A told the story, it sounded so simple. Perseus was a son-of-a-princess-turned-nobody who accepted a few gifts from the gods and became a hero and a legend. Just like that.

Archer rolled over, watching Mama A warily. “Did that *really* happen?”

She smiled distantly, her eyes peeled on the stars above. “What do *you* think?”

“I wanna be a hero just like Perseus!” Ryan shouted, leaping to his feet and flexing his spaghetti-arms.

“And I wanna be the princess!” Stella fluffed skirts of the dress-up gown she wore beneath her thick puffer coat.

“Naw, both of you are weird,” Archer spoke up, still tucked under a heap of blanket. “Why would you want to be a hero or a princess when you could actually fly into the sky and see the stars

up-close? . . . Mama A, how old do you have to be to become an astronaut?”

She beamed and kissed Archer’s forehead, the twins clambering onto her legs. “When you’re older, you can go to a special school where they’ll teach you.”

“What about me, Mama?” Stella’s eyes were saucers in the darkness. “Can I go to school to be a princess?”

“Well, sweetie, that’s not quite how it works—”

“But I can still be a princess, right?” Tears were welling in the corners of her wide eyes as she gazed hopefully at Mama A.

“And what about me, Mama?” Ryan whined. “Can I be a hero, too?”

Mama A held out her hands and scooped them into her arms. “Of course you can, baby.”

Diana rolled her eyes as Mama A rounded up Archer and the twins for bed. When they were secure in the tent, she emerged, a faint smile still lighting up her face as she approached Diana. Pulling the blanket closer to Diana’s sleeping bag, she sat down, tucking her hands into her coat for warmth.

The night was stained the deepest black, like a pot of ink had spilled across the sky while Mama A entranced them all with the story. In the total darkness, the stars seemed even brighter than before, a child’s masterpiece of glitter tossed atop the drying ink, and Diana was awed by the sporadic majesty of it.

Mama A was silent a while as they both stared at the sky. “I know,” she finally said, her voice just a murmur in the silent expanse. “But you’re still a wonderful—”

“Please stop,” Diana cut her off, her voice sharper than necessary. “I’m not *nine*. You can’t fool me with *sure you can be an astronaut or a princess or a hero if only you work hard enough!* I did work hard. I spent *a year* putting together my portfolio. And they rejected me in minutes.”

Mama A didn’t move as she continued to gaze at the galaxies spiraling around them. Her features were filled with sorrow, understanding. Somehow that made it worse.

“You keep telling them to pursue their dreams when you know they’re nothing more than wisps of smoke.” She flapped her hands at the tent where Archer and the twins were rustling the

nylon and giggling quietly. “You gave up *your* dream! If you couldn’t make it as a poet, why do you think *I* can?”

This time, a flash of hurt crossed Mama A’s features and instantly Diana felt horrible.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean –”

“No, you’re right Diana. I never did become an acclaimed poet . . . But do you know what?”

She paused and Diana knew she was waiting for her to prompt her. Begrudgingly she asked, “What?”

“My dream has come true every day since I became a mother. You and your brother and the twins, you express all the feelings in my heart better than any book of poetry I could ever publish. Sometimes . . .” she said thoughtfully, “dreams don’t come true with glorious victories but small triumphs – like looking up at the stars surrounded by the people who mean the most.”

In the silence that followed, Diana felt her heart squeeze. Her mother worked so hard for all four of her children, but somehow she always found the time to remind Diana that she was loved, no matter what happened. Some of her anger fizzled and she stretched out in her sleeping bag, twisting the zipper.

“I still don’t think I’m going to write for a while.”

Mama A nodded slowly. “I understand. But you know I still think your portfolio was wonderful.”

“Of course you do,” Diana grumbled, but a trace of a smile played around her lips. “You’re my mom.”

“Therefore you don’t trust my judgement?” Mama A was smiling back, and at that Diana broke into a grin.

They were silent again, watching the stars glimmer faintly. From here, without the lights of the city to dim the sky, Diana felt suspended in time and space, a mere speck in the great spiral of the Milky Way. She wondered if this was how Mama A had felt when she was a girl, skywatching with her parents. She wondered if this was how Mama A felt now, gazing upward, her eyes wide and sparkling. Above Perseus, a band of light arced across the sky – a shooting star.

“The Orionids,” Mama A mused.

“Hmm?” Diana lifted her head.

“An autumnal meteor shower,” she explained. “And if I’m right, we timed our excursion just in time for their peak.”

Diana’s head tilted toward the sky as another shooting star – meteor – streaked toward the horizon. As quickly as it appeared, it vanished from sight. The rays of light might not have been the wishing stars of fairytales, but they were beautiful all the same.

“Thank you, Mama A,” Diana whispered, tucking her head into the warm folds of her sleeping bag. Visions of her mother’s soft smile and dancing meteors played across the darkness of her eyelids as she drifted toward sleep. But before she sank into oblivion, words burst through the haze of her sleepy thoughts.

“Mama?” Diana sat up.

“What is it, sweetie?”

“Could I have some paper? . . . And a pen?”

Mama A smiled knowingly as she reached into her coat pocket and drew out a tiny notepad and a ballpoint pen. “I never go anywhere without them.”

Her eyes adjusting to the darkness, Diana flipped through her mother’s pages of scattered notes and hurriedly scrawled stanzas, at last finding a blank sheet.

The words pushed at her mind and itched at her fingers, urging her to write them down. It didn’t matter that she had previously declared herself on hiatus. This wasn’t a poem for the world. It was for herself and for those who meant the most to her. And even though it was only a single sentence, she wrote:

*You don’t have to fly to the stars and defeat monsters to be an astronaut of the mind and a hero of the heart.*

Then she slipped the pen and pad back to Mama A.

*First Place  
Senior Short Story  
Madeline Rathz*

## **Pride, Misfortune, Legend, and the Importance of Proper Foot Placement**

Guiscard's horse snorted, pawing at the ill-maintained dirt road as Guiscard and his retinue waited for any sign from the scouts. Guiscard's horse was a quick and sturdy beast - necessary to support Guiscard's muscular frame and weighty armor. Guiscard had gathered a force of about a score of militiamen - armed with simple spears and padded shirts - to accompany him as he investigated rumors of a beast lurking within this dark, uncharted wode. Normally, he would dismiss such tales as commoner's superstitions, but the disappearances had begun to impact the production quotas of this region, leading to this mess of an operation.

The murmur of Guiscard's militia was grating on his nerves. He removed his helm, both to get some air on his face and to get a clear view at the happenings within these woods, perhaps to catch a glimpse of the scouts who had been gone near half an hour, but that had only made their incessant, uneducated babbling all the more obnoxious. He uttered an oath beneath his breath and was about to bark the orders for his men to advance into the forest - he'd have the scouts heads for making him wait this long, if they were still alive - when a young man, clothes dirty and torn, with loose bits of foliage clinging to his person, emerged from the woods, panting and stumbling.

"M-m'lord!" The young man cried, "I - we - the beast! It's real!"

The crashing of foliage and frightened man began to stir his horse, and Guiscard stroked its mane to keep it steady. Glaring at the young man, he commanded:

"Calm yourself, boy. Spit it out."

It took the scout a few moments to calm himself and catch his breath, and when he next spoke he'd straightened himself somewhat, eyes focusing on Guiscard's chin so as to avoid his withering glare.

"I'm sorry, m'lord. When you - we went out into the woods, looking for the monster, m'lord. We stumbled 'cross some

old building of sorts and it was there, m'lord, just like they said. We didn't know what to do, but when it turned Irving into a statue, Hubert an' I ran off. Hubert must've gotten lost on the way back, m'lord."

"I see. And you can lead us to this "old building" you found, correct?"

"But - m'lord - the beast?"

"What of this beast? That is what we are here to find, is it not?"

A look of shock covered the young scout's face, and his eyes darted too and fro, before he had finally, somewhat, regained his composure.

"I-I-If that is your will, M'lord. I sh-shall take you there."

"Good man," Guiscard said, turning to the group of men in his stead, "We move, now!"

It took the men some time to organize themselves - time Guiscard took fuming - but after a few minutes, they were following the scout into the woods. The foliage was thick and verdant, and wildlife, though it steered clear of the large group of men, seemed plentiful. A thick aroma of plant matter permeated the air, combining with the cool temperature to provide a sensation to the nostrils that would have been refreshing were it not for the air of nervousness that was audible from the militia.

Guiscard had heard their rumblings. In the span of minutes, they'd already twisted the scout's report around dozens of times, each retelling supposing ever greater threats lying at the heart of this supposedly haunted forest. Guiscard internally wished he could slap some sense into the piddle brained peasantry, but he had more important things to do on this venture. His eyes swept their surroundings, alert for any sort of danger (and eager to distract themselves from the headache that listening to such weak-minded fools inevitably caused), but he saw little of note - until the monotonous chatter of the soldiers was interrupted by the sounds of sobbing.

Guiscard turned his head forwards, stifling a snarl of disgust as he looked upon the source of the noise. The young scout was kneeling over a statue of another young man, this one lying,

back down, in the shrubbery, face frozen in an impeccably detailed mask of fear.

“H-H-Hubert!” The boy wailed, and Guiscard rolled his eyes, turning about, and delegating one of the congregation of men - an older man with a short, brown beard tinged with silver.

“You. Talk some sense into the boy - I’d rather like to make it to this “beast” before nightfall, yes?”

“Very well, Sir, I’ll do my best, but he’s barely a whelp, perhaps we should -”

“I don’t need excuses, man, I need our scout moving again. Are you questioning my commands?”

“No, sir.”

It took nearly another ten minutes before the group was moving again, and to compound matters, a river crossing over a flimsy bridge meant Guiscard had to leave his horse behind, leaving the loudest of his retinue to escort the horse back to the nearby stables. His rage had boiled to the surface as he walked, and Guiscard often found himself bellowing at these men to fall in line and remain silent, lest he cut them down himself - more than enough of a threat to get most of them to behave.

Another hour and a half of walking, constantly stopping to deal with every nuisance the militiamen could conceive, finally bore fruit when they stumbled across an overgrown, stone brick, wall, atop which a net of vines had laid itself like some sort of bizarre headdress.

“Is this it, boy?” Guiscard snapped.

“Y-Y-Yes. M’lord.”

“Very good then. We shall proceed into these structures and find this beast. When we do, we shall strike it down as an organized unit - whoever lands the killing blow is to be granted fifty crowns for their handiwork, and an additional twenty will be afforded to all of you from my coffers. Do you understand?”

The men murmured in agreement, and Guiscard nodded. Following the scout’s instructions, they filed past the wall, emerging into a lavish, but decaying, courtyard. Arches and long-disused fountains decorated the pathways and what must have once been flowerbeds, and more of these eerie photorealistic statues - victims of the so-called beast - littered the courtyard. The statues

belonged to all manner of species: human, game, even the occasional bear, but one factor was universal - an expression of terror. The feeling of unease amongst the shoddy soldiers peaked, but Guiscard attempted to quell their fear with a command.

“Fan out, men! We shall cover more ground and flush out this monstrosity, wherever it may lie!”

They proceeded, slowly, through the courtyard, avoiding and climbing over statues when necessary. As they had almost reached the courtyard’s centre, a chunk of masonry moving at impressive speed impacted Guiscard in the chest. The blow was mitigated by the armor he wore, but the force nonetheless threw him to the ground, back first. As he fell, a scream rose up from his left flank, and this one scream escalated into many in moments.

Guiscard scrambled to his feet in time to see a womanly figure, garbed in tattered finery, disappear into the shadows of a crumbling structure. Three of his men had been petrified, and a number of others lay dead, bodies torn open by lacerations and bones crushed by blunt-force trauma. He turned as another scream started, and he saw one of his own men being slashed by another woman. As he appraised her, he instantly noticed her greenish skin - and the literal nest of vipers that seemed to make up her hair. He caught her face out of his peripherals, detecting a radiantly beautiful affair, but in an instant remembered the teachings of his tutors on the ages of men long past. One specific tale came to mind - the gorgons, wyrd sisters cursed by the gods, whose visages turned onlookers to stone.

“Your eyes! Cover your eyes!” Guiscard shouted, turning his sword on himself and tearing off a strip of his tabard, which, after a moment, he’d worked into the eye slits of his helm. Though certainly detrimental to his vision, it would allow him to resist the impulse to make eye contact with these horrid creatures. He backed up, pressing himself against an ancient stone pillar, as he assessed his situation.

Even now, he could hear that his men were fleeing, their worn boots clapping against the mossy, cobbled paths as they ran. He’d expected little from these conscripts, ultimately, and he supposed their breaking at the sight of such unnatural creatures was only a matter of course. There was no way those creatures

could move so fast. Unless they truly were in two places at once, then he was dealing with two of the beasts, making his uphill battle even more difficult than he'd hoped.

A little voice wormed its way into the back of his mind - a niggling whisper of doubt, deriding his abilities with the blade and his likelihood at survival, but he banished it soon as it came. He had no time for doubt. He may not have been experienced fighting blind, but he certainly was not going to die so piteously as his former companions, that was certain.

His moment of contemplation was brought to an abrupt end as he felt something press against his chest - hands, he realized. Clawed hands, searching for a chink in his armor and prodding at his body. Roaring with fury, he swung his blade behind himself. His blade struck only at the pillar, but the force of his blow had been such he felt the great old thing sway, then topple, its great old pieces collapsing down with a series of loud thuds. Interspersing these thuds was a promising noise - a wet crunch, sidled by a great hissing shriek - and Guiscard moved towards it, thrusting his blade.

He felt a connection, albeit a shallow one, as he tore through moldered fabric and nicked flesh, blade picking up a thin coat of blood. He could not see how the progeny of Medusa responded, but a sudden shift in rubble indicated that it had made a quick move towards him. Too quick a move for Guiscard to respond to, evidently, as the beastly woman slammed into him with surprising force, once again toppling him to the ground. He felt the clawed fingers scratch at his helmet, attempting to rip off the makeshift blindfold he'd installed, but retorted with a quick punch to the sternum, eliciting a grunt from the gorgon.

A quick headbutt in rapid succession dislodged the gorgon from him, and he elbowed the gorgon in what he assumed to be the side of the head as he rolled to the side. His sword had been discarded in the tussle, and so he grabbed a cobblestone, lifting it and bringing it down with a sickening crunch where he still heard noise. He could feel peculiar, serpentlike appendages writhing against his mailed hand - the aberrant creature's "hair", he supposed - and was brought some level of validation as they went slack.

Breathing heavily, he drew himself to his feet. Though he had slain one of the monsters, he had no idea where its sister may lurk, and to make matters worse, he knew not where his sword was. In a dangerous gambit, he removed the blindfold, eyes passing over the surprisingly beautiful form of the fallen gorgon as it searched for his blade. There it glinted, fallen into a bed of moss, afternoon sun reflecting off of it.

The decision to remove the blindfold had been a good one. The afternoon sun also served to cast a shadow - not his own - behind him, and Guiscard moved to the side just in time to avoid a lunge from the sister gorgon, who produced some horrific amalgamation of war cry and mourning wail as it groped at the air. Once again, Guiscard felt his gaze almost supernaturally drawn to the face of the gorgon, but he resisted such temptation, charging forwards to where his discarded blade lay.

The gorgon rapidly closed even as he passed her, moving with terrifying agility for what could have easily been mistaken for a defenseless young woman. She'd laid her hands upon Guiscard and had almost tackled him down by the time he'd grasped his blade's hilt, swinging it around in a punch that connected with the gorgon's head. He could feel several of the serpent hairs having bitten through the chainmail around his neck, and the pricks where they'd pierced the skin rapidly began to burn - but he could worry about poison later.

Now that he knew where the gorgon was, he pulled back his blade, and, averting his eyes, thrust it forwards. Even as one of the gorgon's clawed hands swiped upwards, cutting his flesh in the armpit of his chainmail, he could feel that the blade had gone deep. A strike to the abdominals, he supposed - certainly lethal, unless this beast's physiology was even less natural than he'd once supposed.

The gorgon groaned, body twisting on his blade, and let out a sigh that was eerily reminiscent to that of an actual young woman - suddenly overtaken by pity and curiosity, Guiscard's eyes flicked to the gorgon's face, just for a moment. It was ethereally beautiful - a perfect bouquet of attractive features, that, in any other setting, would have been considered nothing short of a divine blessing.

Even dying, the gorgon's face split into a spiteful grin as the horror of what he'd done dawned on Guiscard. He could already notice that his feet and hands felt leaden, and though he wanted to struggle, wanted to fight back against the rapidly-spreading weight, he knew it would be pointless. Unwilling to end up like the rest of the statues in the garden, he laughed, grinning as he struck a heroic pose, forcing his blade to cut further through the gorgon.

Though a part of him thought it ridiculously petty, and another thought it senselessly tragic, the last thought to course through his mind was peculiar vindication at having the most dramatically - posed statue in the entire garden.

*Second Place*  
*Senior Short Story*  
*Donald Williams*

## Quarter Past Midnight at the Mount Clare Train Station

At the Baltimore Mount Clare train station, the clock struck twelve-fifteen, marking the arrival of a train. The low hum of its steel wheels against the tracks came to a quiet as it pulled into the station.

As it rolled into the station, a sharp whistle pierced the air, a cloud of steam billowing across the boarding section. A sharp whine filled the space as it ground to a halt on the tracks. The side doors of the cars slid open, and dark figures piled out on to the platform. Clutching luggage and each other, they pushed their way through the throng of people who had gathered for a chance of boarding the train early.

*“First call for passengers heading to Chicago!”* The announcement came from the speakers, a crackling voice that grated against the ears of those who stood near enough to hear it.

On an antique wooden bench, an old woman sat, knitting a sweater for her granddaughter out of cheap wool. It was itchy, and the hair kept making her sneeze, but she persevered, the way old women tend to do.

She was not here to board a train, and she patiently waited for her husband to arrive, as she had for the past hour. Absentmindedly, she slipped her hand into her pocket to clutch at a ticket she had purchased thirty minutes ago. It stayed in her pocket.

With a great deal of longing and no small amount of bitterness, she returned to the task at hand. A sweater for a grandkid she saw twice a year and a wait for a husband she wished she saw less. The ticket, though little more than a scrap of paper, felt heavy now.

It'd be so easy to leave it all behind, and who could blame her, really? She had been in the same town for six decades, and there had been no change in any of them. But, seated she was and seated she would remain.

*“Second call for passengers heading to Chicago!”* The same voice cried out over the speakers, somehow managing to be heard over the hubbub in the station.

A small boy chased after his sister, the two kids dashing down the platform, laughing and giggling as they went. Their mother called out to them to slow down, but they did not heed her warning.

Shrieking in joy, they did not pay attention as they slammed into an older man. He reached out to steady them, a kind smile alight on his face. His crooked grin was missing a few teeth, but that did not affect the joy it exuded.

His gruff voice washed over the children, soothing their momentary panic, “I’d be careful if I were you.”

His eyes twinkled as he leaned down to be on eye level with the two siblings.

“I’m getting a little slow in my old age. I’m afraid I’m a little past my child catching days, and I wouldn’t want you two to fall on the tracks.”

The man’s arm was clutched to his chest, holding a bundle close to his chest. When he spoke his scruffy grey beard brushed at the top of the bundle, prompting it to shift and squirm in his grasp.

When he pulled it away from his chest, it revealed a small gray kitten. It’s fur was fluffed up and eyes were firmly shut. It squealed as it was removed, pink gums revealed as it pulled back its lips.

The old man looked back up the two kids, “Could you two take this little one off my hands? I can’t give it the care it needs.” His eyes were soft, though there was a sorrow to them at the prospect of losing the little cat.

The girl reached her small hand out to stroke the equally small head of the feline. The boy joined her in running hands over the cat, eventually taking the cat from the man and cradling it in his arms.

It was at this time that the kids’ mother caught up to them, and despite their protests and pleads, dragged them away from the old man and his cat. He swaddled the kitten once more, thumb running over its spine, “Better luck next time.”

*“Last call for boarding for the Chicago train! The train departs in five minutes!”*

On the boarding platform, a man clutched his briefcase tight as he hugged his sweetheart goodbye.

The hug didn't last long, and they pulled away from each other with tears in their eyes. They promised one another to write letters and that they'd visit. They both knew the words were for nothing. And as he stepped onto the train, he waved one last time and turned his face away so he didn't have to watch as the train pulled out of the station.

At a quarter past midnight, in Baltimore, Maryland, a train pulled out of Mount Clare station and hurtled towards Chicago. Carrying with it passengers and their baggage, and leaving much more behind.

*Third Place  
Senior Short Story  
Madison Tanner*





Front Cover:  
First Place  
*Polka Dot*  
by Georgia White



Upper Back Cover:  
2nd Place  
*Encounter*  
by Perrin Larkin



Lower Back Cover:  
3rd Place  
*Witch*  
by Danica Vu



