Huntsville Literary Association’s
Fifty-sixth Annual
Young Writers Contest
2024

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Linda Fletcher

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Carol Ashburn Roach, Co-chair,
Bob Fletcher, Linda Fletcher, Pam Briggs,
Liz Stagg, Margaret J. Vann
Acknowledgments

**WLRH FM** for recording first place Winners

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**Personal Note:**

Special thank you to Linda and Bob Fletcher who made compiling this booklet much easier. They spent many hours cataloging, compiling, checking with teachers, and sending me the results in a timely way.

Special thank you to Carol Roach who kept me encouraged in the process.

Margaret J. Vann, editor and compiler
Awards Ceremony
May 12, 2024
Chan Auditorium, UAH
2 pm

Welcome
Dr. Ramona L. Hyman, HLA Contest Chair

Program

Introduction of Speaker
Pamela Briggs, President of HLA

Speaker
Dr. Ramona L. Hyman

Presentation of Awards

Announcement of Elementary Poetry Winners

Announcement of Junior Poetry and Short Story Winners

Announcement of Senior Poetry and Short Story Winners

Readings by First Place Winners

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.
Dedication Page

The Huntsville Literary Association
dedicates
the 56th Young Writers Contest
to
Carol Ashburn Roach
HLA Young Writers Organizer
and longtime
Co-Chair and supporter
# Table of Contents

**List of Winners** ....................................................................................................................... 1

**Lower Elementary Poetry**

*My Wonderful Parents* by Inayah Sohel ......................................................... 8

**Upper Elementary Poetry**

*Dare to Be Visible* by Zayna Killedar................................................................. 9

*My Shadow* by Farris Powell ............................................................... 11

*The Piano Poem* by Ruby Collins................................................................. 12

**Junior Poetry**

*Escribir* by Sarah Moffett ................................................................................. 13

*Summer Is Near* by Victoria Zhang .............................................................. 14

*Shells* by Weitian Zhang................................................................................. 15

**Junior Short Story**

*Ayra’s Hidden Hope* by Abigail Wilson....................................................... 17

*All About Jinny* by Vivianne Brown............................................................. 23

**Senior Poetry**

*I’m Not Sad Anymore* by Laurel Howard .................................................. 29

*Attack* by Samantha Copeland ............................................................................. 31

*Watermelon Gum* by Louise Block................................................................. 33

**Senior Short Story**

*An Excerpt from: the Redneck Viking* by Ella Esslinger...... 34

*Gold* by Emily Parker .................................................................................. 40

*Her Smile* by Hugh Nguyen........................................................................... 46
Artwork
No awards made
WINNERS

Lower Elementary Poetry Division

First Place  Inayah Sohel, First Grade
Midtown Elementary School
Teacher: Mary Eimer
Upper Elementary Poetry Division

First Place  Zayna Killedar, Fifth Grade
Midtown Elementary School
Teacher: Susan Rader

Second Place  Farris Powell, Fifth Grade
Whitesburg Christian Academy
Teacher: Karen Denman

Third Place  Ruby Collins, Third Grade
Whitesburg Christian Academy
Teacher: Leslie Thomas

Honorable Mention  Elias Shields, Fourth Grade
Madison Elementary School
Teacher: Audrey Fruendt

Honorable Mention  Reese Segrest, Fifth Grade
Whitesburg Christian Academy
Teacher: Hannah Peters
Junior Poetry Division

First Place
Sarah Moffett, Eighth Grade
Whitesburg Christian Academy
Teacher: Emily Polak

Second Place
Victoria Pham, Sixth Grade
St. John the Baptist Catholic School
Teacher: Lynda Fulks

Third Place
Weitian Zhang, Seventh Grade
Randolph School
Teacher: Delicia Potter

Honorable Mention
Autumn Bryant, Sixth Grade
Home School
Teacher: Jamie Bryant

Honorable Mention
Hannah Ruhkala, Eighth Grade
Home School
Teacher: Julie Ruhkala
### Senior Poetry Division

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Winner</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Place</td>
<td>Laurel Howard, Sophomore</td>
<td>Grissom High School</td>
<td>Cary Hurt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Place</td>
<td>Samantha Copeland, Senior</td>
<td>Lee High School</td>
<td>Michelle Sisson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Place</td>
<td>Louise Block, Senior</td>
<td>Lee High School</td>
<td>Michelle Sisson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honorable Mention</td>
<td>Emily Parker, Sophomore</td>
<td>Home School</td>
<td>Nicole Parker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honorable Mention</td>
<td>Noah Harris, Junior</td>
<td>Grissom High School</td>
<td>Mary Hudson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honorable Mention</td>
<td>Darianne Ewing, Junior</td>
<td>Lee High School</td>
<td>Michelle Sisson</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Junior Short Story Division

First Place  Abigail Wilson, Sixth
            Discovery Middle School
            Teacher: Erin Thornton

Second Place  Vivianne Brown, Seventh
               Academy for Academics and Arts Middle School
               Teacher: Jennifer Backer

Honorable Mention  Sophia Newell, Seventh
                   Home School
                   Teacher: Stephanie Newell

Honorable Mention  Samaya Brown, Eighth
                   Chapman Middle School
                   Teacher: Maynard James
Senior Short Story Division

First Place  Ella Esslinger, Freshman
            Bob Jones High School
            Teacher: Elizabeth Cairns

Second Place  Emily Parker, Sophomore
               Home School
               Teacher: Nicloe Parker

Third Place  Hugh Nguyen, Junior
            Grissom High School
            Teacher: Mary Hudson
Artwork Category

No Awards made
My Wonderful Parents

My parents are Oh! so sweet,
I am lucky, what a treat!

They are my shining light,
They are the reason I have might.

They hurry to make me feel better for any hurt or bruise,
They also help me get through my morning blues.

My dad cheers me up, he makes me smile,
No matter what, to make me happy he’ll go an extra mile.

As for my mom with love so pure,
Her gentle care makes me feel secure

They have taught me to always be true and honest,
And that anything I do, I should give it my best.

When I am scared or sad they hug me so tight
They also tuck me in bed every night.

Inayah Sohel
Lower Elementary
First Place
Upper Elementary Poetry

Dare to Be Visible

Invisibility can be,
My own superpower,
The ability to disappear,
Though it seems like I cower.

It can be good,
When I want it to be,
Away from the awkwardness,
You cannot find me.

It can be bad,
When I want to be heard,
“Be loud!” some say,
But I am not the brightest bird.

A dull bird,
My wings can’t fly,
What's the first step,
If I can’t soar high?

Yet I learn to adapt,
To finally fit in right,
I can fly amongst,
The rest of the kites.
I fix my wing,
With help from here and there,
I have an idea,
But… Do I dare?

Yes I do,
I am I,
My own self,
It’s how I fly!

With a pinch of help,
A drop of dreams,
A sprinkle of trust,
And a whole lot of me!

First Place
Upper Elementary Poetry
Zayna Killedar
My Shadow

My shadow, it creeps, it crawls, it’s mine!
   It’s always tagging not far behind
      A light shade of black,
      Reflecting off my back,
      My shadow, it's sneaky and sly.

   My shadow, if I move only a bit,
   It jumps, it jeers! ready to do it
      It follows me everywhere,
      Getting as big as a bear,
      My shadow and I, we’re connected.

   My shadow, it scares me! crawling on the wall
   Up so high, I’m worried it might fall
      But now I know,
      Very much so,
      That my shadow will not fall.

   My shadow, it covers up the light
   Always clinging to me so tight
      As you can see,
      My shadow and me,
      Are together all the time.

Second Place
Upper Elementary Poetry
Farris Powell
The Piano Poem

Does your piano have three legs or more?
Or six or nine or two or four?
88 keys, C, D, E,
88 keys, Do, Re, Mi.
Does your piano sing or hum?
Or does it sound like a big bass drum?
Shake-ah, shake-ah, shake, boom, boom, boom.
Do the sounds fill the room?
Is your piano blue or black?
If it's bright this is a fact:
The stronger you are, the harder you play,
The more your worries will go away!
Did you play when you were a baby or maybe a tot?
I'll bet your piano is the best one they've got!
Now here is a question for you and me:
When you look in a piano what do you see?
Now listen carefully and maybe twice
And I will give you some advice:
Keep practicing every day
And then only then will your fears go away!

Third Place
Upper Elementary Poetry
Ruby Collins
Escribir

I’ve always enjoyed my life
My pointy head, and long yellow frame
And my job of crafting works of art
From essays and equations
To portraits and sketches
I’d indeed written many things
But when my time was up
And I had to go
I only wish I could’ve expressed
My beloved holder’s dreams
I could feel them waiting
Wanting to be seen, felt, and heard
Yet fear the quiet captor
Kept them hidden, out of reach
So close they came to breaking free
Practically on my tongue
Yet a cruel word, or snicker from behind
Would send them packing, back to sleep
Oh, what dreams they were
Full of beauty and mystique
I only wonder what those dreams could’ve been
If more kindness was to be seen

First Place
Junior Poetry
Sarah Moffett
Summer Is Near

Summer is coming
More trees and flowers will arrive soon.
We should start planting seeds.

Second Place
Junior Poetry
Victoria Pham
Shells

As I sit above the abyss of death from which I climbed out.
My mind still dragging with regrets.
The days seem farther away.
The minutes pass like hours.
Hours like years.
As hay burns in the corner, the blood dries slowly in front of me.
I cry. I no longer see hope. I feel weak. I feel bleak.
I am not mad or sad. I cry like a drizzle.

Two weeks ago,
I was happy.
I had a family. I had brothers.
I had hope. I had joy.
I was just a boy.
I join the offensive for war.
Now I am far from home. Nanjing is safe.
One week ago, I was scared.
I aimed and saw death reaping my brothers.
I had hope.
They had a machine gun which bullet by bullet ended my brothers.
Three bullets were left in my rifle.
One grenade given to me by my brother
his words echo in my mind “If I die. Revenge alright.”
I retook aim.
I shoot. Missed. I started to get nervous.
Again with sweaty palms. Avoiding bullets left and right. I shoot.
Missed.
I fear this day will come. My heart sank. I took aim tears falling from my eyes. I shoot.
The sound of the helmet of the machine gunner popping was outstanding. I stood. I look. Bodies of brothers piled like leaves on an autumn day. I was mad. I ran clutch the grenade.


Today, I cry. I cry like waterfalls.
I lived. I saw my brothers’ words in my head “Go Home, Together!” I pull my blade.
A spear penetrated me. I dropped. I slice one

    I thought to myself “I got one brother.”

I look home to the south. As I fell. I screamed “I am coming home!”

Nanjing Fell.

Third Place
Junior Poetry
Weitian Zhang
Arya’s Hidden Hope

Ayra gazed at the young man that had brought himself to her hideout at the abandoned ruins. His eyes were calculating and sharp, but behind his gaze was a thought that seemed to tug at his heart and worry him to no end.

“What do you want? You track me down, let my dinner escape, and now you look at me like I’m going to rearrange the earth. If I wasn’t myself, I would be quite upset.” Ayra asked, looking him up and down.

“My apologies,” he purred. “I never knew this princess was. . . well, what is a six letter word for someone who complains constantly?”

“A whiner?” Ayra stated flatly.

“Yes - that’s it! Look, I need your help.” The man took a piece of paper from his cloak and handed it to Ayra. “I’ve heard you’re a bounty hunter. This bounty is called, ‘The Hightrickster.’ It’s an avian-like creature that has been assassinating the royal guard in each kingdom. It’s heading in a circle around The Great Lake, so it should strike in. . . the Lost Sky Kingdom!

Ayra’s face fell. “I can’t.”

The man mirrored Ayra’s expression. “That monster. . . that monster needs to be stopped. What happens when it hurts the kind people in that kingdom?”

“I’ll get caught if I go there.”

“What do you mean? All of your bounty hunts have been successful.”

Ayra sighed. “People will. . . recognize me if I go there.”

“Then be someone different! You are more than Ayra, I’m sure. You are the friend of dragons, the enemy of monsters, and the last hope we have for our salvation. Three should be enough.”

“You don’t understand.” Ayra shook her head.

“I can show you where the last dragon egg is.”
Ayra’s eyebrows shot up. She had heard plenty of stories about dragons; they were majestic, powerful beings, the rulers of the sky. Ayra had always been fascinated by them; maybe she could start her own legacy.

“Fine, I’ll do it. What’s your name, anyway?”

“Featherwin. Now, who’s ready to bring a sword to destiny?

* * *

Night had fallen by the time the couple had reached Ayra’s homeland. Even with horses, the travel from the ancient ruins took several days, although Ayra had purposely chosen that location so she could stay away from her home. And now she was walking right toward it.

“Where is he?” Ayra asked as they walked through the gates that surrounded the moorland.

“Last rumor I heard was that he was going to be at the ball in the palace. It makes sense, too. If he’s looking to erase the Royal Guard from the board he would be close to them, in a large group.” Featherwin summarized. “I’m guessing he’ll be wearing an outfit that keeps him inconspicuous. Speaking of that,” Featherwin pushed his knees into the side of his horse to steer it down a street. “You’ll need a disguise. I’m sure a few people would raise an eyebrow to a woman wearing a bow and seven daggers in her boot to a royal ball.

And I’ll need that so I don’t get recognized by the palace workers, Ayra thought bitterly. Instead of remarking on her thought, Ayra exclaimed halfheartedly, “Those daggers will save your skin.”

“Perhaps,” Her client chuckled to himself. “Although I doubt it. You have your own fires to tend to, such as what I’ve recruited you to do.” Featherwin paused for a moment, thinking, before adding, “You know, we’ll need a dress to get you into the ball. If you had been so foresighted to bring a dress from your hideout, then perhaps this would not be such a problem.”
"I think I know where I could find a dress. I’ll meet you in the ballroom."

Featherwin nodded, and trotted into the shadows. Ayra rode her horse to the palace garden, and tied her mount to the tree she had called her favorite in the time of inhabiting the palace. Surveying the walls for a moment, she scanned any ways to get in. The stone bricks were too large to climb up, and there was no way she could find any cracks to slip her hand into every single time. There were trees, but they didn’t reach her old bedroom.

*I’m ignoring the obvious answer here,* Ayra thought as she approached the wall once again. Carefully, she used a hand to test the wisteria vines that trailed from the roof, and pulled herself up. For a moment the vine swayed, and a rush of fear washed over Ayra as she clung into the greenery. But it held steadfast, so Ayra continued, up and up. She started noticing things she had never noticed before as she climbed, like how quiet it was.

Eventually, Ayra made it to her childhood bedroom, and she pushed open the window. Gentle candlelight flickered from her desk, and it was clear her mother had started sleeping in this room.

Sighing, Ayra opened the door to her closet. Long, trailing dresses hung from the space, slim to fit Ayra’s even slender body and angular features. Picking through the dresses, she found a dark blue dress speckled with gold stars that matched Ayra’s braided hair. Trying to adorn the dress while taming her hair from the few leaves that curled at the tips, Ayra finished it off by spraying several layers of perfume and makeup on her person. She was known for hating makeup; at least, she wore some basic blush, but only at her mother and father’s persistent requests.

*Hopefully this won’t give me away,* Ayra thought hurriedly as she exited her room and strode down to the ballroom. The palace looked a lot smaller than it used to be—or maybe Ayra had gotten taller? It felt unfamiliar, like a whole new place to explore.
She blinked as she entered the ballroom; it was enormous, with seven crystal chandeliers. On the floor was melted gold, silver, and a few rose petals that became frozen in the glass, with several other rose petals littering the floor. People danced in circles in the center of the room, with two people sitting on grand chairs in front of the room by the piano.

*My parents.* Ayra’s heart sank. They looked miserable; her mother’s face was pale and daunted, and her father looked tired and snapped at anyone who came near. They were normally so polite and cheerful; why were they now so grim? And at a party, no less.

Ayra distracted herself by trying to heave herself up the work ropes that the chandelier lighters used to get into the eaves of the elegant room. She scanned the crowd, looking for any members who could be her suspect.

But then she saw him - her bounty target. He looked inconspicuous at Arya’s first glance, but a closer look revealed more. He wore strange robes from everyone else, pure black from the sea of reds, oranges, and yellows. He hung around the back of the room with a black hood over his black tuxedo, and he glanced up when a servant passed by, then quickly tried to avert his gaze from them.

Ayra tipped her bow with a blue powder that would knock the shady man unconscious. She had her arrow aimed at the man’s back, a perfect shot despite the crowded ballroom. Taking a deep, steady breath, she pulled the bowstring taut and prepared to let the arrow fly—

But then her target turned and looked directly at her, finding her in the eaves as if he knew she was there all along.

He winked.

Then, a small, sharp projectile whirled at her chest, and Ayra ducked right in time to avoid getting ripped to shreds. Although she missed the flying object, she still lost balance and careened toward the ballroom floor.
No one blinked an eye.
The only person who flinched were Ayra’s parents, but their confusion disappeared in an instant.

“May I?” Arya looked up and saw her target standing over her, with a voice that seemed ever so familiar.

Ayra considered her options. She couldn’t run or say no, so she chose the only option she was left with. “You may,” Ayra responded curtly, getting up and off the ground.

The two began to dance in circles, curving and whirling under the crystal candlelight. As Ayra’s head got closer to his, she whispered in his ear. “What are you doing? Why don’t we settle this like the monsters we are.”

“What am I doing? Well, let’s see. . . oh, I remember! I’m supposed to show you your mistake!” With that, the man met the tips of his shoes of Ayra’s, and the two spun in circles, only avoiding getting flung across the ballroom by holding hands.

“What is that?”

“The fact that you left the people that cared about you the most.”

The man loosened his grip on Ayra’s hands, and he let go. Ayra flew through the air, screaming as she landed on the floor in front of her parents.

“Is that? No, it couldn’t be!” Ayra’s mother exclaimed.

“In the flesh,” her husband whispered. “Princess Ayra. Our precious daughter.”

Ayra stood up, shaking her head. “No. I’m not your precious daughter, not the little girl you left to hide! I’m not Princess Ayra anymore. I left that life long ago.”

Her mother blinked. “We missed you so much, Ayra! We’re sorry for doing what we did, saying what we said, making you feel so out of place. We thought you wanted to be a princess. We were too blind-sighted to see your real needs.”
Ayra’s father stood up. “Dear, we never wanted you to be perfect. To be honest, we’re far from it. We wanted you to enjoy your life, and we thought being a princess would make you happy.”

Ayra looked deep into her parent’s eyes. “I want to be Dragonrider Ayra. I want to be Monsterslayer Ayra. I want to be your daughter, not the person who pretends to be. But I will pass on being a princess, no thanks.”

At that moment, the man who had thrown Ayra stood up, his robes falling to the ground. “Featherwin?” Ayra gasped.

“I can take up the job as a prince. I’m your biggest supporter, Ayra. How do you think you found that horse in the forest? Or the food hidden in the old ruin hideout? You saved me from monster after monster. While you’re riding dragons and slaying monsters, I can take over the job until you’re ready to be queen.”

The queen clapped her hands.

“Oh, what a splendid idea! Ayra, what do you think?”

All eyes were on her. She thought for a moment. She wanted to save the world and make it a better place, while restoring everything in her path. She wanted to be the queen who fought in battles with the pikemen, or even against beasts unimaginable. She wanted to take care of her kingdom and restore it.

“Mother, father, I think that I am not ready to be queen. Yet. Maybe one day, when you two are ready to retire. But right now, I want to gather knowledge, traverse the world, and grow into what I might become. So if Featherwin is willing to take on the weight of my royal responsibilities and give me the freedom to continue on my path, how can I refuse?”

And she smiled as she pulled into her parent’s embrace.

First Place
Junior Short Story
Abigail Wilson
The first time I saw Jinny was in the garden. It was humid, late spring I believe. She was sitting on the edge of a fountain and her forehead was dripping with sweat. My first thought of her was that she must be spoiled rich- there was a Chanel bag by her feet and her clothing was certainly expensive from the looks of it. Her regal presence entrapped me and I didn’t realize I was staring at her. Her eyes met mine; I promptly stared at my shoes.

“Hi,” A soft voice called.

I allowed myself to glance up at the girl to see if she’d spoken. She smiled warmly at me. She had dimples.

“Hello,” I murmured.

The girl approached me and held out her hand. I hesitantly grabbed it and we shook hands gently.

“My name is Jinny. What’s your name?”

I gazed once more into her gorgeous green irises. They were speckled with the faintest bits of blue and gray. Her dark black lashes framed her eyes perfectly.


“Is that really your name?” She inquired.


“Nice to meet you, Beautiful Benjamin. Now that has a good ring to it.”

She smiled again, this time flashing two rows of perfect teeth. Did this girl have any flaws? She seems perfect to me. I smiled back at her bashfully.

“Well, do you live here?” Jinny asked me. She was referring to the luxury townhouses that surrounded the garden.

“No, I work here. I tend to the grounds on the weekends to earn a bit of extra cash. Do you work?”

She stopped smiling, as though she had remembered something sad.
“Yes.” She said solemnly. “I do.” She frowned and looked at the ground. Something caught her attention, and she stooped down to pick up a rock. Suddenly, the contents of her purse spilled out onto the grass. I knelt down quickly to help her pick up the mess. I reached out for a small piece of paper before she snatched it up.

“No! I can do it myself!” Jinny shrieked.
She stuffed her belongings back into her bag as I stood up slowly. She looked up at me with tears welling in her beautiful eyes.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to lash out at you like that. I’m really horrible.”
Tears streamed down her face and into her lap. She was mumbling something quietly, too quiet for me to hear. She stood up and began to walk away.

“Wait,” I began. “You aren’t horrible, Jinny. I think that you’re quite the opposite. We should talk again soon.”
She turned back to face me. “Do you want my number?”
The ghost of a smile appeared on her face. For a moment, I could see her dimples.

“Sure,”

The second time I saw Jinny was at the cafe. It was only the next day, and a pure coincidence. I stopped in to finish some school work and grab a coffee. Jinny was sitting in the corner typing on an expensive laptop, wearing a simple blue dress. She looked up when I entered and her eyes widened. A glowing smile appeared on her face. I figured that I would talk to her after ordering, and gave her a small wave.

I waited in line to order and scanned over the magazines on display. I picked one up at random and flipped to the first page. Jinny stared back at me, looking positively lovely. Was she a model? I wondered. I moved up in line and put the magazine down.
I joined Jinny in the corner.
“Hello Beautiful Benjamin.” She teased. “You aren’t stalking me, are you?”
“Nope. Just a happy coincidence.”
She closed her computer gently. “I’m sorry that I didn’t text you last night. I was just awfully busy.”
“It’s alright.”
We sat in silence for a few minutes, sipping from our drinks.
“So who are you, Beautiful Benjamin?” She finally broke the silence.
“Who am… I? I don’t really know-”
“No,” She broke me off. “No, I want to know about you. How old are you? What do you enjoy doing? Do you have a family?”
“Well, I’m sixteen. I like to paint. I live with my parents. What about you?”
“I’m sixteen too. I live with my uncle. My parents, well, they passed away a while back. I want to be a doctor, though my uncle wants me to model. ‘Says that being a doctor is a man’s job. I don’t want to do modeling.’
Jinny’s phone began to ring. She picked it up and mouthed “Sorry”.
I opened up my laptop and pulled up an assignment. I tried not to overhear her phone conversation, yet it soon proved impossible.
“No! I’m sorry! I was working at the cafe and spotted a friend!” Jinny’s voice slowly began to rise, and I could hear that she was in an argument.
“I didn’t know that there was a booking today!” She hissed.
I glanced around to see if anyone was looking at us; they were.
“George- don’t- no, don’t cancel it! What did I- Don’t you dare hang up on me!” Jinny shouted and slammed down her phone. She began packing up her things quickly. “I’m sorry. I need to leave.” Her voice broke and she hurried out of the cafe. I watched her through the window as she began to cry.

The third time I saw Jinny was, once more, in the garden. It was a week since we’d last seen each other. We’d texted each other quite a bit and she agreed to meet me in the garden again. She sat in the same spot as last time. Jinny caught sight of me and put down her phone. She looked upset, and I noticed a deep purple bruise formed over her left eye.

“Hello.” She said. She was unhappy, I could tell, though she plastered a smile on her face anyways.

“Hi Jinny.” I said and sat down next to her. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. I’m just a bit tired, that’s all.”

She leaned her head on my shoulder. Silent tears fell from her eyes.

“I’m having a party tomorrow night.” She started. “You’re invited, Beautiful Benjamin.” Jinny laughed lightly. I laughed with her, but inside I was panicked. Something was clearly very wrong. I pushed it from my mind and began to talk with her.

We talked for hours, it seemed, until she checked her golden watch.

“Goodness, is it really that time?” Jinny picked up her bag. “I need to get going.”

She started off towards the gates and stopped. Quickly, she ran back towards me. She planted a single kiss on my cheek and ran off.
The fourth time I saw Jinny was at her party. It was twilight and slightly chilly out. Clouds brewed overhead- a storm was brewing overhead. The address she’d given me was a tall building and the party was being held on the top floor. I rode the elevator with an old couple who were attending the party as well. I nodded curtly at them. They were far more dressed up than I, wearing my too-small suit and scuffed up shoes. I realized that I would be very out of place at this party.

The elevator doors slid open, and I searched for Jinny. She was easy to spot among the various bland people attending the party. I strode toward her.

Jinny heard me approaching and pivoted to face me. Her beautiful gray dress swished around her feet. She looked ravishing, I must admit, and I noticed her bruise had faded considerably.

“Hello, Jinny,” I greeted her.

“Hi Ben.” She began, a half-smile forming on her perfect lips. “I’m extremely glad you came. Everyone here is either a business partner or a bore. Besides you, of course.”

“How have you be--” I started, only to be interrupted by a tall man who grabbed Jinny’s arm and pulled her away from me. They stepped into a nearby room, and I was utterly, awkwardly alone.

The pair stayed in the room for a very long time, the door tightly shut. Dinner was announced. No one left the room or even noticed Jinny’s absence. My anxiety grew with each minute. The meal came to an end, and I tried the door. It opened easily, and no one was inside. She’d left the room when I wasn’t looking.

I strode into a nearby stairwell and heard the sound of heels running up, above me. I started after the sound. It might be her.

I threw open the heavy door at the top of the staircase.
The last time I saw her was on the roof of the skyscraper. Jinny was gazing over the railing. She was staring at the busy streets below us. I ran to her. Rain was pouring down on us. Jinny’s hair was already wet.

“Jinny!” I exclaimed. “What’s wrong?”

She looked up at me, sobbing. Her expensive makeup was smudged, and her hair was tousled.

“I’m sorry,” She breathed. She wiped the tears from her eyes.

“Sorry for what? These have been the happiest days of my life, since I met you Jinny. I love you.”

“You’re the only one, Ben.” Her voice broke and she started to cry again. “The only one who loves me.”

She straightened up abruptly and swallowed her tears. Then it happened. It happened and I couldn’t save her. In the blink of an eye, she swung her legs over the rail. She fell.

The gravity pulled her body down and she fell. I reached out for her one last time and watched her body cascade into the oncoming traffic. Tires screeched to a halt around her, around Jinny.

I could hardly think of her as Jinny now--she was only a corpse now. The girl who was full of life, whose smile lit up the world. Never to smile again.

She changed me. I hardly knew her. Only years later did I stop blaming myself for the whole affair. I loved her, though the world seemed to hate her.
Senior Poetry

I’m Not Sad Anymore

I would like to say I held it all together
but that night was just too long
and cold
and tears fell on the field and I froze and stared ahead
and your eyes fell on my broken form, still stagnant, and you must have felt
so, so old
With a tired girl sobbing maybe thirteen yards away
and a thrumming in your skull as you
searched your wild depths for anything to say
and what you found I can’t remember because,
even though I’m not as tired
as I imagine you,
after that night
I started feeling older too.

I sort of had to wonder—and I wonder even now
what it must have been—what it must be like
Being You
The one who stops to talk,
The one who stays behind and wastes their precious time with
awkward conversations and
starts and stops and looks back and forth and
lingering nearby, wanting to help, not interrupting,
inching closer and closer and
I almost laughed at you, trying to project comfort
hovering because we never hugged back then and
I sent others away, sent them on, because even in tears I had too much left to do and
how much of anyone’s time could I cost?
and you were the only one left
and your little smiles and your two feet planted down
had so much intention, so much decision, that they were more important than anything I’d just lost.

You offered me your two invalid cents you thought your wisdom was pathetic but I thought you were braver than most just for trying and you told me it wasn’t my fault that he was leaving carelessly and I was still out here in the field crying and when you smiled at me it was a

Voluntary Decisive Action and it made me want to choose to smile back.

We stayed like that for so, so long it hurt but it was happy you staying there and fixing things by sheer force of will it never feels that way with anyone since no one else in high school quite excels at being still.

I’m sure I’m not your best friend but I am the one who dreamed of things you said to me and woke up laughing and wanting to help somebody. I hope you know that’s what happens to people when you stay.

First Place Senior Poetry Laurel Howard
You’re in a store and you’d rather be anywhere else.
The things you used to love, still do love, are taunting you
and you don’t know how to tell your mom. She’s
off somewhere, trying not to rush you, and you wish
you could just make this easy for her.

You’re in a store and this was supposed to be nice.
It was supposed to be simple: just find one you like, just
try it on if you aren’t sure, just get whatever makes you feel good.
Pretty women pass by and you are not important to them.
If they notice you, it’s only to say *excuse me* as they walk between
you and the hangers. Still,

You’re in a store and you feel humiliated.
You know you’ve never been one to have dry eyes,
but you hoped it would be better this time. Perhaps
that was your mistake—Perhaps
you’re in a store and you need to apologize.
You need to get fresh air, get somewhere quiet and cool.
Everyone must be upset with you because you’ve disappointed yourself again. They must be rolling their eyes and wishing you would go home. You wish you would go home. But unfortunately you’re stuck in a store and you’re stuck in the women’s aisle and you’re stuck in someone else’s body.
Watermelon Gum

I came back to my room and the blanket
Was folded fuzzy side out, stuffed animals
Lined up at the edge of the bed as sentinel
And I knew
Suddenly, and I hope you know I nearly cried.

I told you I’d change the sheets tomorrow.
You’re repaying a favor when you work like
This, I can see your hands smoothing the
Comforter, you’re very serious about it;
I’m thinking, as I climb into the car to steal

Your watermelon gum, as I swaddle myself
In the sheets at night, I turn the blanket right
Side up; I’m thinking that if these are the best
Years I’ll ever get, I’m fine with it. If it never
Gets any better than this, I’m fine.

Third Place
Senior Poetry
Louise Block
Detective Lee looked down at the body in front of him. He was drawn to this small town due to a suspected homicide. At first, he was skeptical. Nobody kills anyone in a small town like this. Especially not in southern Mississippi, the hospitality state. However, after seeing the corpse, he quickly thought otherwise. The corpse in front of him was a sight to see. It had multiple bullet-esque wounds, and a body that was burnt to a crisp. It was barely identifiable. *What kind of monster would do this to someone?* The coroner suddenly walked in, autopsy report in hand, managing to look livid and somber at the same time. Detective Lee arched his eyebrow in question.

“Unfortunately, we have yet to identify our victim. However, it would seem that his C.O.D was a heart attack, not whatever *this* is, “ She waved her hand at the corpse, “It makes me wonder: What kind of sick human would mangle a corpse like this? So much for respect for the dead” Her southern drawl, at first raised loudly, now sounded more defeated than upset.

Less than a week earlier, a large group of people stood in silent mourning. The funeral was quiet, except for the soft hymns playing in the background. Buck, Rufus, and Gus stood side-by-side, watching the coffin being lowered into the ground. Johnny’s mother, Mrs. Davis, glared at them through tears. She never liked them, and she only allowed them to attend because Johnny would turn in his grave if he found out they were not invited.

“We shouldn’t be letting this happen. It ain’t what Johnny would’ve wanted. Y’ know how he loved them vikings.” Rufus seethed under his breath, quietly leaning towards Buck. Gus shook his head as a few stray tears made it down his face. Johnny was
one of their closest friends, and seeing him gone was taking a toll on everyone. When Gus spoke, his voice was quiet.

“It don’t matter what Johnny wanted, he’s dead,” Gus practically spat the words, “It ain’t like we can do nuthin’ about it. Mrs. Davis ain’t gonna let nobody get near her boy or in the way of her old-fashioned church funeral.”

Buck spoke up for the first time since the service started, “He didn’t want this kind of funeral. He wanted one of them weird funerals. Y’know with the big fire and the ships and all that.”

Rufus hummed in thought, eyes closed, “Maybe we could do it for him… I mean, we ain’t gonna get permission. Johnny can’t do it. So why don’t we do it?” Rufus spoke quietly, careful not to let anyone else overhear. Gus and Buck stared at him incredulously.

A few days later, they found themselves in their shared apartment, beginning to formulate their master plan. None of the boys noticed when the door opened and Johnny’s sister, Emily, entered. She stopped short when she heard what they were saying.

“Well, we gotta dig him up. Can’t exactly burn ‘em if we ain’t got his corpse.” Buck spoke, scratching the back of his head.

“What?” Emily asked. They all turned to her in bewilderment. Emily lived in California, working as a lawyer. She had come down for the funeral; despite growing up with Johnny and his friends, she wasn’t particularly close to her brother. Mrs. Davis had called to let them know that Emily would show up to pick up some of Johnny’s things because Emily was the only one who could handle something like that right now. She said that it needed to be taken out of their ‘grubby paws’ as soon as possible. They were still happy to see her, but they did not expect her to come so quickly. On Emily’s end, she did expect reactions from the boys, as they hadn’t seen her in so long. However, she
expected anything except for what she heard. *Whose corpse were they going to dig up? Why were they going to burn him? Were they talking about Johnny? What on earth is happening?* Her thoughts spun in her head, and she did her best not to show them.

“Oh, uh, Emily… How are you? What can we do for ya? Are you here for Johnny’s stuff? Yeah, uh, we got it all boxed up for you, ready to go.” Gus chuckled awkwardly.

“Please say I heard you wrong,” When she got no answer, she pinched the bridge of her nose, “You boys better spill right now.” Her voice was firm, reminding them of Mrs. Davis. They all stayed silent for a few seconds before Rufus punched Buck’s shoulder. Emily waited expectantly. After a few seconds of awkward silence, Buck sighed in defeat and began explaining their plan.

“Absolutely not.” Emily spoke firmly, leaving no room for argument. Gus and Buck remained quiet, but Rufus didn’t back down from the challenge.

“As if you could stop us,” Rufus scoffed, “We’re doin’ this for Johnny whether you like it or not. We both know your brother didn’t want no full-service funeral. Your momma didn’t even grant him his dying wish.” Rufus was as stubborn as a bull, and it was clear that he wasn’t taking no for an answer. Emily narrowed her eyes.

“You don’t get to bring my momma into this. She did, and has always done, what is best for the family. As for Johnny, what if I tell the police that y’all are planning to mess with him? Then you can’t act on your *master plan*. Besides, you boys are too stupid to pull something like this off.” Her voice came out harsh, and she winced at the sound of it. Buck put a hand on her shoulder, and looked down at her imploringly.
“Emily, I think you know that we’re gonna do this. Nothing you could say or do would deter us. Yer threats are empty and ya know it.” His voice was soft and he pulled out the puppy eyes.

Sighing in defeat, she crossed her arms in front of her chest. She rolled her eyes and muttered, “I guess if you boys are going to do this, I better tag along to make sure you don’t get caught. Don’t make me regret it, yeah?” All three boys nodded, although Rufus was more reluctant than the others. They sat down and began working out the details of their plan.

Johnny’s body landed in the mud with a wet thud. Rufus had been holding the corpse’s legs and Buck was holding his head. It had been raining all day, and even though it stopped, their feet were still sinking uncomfortably into the ground. They could barely see at this time of night, and the moonlight was the only thing illuminating their path. All of them were up to their ankles in mud, and Johnny’s body had gone into rigor mortis a while ago, making it difficult to get a good hold on him. Buck had lost his hold on the corpse’s arms and tried to grab him before he fell, only resulting in twisting the body, making Johnny land on his belly. Buck quickly dropped down to pick him back up. Accidentally grabbing Johnny’s face, Buck winced at the mud all over it. Opting to grab his arms instead, Buck hoisted Johnny back up.

“Oh, no.” He muttered.

Emily was leading their group out of the cemetery and she turned back at the sound of the flop. She groaned in exasperation when she made out Buck’s figure as he clumsily grasped Johnny’s arms. She winced when she saw the mud dripping off of Johnny’s face; “Please, for Heaven’s sake, tell me you didn’t just drop my brother. Please say you didn’t just drop him face first into mud.”

“I didn’t drop yer brother into mud. Especially not on his face. Not at all. I don’t know what yer talkin’ about…” Buck proclaimed unconvincingly.
Emily groaned, running her hands down her face, “Why am I helping you morons?”

“Because you love us very much and we are granting your brother’s dying wish,” Gus replied, “...and because we drove my truck over here”. They could hear the grin in his voice as he commented on the exchange. After Johnny’s death, everyone had been a little more sad, and it had been a little bit harder to smile. Especially for Gus. Gus and Johnny had been close, and hearing that spark of happiness in his voice egged Buck on. Even Rufus joined in. Emily rolled her eyes, deciding to play along. It somehow made the task of lugging a corpse around less grim. As they continued on, the only sounds were the sloshing of the mud under their feet and the lighthearted teasing.

When they finally made it towards the truck, they were met with an unpleasant surprise. A cop car was parked right behind the truck, with an officer leaning against it. Emily, who was leading the group, jumped back, running into Gus. He stumbled and she quickly hushed the group before they could continue their banter.

“What’s wrong?” Gus whispered, suddenly tense.

“There is a cop right by your truck. Gus, why is he here? Did you do something?” Emily whispered back.

“Oh! I’ll handle it. Yeah, that’ll be Jerry, probably upset I didn’t drop by the station. He’s been checkin’ on me occasionally, ever since Johnny died. It’s only been a few days, but it feels like it’s been a year” Gus’ voice was back to normal volume, the tension slipping out of his body. Emily arched an eyebrow at him, but got no further response.

Rufus chimed up from the back, “Gus, go distract our respected boy in blue and we can get Johnny into your truck while you do it?”
“Are you dumb? How do you propose we get a body inside a truck, quite literally behind a police officer's back? What, is Gus gonna light some fireworks or something?” Emily scoffed, looking back at Rufus.

“Gus has always got a plan; you can take that to the bank. He’ll figure out something wontcha Gus?” Rufus inquired. Waiting in silence, he got no reply. He began looking around; it was an act in futility. Gus was gone.

“Great. Now Gus decided he was gonna run off. Rufus, he ain’t got the balls to lie to that cop. He probably just sold us out” Emily shook her head, her usual California valley accent interrupted as a southern drawl made it out of her mouth instead. None of the boys had heard that drawl from her since before she moved away, back in high school. Before they could protest against her harsh allegation, they heard a loud whistling coming from Gus’ truck. Looking around, they saw Gus sitting on the bed of his truck, staring upwards. They didn’t have time to follow his gaze before a thunderous sound rocked the area.

The pyrotechnics swirled in the air, vibrant reds and oranges filling the sky. It was fireworks. Where did he even get fireworks? Emily gazed at Gus, slack jawed. Her eyes widened when she saw him opening… was that a beer?! He gave it to the cop, who grabbed it and leaned against the truck. She gaped. The sound of the fireworks were almost deafening, but Buck could still hear Emily’s voice clearly.

“You have got to be kidding me.”
Gold

Two years earlier

The man bent over the equipment he had stolen from the lab. It was ready—at least he thought it was ready. It had worked on the aloe plant, and then later on the alley cat, which was so miserable from years of scraps and fighting that even if it hadn’t worked and the cat had died, it would have been a mercy.

An amalgam of liquid gold and mercury combined with a very specific type of cancer cell. The man rolled up his sleeve to reveal a pale forearm. He had to be careful, now. The solution was designed to travel intravenously and target the heart, meaning he had to find an easy vein. If he got even a drop of this outside of where it was supposed to be, the results could be fatal. His hands were shaking. He tried to steady them. This would work. It would heal him and make him something new, something better.

Or it might kill him slowly, which… wouldn’t be good. He got to work.

십

I wanted to be a cop, but I failed the fitness test thanks to something called ankylosing spondylitis, which basically fused my spine together. Who wants an officer who can’t even stand up straight? Who can’t breathe right? But hey, now I’m the person the cops call when they can’t handle something. Things work out. Right now, I’m perched on the roof of a warehouse skirting a grimy alley. Waiting. Waiting. I hate it when they make me wait.

I straighten my coat. A navy trench coat, made of the traditional gabardine, with a viscose lining. Double-breasted and long, falling to my shins with a belt at the waist, and big round buttons. A little loose, so it hangs right. I’ve always loved clothes—the way they hang, what materials they’re made of, how they come together. How they can transform a shy person into a stand-in-the-spotlight person, or the other way around.

Of course, I no longer need clothes—but I still love them.
A door creaks below me. Ah, there they are.

Viktor Morozov and Manfred Fischer. Notorious murderer and lackey, respectively. Viktor’s been terrorizing the city for around two months now; the police can’t seem to catch him. But he’s been pretty easy to trace—he’s obviously a man with a secret as well as a string of girlfriends, and has been killing off said girlfriends to protect said secrets. Just a matter of figuring out which one he’ll go after next.

I don’t mean to sound glib about what he’s doing, but sometimes the only way you can protect yourself from tragedy is to keep things light.

Viktor steps out of the doorway, directly below where I’m crouched on the roof. In this apartment lives Violet Parke, one of Viktor’s girlfriends. Although judging by the fact that he’s leaving and the truncheon he’s shoving into what must be a massively deep pants pocket, I think it’s safe to say Violet lived there, past tense.

“Quick,” Viktor’s saying, his voice a low rasp. For a guy in his late twenties, he sounds like he’s been chain-smoking for forty years. And that outfit—no wonder he turned to crime. No one could love him in that. Green and mauve houndstooth patterned bell bottoms and an orange button-down shirt worn open over a bare chest. He looks like he stepped off the wrong end of the 70s. When Manfred comes out behind him, it's not much of a relief. At least he doesn’t clash. But he’s disgustingly modern—a grey T-shirt and skinny jeans. Worst of all, sneakers. No sense of class.

As for me, under my trench coat I have on a white button down shirt beneath a black and navy paisley vest, and black slacks. I’ve always thought navy and black go strikingly with gold. Black combat boots add just a touch of streetwise flair. That’s fashion, you cretins.

Viktor’s voice floats up from the alleyway. “C’mon, Fischer. Police could come any minute.”

And my cue.

“Who needs the police?” I ask, dropping off the roof. It’s about six stories high, an easy jump.

The look on Viktor’s face is priceless when I land in front of him, not even dented. He scrambles back, his horrible shirt
flapping around, gasping like a fish out of water. Hard to believe he just killed someone—he looks like I’m about to kill him.

“Don’t worry,” I say. “I’m not going to murder you.”

Strangely, this doesn’t seem to reassure him.

“G-g-g-” he stammers, unable to get the word out.

Behind him, Manfred is trying to sneak out of the alleyway. I lean over and snag him by his shirt collar. “I don’t think so.”

“Gold!” Viktor squeaks.

“That’s right.” I take a bow. “Moi. You’ve led the police on a merry chase. Unfortunately for you, when you do that, they send in yours truly to come and drag you to jail.” Manfred’s trying to squirm away, so I grip the fabric more tightly. I try not to touch or take hold of people directly anymore—there was an incident with a collarbone that led me to realize I’m a lot stronger than I used to be.

I’m just about to grab Viktor by the tail of that hideous shirt—I think it might be spandex, the heathen—but he’s got something I didn’t see. The truncheon. I’d forgotten he had it tucked away. He slams it into the side of my head, and it’s enough to surprise me into letting go of Manfred. I put a hand to my face. The thing about gold is that it’s malleable, and now there’s a dent where my left eye would have been, if I still had eyes… or, well, any features at all. I still don’t understand how I can see. Or hear. Or speak.

But the thing about mercury is that it can cover anything. I just have to concentrate, and voila. No more dent. Instant healing. If you can call repairing metal healing.

Manfred’s made it almost to the mouth of the alley by now, and Viktor’s not far behind him. I’m faster than a normal person, as well as stronger, but these two could be in the Olympics for how fast they’re scarpering. Time for drastic measures. I’m going to regret this; it’s going to ruin my clothes, leaving them on this filthy pavement.

A fun thing about mercury and easily-shapeable gold is that it can take a new form at any moment. So I melt. I am a river of slick gold. I am a liquid lighting bolt. I streak along the cracked
alley pavement to tangle around Viktor’s legs, then lash out a
tendril to snare Manfred, solidifying and trapping them. They
might struggle, but I have a firm grip on their ankles. Firm for
them, anyway. I’m being as gentle as I can.

“Going somewhere?” I ask. “But we’ve just met.”
Viktor gives a strangled squawk.

“Oh, is this form too hard for you to grasp? Pardon me.” I
reform to a humanoid shape—not human, mind you. No human
has four arms. But more than the usual amount of hands are handy
for handling criminals who are a whole handful and might fly off
the handle at any moment. Puns all intended.

Unfortunately for me, I only have so much mass, so
creating those extra arms takes some feet off my height. A little
less impressive than I’d like to be. And I’m missing my outfit, so
there goes my flair. I’m nothing but sentient, cut-rate, twenty-four
karat department store mannequin now. But better than a fused-
back, weedy, IQ-and-nothing-else scientist. And better than dead.

“You got a phone, Viktor?” I’d use mine, but it’s back in
the pocket of my coat.

Manfred slowly raises his hand. “I do.”

“Give it.” I let go of one of his wrists so that he can pull it
out of his pocket, then snatch it from him, dialing the number of
Josh Barnes, local chief of police. He should have gotten people
here already, waiting to escort Viktor and Manfred to prison, but…
no one’s shown up.

He answers on the second ring. “Hello? Who’s this?”

“Where’s my backup, Josh? I’ve got the guys ready to go,
but no one’s here for me.”

He sighs so loudly that I can hear it through the phone.

“Gold. I should have known. What is it with you and stealing
phones?”

“I never stole a phone!” I protest. “Only twice. To help
you, I might add. And I’ve got the guy right here. I’ll give this
back to him once you get me my people.”

“I sent them off fifteen minutes after you left. I wanted to
give you time—I know you hate it when other people mess with
They should be there soon; I figured you’d still be trying to get the guys.”

I do hate it when people ‘mess with my work,’ but not for the petty reasons Josh might think. More people in these situations means more people who could get hurt. More people under my care who could potentially be killed. It’s better to send me in alone—I don’t damage easily.

“You know me,” I drawl. “I’m in a league of my own. Hanging up now.” I click the hangup button and hand the phone back to Manfred. “Don’t try to activate a bomb with this or anything.”

Viktor kicks me in the shin, which probably hurts his foot more than it does my leg. “Let me go!”

“So you can run off and murder more people? Yeah, I don’t think so. Plus, my outfit is ruined because of you. Definitely not letting you get away with that.”

A police car skids around the corner with its lights flashing but its sirens off. An officer—someone I don’t recognize—gets out from the driver’s side, and another comes from the passenger door.

“Viktor Morozov and Manfred Fischer?” the passenger’s side asks.

“That’s them,” I say, pushing them forward a little.

The officer ducks his head and raises his shoulder, like he’s nervous but trying to hide it. But I know what he’s nervous about… it’s me. When people meet me, nine times out of ten they look somewhere over my shoulder, like they’re scared to look at my face. Or… lack thereof. And I understand that. I made my choice, and I’ll stand by it. But that doesn’t mean that other people will. So I try not to antagonize them. There’s no reason to terrify them just because I feel like winding someone up.

“Viktor Morozov and Manfred Fischer, you are under arrest for the murders of Jenna Hartford, Mabel Green, and Katie Westing.” The officer’s voice shakes. He can’t be more than twenty, likely very green to the job. “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have a right to an attorney. If you cannot afford
an attorney, one will be appointed for you.” At least he’s got his Miranda rights down.

I hold Viktor and Manfred by the collars of their shirts while the other officer cuffs their hands. Then they’re led away to the car, which speeds away as legally quickly as it arrived.

I’m alone again. You know, the usual. I go to the back of the alley and retrieve my clothing, now wrinkled and dirty. You might think this would give me a reason to wear throwaway clothes to these kinds of things, but that’s not how I roll.

Before leaving, I glance one more time at the apartment where Violet lived. Poor woman. I wanted to be a cop so I could protect people like her. Now I’m here, and I stop the bad guys, But I’m often too late to save the victims. Why is it that I can never get to the right place in time? Why do I always fail, even when I succeed?

Some people might call me a superhero. Some love me, some hate me. But no one ever sees me. I’m no hero. I’m tired, and I’m pushy, and I’m the biggest annoyance I can make myself.

But never for one second do I regret anything I’ve chosen to do. I love life. I want others to love life. And I will do everything I can to protect their right to live. That means stopping people like Viktor. That means fighting the bosses up the line, including the big ones even stronger than I am.

And when it’s the end of the line and I’m pinned to the dirt, my metal body betraying me, I will say that I was here. I lived.

I lived a golden life.

Second Place
Senior Short Story
Emily Parker
Her Smile

Everyone longs for more time, whether it be to experience new things or to just enjoy life. Life works like an hourglass because everyone has a certain amount of time before they move on. Although everyone has a certain amount of time, some have more time than others. If I've learned anything over the course of my life, it would be that not all time holds the same value. One point in your life may remain with you for the rest of your life while other parts drift away like a leaf in the wind. Time is special in that sense because you get to choose how you spend it. In my opinion, living like there’s no tomorrow is the best way to live. My best friend taught me that, and like fluttering butterflies in the wind, my memories of her never fail to bring a smile to my face. Sera, the girl who sang more beautifully than any instrument, the girl who smiled in the face of death, and the girl who learned to live in the present.

I first met Seraphina when our parents introduced us to each other as Elios and Seraphina. She was a somewhat short, brown-haired girl with dazzling viridescent eyes. She was a bit of a clumsy girl and always managed to trip on something, whether it be a rock or the air itself. Our days together were a bit awkward at first as we just played on the swings in an old playground while idly chatting. This went on for a few days until one day she began humming the song “My Way by Frank Sinatra”. Her voice molded the song into a pleasant melody with each note a brushstroke in a serene painting. Her voice was like a gentle stream, flowing effortlessly into my ears. I was so entranced by the notes that I began to hum it alongside her. She looked over at me, and as our eyes met, I knew that a friendship had just sparked that would last a lifetime. We began singing every time we met up: at the park, her house, my house, etc. She’d always ask me the same question
every time we met up: “Wanna sing?” Years eventually went on with us being best friends through the flow of music.

When we both reached high school, we began to compete in singing competitions hosted by our state. I was able to compete with her because my voice was known to hold a tapestry of emotions. Rich in my vocals with a deep and commanding voice that could also hit the soft and gentler notes, I wasn’t too bad at singing myself. The two of us quickly began garnering attention in such a competition, as the two of us would always make it to 1st and 2nd in the state. We kept track of our “wins” and “losses” vs. each other. At the time of our Junior year of high school, the score was 6-8 in her favor. Just like in her younger years, Sera was still somewhat of a klutz. Every other competition or so, she’d walk up to the stage and somehow trip on her shoelace and then get up with a smile. The crowd would laugh, and then her performance would begin. I’d never say it to her face because she’d wear a smug grin if I ever told her, but her performances were nothing short of breathtaking. Her voice always seemed to resonate with the crowd, captivating and calming as it emanated throughout the auditorium.

Apparently, at the upcoming competition, there are going to be scouts for the national duo singing competition held in LA. Sera and I were ecstatic and immediately began to practice for this competition. Over the upcoming weeks, we gave it our all to practice and prepare with each other. We practiced nearly every day after school at either her or my house. We’d always sing for a while, then get distracted and play video games while talking about how hard AP classes were. Still the clumsy girl that I knew her to be, Sera was always letting things slip out of her hands. She even dropped her phone and complained to me about how big the crack on her phone had gotten. I initially thought her grip was weak due to a lack of muscles, as it seemed shaky during our handshakes. However, I quickly forgot about it, and in the blink of an eye, the competition had already arrived.
On the day of the competition, I noticed her hand trembling, and I found that odd as she’d never had stage fright. As contestants after contestants were called, I awaited mine and Sera’s turn. Then one of the judges said, “Elios and Seraphina.” We both walked up and began to create a symphony of grace and emotion that drew in the crowd. Our voices blended together and lingered throughout the room with a warm and inviting pitch that swooned the judges and scouts. The five judges gave us a score of forty-eight out of fifty. Both of us bowed and began to walk off stage. However, when I turned to my left to look at Sera’s face, I immediately noticed something was off: she was too pale and sweaty. It appeared as if the fluorescent ceiling light was bothering her and that gravity was too strong. As she attempted to walk off the stage, I noticed her legs beginning to give out as she began to faint. I knew what her normal clumsiness looked like, and this certainly wasn’t it. Without a moment to waste, I leaped to catch her before her head made contact with the floor. An ambulance was soon called, and it was at the hospital that Sera’s mom finally informed me of what had been going on.

Apparently, Sera had been a premature baby when she was born and thus had some physical issues. It began as something small, such as causing her to appear clumsy, but recently had begun to get worse. A month prior to the competition, her parents took her to a doctor, and it wasn’t good. She had been declared to have Acute myeloid leukemia (A cancer that affects the creation of white and red blood cells in the bone marrow). Her doctor apparently gave her at best, 3 months left to live. I was devastated because I didn’t want to lose my best friend. Saddened, I went into her hospital room only to find her as cheerful as ever as she pointed at her phone with an email pulled up. Apparently, we were nominated by the scouts to compete for our state in the national duo singing competition. I laughed at her almost unbelievable grin
and questioned her on how she was so cheerful, and that was when she taught me something that’ll stick with me for the rest of my life. She asked me, “Does the thought of running out of time mean you should give up on your dreams?” I thought about it for a moment, and responded with “no.” She then told me that it was her dream to win the national competition, and that if she was gonna go out, she might as well go out with a bang. Looking at me with her brilliant Viridescent eyes that almost appeared to house twinkling stars within them, Sera once again asked me, “wanna sing?” Faced with this question that I’d heard countless times, I laughed and said “with pleasure.”

Her parents seemed on board with the idea, since they knew that this was her wish. We had two weeks to prepare for the competition and we had to pick a song that we could sing. We eventually decided on the one song that had started it all: “My Way.” We modified the song to have a female and male portion as well as a dazzling chorus during the main section. After two weeks of preparing, Sera and I were flown to LA to compete in this singing competition that would be broadcast on national television. At the national competition, there were dozens of talents from throughout the nation, each with their strengths and weaknesses, but Sera and I stood unwavering as we awaited our turn to shock the world with our performance. With our names being called, Sera and I walked to the stage. Her eyes were pouring with emotion and determination, and I knew that this would be her best performance yet. As the instrumental began, I poured my everything into a song that stoked emotions with a symphony of strength and vulnerability. The female portion began, and Sera’s voice made the air vibrate at the beck and call of the tender notes flowing from within her voice. The power in her voice commanded the attention of the audience, the judges, and those watching at home. As the blending of our voices gave rise to an unexplainable resonance in the air, we watched as the crowd was left dumbfounded. We both sang our hearts out, enjoying every moment of the performance.
As I sang, I began to remember that this was Sera’s last performance before she was destined to pass on. With pain in my eyes as the ending of the song grew near, I gazed to my left at my best friend, expecting to see her face filled with worry. However, what I saw left me amazed. Sera was smiling brighter than any sun ever had. Her unwavering and beautiful face radiated light as she grinned like a maniac. Her smile must’ve been contagious because now I was smiling as I sang. She’d been living in the present, on this stage, right here, right now, with nothing but me and her. As the final curtain began to fall on the song, our voices resonated throughout the nation and left a mark on the history of singing. The crowd's applause rang out in my ears even after they stopped clapping, and Sera and I grinned at each other just like we always did back when we were just kids playing on that small playground. We knew we’d won. We were the best in the nation.

Although her time was limited, Sera lived every day to the fullest. Of course, I wish I had more time with her, but as she left this world, she wore a smile on her face. She made me realize that it isn’t the amount of time that you spend on this Earth that’s important, but it’s how you spend that time. Live each day with no regrets, so that one day you too may leave with a smile on your face just as she had. And although it pained me to know that I would need to continue turning the page of my own story without her in the next chapter, I decided to live the rest of my life as she had: with a smile.

Third Place
Senior Short Story
Hugh Nguyen