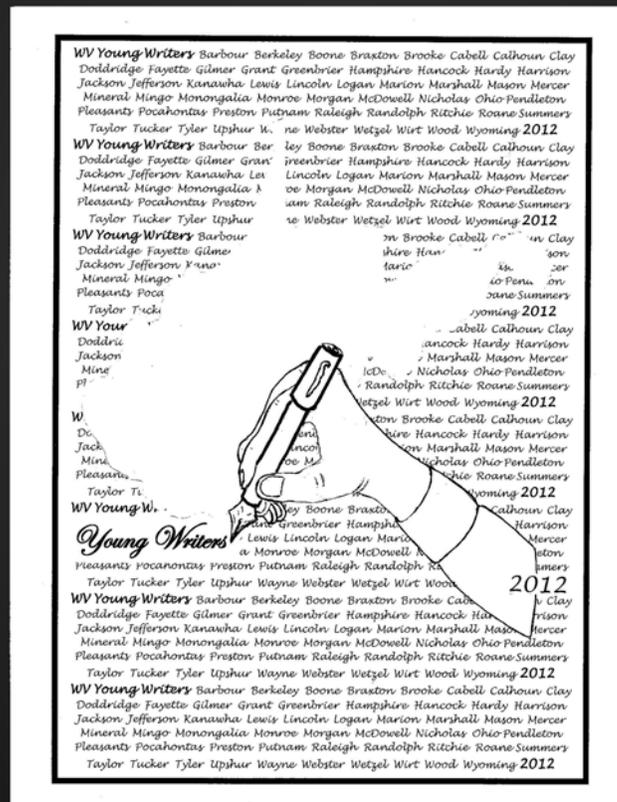


West Virginia's National Writing Project Sites and the
West Virginia Department of Education present

2012 WEST VIRGINIA YOUNG WRITERS ANTHOLOGY



Inside:

19 WV Young Writers Contest Award Winning Stories

*2012 West Virginia
Young Writers Contest
Anthology*

May 2012

Introduction

We proudly present the anthology of the 2012 West Virginia Young Writers contest. It showcases the stories of nineteen students who first won in their counties in their grade level divisions and then won at the state level. These young writers represent counties from all around the state. Included are the winners of first, second, and third place in each grade level category, plus the winner of the Barbara W. Walters Memorial College Scholarship awarded to a 12th grade entrant.

The West Virginia Young Writers Contest has honored excellent writing by our state's students in grades one through twelve for 28 years. The contest is an initiative of West Virginia's National Writing Projects (nwp.org) and supported by the West Virginia Department of Education. University of Charleston also provides invaluable support by hosting Young Writers Day. The 2012 contest was directed by Paul Epstein, Director of Central West Virginia Writing Project with assistance from Edwina Howard-Jack, English Language Arts Coordinator, Office of Instruction, West Virginia Department of Education.

Sponsors

West Virginia Young Writers Contest and Young Writers Day are initiatives of West Virginia's National Writing Project sites whose mission is to improve the teaching of writing and learning in West Virginia schools. To learn more about their professional development programs, visit the websites listed below.

Central WV Writing Project:	www.marshall.edu/cwvwp
Marshall University Writing Project:	www.muwp.org
NWP at WVU:	nwp.wvu.edu

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My Best Friend Reesie

Nate Smith

Madison Elementary School, Boone County
1st Place Winner (Grades 1-2)

My best friend is my dog. His name is Reesie. His birthday is August 1, 2011. Reesie's mom and dad are my Aunt Mary Ann's dogs, Tori and Bruiser. They are English bulldogs. Reesie is dark brindle and white. He is very fat and lazy.

Dogs can do all kinds of stuff. My dog barks, drools everywhere, and snores loudly. He loves taking baths, hiding things under my mom's bed, going for car rides, shredding toilet paper, getting his belly rubbed, and snuggling like a cat. He also likes to chew on everything, especially pacifiers.

My dog is extremely talented. He can jump in the air and run fast. It is funny when he chases his tail.

Reesie is such a silly dog. His favorite food is hot fries. When he is thinking or nervous, he twists his head to the side. I love it when we put a shirt on him. He looks like a person. When we leave our house, we have to keep the TV turned on for him.

Reesie's favorite toy is a pink and orange stuffed animal with crazy hair. It looks like an evil scientist. If you shake the animal's hair in front of Reesie, he will grab it with his mouth and quickly take off.

Having a dog is lots of fun, but they are hard to take care of. You have to feed them, give them plenty of water, take them for walks, bathe them, and let them outside to go to the bathroom. Reesie is worth the hard work. He loves me very much and I love him. Reesie is my best friend.

The Best Cook in the Whole Wide World

Kiah Napier

Wayne Elementary School, Wayne County
2nd Place Winner (Grades 1-2)

One of the best cooks in the whole wide world is my mammaw. She cooks delicious breakfasts, lunches, dinners, and sweets.

For breakfast, she makes perfect pancakes, round and light brown. The sausage patties taste fantastic, and cold chocolate milk makes it a delicious breakfast.

When we have lunch together, we start with bologna. We get the bread out and spread mustard on the bread. Next, we place the round bologna on the white, soft bread. Finally, we close up the bread, grab a Pepsi, and sit down to enjoy our tasty lunch. Sometimes we eat dinner together. Dinner is my favorite meal to share with Mammaw. Her baked spaghetti with pepperoni is terrific. It has noodles, sauce, pepperoni, and cheese layered in a clear dish baked in the oven until it smells good. She gets it out of the oven and cuts it up. We eat it with the same bread we use on our bologna sandwiches, with white milk to drink.

Her coconut balls, chocolate chip cookies, Oreo truffles, and cornflake candy are the best treats in the galaxy. Sometimes I help her make them. We have a lot of fun.

The wonderful foods Mammaw cooks make me feel awesome, full, and happy. We enjoy cooking together and spending time together.

The Return of the King's Gold

Andrew Adkins

Clay Elementary, Clay County
3rd Place Winner (Grades 1-2)

Hi, my name is Max. I am a “not so little” five pound Chihuahua owned by a “not so famous” archeologist, Sam Sizemore. We live in Washington DC in a tiny Washington DC apartment. This is my story about how my master, Sam Sizemore, returned the king's gold.

To start, let me tell you about Egypt. Egypt has hundreds of pyramids. They're everywhere! Inside one of them is a priceless, metal box. There is a century-old, long-dead mummy king in the box protecting his gold. Lots of gold! It's Sam's job to find the gold and my job to help him.

First, Sam packed. He packed a hundred archeologist things (including me) into his old truck. I sat in the front seat all the way to the airport. As soon as we bought the tickets, a loud voice announced that our plane had crashed. Sam and I had to sail a boat to Egypt!

Secondly, Sam learned how to sail a boat. We sailed past a deserted island on the way. Sam saw an old motor boat! He fixed it and I pulled the boat out to sea. Now Sam steered our way to Egypt.

In Egypt, pyramids were everywhere! Sam searched and searched until he found the right one. The pyramid had mazes and clues and mysterious words that led us to the Dogring. Sam placed the ring on the mummy's finger. Suddenly, a hidden door opened and there was the king's gold!

That's the story of how Sam the “now famous” archeologist and I found the king's gold! The gold is now in a Washington DC museum for everyone to see. Sam and I are home too. In a large gold Washington DC home!

Living in the Country

Rebecca Whetzel

East Hardy Early Middle School, Hardy County

1st Place Winner (Grades 3-4)

I live on a farm on the top of a mountain. People laugh, and many are traumatized by our driveway which is two and a half miles long. Some of my own family will only visit us in the summer when the weather is good. I love living on a farm, high on our mountain, because I see and experience things that many others never will.

There are no street lights that obscure the night sky filled with millions of stars. I have learned to find the Big and Little Dippers and some of the bright planets. When there is a full moon it shines in my bedroom window like a beautiful white night light. It is so bright that I can see some of the trees and fields.

One of the most special things I like is from my front bedroom window where I can look out and see the birds flying below me. My room is so high; when I stand and look straight out, the only thing I can see is sky. It is such a peaceful feeling to look into the valley on cool mornings and see only the mountain tops peaking through the blanket of fog. It appears that overnight someone spooned whipped cream into the valley just leaving the peaks to show.

In the spring, when the days are beginning to warm up, we eagerly listen to hear the first pond frogs croak. For days we sit on the front porch in the evenings to hear the songs of the frogs. It is like music in the mountains and it makes me happy that this is my home.

In the summer there is the amazing smell of freshly cut hay. The scent is sweet and heavy. We have a lot of thunderstorms around haymaking time. One of my favorite things is to go out after a storm and find the rainbow. Sometimes we are surprised by a double rainbow and we all take pictures.

When it storms, being on top of the mountain often gets exciting. Lightning races across the sky with thin and wicked fingers setting the clouds on fire. The valley lights up with flashes and the house shakes with the rolls of thunder. Many times we have found huge trees splintered with the force of lightning and shattered into fire wood.

The most amazing thing to me about living in the country is the sounds at night. There are birds and owls that sing and hoot. Coyotes howl and cry to each other. Crickets chirp and bugs hum. But the best sound is the silence. Some nights there nothing but calm. No noise, no cars, no chatter. We set and listen to the serene sound of nothing. This is just one of the many things that make me love the farm I live on, high on a mountain top, looking out over the valley.

Grandma's Bible

Jessica Flemming

Madison Elementary School, Boone County

2nd Place Winner (Grades 3-4)

My grandmother passed away when I was five years old after fighting a courageous battle against cancer. When it became evident that she would not be victorious over this terrible disease, she summoned me to her bedside. She knew the time was close at hand for her to depart this world and she wanted to give each family member something of hers to cherish as they went on without her.

It appeared that she and my grandfather had put much thought into what treasure would be mine. I would receive Grandma's Bible. I had spent countless hours with her attending church services. I had sat beside her in these meetings and watched her mark scripture after scripture for future use. I had witnessed her on her knees in prayer for our family. She taught me to lean on this precious book during a very difficult time in my own young life, my parents' divorce.

The week before my grandmother passed away, she had my grandfather take the Bible and have my name engraved on the back in beautiful gold letters. The front cover was engraved many years before with their names.

This precious book was a wedding gift presented from my grandfather to his new young bride. I will never forget the day my grandmother placed this cherished part of her in my hand. I knew she was telling me goodbye. She opened it to a page in the back where she had traced the outline of her hand. "Now Jessica," she whispered, "Whenever you need me, open my Bible to this page and lay your hand on mine and you will feel me with you."

My grandmother's Bible brought her countless hours of comfort. This is evident by the worn pages and by all the little notes she wrote inside. There are dates recorded for births, marriages, and deaths. Scriptures that brought her peace in times of trouble are underlined. There are no words to describe how much I miss my grandmother. I think of her every day of my life. I will be forever grateful that she chose me to carry on living my life as she did with this blessed book of hers as my guide. "I love you Grandma."

My Cat Needs Glasses

Julianna A. Brown

Berlin Mckinney Elementary, Wyoming County
3rd Place Winner (Grades 3-4)

My cat Jojo is an amazing cat. I've trained him well. He puts my books back on the shelf after I've read them and returns my pencils to my pencil box after I've written something. Since my cat is trained this well, you'd expect him to do the right things, but when I called him to come eat the other day, he ate the dog's food! Spot's name was even printed on the bowl! At first, I thought Jojo just wanted to annoy the dog, but when he put my pencil in my dad's tool box, I started to get a tad worried. I didn't stress too much until I gave him my book to return to the shelf and he put it in the toilet! It was getting really weird, so I decided to tell my mom about the strange things Jojo was doing. She said, "That is strange, but maybe Jojo just needs glasses."

"What? A cat with glasses!" Then I thought, "Well, if people can wear them, why not animals?"

We took Jojo to see Dr. Doolittle, the vet. As I was signing him in, he began to shake so I held him close. About five minutes later, Dr. Doolittle came in and told us to take Jojo to room four. By this time, Jojo was quaking! Mom took him into her comforting arms. He peacefully relaxed and calmed down and by the time we reached the room, he was purring. I placed him tenderly down on the cold, hard examining table. He looked confused and afraid until Dr. Doolittle spoke to him softly and petted him. Dr. Doolittle looked at Jojo, "What seems to be the problem here?" Jojo softly meowed a couple of times.

"Okay, I understand what you're saying," replied the doctor as he nodded his head and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Let's have a look."

He showed Jojo a variety of pictures representing different amounts of mice. When he was shown a card with three mice, Jojo said, "Six." When he was showing cards with five mice, he said there were nine. "Aha!" exclaimed Dr. Doolittle, "Your cat definitely needs glasses, not anything major just a small, tiny problem that can be fixed with a pair of glasses."

He led us into a small, bright room down the hall that was lined with rows of shelves filled with small pairs of glasses. I chuckled as Dr. Doolittle fitted Jojo for the correct size and shape of glasses he could wear. I thought to myself, "A cat with glasses, that's amazing!" The doctor put a pair of blue, oval-shaped glasses on Jojo, he shook his head and took them off replacing them with a pair of red square glasses. "No, let's try these," he remarked, putting them on Jojo's bright, green eyes. "I think these are the perfect pair." Crossing my fingers, I grinned. Jojo was nodding excitedly, a smile spreading across his face wearing his yellow cat's eye glasses.

Going Home by Leaving

Jessica Taylor

Clay County Middle School, Clay County
1st Place Winner (Grades 5-6)

“No! No, it can’t be, it just can’t!” Mommy yelled as she pulled my sister and told me to walk faster. It was kind of odd though; her words didn’t tell me to walk faster. It was her eyes. Her eyes just didn’t look like her usual eyes. Normally a deep blue sea, they were now faded, almost grey. They always seemed to be set on a white background, brighter than that of all others, but now they were set only on a sea of tears.

I still didn’t know what was going on. Neither Mommy’s eyes nor her mouth had told me what had happened. “*Why was Mother crying? Why were we in the Side Road Hospital? Why did we wake up in the middle of the night? Why were we rushed up here so quickly? Who was in the hospital? WHAT WAS GOING ON?!?!?*” These thoughts raced through my head as I kept trying to match up the evidence to determine the ‘who, what, when, where, why, and how,’ but nothing matched. All I knew was that nothing made sense.

“Where is room 209?” It was more of a demand than question. Mommy’s voice sounded more scared than before.

“I’m sorry Ms.,” a man’s voice said, empty with no compassion. “He’s in critical condition. He’s not having any visitors at the moment. Come back later, and we’ll schedule a time for you to go see him.”

Mommy’s eyes burned with an anger I had never seen, yet out of her mouth came grace.

“May I please see him? I came because of the critical condition. I came now because he might not be here later. Please, please let me see him.”

The man looked like no one had ever spoken to him nicely. “Go to the elevator, 2nd floor, go straight until you reach the second hall, turn right. There you’ll find room 209.” It was weird the way he said it. It was fast, but not an excited fast.

Mommy followed the directions carefully, and no one talked during that time. Finally we came to room 209. Mommy reached for the handle, but a doctor opened it from the inside.

“You must be Mrs. McCoy.” Mom shook her head, but the doctor kept talking. “Mr. McCoy’s wreck was... well...” He dropped his head and tried to force a smile onto his solemn face. “I’ll just say, he’s not doin’ too well.”

“Mr. McCoy? Mr. McCoy! What? That’s Daddy, my daddy.” Thoughts raced through my head again. “He was in a wreck! Will he be okay?” My thought then came out loud. “Mommy, will Daddy be... will he... will he be okay?” Like my voice, everything seemed quiet.

“Honey, I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

We stepped in a tidy little room where Daddy lay on a bed. He wasn't moving. His eyes were closed. As soon as Mommy saw him, she was at his side. She touched his hand, and he slowly opened his eyes. "Are, are you okay?" she said, trying her best to stifle her tears.

He squeezed Mommy's hand. "Julie, I'm goin' to meet God. I was waiting for you to come so I could tell you that I'm not leaving you. I'll always be in your heart, and then someday you'll see me in Heaven." His eyes glanced over at me and my sister and he said, "Girls, always remember your daddy loved you so much!" His soft, melodic voice rang in song. "I'll meet you in the morning, by the bright river side, when all sorrow has drifted away: I'll be by the portals, when the gates open wide." His voice faded away, and his forever green eyes closed, their last time on earth.

I felt the hot tears streaming down my face, and Mommy looked at me with an indescribable look. A look of peace came over her. Why was she not crying? I never cry, and I was crying. She'd been married for 14 years to the most important person in our family, and he had just died. "Amy, don't cry," she said in an unusually calm voice. "Honey, your daddy is in God's hands."

The Talent Show Fiasco

Abbey Delk

Triadelphia Middle School, Ohio County
2nd Place Winner (Grades 5-6)

Molly and I were sitting in the Oakwood School Library during study hall. We had just noticed a flyer for the big school talent show as we entered the library, and Molly was begging me to enter.

Molly is always saying that I'm an amazing singer. I do practice a lot, but I don't think of myself as a fantastic singer. I prefer to think of myself as a normal girl, just trying to stay under the radar and avoid C.J. Turner, the school bully.

"You should enter!" Molly exclaimed, her amber pigtails bouncing. I had to admit winning the show sounded awesome, but I was nervous about entering.

"I'll think about it," I said. *Maybe I could win*, I thought. After all, I had sung in competitions before.

We were strolling out of the library when C. J. Turner rounded the corner. She looked stunning, dressed in designer clothes and shoes.

"Hey, dorks," she sneered, standing in front of us, surrounded by her posse.

"Hey, C.J.," Molly said sarcastically.

"Move along, dorks, we need to get through," she said, her friends smirking behind her.

"Sure, whatever," Molly said. "We were just signing Rose up for the talent show. She's going to win. She's the best singer ever!"

"Not in a million years," C.J. retorted. "We're entering, and our dance numbers always win. But good luck dorks." And she sauntered into the library, her gang giggling and whispering.

"Thanks a lot," I sighed. "The last thing I need is C.J. against me. You know how mean she is!"

Molly stopped me and said gravely, "You are going to beat her. You're more talented than she is, trust me." I was still nervous, but I trusted Molly.

When my car pulled up to the curb the next morning, I hopped out and hurried into school. I was supposed to meet Molly at her locker, and I was super late. I was just rounding the corner when I ran smack into C.J.

"Hey, watch where you're going!" she shrieked. "Wait," she said, smirking. "Aren't you the one entering the talent show? Wow, you don't have a chance. Sorry, but to win, you have to have talent!" She sashayed off toward her locker, her blonde locks bouncing behind her.

I scurried away and was met by a fuming Molly. “You were supposed to meet me fifteen minutes ago!”

“Sorry,” I moaned. I spent the next ten minutes telling her about what had happened with C.J.

“I don’t know if I want to compete,” I said grimly. “C.J. can do awful things to people, and she never gets caught!”

“Rose, just ignore her. You are going to win!” Molly replied. I wish I had backed out then, but I was too loyal to Molly to really consider what C.J. could really do.

Since it was Friday, Molly and I were planning to go ice skating that night. Sitting in my bedroom, messing around on the computer, I had completely forgotten about C.J. and the talent show. I logged on to the school website and clicked on the link to the student wall, a place where students could post messages and pictures. Then I saw it. My stomach dropped and I felt sick. On the top of the wall was a message from C.J.

Rose Parker is a loser! She can’t even sing!

I called Molly that night to cancel our evening out. But the conversation turned to the talent show almost immediately. “Molly, I can’t compete in the talent show!” I wailed.

“Why, just because of some stupid post? Rose, you’ll never win if you don’t believe in yourself. And by the way, you’re the best singer I’ve ever heard.” She hung up, but I didn’t need to talk anymore anyway.

I stood in the wings, watching C.J. dance. Boy, had she been shocked when I showed up. She hadn’t expected me to come. The lights dimmed and C.J. sauntered off the stage with her gang. I stepped out of the darkness and into my moment, leaving all fear behind me. Closing my eyes I sang my heart out, knowing I had already beaten C.J. just by showing up.

My Night at Sears

Alli Suter

Paden City Elementary School, Wetzel County
3rd Place Winner (Grades 5-6)

It started out as an ordinary day. I had my usual routine of school, basketball practice, and homework. However, on this particular Tuesday I had to go with my mother to our local Sears store to purchase a new water filter for our refrigerator. That was a trip that I would never forget!

We arrived at Sears around 8:30 because basketball practice ran late. We rushed to the appliance section because the store would be closing in about 30 minutes. Several ounces of Gatorade at practice forced me to find the nearest restroom which happened to be on the other side of the store. I told my mother I would meet her at the entrance in five minutes. Being the clumsy person I am, I accidentally slipped on a plastic coat hanger that was lying on the wet restroom floor. Why the hanger had not been removed before the mopping still remains a mystery. As my foot slipped and my feet came out from under me, I hit my forehead on a hand dryer, and fell to the floor. I saw stars. Lots of stars as I became unconscious.

As I began to wake up a few minutes later, I rushed to leave the restroom to find my mother. I left only to find the once brightly lit Sears store was now dark and empty. The doors to all the entrances were locked, and I was alone and trapped at closing time in Sears with now way out!

I reached for my cell phone, but remembered I had left it in the car. And there was no pay phone like Mom always talked about in the olden days. I knew I was stuck, and I knew I needed a plan of action. This first thing I needed was food. I never remembered seeing any type of food in Sears, so I desperately tried to think where anything edible might be. Walking quickly through each section, I soon discovered a display of Hickory Farms meat and cheese boxes. I hurried to unwrap the tightly sealed box and began to eat my delicious dinner for the night. My appetite was then satisfied.

What happened next you might ask? A good old workout in the fitness department was just what I needed to keep my mind off of things. I determined the treadmill on sale for \$799.00 was a perfect fit. A 20 minute workout and I was ready for my next event.

Video games had been banned at my house on school nights, so I found it to be a perfect time to play a game of Just Dance 2. That kept me busy for the next 30 minutes, and I was now ready for a shower, pajamas, and bed. Of course with no shower available, I went to the water fountain and splashed some cool water on my face, and then dabbed my face dry with the fluffy white towels I picked up in the bathroom collection.

I then went to the clothing department and picked out a nice pair of button-up plaid pajamas. All that was left to do was to find a place to sleep for the night. A five-piece fluffy down comforter set was on display on a bed, and it was a welcoming sight. I first hurried to the electronic department to get a digital alarm clock so I could wake up way before the first employees would enter the store in the morning.

I slept like a baby. I would really need to tell my mother to purchase this pillow top mattress when it went on sale. Suddenly I felt hands tapping at my face and people shouting my name. They yelled for me to get up and asked if I was alright. As I opened my eyes, I saw my mother standing over me holding a plastic hanger, the thing that started it all. And it all was just a dream.

A Bird's Lullaby

Sarah Rowe

Buffalo Middle School, Wayne County
1st Place Winner (Grades 7-8)

Her bright blue eyes were grey with tears; the blonde haired child with nimble fingers and a knack to sing like a bird quietly crept up the spiraling staircase. Tears began to spill over her pale cheeks as she collapsed on the bed of the dimly lit room. Her parent's shouts of hatred are continuously fired at one another, and with each shout, her faith in love faded a little more. The young girl had too many burdens to bear at such a young age; as other kids yearned for the life of an adult, she only wished her childhood would begin. Her parents rarely spoke, and when they did, it was due to the fact that they couldn't hold the overwhelming grudges. She lay there with her face down buried into the pillow and replaced the ominous shouts of hatred with sweet memories of the past. Memories flashed through her head of her father. He used to sing a lullaby to her every night as she would struggle to keep such a perfect tune. Whispering the lullaby, she was happy for a moment, but thundering footsteps and a deafening slam of the door dissolved her daze.

Snow swirled around the little girl's father as wind howled and ice stung his scarlet cheeks. He shuffled through the snow, and struggled to smash the barrier of ice that stood in the way of inside the door. The little girl's father was blind with anger. He ignored the rampant blizzard, and continued to barrel down the highway. He ignored the swerving vehicles, the relentless snow, and even the screeches of the tires as the car skidded on two wheels around a sharp turn. What he couldn't ignore was the coughs and sputters of the engine as it rolled to a slow stop. The little girl's father only had enough precious seconds to grumble a few curse words under his breath before the blinding snow of headlights filled the rearview mirror.

His grumbles of hatred changed drastically to shrieks of terror as his fingers tangled into a mess. He was attempting to revive the lifeless vehicle, but it was too late. His life flashed before his eyes as shattered glass and mangled metal raged around him. His daughter, with blonde hair, nimble fingers, and a tweeting voice like a bird, filled his thoughts. He saw her in his memories; nestled under the blankets in the dimly lit room, he sang to her a lullaby one final time. Then, he entered the sweet release of darkness.

She rushed to his side as the blizzard continued to rage outside; the little girl held tightly to her father's hand. They were in an ambulance that was racing down the icy highway. Her father was dead to the world, but the line on the heart monitor struggled to keep a small wave. Something was urging his child. When she would scrape her knee as a child, or hit her head, her father would sweetly sing that lullaby with a perfect tune. She felt like she needed to sing to him, to comfort him; like he did when she was in pain. The little girl was ignoring the frantic doctors, and the

crammed space of the ambulance, and racked her brain for the tune of the melody of his perfect lullaby. She combed her nimble fingers through his hair, and brushed away the dark brown silky strands that covered his forehead. Her father was cut, and blood streamed from his open wounds, but she wouldn't let herself believe that he was in that much pain.

The little girl's throat was scratchy and dry, but she began to whisper his sweet tune to her unconscious father. She felt like he was comforted, although she was the one that needed comfort the most. Her mother was huddled in the corner of the ambulance, sobbing hysterically, but she ignored it. The little girl softly sang her father into a peaceful sleep as the line went flat on the monitor, and it beeped. Tiny tears rolled down her face as she held her lifeless father, but she stayed strong. After all, losing him was just another burden to bear.

One Bird with Two Stones

Paige Conrad

Shepherdstown Middle School, Jefferson County
2nd Place Winner (Grades 7-8)

Tweet, tweet.

That was her life. Twitter, and Facebook, post another picture, send another tweet. Go to school, do your homework, and come home. Post another picture taken alone, in your room, and tweet a certain number of tweets per night to get to a set number of one thousand. Why, in the first place, had her life been reduced to this? Wasting brainpower on the next tweet, which ought to be funny and clever, yet still cool and modern. A writer, that's what she wanted to be. Not a tweeter. Not a Facebook addict. But, all of her friends had twitters. All of the high school students had one.

"What gives me the right to be different?" she thought. "That's right. There isn't a right to be different. There's a mindset." She sighed as she typed another tweet, a jumble of words about how much homework she had, under 140 characters. Always under 140 characters. She smiled at the irony of living her life 140 characters at a time and glanced around her room. It was sea foam green, with pictures on pictures on every surface. And the flowers, hanging on the wall by a thumbtack, those had been the final touch to her room. It crossed the line into romantic, vintage, creative. That's all she wanted. Just to be creative.

Ping, ping, ping.

The sound of the keyboard haunted her sleep, the sound of the pads of her fingers hitting the expertly made plastic squares. She hardly ever wrote with her hands, the old fashioned way with pencil and paper. She got out of bed, and glanced at the clock. 2:17 am. She picked up her laptop from the floor, and pressed the power button. A few seconds of waiting led to a million thoughts. "Should I do this?" the voice inside her head inquired. "Yes," the other one dictated. She signed into her twitter, her fingers hovering over the track pad, about to hit the delete button. Her heart raced, when suddenly she stopped. She couldn't. She wouldn't. She trudged back to her warm bed, and fell asleep immediately.

Chirp, chirp, chirp.

She rolled over on her side, ignoring the lonely, shrill sound of her alarm. It was ironic, really, that the sound that woke her up in the morning was the chirp of a bird. The twittering noise.

Clunk, clunk, clunk.

The sound her heavy, expensive, fuzzy Australian boots made in the hallway. She smiled a fake smile to her friend, one that didn't spread to her eyes. That's when the final bell rang, and she was able to go home. A lonely bus ride, and few words muttered to her parents, and she was off again. Tweet, tweet, tweet. She glanced in the mirror, and thought she looked pretty good. She pulled out her phone, and snapped a few pictures. After editing it, she added it to Facebook, wondering how many likes she would get this time. Suddenly, she was filled with an anger and bitterness she had never felt before.

"I don't need them to like me," she said to herself. "I don't need their approval. Will a hundred likes on my picture make me a better person? Will I find what I need in life? No." Resolutely, she signed into her twitter. Her fingers hovered over the track pad, ready to do it. It was so easy. A click of a button, and her life was hers once again. Still, doubts ran through her mind. "This is what I want," she told herself like a mother scolding a child. "I can't keep living my life through a screen. Does it matter how many Friends I have on Facebook, or how many people are following me on twitter? This isn't going to make me more successful in life. This isn't helping me get to where I want to go." With the click of that button, it was all gone. Quickly, she signed into Facebook, pressed by a force deep inside her mind. One more click of the button, and she was free. She sat down on her bed, and smiled. This was it. This was her only life, finally.

Darkness

Grace Ward

John Adams Middle School, Kanawha County
3rd Place Winner (Grades 7-8)

At first I felt powerful. The rush was so exhilarating, so freeing – I felt on top of the world. Then it started spiraling out of control. I couldn't focus, couldn't socialize, couldn't do anything as well as I used to. A fog started clouding my mind that could only be removed by the rush. But it became harder and harder to clear. I became depressed and awkward. My friends avoided me; my A's slipped into F's. I still kept on doing it though – I needed the rush. I was addicted to shoplifting, and I didn't stop until it was too late.

Cecelia and I were strolling into a department store– who knew walking into a store could be so life changing – when we saw it. A beautiful, elegant scarf. It was white silk with blue roses on it, and the roses were tangled and intertwined, a wild garden in full bloom. Cecelia and I both sprinted to it and tried it on, acting like supermodels walking down the runway. Then reality sunk in and we stared at it, hardly breathing, both of us unwilling to check the price tag. Finally, I mustered up the courage and turned the white tag over. My heart sank as I examined it, hoping desperately that my eyes were tricking me, that there was no way this scarf cost a hundred dollars. Disappointed, I turned to go, but Cecelia stopped me. A wicked gleam in her eyes, she winked at me, then stealthily pulled out a pair of scissors and snipped the price and security tag off. She grabbed the scarf and handed it to me, motioning for me to put it in my bag.

If you freeze the scene there, you can see the doubt and fear in my eyes. But then greed strangled doubt and vanity stabbed fear, and I took the scarf and stuffed it in my bag. We strolled out of the store like nothing was amiss. It was then that I got my first rush. Power joined the party in my head and whispered sweet nothings in my ear. I was hooked.

I became an expert on shoplifting. The items I lifted became bigger and bigger. Little things only gave me power in the beginning, and the devils in my head wanted more. Clothes, jewelry, and food – if it was in a store, I took it. That was when the darkness first started growing inside my head, a sticky web only stealing could clear. It was extremely difficult to stay normal, and finally I cracked.

Eventually, I was caught. The bright lights of the police sirens penetrated my mind, but the inky blackness swallowed it up. I was shoved into the police car. The cop in the front seat turned around and took a long look at me. I could see my reflection in the car window – a thin, sallow girl, with stringy hair and dull eyes. I was but a ghost of my old self. The web in my head grew tighter and more tangled every second I was trapped in that car. I drew into myself, and stared into nothing.

When I woke up, the blinding whiteness of the room was a shock to my senses. For a brief second, the fog lifted, replaced by complete and utter bliss. Then the fuzziness took control again. People came and went, their silhouettes blurry, their voices muted. I stared blankly at the ceiling, devoid of emotion. I had no clue where I was, how I got there, or why, and I didn't care. One person finally came in, clearer than the rest, and I could have sworn the darkness receded a little when I saw her. She smiled warmly at me, shook my limp hand, and introduced herself as Nurse Nancy. I willed my eyes to focus, to actually see her as a person and not just a shadow. She whispered something, and I had to strain my ears to hear it. Nancy said, "It felt powerful at first, didn't it? But then it sucked you down into its trap..." She stroked my hair, then smiled at me again. "Don't worry honey," she murmured, "you're going to be okay."

A Life Well Done

Emily Hough

University High School, Monongalia County
1st Place Winner (Grades 9-10)

1900. She comes into the world on a dark night lit only by stars and candlelight with an agonized cry and a small hiccup. Parents embrace her, and kiss her face, and her tiny fingers clench around her mother's hands. When her eyes open, they are sapphire blue and drowsy. Her father peers into her face and smiles at his baby girl and compliments his wife on a job well done.

1905. Her pink spring dress, lavish and decorated with ruffles and crocheted flowers, bounces around her knees as she dashes out of her house. She flops into a flaky, welcoming tuft of puffy lemongrass, falling into the blissful canyons of imagination. Clouds drift by overhead, taking shapes of unicorns, dragons, and beautiful ships, waiting to take her on a voyage to something beyond her simple cottage life. A biplane zooming overhead disrupts the images in the sky. Her eyes follow it with longing. She yearns to soar through the heavens, to dance on the clouds, and to ride the rolling winds as if a fearless eagle. As the pilot disappears from sight, she complements him on a job well done.

1915. She sits by the fireside listening to her father sing folk songs with the guitar in his knowledgeable hands. She watches her baby brother chase the ever-patient collie across the carpet, turning over her knitting in her hands, which she considers mediocre, with frustration. Her mother scoops up the baby and begins to dance, sounds of laughter echoing through the entire red velvet room. The baby, Aden, is passed into her care, and the adults begin to twirl in each other's arms slowly, with all the grace of a picturesque swan, with adoration shimmering in emerald eyes. She forgets her chores and her dilemmas, if only for a moment, and compliments their happiness on a job well done.

1920. Her mind attempts to retreat to the blissfulness of the early years, desperate to escape from reality. But she is powerless to hinder the vicious fangs of the truth from slashing through the white, cottony, jovial clouds of the past. She watches powerlessly as one terribly final signature joins the first upon the crinkled, leather-like parchment, sealing forever the decision to break apart an unbreakable vow. Her blue eyes glisten with tears like the stars in the night sky, which she hoped to fly amongst someday, but now never will because of her responsibilities at the home. A throat clears, and someone states, with less emotion than if he were commenting about the weather, "that's that," and her father hastens from the room, to the arm of another lady, without even so much as a goodbye. Her mother clutches Aden to her chest, and the lawyer compliments himself on a job well done.

1922. She is in love, for the very first time. His name is Sebastian. He says he is in the Air Force. He says he has no family because they were killed in the Great War. He says he can help her fly, and maybe, someday, they will live on an island with room just for two, and no matter where you stand, you would be able to see the sky. He says, in a voice that soothes and ignites the soul like fire, that they will someday have a family, complete with two dark haired children with blue eyes, and everyone will compliment them on a job well done.

1924. She leans against the marble counter of the bar, drowning out the sounds of jazz with yet another drink. It has been years since she has seen Sebastian, even though he promised that he would return. He said that he had to leave for training, after teaching her a different kind of flying than she had anticipated. Her friends had told her that it was normal in this age, and that men were no good, and that they had seen him on the other side of town running rampant amongst the bars, but still, the memories control her mind. Alone now, she has become a pilot, but a pilot of a different sort. She turns away from the liquor that has become her best friend, the soothing fire that scalds the body and calms the mind just the way Sebastian used to, and strides to the dance floor, sequenced dress two-sizes-too-small glittering to the sound of the wailing saxophone. She dances until the dollars are thrown, and soon a passenger has signed on to board. She takes him on a one-way trip, and at the end of the night, he compliments her on a job well done.

1941. Her son plays with toy tanks on a latch-hooked carpet depicting a valley in the summer, blooming with flowers of pink and blue. She sits with her husband, listening to the devastating news of the beginning of the second Great War. She takes note of Churchill's pleas for involvement from all, even training women to fly. Timidly, she asks for permission to join the cause. Her husband scoffs, explaining that flying is man's work, and only they can perform a job well done.

19... She is an old woman now, more dead than alive, and she is wandering alone throughout the barren waste that used to be her life. The bombs of the war killed her baby, and the Gestapo took away her husband. The jazz club lies barren, and she realizes suddenly she has not even thought of Aden. She wonders if she had ever been an aunt, and if that were so, then did they survive through the Great War's blitzkrieg bombings? She wonders whatever became of her dear mother and what all had occurred those pointless years when she had been chasing Sebastian, and when she had been dreaming of flying. She peers blankly at the splotchy, shapeless finger painting she has just completed, and her psychiatrist compliments her on a job well done.

The Sunrise

Madalynn Payne

East Hardy High School, Hardy County
2nd Place Winner (Grades 9-10)

The darkness is still upon us. The moon with its huge face is still lighting the way of the night travelers. These night travelers have scurried by us on many occasions, in search of their mid-night meal. But we are watching, waiting, hoping the moon will retire early. The trees whisper with the light breeze, talking of the coming day. The brook running through the woods is trying in vain to quietly slip by. The splash and gurgle it makes as it climbs over the rocks is able to be heard, even down here in the meadow. We are standing proud and tall waiting, waiting for that moment. Our petals are all but shaking with anticipation of what is to come. We, the flowers of the silent meadow, are holding our excitement in the best we can.

The dark blue of the night is slowly being replaced with a blanket of color. The clouds, embarrassed to be caught by the rising sun, have turned a shade of pink. The birds have collectively taken a breath, so as to be ready to sing at just the right moment. The moon has stepped back to see the performance, slowly slipping behind its curtain. Its performance is finally coming to an end. We try to stretch taller to take a drink of the first glass of light the sun grants us, our roots keeping us grounded to the cold earth. By now, the night travelers have made their way to their beds to sleep until the coolness of night has come again. Some of the clouds have even grabbed their best coat of purple to impress the awaited one.

Can you see it over the head of the mighty mountain? Mountain, will you please lower your lofty head or remove your hat of sturdy pines? Gone is all trace of night. The sky has once again been filled with our friend, the sun. How we have waited for the moment in which we bathe to our hearts desire in the warmth of the sun. The birds have joined together in song, a song so wonderful to the ears. The brook no longer tries to be quiet, but instead bubbles with joy over the dawn of a new day. The trees are dancing and laughing in the morning wind. We, the beautiful flowers, are dinning in the most wonderful feast, the sunrise.

Chronophobic

Heather Green

Doddridge County High School, Doddridge County
3rd Place Winner (Grades 9-10)

I had made her perfect. Her twisted blonde hair fell elegantly around her flawless, ivory face. Her immortal benevolence would never know the hurt or remorse of humanity. She would never feel the shame of failure or experience the pain of death. Her soul would never be burdened with thoughts of the afterlife. But, in spite of that, the desperate longing in her lifeless, painted glass eyes haunted me perpetually.

Even when bound into servitude, any sentient entity has some amount of free-will. Be that as it may, she is a substance devoid of any freedom. Her heart is an empty cavity, deprived of a beat. Dead air remains in her lungs, unable to cycle into new life. Voiceless, red lips rest expressionless under an apathetic, blue gaze. She sits enduringly in an everlasting, noiseless oblivion. She is, without a doubt, in absolutely no state of mind.

As time ticks in agonizing strokes, macabre scenes dance before her, to which she remains impassive and emotionless. Her lovely, china-white features remedy an uncanny society with bliss and charm, yet she is unable to receive contentment in return. Her heartless body cannot feel happiness.

“Why do you cry?” she asks me, searching my lachrymose eyes for an answer. I don’t respond. She doesn’t understand what it means to be isolated, for she has never been introduced to the world. The affliction that so deeply bothers me has no meaning to her.

Soon, however, we engage in conversation. I want to teach her the few joys of humanity. Unfortunately, she doesn’t seem to be able to fathom what I’m telling her. When I explain to her how to erupt all of her passion into a beautiful melody, her voice and expression carry out a disharmonized, melancholy drone. I tell her of magnificent heroes bravely battling ferocious monsters, and her heart does not, even once, beat with excitement. When I remind her of how I came to be so alone, she doesn’t shed a tear. Someday, she may come to wonder why she feels so sequestered.

As my skin begins to crease and bones begin to creak, I wonder what will happen to this entity when I am expired. I ask myself if her very existence relies on my own. I believe the answer is yes. If I told her this, would she care? Is she capable of “caring”? I loathe these questions unceasingly.

She asks me again why I am crying. I contemplate on giving her an answer. Perhaps, her toneless, unimpassioned voice is merely a personal display of my own paranoia. She waits patiently for a reply, her blank stare chilling me to the state of trembling. I feebly clutch my chest as my heart begins to race faster than I have ever felt before. The feeling of drowning in my own thoughts compels me to gasp for air, but I am without success. My gaze on her is unwavering as her face begins to twist into a reflection of my own horror. The edges of my view

on the world begin to darken and close into mindlessness.

As generations recede and advance, the meaning of her existence will begin to fade, along with her once angelic virtues. My intentions of creating her will be lost in the past, and ignorance will take over all who look upon her. Nevertheless, she will never recognize that she has lost. She will remain forever in an empty state of unmindfulness, waiting for a new patron in a vacant antique shop.

Tulips in August

Brittany Strother

Lewis County High School, Lewis County
1st Place Winner (Grades 11-12)

I poked at the cake distastefully with my fork, watching a cascade of pink and white frosting slide onto my plate. The room was too hot for the too-bright pastry to survive; where there had once been a festive birthday greeting, gruesome pink streaks had melted in all directions, looking more like spider veins than letters.

But, it didn't bother me. In fact, it was easier to see my birthday cake reduced to a puddle than to see the message that had originally been scrawled in its place. I could still see the mockingly cheerful icing spelling out "HAPPY 18th BIRTHDAY KORI!"

"It just isn't right," I croaked to myself. And it wasn't. Every birthday since I was born, I'd been forced into sharing my birthday with the most irritating, obnoxious person known to mankind; my twin brother, Cal.

I felt my tear-drenched eyes drawn to the picture above our fridge. It was Cal and me at graduation. He was happy and laughing, with me tucked under his arm in a headlock while he gleefully tortured my hair. "Typical Scotts twins," as teachers and peers would say.

We were supposed to be starting college together soon. Of course, to my dismay, he'd gotten into my dream school. Sometimes I swore he did things just for the sake of getting on my nerves.

It's funny, I thought to myself. *I always told him to get lost, and now he is.*

Cal had died three months ago in a car crash. He'd been texting one of his friends, and swerved right over into the other side of the road. He was gone on impact.

It'd always been Kori and Cal. Cal and Kori.

And now it was just Kori. It was like Cal never existed, like he'd been my imaginary friend for nearly eighteen years. People seemed to think it would be easier on me to act as if I was an only child, rather than acknowledging the unfavorable truth.

"Was it worth it, Cal?" I asked no one for the thousandth time. Shoving the plate away, I buried my head in my arms and cried silent, choking sobs at the thought of facing the rest of my life alone.

I'm not sure how long I sat there, grieving and remembering. It may have been minutes, or hours; it was all the same to me, anymore. But, when I unfolded myself from the chair to answer a hesitant knock at the door, my whole body felt stiff and aged.

I took my time getting to the door, trying fruitlessly to smooth my hair and wipe crusted tears from my face. When I opened the door, I could tell from the look on the man's face that my disgruntled appearance startled him. But, in all fairness, he startled me, too, with the plethora of

oversized helium balloons in his hand, and a bouquet of flowers in the other. The balloons weaved and bobbed as if by their own accord, almost as if they wanted to be in the house.

“Are you,” the man started, juggling his merchandise while trying to read the name on a card, “Kori Scotts?”

I nodded impatiently while he loaded the gifts into my outstretched arms. It looked like the church was taking pity on me again. Right after Cal died, I received more flowers, balloons, teddy bears, and candies than I could ever want; all of which ended up going to the children’s hospital the same day. I waved the delivery guy away and shut the door, not wanting to hear the words “Have a nice day,” or “Happy birthday.”

I set the balloons free in my living room, and momentarily watched the cheesy birthday blurbs dance against the ceiling and walls. Then, losing interest, I collapsed on the couch, balancing the vase of flowers between my knees. They were tulips, my favorite, in every color, nineteen, to be exact. I couldn’t help but admire them.

I hadn’t planned to read the card, but curiosity got the better of me. I plucked it from the center of the bouquet and squinted to read the small print.

Kori,

I bet you thought I was gonna forget again, didn’t you? Well, despite being the superior twin in every other way, I admit, I seem to always forget to get you a birthday present. Weird, huh? Anyways, remember when we were house-sitting for Mrs. Johns when she was on vacation this spring, and you kept saying how much you liked these? That day, I went to the flower shop and had them pre-ordered to be delivered today, just so I didn’t forget. Who’s the best brother in the world? I am!

I know what you’re thinking. “Cal, you idiot, we’re eighteen today, and there are nineteen flowers.” Well, my unimaginative little twin, look closely at the gold one. It’s fake, see? The real ones are all going to die. How depressing would dead flowers be on your birthday? So, the fake one, you can keep it forever, and just in case I screw up and forget next year, you can remember how thoughtful I really am. Big brother Cal’s got your back, sister.

Now, I’m gonna tell you something. I don’t say it often, I’ll deny I ever did say it, and I’ll kill you if you tell anyone, but I love you, Kori. Happy Birthday, sis!

-Cal

I reread the note, twice. Hot tears streamed down my cheeks, such a familiar sensation, but this time, different. This time, I wasn’t crying because I missed him, or because he was gone. This time, they were happy tears, evoked from his memory. I could see his smile, his eyes, in every petal. I stroked the silky flowers gently between my thumb and forefinger, smiling. And, for the first time in months, I meant it.

“I love you too, Cal. Happy birthday.”

One Empty Chair

Caitlin Wilson

James Monroe High School, Monroe County
2nd Place Winner (Grades 11-12)

Macy McCallister was a young, wild, newly turned eighteen-year-old senior in high school. She was a very attractive young lady with blond hair that lavishly flowed down to her mid back, blue eyes that were like that of a crystal and a smile that could melt the heart of any guy. Macy was what you would call one of the popular kids, but she was nice to everyone. She was a straight-A student, graduating first in her class. The senior class of twenty twelve would be graduating at one o'clock on June first, tomorrow afternoon. Like every other senior, Macy believed a grand achievement such as completing thirteen years of listening to teachers, going to school every day and passing every class was well worthy of a celebration.

Macy left around ten o'clock for a friend's house to begin celebrating the night before graduation. This particular friend's parents were out of town for the night. Walking into the house, Macy was so excited for tomorrow. She grabbed a little red cup and gulped it down followed by another and another. Soon Macy was slurring words and stumbling around. Four hours later, after consuming numerous little red cups, Macy stumbled out to her car while digging in her purse for the keys. Once inside she rolled the windows down, cranked the radio and sped off into the darkness without thinking to fasten her safety belt.

Zooming through the straight stretches and whipping around the curves in a hurry to get home, Macy was singing along to the blaring radio, not paying the slightest attention to the glowing yellow eyes of a deer standing in the middle of her lane. Macy swerved fiercely as she saw the deer, over corrected and rolled her car over and over. Being inside a rolling vehicle would be scary for anyone, but Macy was not buckled up. As the car rolled, so did she. Macy bounced off the roof to doors, seats, and the dashboard and finally she was thrown through one of the open windows. When the car finally stopped rolling, the deer was still running away in fright, the horn was stuck and echoing off of the surrounding hills, the radio was still blaring and Macy lay lifelessly on the pavement.

The morning of graduation had arrived, but not the way Mr. and Mrs. McCallister had hoped. The doorbell awoke them around four o'clock. Putting on their bathrobes, they sleepily walked to the door, hoping Macy had simply forgotten her key. Upon opening the door Mrs. McCallister's heart sank, she knew. The officer explained that Macy had been in an accident and went into detail of what was thought to have happened. The rest of the McCallisters' morning was not spent sleeping in or making breakfast, but flipping through eighteen years of photo albums, crying a thousand tears and asking one three-lettered question, "Why?"

Around nine o'clock on that first day of June the McCallisters began getting dressed to attend their child's graduation, knowing she would not be there, but still hoping. Thousands of people arrived and began selecting their seats in the bleachers, each with their own camera to document each child's greatest accomplishment so far. Mrs. McCallister watched all the happy faces as the graduating class began to walk in, but she could only sob. They filled in all of their seats, but there was one empty chair remaining. The principal then demanded the attention of the crowd, waited for silence, and then addressed them. "This is Mrs. McCallister. She would like to replace our valedictorian's speech with her own."

"Hello, graduating class of twenty-twelve and their loved ones. I am sure some of you have heard of your valedictorian's, my daughter's accident. I am not here to pass blame on any of you. Macy was an adult. She knew better than to not buckle up, and I never thought she would drink and drive. However, her blood alcohol content was a point zero eight. Though Macy was legally an adult, she was not to my husband and me. She was our baby girl, our only child. I remember it like it was yesterday, Macy dancing and twirling around out of her room dressed in her bright pink, tipped with a tiara. I do not get the honor of watching my little princess dance across the stage. I will never be a grandmother or a mother-in-law, but I do have your attention just for the moment." Mrs. McCallister turned to face the graduates now.

"I know that Macy was probably not alone in driving home intoxicated last night. I am not blaming any of you, as I said before. What I am asking every single one of you, the next time, whether it is your first time or your one millionth time driving drunk, don't do it, if not for yourselves, for everyone here. They do not want to feel how I am feeling now. Will everyone take a look at the fourth chair on the field, please? There is no one sitting in it because my little girl decided to drink and drive, and for that reason she is not able to share this special day with all of you. In that chair rests a purple cap and gown with Macy's measurements and a single red rose, in memory of her. Remember that one empty chair the next time you are out drinking and decide to stumble to your car and get behind the wheel. Remember the tears streaming down your faces and my tears. Remember that drinking and driving kills. It took my little girl the day of her high school graduation, and it will again." As Mrs. McCallister began to speak of the fourth chair, not only did everyone's tears start up again, so did the wind. The wind grabbed Macy's gown and made it dance through the air almost as if Macy were still trying to celebrate their success with her friends.

Honeysuckle Air

Rebekah Honce

Bridgeport High School, Harrison County
3rd Place Winner (Grades 11-12)

The screen door slid open, rattling along its track. I stepped onto the mossy front porch. The overgrown field was before me, the tree stumps to my right, the fence to my left. I looked toward the cloudless summer sky, the sun forcing my eyes shut. The perfumed wind kissed my body, enveloping me in my honeysuckle-scented childhood

“Just wait a little longer, Samantha,” the wind carried her sweet voice through the valleys and hills, through the many summers passing since I had been there. My eyes would not open as memories flooded my mind.

“Please hurry!” I felt my mouth say, but my ears heard the cry of a seven-year-old girl.

“Just let me take these pepperoni rolls out of the oven.” I could hear the oven door closing, her steps growing louder as she approached the front door. I felt the warmth of her grasp, and I opened my eyes. I had gone back. Before me was Anna, her blond hair coiffed into a red bandanna, a blue flannel shirt tucked into her faded blue jeans. With her hand in mine, we set off to explore her farmland, and I set off to relive my childhood.

“C’mon let’s go,” I pleaded as she grasped the picnic basket in her hand. We skipped off the porch, and letting go of her hand, I raced toward the fields. Climbing the split rail fence board by board and carefully jumping down to avoid an electric shock, I never lost momentum. Anna was behind, a grin blossoming on her face.

“Slow down, Samantha. You don’t want me to drop our lunch.” Scarcely slowing, I ran through the fields, the summer wind forming mauve waves in the uncut hay. My blonde hair flowing behind me, I raced toward the creek. I splashed into its murky water, silky mud oozing between my toes, water lapping at the hem of my cotton dress. In ankle deep water, I chased frogs and minnows, my feet slipping on the mossy rocks. Fresh pepperoni rolls and sweet tea waited for me on the bank.

“Samantha, come here before the ants get to it!” At Anna’s command, I splashed out, my feet coated with sandy dirt. I plopped down on the quilt, my stomach craving the fresh potato bread and pepperoni. Anna untied her bandana; blond tendrils fell around her chin. She wiped my muddy hands and allowed me to devour lunch. Stomach full, I laid on the quilt, the grass beneath cradling my head. The trees filtered the bright sunlight reaching my face; I felt its warmth as I shut my eyes.

I realized I had walked to the fence-line. The barn’s roof had collapsed since my last visit nearly ten years ago; a disappointed sigh escaped my lips. In the distance, I could hear the

babbling creek, calling me to its bank. I gazed into the glassy water, my reflection older than it remembered. I looked up to the trees rooted in the creek bank. A solitary green leaf slowly drifted to the creek, rippling the water to the edge of the bank.

Anna had woken me from my nap, folded the quilt and stored the picnic basket at the base of a large tree. We continued our adventure, the sun sinking lower in the sky. Carefully crossing the narrow creek, I led the way up the hill to the dense woods. It was a darker place, musky and damp.

“Sami, come here.” Leaping over mushroom-covered logs, I found her. In her grasp was a long, winding vine; I stepped closer and felt its knotty surface.

“It’s called a grapevine,” she explained, seeing my puzzled expression. Without hesitation, Anna walked up the hill and jumped. Twisting her long legs around the vine, she flew through the air as I looked on in utter amazement.

“Me next!” I cried as Anna stumbled to the ground. I used all my strength just to hold on as the grapevine swung back and forth. The trees blurred on either side, and the jagged vine sliced my fragile palms. I clumsily dismounted and crashed into a pile of musty leaves. Anna helped me up, tied my hair back in the red bandanna, and encouraged me as I tried again and again

As the leaves continued to fall victim to the wind, I walked across the dried-up creek bed. Only pools of water were left in the twisting brook. I climbed the hill, steeper than in my memories—the past slowly lighting my path.

The sun stretched our shadows as we slowly walked out of the forest. The sun’s last rays bathed the landscape in liquid gold, the hay dancing in a cooler breeze. The moon rose in the cobalt heavens; Anna slowly walked into the valley. She stopped, her eyes lowered to strange rocks jutting from the landscape. A solemn look had been painted on her face.

“What’s wrong, Anna?” I inquired.

“Oh nothing,” she said as she sat in the cool grass. “This is our family cemetery. This is my grandparents’ grave, and this one is my baby cousin.” She slowly named the granite gravestones, one by one. There were fifteen, lichen-covered stones, rough from years in the harsh elements. The nighttime haze covered the farmland; lightning bugs sparkled in the distance.

The summer sun was sinking lower as I traversed the forest, grapevines creaking in the gusts of wind. The logs I leaped over then were hardly obstacles to my path now as I made my way down the hill, my eyes tricking me into seeing the impressions Anna and I had made in the amber hay. I slowly approached the family cemetery; fifteen stones were the backdrop for a newer, shiny granite marker. The smooth stone chilled my fingertips as I read the inscription I had avoided for so long.

“Bye, Anna,” I whispered as a solitary lightning bug landed on the gravestone. I laid the faded bandanna by the base of her headstone, the honeysuckle-scented air drifted away.

Bad News

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2012 Barbara W. Walters Memorial College Scholarship Winner

One warm summer afternoon, Joy sat on her favorite chair enjoying the sun's rays. Just in that moment, her little niece came running over to her. Abby jumped into her lap and made herself comfortable. Joy just gave her a big smile and started to run her fingers through the little girl's soft blonde hair. Abby sat there quietly, and began to play with her aunt's ring that she saw sparkling on her left hand.

"Auntie, when is Uncle Cody coming back?"

Joy just sat there silently watching the small girl play with the precious ring.

"He'll be home in a year and two months."

She had been counting ever since he left for basic almost five years ago. Joy sat there watching the evening unfold while listening to her niece tell stories about everything that crossed her mind. She soon put Abby to bed.

She returned to her chair with pink lemonade in hand. She settled in her chair and took a drink of the cold drink; she let the taste stay on her tongue as she set her head back. She watched the rambunctious foals run around their mothers in the field. The world was barely lit up, the sun was out of sight, and everything was going dark. Joy could still see her ring sparkling on her hand. She looked at it and let out a sigh. She had been married to Cody for five years; she had seen him only five months of those five years. They had gotten married when he came back from basic. He had proposed on a beautiful day in April; they had their wedding in July. He had left the very next month to go overseas. Being with someone in the military is not the easiest task to do.

Joy worried all the time and missed her husband every waking moment. Since he left, all she did was busy herself with work, the farm, and anything she could. She would stop only in the late evenings and observe the world while she sat and thought. She barely ever slept anymore; she hated sleeping alone. However, she finally dragged herself to her room to attempt to go to sleep.

Joy felt something cold and wet moving up and down her arm to her hand. She cracked her eye and glanced down to see her giant German shepherd Duke. He was letting her know it was time to get up and get moving like he did every morning.

"Duke, it's not even six yet." she scolded. She let out a huge sigh and sat up. Duke barked excitedly and did a little dance before he ran out of the room. Joy quickly got herself cleaned up. After she ate a fast breakfast, she was heading out the door to start taking care of her animals.

By ten forty five, she was grooming one of her mares leisurely when a black car pulled into her driveway. Who could that be? She did not recognize the car or its driver. When the tall

man stepped out of the vehicle, her heart dropped. He was in a military uniform. She had no idea what to say as the man approached her. Her mind was blank. With a grave face, he nodded his head and asked if she were Mrs. Montgomery. No words came out of her mouth. She could not seem to find her voice. She just nodded her head yes. The gentleman removed his hat and awkwardly moved his weight on one leg. Whatever he had to say, he did not know how to say it. He finally proceeded to inform her that her husband had been shot two days ago in battle. They had tried to save him, but he didn't make it. Joy just sat stood there. She was in shock; this wasn't real. This wasn't happening. He wasn't dead. It seemed as if her world just froze; time stood still. She didn't move. Long after the man had left, she still stood there, frozen. She finally leaned back against the barn wall and slid down until she was sitting on a bale of hay.

She stared at the ground until her eyes filled with tears. How could this have happened? Why him? A million questions raced through her mind. She cupped her face in her hands and cried for hours.

The next couple of days were a blur. She was in a daze; nothing felt real anymore. Her hired hands would find her randomly sitting in the feed room or sitting in a stall just staring off in space. All the life was drained from her. She heard hundreds of condolences, but nothing truly comforted her. She was empty.

The horrid day finally came. She slowly dressed in the black outfit that seemed to match her feelings. She looked at her reflection and barely recognized herself. She was skinny from not eating, and a sadness hung over her like a cloud. She slowly walked outside and dropped into her car. When she pulled into the funeral home's parking lot, she reluctantly turned off the car. She sat there and tried to gather the strength to go inside. She couldn't do this! Her mother practically had to carry her inside. Joy caught her breath as she saw his pictures. She missed him so much! She sat in a daze the whole service. She was so lost.

When it was all over, she slowly walked away from the grave towards her car. At that moment, a blonde girl chased after her, calling out her name. Joy stopped and waited for the girl to keep up. She didn't know who the girl was, but she was in uniform. Joy was just expecting another "I'm so sorry for your loss" speech she had heard so many times the past week.

To her surprise, that is not what the girl wanted at all. She introduced herself as Kelly Grahmer. She had been on the same mission as Cody. Kelly went on to explain that Cody had saved her life. Kelly went into a burning house to save a little girl as bombs were raining down. Kelly found herself trapped. Cody had come out of nowhere and pulled them both out of the house. He had been burned but still carried the little girl. He had taken the girls to safety and put them on a military van to go back to their base. Right as he was closing the doors, he was shot several times. Even though he had been shot, burned, and bleeding, he still drove Kelly and the little girl back to base. Only nineteen hours later he had died.

Joy broke down and started to cry. Her husband died a hero. Somehow knowing what he did made the pain weaken a little. Kelly crouched down beside Joy and handed her a framed picture on a chain. It was Cody's.

"He always had this on him. He held it until his last breath. He told me to tell you that he loved you and he would be waiting for you."

Joy took the picture of Cody and her. She smiled as she kissed the picture.

"I'll see you again, baby." she whispered.

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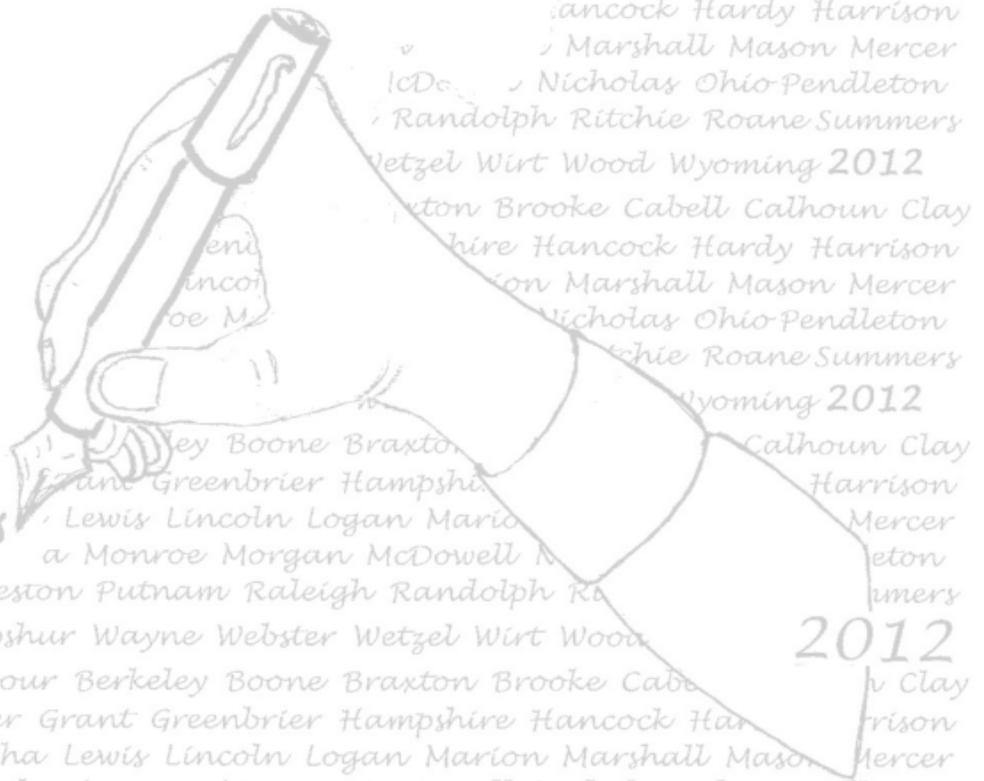
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